

“Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side”: A framework for inter faith dialogue and social action

A response from North East England, resulting from an inter faith consultation held at The Glebe Centre, Murton, County Durham, Monday 25 February 2007, 12.00 – 15.00

This event was organised by the Churches’ Regional Commission for the North East of England in partnership with Government Office for the North East [GONE] and the newly developed North East Regional Faiths Network. The event was planned as a networking opportunity for the 70 participants who attended from a wide-ranging faiths background (the majority were Christian, but there were also Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists and people from the Baha’i faith represented) and sector interests in local authorities and public bodies. Transport was offered from key points across the region and the welcoming process included lunch and informal hospitality.

David Jones (from the Department for Communities and Local Government) briefly outlined the document which formed the basis of this regional consultation, in particular unpacking the notion of “cohesion” and discussing shared values, breaking down barriers and the public policy context. Following some questions and clarifications, the 70 participants were more or less evenly distributed into five groups on the basis of each group tackling two or three questions. Participant had free choice to select the ‘roundtables’ addressing the questions they found most interesting. All ‘roundtables’ were invited to discuss and consider Question 20 relating to the key building blocks needed for inter faith dialogue and social action.

SUMMARY of KEY POINTS

The full notes from the discussion groups are contained in a separate Appendix.

1. The need for a “balance” between national, regional and local inter faith structures was highlighted. Networks at different levels are not necessarily indicative of consistent good communication. Consistent effort, supported by sustainable funding over considerable time, perhaps years, will be need to be put into communication and mutual working before viable and strong results are seen.
2. The Government (both national and local) has a clear operational role to play in fostering community cohesion, besides providing much needed funding, to ensure people will work together on issues of respect and mutual

responsibility and in building relationships. A major assumption that needs to be realised is that we are dealing with human beings, “not figures on paper”. An essential element is to communicate the reasons for taking a course of action rather than just doing for the sake of doing.

3. There is much interest in the co-operation of “faith” and “non-faith” groups and participants were conscious that engagement needs to be inclusive. Contrary to some public perception, faith groups need to be open and welcoming and their enhanced ‘image’ should be an aid to community cohesion. Perhaps implicitly, *face-to-face* (inter faith dialogue and understanding) may come after *side-by-side* (social action). There was evidence from participants’ experience that joint action can lead to better mutual understanding. At the same time, some participants do query what is really meant by “social action” as there can never be a level playing field for all faith groups.

4. In inter faith relations, it is well recognised that there are various routes to learning that is, through first-hand personal experience, through formal settings such as schools, study groups and online resources. However, for key values of tolerance, respect and acceptance, it is crucial for people to know each first as people.

5. It is also recognised that often the rhetoric of “faith” and “race” could appear divergent and separate. It would be important to see how the two strands could converge where appropriate.

6. The notion of “spaces” perhaps requires further elucidation. There are the obvious sensitivities to do with the physical spaces such as places of worship. However, “spaces” in the mass media are worth grappling with, as well as coping with the “emotional spaces” (such as negotiating the difficult terrain of inter faith dialogue and relations, and their gender-specific contexts) and overcoming prejudice currently engendered by our engagement. Hence, “spaces” are not just physical but are concerned with “hearts and minds”.

7. There is a clear recognition within the document (and the concomitant governmental thinking) that women and young people are often excluded or marginalised at all levels of inter faith engagement.

8. We cannot simply assume what the barriers for women are, but need to listen to women to find out what they perceive the barriers to be. Besides some of the more common cultural (including appropriate childcare provision) and communication barriers, there are clearly issues to do with the exclusion of women in the decision making process within many faith structures, and often these are wrongly justified by history and tradition. Rebuilding confidence for

women's greater participation in inter faith structures and relations could be initiated either by the local authority or the voluntary/community sector.

9. Contrary to common perception and prejudice, many young people are already engaged in a number of issues, and perhaps often we do not adequately listen to these views. However, there is also a clear need to consult the 'kids on the estate', specially the ones not motivated and often disadvantaged and they do come from a wide range of (faiths) background. The challenge is how do we engage the "less engaged"? Could we then embed inter faith dialogue and social action into education rather than as an 'add on'?

10. Not surprising, consistently throughout the notes is the view among participants that funding (that is, the lack of it) is both a formidable and perpetual barrier. The Government will need to address this problem so as to improve access to sources of money which will help to create the necessary inter faith infrastructure at all levels. The provision of resources through the Faiths Community Capacity Building Fund was acknowledged and welcomed by participant groups who had accessed these resources.

11. There was a general feeling of "consultation fatigue" with Government documents and initiatives. It would be fair to say that participants wish to see concrete outcomes.

