



Tees Valley Inter Faith Stakeholder Event

The Education Centre Stockton

Wednesday 18th November 2009

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Tees Valley Inter Faith Stakeholder event was commissioned by the North East Regional Faiths Network (NERFN), in conjunction with the Tees Valley Faith Communities Regeneration Group. The event brought together stakeholders from the 5 local authority areas that make up Tees Valley – Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland, Darlington, Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees, with support and input from the Churches' Regional Commission (CRC), the Government Office for the North East (GONE) and the Cedar Partnership.

The event was timed to coincide with the first ever National Inter Faith Week and reflected the key principles and messages set out in 'Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side' (2008), the government's framework for partnership in a multi-faith society. We thank Stockton Borough Council who hosted the event at Stockton's Education Centre, all 5 local authorities who shared in the planning and resourcing of the event and Paresh Solanki from the UK Inter faith Network who took and supplied photographs of the event.

DELEGATES



It was recognised that the 'experts were in the room'. The 90 delegates included local authority officers at all levels and from all sections, elected members, representatives from other public bodies including health, fire and rescue service, police and offender management services, representatives from faith communities (both individuals and groups) and from other voluntary and community sector organisations.' Delegates received information packs with key information about inter faith activity and who was engaged in such work across the Tees Valley.

THE EVENT

The event itself was interactive and participative with a mix of presentations, workshops, theatre and case studies. The programme provided opportunities for networking and sharing information and good practice. Each local authority, for example, showcased an outstanding example of good practice from their area. These 5 case studies highlighted the importance of positive partnership working in developing inter faith engagement and activity.

THE KEY QUESTION

THE KEY QUESTION: ‘**What is the most appropriate infrastructure to support and encourage inter faith activity and action in the Tees Valley?**’ was suggested to the participants as a ‘core theme’ they should keep in mind throughout the event. The keynote address was given by Rosemary Hartill, former BBC religious affairs correspondent, who challenged us to consider ‘**what’s the point of encouraging inter faith activity in the Tees Valley?**’ Her thought-provoking analysis set the scene for the workshop activity by providing both an intellectual critique and a menu of practical ideas and examples of how the inter faith agenda in the Tees Valley might be progressed.

THEATRE

Movers and Shakers Training entertained participants with a short seasonal theatre performance, based on the pantomime Cinderella, which was a light hearted and amusing portrayal of the interrelated themes of equality, diversity, tolerance, respect and acceptance of difference. David Faulkner and Sumati Bala from Movers and Shakers Training invited the participants to explore and critically comment on the themes that emerged from the performance via a question and answer session.

WORKSHOP 1: FAITH AND THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

This topic was summarised by one planning group member who said that a colleague had recently told her, when they were talking about faith in the workplace, “I just do my job – faith has nowt to do with it!” We explored the role of faith in the workplace and the wider public domain by addressing the following issues:

- Does faith play a role in people’s working lives?



Delegates felt that faith does have a part to play in people’s working lives and the roles and structures that exist within organisations, but there can be barriers. The influence and acceptance of faith can often depend on the individual role, the particular organisation and its capacity to meet the requirements of religious and cultural awareness policies.

- How does faith influence / impact upon people’s way of living & identity?

*Delegates acknowledged the complexity that faith can bring to people’s way of living and identity in the public domain. On the one hand, faith and belief can bring a sense of vocation or discipline which is helpful to public life but, on the other hand, ignorance or lack of information and insight can lead to fear, intolerance and ultimately insularity and extremism. The emergence of a multi-faith society requires public bodies to be much more sophisticated in the development of policies and practices. Many organisations find this challenging, despite the fact that the creation of **shared values** that transcend individual faiths should ensure that the traditions of the majority of individual faiths and beliefs are respected.*

- Do policies normally reflect moral & ethical (faith) perspectives... and should they?

Delegates acknowledged that the ethical and moral stance in many policies is influenced by a faith based [mainly Christian] historical perspective. Although in recent times this has broadened out, faith and belief still influence policies depending upon factors such as leadership and levels of awareness. As people and

organisations become more aware of other faith traditions (and non-faith) the situation becomes more complex. This tends to result in conflict between individual faith perspectives and 'state' perspectives becoming more acute.

