

West Midlands Regional Faiths Task Group

A Regional Faiths Forum?

Executive Summary of a regional faiths feasibility study

 **West Midlands
Regional Assembly**

Speaking out for the region
Speaking up for the region

October 2002

Introduction

This is a report commissioned by West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA) into exploring the most appropriate means for faith communities within the West Midlands to engage with Central Government's regionalisation agenda. The Study carried out by the Centre for Voluntary Action Research (CVAR) at Aston Business School, Birmingham between December 2001 and July 2002.

Background and Aims of this Study

As part of this regionalisation agenda, there is an increasing desire on the part of central and local government to bring faith communities into a structured process of consultation on a variety of issues, including regional, sub-regional and local plans. This desire reflecting an increase in public policy interest in the role of faith based organisations in service delivery, policy development and civil society.

To respond to this agenda, a Faiths Task Group was established in 2001 with the aim of advising the West Midlands Regional Assembly on how best to engage with faith communities. With this in mind the principal aim of the research was:

"Advise the (West Midlands Regional Assembly) Faith Task Group on the issues to be considered in establishing a Regional Faith Forum. This will include the nature, remit and membership of a Regional Faith Forum which as far as possible is accountable to and broadly representative of the faith communities in the West Midlands."

The research took place between November 2001 and July 2002; it comprised five distinct stages.

1 Study Participants

The Study involved 45 semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives of faith groups, West Midlands regional bodies and individuals from national agencies or organisations in other regions involved in multi-faith initiatives. It was not easy to identify significant numbers of people from faith groups who were interested in or active in the regional agenda, suggesting that the involvement of faith groups at the regional level is both sporadic and sparse. Certain parts of the region were not directly represented in this sample, eg. Shropshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire. There was considerable difficulty in locating contacts in some rural areas, reflecting more general issues of rural isolation.

2 Fieldwork

The fieldwork identified a number of key issues in relation to the establishment of a Faith Forum, including:

- Genuine interest amongst faith groups in issues of public policy, but a general preoccupation with local organisational survival; it is through other mechanisms and networks that action on these interests and concerns is taken.
- A wide range of views about faith groups' contributions to society, about the nature of the 'faith dimension', about what it brings to issues of wider public policy, and what it means to be a 'faith community' in today's society. Some faith groups are undoubtedly struggling with their position in a multi-faith society.
- A widespread degree of ignorance in faith communities, certainly those operating at the local level, about the West Midlands region, the regional agenda and the bodies responsible for developing and implementing policy at the regional level.
- Universal agreement about the need for the role of a Faith Forum to be absolutely clear, alongside a diversity of views about what that role might be, including: acting as a consultative body, sharing good practice, obtaining resources, offering a voice for excluded groups.
- The need for an inclusive approach to the membership of a Faith Forum; some divergence of opinion about what would constitute inclusiveness.
- An interest in building on established structures (eg. existing multi-faith groups) as a way of establishing a body with legitimacy and credibility.
- Two potential sets of obstacles to participation: first, those that might affect individuals' ability to participate (eg. practical questions of time, travel and money); second, more general structural barriers to the effective working of the Forum (eg. the domination by strong personalities, divisions within and across faiths, the need for practical benefits).
- The need for pump-priming funding and development time to build capacity, relationships and trust within and across faiths.

3 Model Building

The process of building possible models for a Faith Forum comprised four elements:

a. A limited review of the (regional and national) public policy agenda in relation to the involvement of faith communities in public policy.

At regional level, three specific objectives were identified for the establishment of a Regional Faith Forum:

- i. To enable faith groups to be pro-active in establishing and developing the regional agenda and influencing a whole range of regional policies
- ii. To influence the expenditure of funding within the region
- iii. To promote spiritual values within all aspects of economic, social and community development within the West Midlands region.

At national level, these translated to:

- i. The role faith groups might play in community renewal ("Faith and Civil Society").
- ii. The role faith groups might play in identifying and accessing marginalised and excluded groups ("Faith and Community Reach").
- iii. The potential within faith groups to accommodate and deliver services on the ground ("Faith and Service Delivery").

b. A review of previous research on the involvement of voluntary and community organisations with the regional agenda identified:

- i. The importance of building organisation's capacity to become engaged in the regional agenda and creating incentives for sustained involvement.
- ii. The challenge for intermediary bodies of building their legitimacy and authenticity with their members and constituents, as well as building legitimacy as an authoritative voice with other sectors active at the regional level.
- iii. The choice for intermediary bodies of acting as a "policy taker" (a generally passive role – scanning and interpreting the environment, participating in consultation exercises, and disseminating information) or a "policy shaper" (seeking to be more proactive by trying to influence, "shape" and "re-shape" relevant policy).

c. Focus Groups with members of the Faith Task Group and a selection of faith community interviewees highlighted key areas of:

- i. The definition of a "faith perspective" and the undesirability of a single "faith perspective".

- ii. Relationships between the local and the regional levels, and the potential for a credible and respected Faith Forum to offer the opportunity to influence regional policy, to hold regional bodies to account at the local level, and to secure resources for local projects.

