

Issue 2 - December 2010

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FaithShare

the newsletter of **West Midlands Faiths Forum**



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We are very keen for WMFF members and associate organisations to use this publication to share experiences and raise awareness of faith issues in the region; we would particularly like to invite local Inter Faith Groups to take this opportunity to contribute views and information on events and activities. As always, it is understood that opinions expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily shared by WMFF Executive.

FaithShare issue 3 will be published during 2011. Send contributions to Selina Brown at the email above.

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FUTURE OF INTER FAITH

A heading that conveys both a tremendous positive message of hope, and a little bit of gloom.

An organisation depends on its members and WMFF is no exception. At a time of huge cuts in public funding, members of the congregations are coming to terms with economic uncertainties, threats of unemployment, everyday demands of a growing family, the educational future of our children and grandchildren and many other personal issues that impact on each and every one of us in one form or another. Something holds us all together, be it our faith, our spirituality, our beliefs, our friends or our families, that something is our vision of "hope".

The work of the WMFF continues to be the focal point of strategic participation and a conduit for partnership working and networking across the region. The future brings to us challenges in a climate of increasing unemployment, over stretched resources, a rise in religious intolerance and the negativity propagated by some and supported by the ill informed sectors of the media. These challenges alone will ensure the future of inter faith is strong because we are strong at grassroots level; our collective passion is for a just, and equal society, a society tolerant of our differences and the commonalities that bond us.

WMFF members, the Executive and our staff proactively continue to work in an environment of constantly changing personal commitments and the immensely diverse nature of inter faith work. The Regional launch of the Inter Faith Week in Coventry saw once again the excellent presentations from Faith groups across the region, followed by community provided delicious snacks and concluding with a symbolic commitment of unity, and working together in mutual benefit. This single example once again clearly showed that where there is the understanding and the desire to work together, we can!

The bit of gloom is not as insignificant as I have initially suggested. Funding cuts and their impact to regional bodies like the WMFF could well be life threatening. Interfaith work by just dedicated hard work and the partnership working cannot be sustained without financial support or embarking on schemes of income generation. We need a regular source of income to sustain and provide the level of services to this region. The Executive has worked diligently over the year and explored several avenues of independent financial support and grants. My thanks to the Project Management Group under the leadership of Colin Marsh, supported by Linda Williams and Gerald Nembhard for their financial acumen and for paving the way for WMFF to become a Company Limited by Guarantee. This should avail us the opportunities to meet the legal requirements and tap into the numerous grant giving Charitable Foundations.

Harish Dhokia JP, Chair-Coventry and Warwickshire Hindu Council, Co Chair WMFF.

Regional Faiths Forums: Looking Forward

By Jane Gallagher, P/T Development Manager



Members of West Midlands Faiths Forum Executive and Staff with Dr Harriet Crabtree, Inter Faith Network for the UK and Dr Ataullah Siddiqui, Islamic Foundation/ Markfield Institute of Higher Education at the Regional Launch of the first Inter Faith Week 2009.

During the past three years the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG) has invested in building the capacity of Regional Faiths Forums (RFFs), including WMFF's. The English RFF Network (ERFFN) meets quarterly to develop strategic collaboration, exchange resources, share good practice and work together on issues of common concern. ERFFN (www.erffn.org.uk) has been facilitated by the Inter Faith Network for the UK and the Faith Based Regeneration Network UK. As WMFF's representative at ERFFN over the past year, I have been engaged in work to strengthen their collective voice, bring together evidence of impact and look to future sustainability of our work. We have benefited from support offered by the Community Development Foundation (in particular, Tansy Miller, Faiths in Action Regional Manager) and DCLG Faith & Cohesion Unit (in particular, David Rayner and Warwick Hawkins).

As the political landscape has changed dramatically since May 2010, we find ourselves in an environment where regional government is being dismantled. The question all regional voluntary & community sector organisations are currently

addressing is whether this means there is no longer a role for any structures 'larger than local' but 'smaller than national'. WMFF will be conducting a survey of its members shortly and your views will be very important in shaping priorities for the future.

One thing is clear: WMFF Executive are unanimous in their resolve that the Forum will continue its work, despite current funding challenges. The Vision is as relevant as it was when the Forum was established in 2003 that there should be 'A West Midlands region where there is mutual respect and understanding between faiths, where faiths work collaboratively to influence and shape community life for the benefit of all'. WMFF also has a Mission **'To act as a hub for faiths in the region, promoting positive inter faith dialogue and influencing policies and strategies'**. The Executive plan to **take the Mission forward and continue to ensure that faith voices are reflected in public policy while offering a 'connecting hub'** that has been demonstrably valued by faith, inter faith and public bodies over the past 5 years.

