

An Inter Faith Strategy for the Church

Introduction

This document aims to outline the churches' task in a multi Faith society, and to offer a strategy for our presence and engagement with people and communities of faiths other than Christianity.

This strategy will encompass:

- Locality and context
- The mission of God
- The churches' response
- Implementation
- Resources

1. Locality and Context

1.1. Christian mission is now carried out in a multi faith context which lays upon us a responsibility and opportunity that we cannot ignore:

- We live in a globalised world where people of different faiths and cultures are no longer separated from us by great distances but are our close neighbours. The result is a multi faith society, with new questions increasingly being raised about our cultural identity, and about the nature of Christians' response to those of other faiths. "We need to focus on our local situation, aware of our global context."
- Our immediate context is that in Nottingham, there are some areas where 10% or more of the population are of faiths other than Christian. Events internationally and nationally have highlighted the need for better social cohesion. However our strategy should be based on love and hospitality rather than fear. In this context we believe the imaginative development of local inter faith relations should be encouraged to focus on all faiths rather than one particular group or community and to build positive relationships between all people of faith.
- Beyond Greater Nottingham in the former Coalfields and in the more rural areas covered by our churches we recognise that inter faith issues are significant, not only in media coverage and in people's work connections, but also by increasing numbers of people of different faiths moving into these places.

1.2. We live in an increasingly secularised society in the West, in particular in Europe, where all – not just Christian - religious belief seems to be marginalised. As a result of this, as Christians, we need to be clear about our own faith, clear about the way we communicate it, clear about the way in which we relate to those of other faiths, and aware that, in some contexts, we stand alongside those of other faiths.

1.3. Part of the inter faith context is the wide range of Christian response itself to that context. It is important that this range of opinion is respected, and that Christians learn

from one another. Anglican, Methodist and Roman Catholic churches have all commended engagement in dialogue and social action with people of other faiths.¹ Christian response varies not only at theological level but also at the level of experience.

- 1.4 For some, interfaith engagement can be enriching. However, for Christians who experience persecution at the hands of those of other faiths, inter faith engagement is exceptionally difficult. In this respect two particular groups though small are worthy of mention. The first is the growing community of South Asian Christians almost all of whom have come to Nottingham since 2000. The majority are from Pakistan where some have experienced targeted harassment and persecution. It is important in the movement toward dialogue that their experience is heard with empathy. It is also important that this group be recognised as a resource for dialogue in the sense that they can act as a cultural bridge into the other faith communities that have come from South Asia to the UK. The second group is the convert to Christ from Islam. These come from for example Iranian, Afghan or British/Pakistani backgrounds. They may well come from situations of family or community hostility from within the UK. This group needs safety, welcome and nurture in the mainstream churches. This growing number of converts needs to be affirmed and understood. Inter faith engagement involves recognising, acknowledging and learning how to handle such diverse experience.
- 1.5. A year ago the Diocesan Director for Partnerships and Mission convened what has become the Faiths Engagement Group (FEG) which is addressing the Presence and Engagement² approach to inter faith relations which has been affirmed by General Synod of the Church of England.

Our engagement with other faiths needs to also take note of the recent report Sharing the Gospel Of Salvation recently commended by General Synod.

Explorations within FEG has shown a keen and widespread desire to engage much more widely in inter faith dialogue, and has indicated the importance of taking the whole process further to the development of an inter faith strategy for the diocese (in conjunction with our ecumenical partners.)

In due course FEG could work more ecumenically with Methodist and Roman Catholic, URC and other partners, emphasising the significance of this work for other denominations.

⁴See the Roman Catholic document "Meeting God in Friend and Stranger", the Methodist document "Called to Love and Praise" (1999).

We acknowledge the assistance of the Diocese of Ripon and Leeds in producing this strategy for we are very grateful

² "Presence and Engagement" is the term used to describe what is now the Anglican approach to inter faith relations. "Presence" refers to the way people simply live out their Christian way of life in a context where the majority are of another faith. "Engagement" refers to active dialogue or joint action between people of different faiths.

- 1.6. The credibility of faith is affected by the way we are seen as churches to engage with people of other faiths and by the way we work with other denominations in doing so. People are quick to notice any discrepancy between love of God and neighbour enjoined by the main religions and the way we actually behave to each other.³ Presence and engagement is primarily about the churches working in their locality; and this strategy, with the resources offered, recognises this primary focus. Before examining the tasks for the churches, we offer next a summary of the missiological imperative and our response as Christians.