- iii. The role of Faith Forum representatives on the Regional Assembly and the importance of them being integral to the life of the Faith Forum, immersed in its debates and able to take forward an agreed range of opinion and feeling rather than a single perspective.

d. The identification of models for a Regional Faith Forum, each based on a key function. These being:

- i. The "Faiths Perspective" Model, in which the key function of the Forum would be to offer perspectives of faith groups on relevant areas of regional policy.
- ii. The "Advocacy" Model, in which the key function of the Forum would be to advance the agenda of faith groups by trying to influence and shape regional policy.
- iii. The "Policy Implementation" Model, in which the key function of the Forum would be to be closely involved in the implementation of regional policies relevant to local communities, eg. Regeneration, Neighbourhood Renewal.
- iv. The "Social Capital" Model, in which the key function of the Forum would be to create opportunities for mutual aid and capacity building within and amongst different faith groups.

4 The Development of an "Advocacy Model" for a Regional Faith Forum

In developing the "Advocacy Model" as the preferred option for the establishment of a Faith Forum, the following generic and specific issues need to be addressed:

- The need for membership to include groups operating at the grassroots.
- The importance of a core group within the Forum that is able to be pluralistic as well as politically astute.
- A proactive approach to the Forum's agenda and activities.
- The securing of tangible benefits for faith groups.
- An ongoing programme of capacity building.
- A commitment to building on existing structures and relationships.
- The involvement of people able to read and interpret the changing regional and national policy agenda.

5 Multi-Faith Perspectives on the establishment of a Regional Faith Forum

The process of gathering multi-faith perspectives on the establishment of a Faith Forum involved focus groups with three multi-faith fora already established in the region.

The focus groups highlighted a number of key issues relevant to the establishment of a Faith Forum:

- A widespread interest in using multi-faith groups to build social cohesion across different faiths and cultures.
- The difficulty of attracting members from all faiths.
- The importance of having explicit goals and using clear boundaries for discussions and activities as a way of managing diversity of views.
- A recognition that relationships of trust and mutual respect take considerable time to develop.
- The importance of involving people who are in touch with and able to represent others without seeking to dominate.

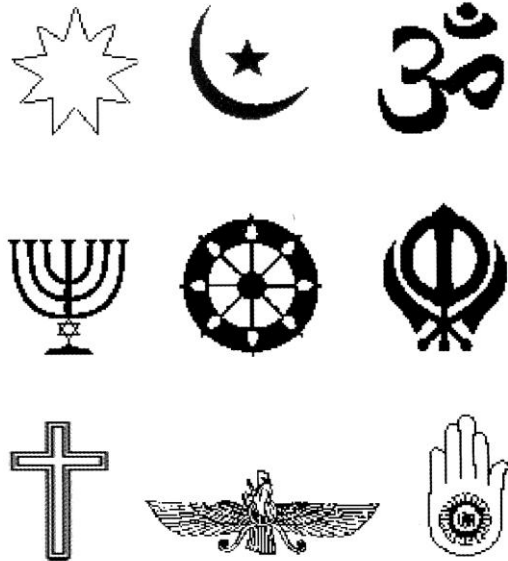
6 Key issues for Consideration in the establishment of a Regional Faith Forum in the West Midlands

In the final part of the report three broad areas were highlighted that may need to be addressed by the Faith Task Group following the completion of the Study:

- The context in which the initiative to establish a Regional Faith Forum is taking place. In particular, the speed and significance of change at the regional level, and the tension between the public policy interest in faith groups and the widespread lack of knowledge and understanding about the regional agenda amongst local faith communities.
- The developments required to connect local faith groups with the regional agenda. In particular, raising awareness of the regional agenda amongst faith communities, building on the model of existing multi-faith groups and activities in the region, adequately resourcing people's involvement, and establishing a clear, tight remit for a Forum, focused on identified areas of common concern (eg. regeneration).
- Possible critical success factors for the establishment of a Faith Forum. In particular, viewing faith community involvement in the regional agenda from an exchange perspective where time and energy are exchanged for practical benefits. Developing the Forum as a proactive policy-shaper rather than a reactive policy-taker, taking an organic approach to change, and seeing the faith representatives on the Regional Assembly as an integral element of a dynamic connection between local and regional.

At the end of the report eight specific areas requiring action were outlined:

- Expansion of the membership of the Faith Task Group and clarification of its role in establishing the Faith Forum.
- The dissemination of the Study findings to spread a sense of ownership and interest for the initiative amongst faith groups.
- An emphasis on building the capacity of faith groups to become actively involved in the Faith Forum.
- A focus on promoting the Faith Forum as a new vehicle for faith groups to achieve influence and acquiring resources that will have an impact locally.
- A commitment to allowing the initial membership of the Forum to develop their own vision.
- An initial focus for the Forum's work on identified areas of common concern (eg. regeneration and social cohesion).
- A commitment to an incremental approach to the Forum's actual operation.
- An ongoing commitment from the Regional Assembly and other regional bodies to the initiative.



The full report of "A Regional Faiths Forum" is available on :

www.rawm.org.uk
www.wmra.gov.uk



West Midlands Regional Assembly
Lombard House
145 Great Charles Street
Birmingham B3 3LS
Tel: 0121 678 1010

Fax: 0121 678 1049
info@wmra.gov.uk
www.wmra.gov.uk

For further information please contact :
Deepak Naik.
West Midlands Regional Faiths Forum
c/o Coventry Multi-Faith Centre, Priory Visitor centre,
Priory Gardens, Priory Row,
Coventry, CV1 5EX
Tel / Fax 024 7663 3168
email: wmfaithforum@btinternet.com