INTER FAITH WEEK LAUNCH 2010

By Selina Brown, Executive Communications Officer

The Inter Faith Week Launch was back for its second year: this high profile affair took place on 20 November 2010 at Coventry Central Methodist Hall. The overall objective was to emphasize and share the richness of West Midlands religious and spiritual diversity through highlighting grassroots inter faith understanding, harmony, co-operation and renewal. The event assisted in bringing



together numerous inter faith groups, and showing how they foster stronger community relations and cooperation.

The Launch started with a networking session that included stalls from various groups and statutory organisations such as West Midlands Police Service and West Midlands Ambulance Service. All stall holders showcased their extensive range of innovative community activities and the positive impact of their work. Food was donated from local shops and places of worship, creating a delicious buffet that was enjoyed by the 150 guests that attended.



The main event kicked off at 6pm when the stage played host to various devotional performances which included a presentation of Zikr from a Muslim group led by Muhammad Imran, a Bharathanatyam dance by Sauriga Kukathasan (with her young colleague) and Gospel songs from the Berachah Faith Ministries Community Gospel Choir.

The guest speaker for the evening was Madhava Turumella from the Inter-Faith Working Committee of the Hindu Forum of Britain. His presentation touched upon the three important A's for Inter Faith dialogue: "Ask, Adhere and Attitude". During the middle of the event members of different faiths lit a candle and placed them on a single stand, symbolically demonstrating the strength of Inter Faith. Short speeches were also delivered by Cllr Phil Townshend, Cabinet Member from Coventry City Council, Paresh Solanki from the Inter Faith Network for the UK and Ruth Tetlow from the Faith Encounter Programme.

The overall objective was to use the event as a platform to emphasize and share the richness of the West Midlands religious and spiritual diversity through highlighting grassroots interfaith understanding, harmony, co-operation and renewal. This was a goal that the event exceeded. We acknowledge with gratitude the welcome and co-operation given us in Coventry.

OO D'YOU FINK YOU'RE TALKIN' TO?

BY YANN LOVELOCK, INTERFAITH OFFICER FOR THE NETWORK OF BUDDHIST ORGANISATIONS AND A MEMBER OF THE INTER FAITH NETWORK

A few years ago, when the idea that the different UK communities were living 'parallel lives' was bothering the Government, they appointed a Commission to look into the matter. Get people to start talking to each other was the conclusion, and one suggestion was to organise a national Inter Faith Week.

A look at some of the more extreme types of faith dialogue shows why this might be a good idea. I was brought up as an exclusive Christian fundamentalist and was discouraged from having much to do with any but my own kind. If others were not religiously inclined, then they were 'worldly' and might weaken my faith. If they took their religion seriously, on the other hand, they were 'in error' and dangerous.

However, on condition that one pointed out to others where they were in error, conversation was permitted. Not that any such exchange is likely to be fruitful. Starting from the position that I am right and everyone else is wrong does not get us very far. It is self-righteous and aggressive. No wonder they say that the two subjects to avoid when talking to

others is religion and politics.

Another reason commonly given for avoiding religion is that to discuss it is an invasion of privacy. But since every faith encourages developing and acting upon a social conscience, the last thing one can call them is private. In my experience, people love to answer questions about their religion. The most difficult thing is getting them to stop once they've started!

Inter Faith Week built on the curiosity we have about each other, encouraging us to make it an exchange. What we found was that, though we may have a lot in common, differences are interesting too, and so are the places and occasions where such conversations take place. Now the ice has been broken, let's do it some more.

In a way, yes, the people that brought me up were right: it's living dangerously. You might start seeing things and people in a different light. But is that so bad?

INTER FAITH: THE FUTURE

By Ruth Jacobs, Birmingham and West Midlands Jewish Community and West Midlands Faiths Forum Executive

In 20 years of participating in interfaith dialogue I have been encouraged by the relationships made and greater understanding of other faiths gained as a result. Having gradually acquired the skills required to be an effective 'dialoguer,' I soon realised that finding the balance between being open and honest, sensitive and aware is as important as being strong in your own faith and respectful of the other.

My concern about having meaningful dialogue today and in the future is how to achieve this despite the political issues and agendas which have come to be associated with certain faith communities. How do we cross the barriers surrounding the issues inextricably linked to a

number of faiths which are difficult to talk about? Surely this is the challenge for interfaith work - to ensure that enough trust and care exists to allow anything and everything to be spoken about and worked on, to help build a better world.

