



‘WORKING WITH PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT FAITH TRADITIONS’

Report on the workshops

**Nunsmoor Play Centre, Arthur’s Hill,
Newcastle**

16th and 29th January 2007

**Report by Fiona Damm, Faith Communities
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‘Working with people from different Faith traditions’

BACKGROUND

The Churches’ Regional Commission in the North East and the CHAT Shop (Churches Acting Together in Arthur’s Hill) have both been working on projects funded by the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund:

- CRC has been looking at the needs and concerns of all faith-based communities and organisations with the aim of identifying appropriate community development training for people working or supporting, people from different faith traditions.
- The CHAT Shop has been working on a women’s interfaith project with a view to encouraging women to participate and get involved within their local community and to encourage women to work across different faiths/cultures.

As the two projects are working in similar areas, it was decided to work in partnership to run two workshops to look at the issues that people working with different faith traditions experience.

Initially the idea was to focus on a geographical area, i.e. Arthur’s Hill and the other areas in the west end of Newcastle. However, workers from outside this area expressed an interest in the workshops, so the geographical area was widened to include Sunderland, and Durham. There appeared to be a real demand from people to meet together to discuss issues relating to faith and culture, with many people saying this was the first opportunity they had had to explore the issues that faced them in their work.

In the planning stages of the workshops it had been anticipated that the women from the Chat Shop Friends Together project or other participants from local groups would attend the participants’ workshop. For various practical reasons, this proved difficult:

- Several different interpreters would have been required to capture the views of the service users/participants. It would have been extremely time consuming and costly to co-ordinate the attendance of both interpreters and the participants at a workshop at a set time and place
- Even with the provision of childcare, women may find it hard to engage as they would like to while the children are nearby.
- People from different cultures and faith backgrounds may not feel confident in expressing, what are sometimes very personal views in a group situation.

- Some women would prefer not to attend an event where men were present.

It was decided that the best way forward was, to seek the views of the project/community workers from both their own perspective, and from the point of view of the people they worked with. Many of the volunteers and workers at the workshops had their own faith perspective to bring to the discussions. They also had experience of working with people from different faith traditions on a one to one basis and felt that they could respond to some of the issues which participants of services or groups had experienced.

The decision was made, therefore, to hold two workshops:

- **Workshop 1 (16th January) - A Workers' Perspective**, with aims:
 - 1 Identify key barriers/issues for workers engaging with people from different faith and cultural backgrounds
 - 2 Find ways to address and overcome these barriers/issues
 - 3 Identify any support/training which would be useful to you in your work.
- **Workshop 2 (29th January) – Consideration of the users' perspective**, with aims:
 - 1 Identify what prevents service users/participants from engaging with each other and with your organisation.
 - 2 Identify ways to address and overcome these barriers/issues
 - 3 Identify any support/training issues which would enable you to engage more effectively with people from different faith and cultural backgrounds

The workshops were well attended with 20 people at the first, and 15 at the second. Representatives came from:

- The North England Refugee Service in both Newcastle and Sunderland
- The CHAT Shop (Churches Acting Together in Arthur's Hill')
- Friends Together' interfaith women's group
- Toy café Centre for Cultural Curiosity
- The Time Exchange
- Tyne and Wear Museums
- Westgate Children's Centre
- Sure Start Rye Hill Centre
- Parentline
- Churches Regional Commission
- Durham University researcher
- Middlesbrough Council of Faiths

OUTCOMES WORKSHOP 1

Identify key barriers/issues for workers engaging with people from different faith and cultural backgrounds

These could be summarised in three main categories: Language/Communication; Culture/Knowledge; Faith and Identity. These are discussed below:

1. Language/Communication

Multiple languages were seen as key challenges to communication, as was communicating cross-culturally. Even with an interpreter present, it is difficult to capture the essence of what is being said and this can make it difficult for workers to understand what is going on in a group discussion. Without knowledge and language it is hard for people to build relationships with others in a group and this was a point that was raised several times. It was also hard to communicate with people from different faiths and cultures, as to how exactly the British organisational structures and systems worked. For some refugees, and asylum seekers, a visit to the doctor is fraught with difficulties.

2. Culture/knowledge

A lack of knowledge of other cultures can lead to misunderstandings and assumptions, often rooted in media stereotypes. One dilemma discussed was how to deal with one venue's unwelcoming reaction to an Iraqi men's group who attended a community centre. The worker was unsure whether she should challenge her work colleague about this attitude; get the group to complain; or just go to another more welcoming venue, or some other response. In practice, it was often easier to just go elsewhere. The group consensus was that people needed to be challenged about their attitudes to people from other cultures but it was the way in which this was carried out that was important if attitudes were to be changed.

A further difficult situation was recounted by an attendee of the workshop who was serving in a local community café:

A local member of the BNP who had come into a community café said he would not be served by a black man. In this case, there were other voluntary workers present in the café, and they had supported each other to gently challenge this behaviour, and tried to build a relationship with the man, despite his original prejudice.