12. Comments from participants implicitly and explicitly indicated important building blocks for inter faith dialogue and social action: Ensuring good communication systems at all levels; Raising awareness of inter faith actions and activities; Constructing arenas for critical discussion and debate; Developing mechanisms for sharing good practice; Opportunities created for engagement in decision making that involves the grassroots; Enhancing the social capital that faith groups contribute to social cohesion and regeneration.

Endnote: The consultation ended on a positive note. Participants had welcomed the opportunity to meet at a regional level and have the opportunity to share experiences from their work at sub-regional and local levels. The commonalities of experience were noted and the three regional organisations were asked to consider the possibility of further regional events.

Andy Lie

(with critical input from Ian Hunter-Smart, Jim Robertson and Paul Southgate)

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APPENDIX

This Appendix contains details of the questions considered by each group and their accompanying notes. It will immediately be observed that the notes (mostly in bullet points) from each group are reproduced (with minimal editing) as they were handed in by the respective scribes and hence may appear somewhat uneven. This is deliberate as there is no attempt at manufacturing or refining the participants’ views. However, as only three groups had the opportunity to discuss the common question (no. 20), the notes are reproduced at the end.

Discussion Group One

Question 1:

Is the balance of structures to facilitate inter faith dialogue and social action at national, regional and local level right?

- Issues about balance; no initiative, support
- Network not necessary indicative of communication
- Media represent contributions [which are] too negative to interact; encouraged to publicise events etc.
- Basic level: local membership unaware – not disseminated at places of worship
- Framework (flexible) to signpost people to local, regional and national structures and organisations
- Issues about demographics in NE and classifications
- 5-10 years of talking to each other before results are seen, therefore real funding issues
- Non-religious groups much less organised than religious ones; hard to include [the former groups].

Question 3:

Are different approaches required at national, regional and local levels? What might these consist of? What role or roles do you

envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing?

- Government and faith communities to work together to explain terminology in inter faith work
- Government has role to play as others do but need to pull together on issues of respect, responsibility

- Local – person to person or no trust (ie. build the person)
- Regional – almost but partly institution to institution
- Larger – institutional mainly

- Government financial facilitation, if serious in moving forward
- Building relationships important, but also need local government support
- Government understanding human beings, not figures on paper
- Communication on the ‘why’ rather than the ‘doing’ essential
- Develop [college and] models of support for faith and no faith

Discussion Group Two

Question 4:

Are there appropriate opportunities in your community and your local area to learn about different faiths and beliefs?

Question 5:

How do we improve opportunities for learning about different religions and beliefs and build on existing best practice?

Opportunities for learning which build understanding:

Learning by experiencing

- Look for very local opportunities to learn about different faiths/beliefs e.g. local shopkeepers, neighbours
- Sharing festivals/ Visiting places of worship
- Getting to know people first as people
- Becoming familiar with faith community buildings as public spaces – community resource
- Values of tolerance/respect/acceptance taught within home/family

Learning in formal settings

- Finding appropriate resources e.g. library information, North East Religious Learning Resource Centre www.resourcescentreonline.co.uk
- Importance of teaching and learning about different faiths/beliefs in schools – role of RE. More difficult to reach 16+
- Important to seek opportunities for more sustained study together e.g. sacred texts

Barriers to learning

- Public perception is that faith communities are exclusive and often work against cohesion, however faith communities think they are open and welcoming – need to do more to enhance their image
- English reserve – don't like to ask or initiate conversation, prevents dialogue/interaction
- Community Cohesion means different things in different communities
- Values learnt in the home/family can reinforce stereotypes
- Too many separate networks – need to work together e.g. Race/Faith

Discussion Group Three

Question 9: What spaces are being used by faith communities for inter faith dialogue and social action?

- Confused with meaning of inter faith: Christian/Christian; Christian/Jewish/Muslim Faith community / race community
- Use fire station – neutral space – to start inter faith; like schools(to use these places for community service) ... school places after school time, 9-3pm; 5-8 pm
- Sensitive to use other faith places
- Encourage dialogue – share places
- Meeting in civic centre – good place but expensive
- Survey a building first – then bring people
- Government should support community by offering places; then cohesion/interfaith will be improved
- Only places available at churches
- Space in media: paper, local radio, “Look North” [a daily prime time local TV programme]
- Organise activity under faith – sensitive to non-faith – leaders, community
- Public places only for days – Muslim, Christian, Jews – need to organize activities where all different groups mix – cohesion
- Black and Asian disco; White disco --- ALL [inclusive] DISCO
- Youth & Community Centre x 35 – one fulfill other needs / minority culture/ culture difference

- Sensitive issue – gender specific

Question 10:

What barriers are there to sharing spaces?

- Barriers – civic centre; who owns the centre
- Different cultures – women wearing scarves, drunk people on bus with other passengers; misunderstanding and ignorance/perceptions

Question 11:

What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing to create shared spaces?