Using the principles and values that our faiths teach us, and that we have in common, must be the way forward: both to create the safe environment in which to voice fears and concerns and to help us avoid situations which have the potential to destroy us all. Yes, it takes courage to be part of this, but the reward can be greater than we can imagine - we just have to be determined to stick with it and care enough about each other to make it work.

THE BIG SOCIETY IN ACTION

Two Sikh perspectives

The Big Society idea does not start with politicians but with people who practise their beliefs in a social setting. That was the theme of several events during Inter Faith Week. One of the organisers of these, the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha in Birmingham, had recently received a Queens Award for its social interface. Included here is an excerpt from Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh's speech of acceptance on that occasion. It is partnered by a short account by Pritpal Kaur Riat, also from that gurdwara, describing her experience as a Faiths Act Fellow for 2009-10.

"We talk about 'The Big Society'. To my thinking, we have a mini-society within a family. A family stands for 'Father And Mother I Love You.' If you have a good family, you have a good micro society. What is one required to do within the family? To have respect for each other, trust for each other, sacrifice for each other. If you have a good family, you will inevitably have a good community. If you have a good community, you will necessarily have a good nation. It is as simple as that.

We have tolerance within society. This is the basic step. This is followed by acceptance. But to 'accept' someone is demeaning. This is followed by respect, which is slightly better. Then comes sacrifice. Going beyond oneself – to sacrifice oneself for the other is what is demanded of good human beings. If you are not able to serve others or the community or the society you live in, you are less of a human being.

Everyone is now saying that we are living in a global village. In a village you must know each other very well. You have got to feel the pain of each other. If a dog dies in a village, you should feel the pain. We are at a very special period in the history of mankind. This century will go down as a century of change. Humanity must change and take stock of what it has been doing in the previous centuries. I am optimistic that the change will be for the better."

By Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, Chairman of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, WMFF Executive member

"Our goal was to create a multi-faith hub of young volunteers working towards alleviating global poverty, and in particular towards ending deaths due to malaria.

The Fellowship's biggest impact on my life, however, was the creation of meaningful relationships. The Sikh teaching is that all human beings are but one large family – and throughout last year, the other 29 Fellows became my brothers and sisters. At the end of my time as a Fellow, I not only left behind a group of Faiths Act volunteers, mobilised to work across different faiths. Another important legacy of the programme was our friendships.

The Fellowship gave us a chance to express our faith values positively, and it was a privilege to work in a capacity where our faith identities were encouraged as an asset. It was an invaluable opportunity to engage, in a humble way, towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals through the shared values of compassion and service.

If you are a young person of faith, who feels that it is a shared responsibility to make a difference in the world – then do not hesitate to apply to be one of next year's Faiths Act Fellows." (<http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/pages/faiths-act-fellowship-application>)

by Pritpal Kaur Riat

World Interfaith Harmony Week

By Yann Lovelock, Interfaith Officer For The Network Of Buddhist Organisations And A Member Of The Inter Faith Network

In October 2010 the United Nations decided that the first week of February each year would from now on be celebrated as World Interfaith Harmony Week. It 'encourages all states to support, on a voluntary basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship during that week, based on Love of God and Love of the Neighbour, or on Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions.'

One motive behind this, according to its proposer, Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan, is that 'if preachers and teachers commit themselves on the record once a year to peace and harmony, this means that when the next inter-religious crisis or provocation occurs, they cannot then relapse into parochial fear and mistrust, and will be more likely to resist the winds of popular demagoguery.' Behind the cautious and idealistic wording of the proposal, there is a practical religious intelligence that we can all respect.

One potential drawback to this positive initiative is that, although difference in religious practice are acknowledged, there is still the assumption that assumption that all faiths function more or less on the Abrahamic model. Relying mainly on declarations within places of worship is not the most effective way of spreading this message. One proposed way of addressing this is for a meal to be shared together on the Thursday of that week on 3rd February 2011: www.interfaithharmonybreakfasts.org

Find out more at:
www.worldinterfaithharmonyweek.org.

INTER FAITH WEEK 2011

The Inter Faith Network for the UK have just announced that Inter Faith Week in 2011 will take place in England and Wales from Sunday 20 November until Saturday 26 November. Its first day will again coincide with Mitzvah Day. The 2011 date for National Sewa Day, which last year was on the same day as Mitzvah Day, has not yet been advertised.