It was agreed by those present at the workshop that there was a distinction between respecting people (which should always be essential) and necessarily having to respect their views (which, if they were oppressive, might warrant further exploration as part of the worker's intervention).

Workers also experienced difficulties in getting people from different backgrounds to mix and feel comfortable in new situations and to be open enough to share their emotions and experiences, especially where they were not encouraged to do this in their own culture.

The fear of offending people was cited as a major barrier to engaging and working with people from different faith traditions. It was felt that it was really important to not be afraid to ask people about their religion, beliefs or culture and to listen and learn from these discussions. This was a two way process and people should also not be afraid to 'be themselves' and share, if appropriate, their own beliefs and faith.

3. Faith and identity

Who we are and what we believe was an issue for many people. Workers felt that out of respect for equal opportunities, they could not promote one religion over another. However, the Christians in the group discussion recognised that they had not met anybody who had been affected by their celebrations of Christmas and often felt less able to publicly celebrate Christmas as a religious festival, compared to those festivals celebrated by other faiths.

One volunteer queried:

'as a volunteer how should I identify my own faith tradition? And how vocal should I be?'

This led onto discussion as to whether people should leave their faith behind' when they went to work, or could you share your faith with other people, if for example, you had built up a relationship and trust over time? It was felt that this was an issue which was frequently not talked about in training.

The very use of the word 'faith' can also be seen as divisive. The CHAT Shop initially had difficulty in recruiting women to attend their sessions because of the reference to 'faith' in the title of the group, which the women were unhappy about. The group was renamed 'Friends Together'.

Respecting all religions is seen as a pre-requisite to recognising diversity within, as well as between, faiths. One practical example of how to do this was for people to talk to their co-workers from other faiths and religions.

The characteristics of the worker can also make a difference, for example women from certain faith traditions may not attend a group run by a male worker.

Find ways to address and overcome these barriers/issues (Workers' Perspective)

Each of the three main categories: Language/Communication; Culture/Knowledge; Faith and Identity were then addressed to determine ways that these barriers/issues could be overcome:

1. Language/Communication

The provision of ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) was seen as essential to working with people from different faith traditions and cultures.

There were many interpretations as to how ESOL services could be used innovatively:

- ESOL classes could be held in a museum to encourage people to visit and access the resources there
- an ESOL resource book could be used for a museum visit in order to provide information in several languages.
- a travelling ethnographic resource could be taken to ESOL classes to explore culture through objects and poetry.
- it was suggested that ESOL could be task focused i.e. to help people find a job

A free telephone interpreting service, to help families to access information, was also suggested.

Communication was seen as affecting everyone, not just those who are different from the 'norm'. As one person said:

"We know there are differences, so we have to train people to deal with diversity".

One of the main ways of doing this is by developing communication skills, which are important for everyone. (One example cited was an African company programme, which was failing when targeted specifically at race relations, but succeeded when it focused on communication skills for everyone).

2. Culture/Knowledge

It was felt that often we make assumptions that ethnic groups may react in the same way, or speak a certain language. It was considered important, therefore to 'challenge' people's misconceptions and prejudices as one worker put it:

"by asking questions, and to look for those answers instead of them coming to me"

In order to create an atmosphere of respect and knowledge, it was important to have activities which celebrate the diversity of cultures. Many practical examples were given of how to overcome barriers:

- attending and promoting cultural and faith festivals
- holding information workshops for the local community
- each week hold a different activity where people can show where they live on a map, make each other's national flag, make a snack, play a game or sing a song from their country of origin.

It was important to make sure that the practical needs of people were met by ensuring adequate crèche and child care was available. Strategically, it was felt that funding streams did not always recognise the importance of 1 to 1 support and mentoring. It was essential in order to build up relationships of trust and to value and learn about one another's culture. This was a two way process and allowed people to see what refugees/asylum seekers and others could offer themselves.

Motivating people by encouraging them to work towards achieving certificates or accreditation, or helping people to get job references etc. was also important to encourage participation. Positive role modelling was also suggested as a practical way to building positive relationships with service users/participants

Many examples of good practice were suggested:

- Working with community development workers who have a relationship with different cultural and identity groups
- Rules and guidelines and protocols were suggested as one possible response to overcoming some issues, but in some circumstances, their usefulness was seen as potentially limited.
- Visit established groups where people are happy to communicate and piggy back consultation onto their sessions
- Music group – opportunity for volunteers to meet and work with workers on a social basis
- Opportunities for workers to have professional training or structured learning.
- Opportunities to learn about other faiths and cultures

3. Faith and identity

It was important to build trust over time before sharing your own beliefs. Someone suggested that there should be guidance written into the person specification for volunteers on how to address the issue of sharing a person's own belief with those they were working with.