WORKSHOP 2: DEVELOPING BETTER UNDERSTANDING



The aim of workshop 2 was to develop a better understanding of inter faith activity in the Tees Valley. Whilst it is recognised that much good inter faith work is going on, the activity tends to be 'in pockets' rather than shared systematically across the whole sub region. This workshop gave delegates the opportunity to exchange ideas and information, leading to more collaboration and networking, by addressing the key issues below:

- Consider how different faith and belief groups work and operate as organisations.

It would appear that improving different faith understanding, funding for inter faith projects and the role of schools in developing inter faith tolerance and insight are the key messages coming out of this topic. Engaging more people will only happen if there is clarity of purpose and a focus on outcomes. One idea was to better coordinate and communicate key faith festival dates and cascade this information electronically.

- Gain information and ideas for bringing people together in the Tees Valley area.

The lack of many specific concrete suggestions on this topic illustrates the need to gain information, knowledge and ideas in order to improve inter faith collaboration in Tees Valley. The planning group will need to determine how to develop this theme by engaging with the relevant stakeholders identified.

- Improve understanding of different faiths and beliefs & discuss the mechanisms of engagement.

The practical, thoughtful and innovative ideas put forward could mould into an action plan. One suggestion was to involve university students to research and log the faith based internet activity (face book etc) that already exists or could be created. Another suggestion was to create an independent advisory group to host meetings at specific faith based locations to give presentations and advice on wider strategic inter faith issues. Certain faith buildings were felt to be a barrier to successful inter faith dialogue.

WORKSHOP 3: WORKING TOGETHER / FAITHS INFRASTRUCTURE IN TEES VALLEY

The aim of this workshop was to examine the desire for a Tees Valley inter faith infrastructure organisation, how existing faith and inter faith structures might contribute and what will be needed to make progress. This workshop was designed to 'get down to business' by translating the day's learning and activity into action to determine a clear way forward.

The planning group asked participants to consider the following key issues:



- Critically explore what faith / inter faith activity already exists in Tees Valley.

Delegates observed varying levels of commitment by and sustainability of existing organisations. Concern expressed that the existing structures do not reach many of the stakeholders who need to be involved. Suggestions included undertaking a gap analysis, use 1-1 contacts to engage individuals and groups, share information and resources.

- Do existing inter faith groups work across Borough and local authority boundaries?

The lack of information produced for this topic may illustrate the paucity of information on cross boundary working.

- Which structures might be most effective and relevant?

There was a divergence of opinion on whether regional, sub-regional or local structures are required but the majority of delegates seemed to suggest that all 3 have their place depending upon the focus and the type of outcomes required. Developing structures that are both interactive, effective at sharing information and knowledge and which promote better understanding are important elements

- Who is best placed take the work forward?

The planning group, in conjunction with NERFN, are now engaged in determining how best to take the work forward, bearing in mind the complexity of the current picture and the need to produce a way forward that everyone can accept and own. Delegates commented on the challenge of including more people in the process, the opportunity to get people from faith communities involved in social action, and the possibility of linking this work to other existing activity. Whilst it is easier for paid staff to undertake faith engagement, volunteers often do not have the commitment or time to get engaged. Local authorities should be better represented at faith / inter faith meetings. Any new organisation developed needs to be focussed and have the ability to call upon different faiths and share resources and ideas. It should concentrate on joint projects and have clear aims and objectives. The decline of existing forums and structures should be seen as an opportunity to create something new.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS for planning group

1. Respecting the principle of subsidiarity, agree what activity is most appropriate at different levels: regional, sub regional, local.
2. Produce a clear action plan appropriate to each level.
3. Consider what resources are needed for each level.
4. Determine how action plan may be taken forward.
5. Discuss formally with NERFN how the 'leadership' requirement will be managed and ongoing work progressed
6. Consider holding a similar event to review progress in 1 year's time.