A Museum of Living Religion

By Yann Lovelock, Interfaith Officer For The Network Of Buddhist Organisations And A Member Of The Inter Faith Network

Last year a glittering international caravan of planners arrived in Birmingham, bringing with them Rev. Master Hsin Tao, founder of Taipei's Museum of World Religions, <http://www.mwr.org.tw/en-library/en.htm> with the proposal that a similar institution should be sited in Birmingham. Everyone loved the idea and so was taken aback when the organisers disappeared again without leaving so much as a forwarding address. Meanwhile an outfit called Monks Without Borders (that is equally cagey about contact details) has announced that it means to establish a similar museum in America.

In fact the Working Committee of the Birmingham project includes three members of the university theology department and a WMFF Executive member. They were all back in the city during Inter Faith Week for a consultation event and this time meant business, they said. Their concept paper can be found on the WMFF website.

An outline plan is a good thing, but it needs fleshing out and that is where local know-how is needed. It has to be stressed at the outset too that Birmingham was chosen as a site, not just for its diversity but because it is central to the region - and to the country - and has good transport connections.

Now is not the best time to be raising funds for such an ambitious project. But in the meantime there can be related activities in the form of seminars and exhibitions. Some of these might also be associated with the opening of the city's new central library in the second half of 2013. What has been proposed is a regional advisory council to suggest and gather ideas, which will have its first meeting next February. It will be chaired by Jonathan Webber, formerly UNESCO Professor of Interfaith Relations at the university. Those interested in joining this can contact the Vice Chair, Yann Lovelock (once of WMFF) on yanda_lovelock@yahoo.co.uk.

Inter Faith Relations

THE NEXT STEP

By Subrata Dey, Hindu Council of Birmingham & WMFF Executive member

We have come a long way in terms of establishing good inter-faith relations since the Inter-faith Network was launched in 1987. We have a healthy tolerance of faiths other than our own. Notwithstanding this, we need to do more.

As Dr Ataullah Siddiqui said in his keynote speech at the launch of Inter-faith Week in November 2009, we need to examine what our respective faiths have to say about other faiths in order to cultivate respect. Tolerance is not enough. We need to move beyond tolerance towards embracing other faiths as if they were our own. How can we embrace other faiths when many of us will not embrace those within our own faith who question established ways of thinking? However, we must question. We cannot have meaningful inter-faith relations without relinquishing the culture of disrespect derived from a belief in the inherent superiority of our

own faith. Such views have led to political and economic strife.

We must cultivate compassion in order to truly embrace all others. However, unless we have an ideological commitment to it that is grounded within our faith, we will never be able to practise compassion universally. So, we need a theme and value based response to inter-faith dialogue whereby we are less concerned about the rituals and supremacy of our faiths and more willing to extract the timeless values of compassion, universal love and harmony that are the key messages of the founders and scriptures of our faiths. Emphasising such values will help each develop an all-comprehensiveness, which will become a key defining characteristic that can help create a genuine faith-based response towards promoting universal harmony and peace.

BIRMINGHAM STREET PASTORS – STREETS AHEAD

By Gerald Nembhard, Secretary, Council of Black Led Churches & WMFF Executive member

Dressed in a distinctive blue uniform, a team of dedicated volunteers called Street Pastors are on the frontline against crime and violence in the Handsworth, Aston and Lozells neighbourhoods of Birmingham, engaging with people from all walks of life.

Street Pastors work on the streets each weekend on either a Friday or Saturday night between 8:00pm and 3:00am. Whilst out on patrol, Street Pastors just want to touch base with people and feel that those times of night and early morning are when people are most vulnerable. Either they've had a drink or an argument with their spouse. Street Pastors are on the Streets to provide support and not to preach at people.

Street Pastors work with local authorities and the community to create a better living environment for us all. One of their most challenging times was being present on the streets of Lozells when the disturbances broke out in October 2005. For several nights in a row Street Pastors came out to keep the peace. In 2007 the Street Pastors team supported the

Council of Black Led Churches in a peace march through the streets of Lozells and Aston in protest against the high number of shootings at the time. This march had the support of the Sikh, Muslim and Hindu communities in the area. Muslim Councillor Salma Yaqoob even took part in the Christian ceremony of 'washing of feet' conducted at the end of the march, as a sign of solidarity between faith communities. It is interesting to note that the number of shootings have since come down.

The years of dedicated work on the streets of Lozells and Aston was recognised by the 'Safer Streets of Birmingham Awards' in September 2009 where the team came first in the category "Working together for our Community".

To become a Street Pastor or to know more please contact:

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