2. The mission of God

- 2.1 We are all created as children of the one God⁴, and we are to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves⁵. To speak of presence and engagement is to speak of the part which Christian people understand themselves to play in the mission of God, to which all human plans and projects are subordinate. Churches have a vital part to play in the mission of God but that mission is neither dependent on the church nor restricted by its institutions. The Spirit blows where it wills and wherever we find love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control we know that God is at work.
- 2.2 Our love of God challenges us to recognise that God is greater than our concepts of the Divine and that therefore our own commitment of faith should make room for us to respect the commitment and belief of others. Love of God highlights the need for integrity in our own commitment and, at the same time, a respect that prevents religion being used as an authorisation for intolerance and violence.
- 2.3 As Christians we are committed to our belief in, and proclamation of, the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ⁶, and to the vision that Christ sends us out in mission⁷ so that all the nations of the earth may be⁸ blessed. However Jesus in proclaiming and showing forth the kingdom of God did so with care and in love with those beyond the confines of Jewish faith, such as the Roman centurion⁹, Samaritan villagers¹⁰ or the Syrophenician woman.

³ Issues of conversion are relevant in this context and can give rise to the suspicion that interfaith dialogue is partly a cloak for proselytising. Therefore it is a moral imperative rather than an optional interest that we have a considered inter faith strategy based on clear values, with a clear idea of what dialogue is intended to achieve.

⁴ Acts 17: 24-28

⁵ Matthew 23: 37-40

⁶ In the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is contained our belief that God saves us by the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the sending of the Holy Spirit; and that from this experience springs our belief in God as a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The particular emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ deliberately points up the distinctiveness of faith in Jesus Christ, and that these saving acts constitute a point at which history is moved forward by God's action.

⁷ Matthew 28: 18-20

⁸ Genesis 22: 18

⁹ Matthew 8: 5-13

¹⁰ Luke 9: 51-56, John 4: 1-42

The Christian gospel itself obliges us to engage with those of other faiths with honesty, love, respect and generosity of spirit, as we preach Jesus¹¹.

3. The churches' response

3.1 We would therefore encourage all in our congregations to see engagement and dialogue with people of other faiths as an opportunity to take part in the Mission of God; and to do this as far as is possible, ecumenically.

The World Council of Churches developed the following four principles of dialogue¹²:

- Dialogue begins when people meet each other
- Dialogue is about building up trust in the other person and learning to tell the truth about another religious tradition
- Dialogue helps us to work together for the goal of developing a better human community
- Dialogue becomes a way of authentic mutual witness

3.2 Engagement and dialogue spring from love of neighbour as well as love of God. Our love of neighbour requires social (and indeed political) engagement, which, in our multi faith context, requires mutual understanding of those of other faiths if we are to avoid ignorance, fear and hostility that lead to violence. God calls us to engagement with people of other religions. This requires dialogue. Dialogue not only aims to identify areas that faiths have in common. It also seeks to recognise and handle difference, and to model that handling of difference to the wider community. In such love of neighbour we begin to participate in the way we believe God was in Christ reconciling all things to himself¹³. This is not done in an exclusive spirit but in humble obedience to Christ's calling.

3.3 Our main aim is to maximise our generosity in relationship with others. Dialogue means speaking and listening – no monologues allowed. We are invited to take every opportunity to be with and amongst people of other faiths and religions; to be hospitable and receive hospitality – even when it is time consuming. In our interfaith dialogue we bear witness to, and proclaim our faith not only through words but through our attitudes, actions and lifestyles and, if appropriate, share our convictions about the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

3.4 Sharing the Gospel of Salvation reminds us that the Christian imperative to proclaim the Gospel remains in our diverse society. We should be aware of the Ethical Guidelines for Christian and Muslim Witness in Britain developed by the Christian Muslim Forum. (see resources)

¹¹ Acts 8: 35

¹² British Council of Churches 1981

¹³ Colossians 1: 19-20

4. Implementation

4.1 The central approach of churches in an inter faith context, therefore, is to inform, strengthen and encourage in every place dialogue and personal friendships between Christians and people of other faiths. This needs to be both face to face at Faith Leaders' level and at the local/grass-roots level.