- Look at capacity building; [provide] educational expertise
- Change places to fit other requirements / criteria / needs – mapping; government building; council

Discussion Group Four

Question 12:

Access to funding, leadership skills, and misconceptions about the role of faith in public life have all been recognised as issues which can limit the ability of faith communities to bridge and link. Are there other barriers in your community or local area which need to be overcome? Who needs to take action, and what do they need to do?

- Diversity within diversity. Assumptions
- Lack of encounter with ‘other’ groups (different faiths, ethnicity, etc.)
- Funding / ‘cost of involvement’
- Lack of capacity
- Need to use variety of techniques: community development; arts culture, education as part of what ‘social action’ might be.
- Sharing practice.

Question 13:

To what extent does inter faith social action in your local area enable you to work side by side with people who have no religious belief? How might social action involving faith communities and wider civil society be increased and strengthened?

- Issue-based response can galvanise communities

- Faith-based roles in e.g. LSPs, allow input into secular-based discussions
- There is willingness in secular communities.
- Funding!

Question 14:

What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing to increase the level and scope of inter faith social action?

- If the aim of ... is 'social action'; what is the term to mean?
- Page 16 of document leads us to [a] non level-playing field for all faith groups in terms of social viability to participate and develop this work
- Assumes individuals are able to participate
- People of non-faith can still have input but why are they to be engaged on inter faith work.

Discussion Group Five

Question 16:

How might the barriers experienced by women be overcome?

Question 17:

What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing in overcoming these?

These two questions tended to be merged into one.

- Firstly needed to identify the barriers as perceived:
 - Cultural and religious barriers – women excluded from equality in their faith groups
 - Language
 - Lack of information
 - Change in nature of society
 - In many faiths, women not included in the decision making process
 - History and tradition play a part
 - In the Christian church women are the ones that make things 'tick' but are often not representative at higher levels – worse in other religions.
- Not enough women put themselves forward – hence there is a great need to educate/empower women in our society.

- Need to listen to women to find out what they perceive the barriers as being.

There is probably a huge pool of women in the North East who have not moved on from looking after their homes/families.

- Many women need their confidence building before they can go on to other things, doesn't matter who initiates this, LA or VCS, as long as it can be accessed.
- Most important is the need for childcare. Crucial it is recognised that funders need to think 'outside the box'. Often the lack of childcare etc. can be down to cost.
- A lot of work done by women in our region is done by voluntary organisations and here again funding can be an issue.
- Important that any gatherings etc. are arranged on the right days/times/venue to suit women.
- Needs to be a gradual building up of trust.
- Faith groups can help women get out into the wider world.

Question 18:

How might the barriers experienced by young people be overcome?

Question 19:

What role or roles do you envisage government, faith communities, faith and non-faith based organisations, inter faith organisations and wider civil society playing in overcoming these?

Again the questions got merged into one.

- 'Street-cred' – it's not cool to be religious. Peer pressure can make things difficult for young people.
- Young people need role models.
- Young people automatically challenge everything and anything.
- It was acknowledged that the media was very important in modern culture. Using 'old tools' was often not effective, needed to look at modern communication technologies.
- Need to ask the young people themselves what they want to see happen.
- Misconceptions about young people – particularly Asian young men.

- Since 9/11 quite a lot of young people have looked more at faith issues – a lot to do with identity.
- There are issues among the BME community – never mind the wider community. Not much statutory provision for the BME community.
- Young people we consult are often already engaged in things – need to consult the ‘kids on the estate’, the ones not motivated and often disadvantaged. How do we engage the ‘less engaged’?
- Large barrier is funding.
- Such issues need embedding into education – not just as an ‘add on’.

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- Felt we have ‘consultation fatigue’ – need to see some outcomes.
 - 12 people in our group – felt an important part was the networking amongst members afterwards, in particular a BECON youth worker and someone from Stockton Riverside College.

Question 20:

What can successful existing approaches tell us about the key building blocks needed for inter faith dialogue and social action?

This question was covered to some extent by 3 groups.

- Grassroots up rather than imposed
- Deal with hindrances, e.g. ‘only true religion’ – teach through faith
- Respect towards the person
- Agreed commonalities
- Examples of good practice sharing
- Engage places where people meet together
- Money not to be ignored to building and developing, necessary for resources
- Issues that concern whole community to bring people together
- Cohesion needs to be active not left to chance
- Like minds moving forward together
- More caring and aware society
- Looking to opportunities for interaction
- Understanding through co-operation
- Good press coverage ie. positive and recurring at local levels especially
- Clear information

- Interaction between faith and cultural activities
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- Respect and their needs are met
 - Check mechanism – will create shared spaces
 - Equality / tolerance – equal access; equal outcomes
 - Problem of cultures! Even inside one same religion, women not study/go to certain mosques
 - Community only speak Urdu/Bengali/ Turkish and not English!
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- Sharing good practice
- Education
- Dialogue
- Relationships
- Trust

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