4.2 This approach is the responsibility of us all and can be implemented in many ways and, as with all new journeys, you start with the easy route. This may be by more informal routes such as:

- finding opportunities to have conversations with people of other faiths when you meet your neighbours when shopping
- helping at a local community event

or by routes more formally facilitated by The Department for Development with the Faiths Engagement Group and/or St Philips Centre, Leicester, such as:

- providing training courses and public events
- resourcing individuals and congregations in their inter faith engagement
- developing opportunities to deepen our theology and spirituality in the context of other faiths

4.3 Good practice, therefore, should include:

- Working with people of other religions and faiths whenever possible.
For example, if your church is considering running a lunch club or local campaign, ask “Can we work with our neighbours on this?”
- Responding helpfully to requests.
At the local level many stories, questions and issues will arise. For example; How might we respond to requests for help in planning a mixed faith marriage? How do I lead assembly in a mixed faith local school? Should I take part in prayers in the local mosque? There will be issues around attitudes towards sexuality, the use of church premises by other faith groups, gender and asylum issues.
- Providing support in the community.
For instance, churches can help organising faith speakers to visit schools; help in arranging visits to places of worship; help students look at their image of other faith groups and see if this is different from the stereotypes portrayed by the media.
- Working together.
It is important that churches feel that there is support and resources available in these matters of inter faith relations. So churches can share stories and examples of good and successful practice. Resources for group study are available.

4.4 Implementation of this Inter Faith Strategy is dependent on our commitment to:

- Discernment and learning from inter faith engagement as it develops in different local contexts;
- Feeding back such developments and theological insights into our strategic thinking;
- Producing resources to equip and encourage good inter faith dialogue and practice
- Facilitate Scriptural Reasoning Group/s across the diocese
- Identifying and appointing inter faith activists in appropriate local contexts.
- Continue to support SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education) through Diocesan Department of Education representative. (We are currently looking for a new representative)
- Require leaders (ordained and lay) to undertake training and to incorporate into CME programme.
- Working with theological colleges, ministry training courses and vocations programmes to advocate inter faith engagement, cooperating in this with St Philips Centre, Leicester and/or Bradford Churches for Dialogue and Diversity and appropriate Diocesan departments.
- Liaising and cooperating with Schools, Universities, Armed Forces, Prisons and Hospitals and working with their chaplains.
- Developing links with different faith communities and with their representative organizations such as Nottingham Inter Faith Council, Faith to Engage and Faiths Forum East Midlands
- Building relationships with Faith Leaders, especially those with whom we have little or no contact. Bishops to take a lead. Faith Leaders to develop a coherent strategic engagement with local authorities and other agencies, aiming to speak with a common voice on particular issues.
- Engagement with Local Strategic Partnerships strategies for social cohesion from the local to Board levels. The Ven. Peter Hill is currently Faiths Advocate on One Nottingham Board. Responding to Big Society Agenda of the Government in a spirit of partnership.
- Communicating resources and information on appropriate websites

5. Resources

5.1 The Faiths Engagement Group as a place to share experience, resources and to prioritise this aspect of our mission.

5.2 You may find the following resources and websites useful :

Denominational resources

Sharing the Gospel of Salvation General Synod Report
www.presenceandengagement.org.uk/pdf_lib/69_resource

Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England 'Presence and Engagement'

Roman Catholic document "Meeting God in Friend and Stranger"

Methodist document "Called to Love and Praise" (1999)

www.cofe.anglican.org

www.methodist.org.uk

www.catholic-ew.org.uk

All three denominational church sites have links to their interfaith documents

www.presenceandengagement.org.uk

General and ecumenical resources

A 5 session course developed by the Rainbow Project in Hyson Green entitled 'Islam in Britain Today and Christian Responses' (grahamjohnburton@gmail.com)

Young, British and Muslim

Philip Lewis

Love the Stranger: Ministry in Multi-Faith Areas

Roger Hooker and Christopher Lamb

Distinctly Welcoming: Christian presence in a multifaith society
Christian approached to other faiths

*Richard Sudworth
Alan Race and Paul M. Hedges*

Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity & Political Theory

Bhikhu Parekh

Together and Different: Christians engaging with people of other faiths

Edited by Malcolm Torry and Sarah Thorley

May I call you friend? *Sharing our faith with people of other faiths*

A resource for individuals and groups from the Methodist Church

Generous Love A report of the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns

Useful agencies

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland www.ctbi.org.uk

Churches Regional Commission www.crc-online.org.uk

St Philip's Centre, Leicester www.stphilipscentre.org.uk

Bradford Churches for Dialogue and Diversity www.bcdd.org.uk

Nottingham Inter Faith Council www.interfaithnottm.org.uk

Christian-Muslim Forum www.christianmuslimforum.org

East Midlands Churches Forum www.emcf.org.uk

Faiths Forum East Midlands www.ffem.org.uk