Identify any support/training which would be useful to you in your work (Workers' Perspective)

The suggestions for how to take what had been learned in the workshops can be summarised in two points:

1. A local level community network

Most people stated that one of the most beneficial elements of the workshop was that workers had been able to discuss their work with people from different faith traditions in a confidential and supportive environment. A network would enable people to meet regularly to discuss what they have learnt, done differently and to improve on the issues discussed. It could act as a forum to share ideas on good practice. A directory of people/organisations working across different faith traditions would also be useful to help with networking.

2. To form a steering group.

It often takes up to a year to establish a group/service and when the contract ends the work that has been done is largely wasted. It was agreed that in order to effect change, the findings of the workshops should be circulated at a more strategic level. A member of the CHAT Shop board suggested that the report was sent to local MPs. The Chat Shop would also look at forming a Steering Group to discuss the ideas which had been raised at the workshops, but this was likely to be at a more local level ie the west end of Newcastle.

OUTCOMES WORKSHOP 2

Identify what prevents service users/participants from engaging with each other, and with your organisation (service users perspective)

As anticipated there was some overlap between those issues and barriers experienced by workers and those identified by participants and service users. These have therefore been summarised under the same headings as in the first Workshop.

It was the combination of not one, but several barriers, which participants and service users found overwhelming.

1. Language/communication

Not surprisingly language was again a key issue for people. Without knowledge and language it was hard for people to access services or join in a group. ESOL classes are therefore essential to help people to access services but also to interact with each other. The Government policy in reducing the provision ESOL was viewed with great misgiving by all those present at the workshops.

2. Culture/Knowledge

However the problem was seen to be much wider than this. There is a shared lack of understanding and knowledge of cultural practices, i.e. BME (black minority ethnic) groups, refugees, asylum seekers, as well as host community members who just don't know enough about each others' culture. This covers the 'I don't like to ask' perspective of the English, while for people from other cultures it is sometimes a lack of confidence and not knowing what is expected of them that is a barrier to understanding our culture

People may have a limited experience of using public services in their own countries. This has implications for people accessing public services such as social security and the NHS, and housing but also in a cultural context ie people may not find a cultural interest/identity to relate to within a museum or art gallery.

Differences in culture were also apparent in family life, such as the way that children are treated (i.e. condoning smacking) or how women are treated (subject to domestic violence or arranged marriages). The problem is further compounded as people often have no extended family to turn to for help and support.

One person stated that 'a lack of confidence and understanding of what is expected of them was a major issue for people from different faith traditions and cultures'.

One worker gave an example where she had organised a social event for some refugees and asylum seekers. There were free non alcoholic drinks available for guests. However, no-one was going up to the bar to get a drink so the worker spent most of the evening ferrying drinks individually to people! The problem was that people were just not comfortable with the concept of going and helping themselves to free drinks.

Another example was given where a volunteer had asked someone home for Sunday lunch. The person kept refusing the invitation. On further investigation it turned out that the person was frightened of offending the host and did not know what were the customs or norms for someone visiting a house in this country.

Sometimes there were just too many barriers for people to cross at one time: Some of the examples given were:

- coping with a strange language
- strange customs
- strange food
- strange buildings
- understanding how to use public transport
- visit the Doctor
- understand the currency

Actually getting people to attend a taster course, or a group meeting was in itself a challenge because people often thought it was 'not for them'. One worker had tried unsuccessfully to get some older women to attend a free trial session for an aerobics class without success. The worker, decided to meet with them in person, at a class they already attended on a Sunday. The women agreed that if they could meet at the same time on a Sunday, at the same venue, they would be willing to try something new.

3. Faith and Identity

Staff from the North England Refugee Service said that religion had not been raised as an issue with their service users. This could be because some asylum seekers have lived in several countries and are used to looking after themselves. The dynamics of the organisation reflect this. There is a regional refugee forum which is an umbrella organisation to bring people together by grouping them by country, or language, and from this they will find self identify their own religious grouping. A volunteer co-ordinator gave a personal example from several years ago when he too had been a refugee. He only settled into the country after he and his family had found a Christian church in the area and he felt that responding to people's faith was important to their whole well-being.

Tension between 'official' religious beliefs and personal faith and people not being comfortable to communicate or discuss personal issues, were also seen as a barrier to people from different faith traditions meeting together. Where meetings were held was also important. It was better if people could meet in a neutral venue and not say a church hall, although this was not always feasible due to costs, and locality etc.

Identify ways to address and overcome these barriers/issues (service users' perspective)

As for the first workshop, each of the three main categories: Language/Communication; Culture/knowledge; Faith and Identity have been addressed to determine ways that these barriers/issues could be addressed.

1. Language/Communication

The continuing provision of ESOL, was seen as a pre-requisite to people being able participate in groups and in accessing services. Using basic language and making it easy to understand was important, as was getting feedback from clients to make adjustments to their language needs.

2. Culture/knowledge

It was difficult to match individual aims with those of a project. Although this was seen as an area of tension for project workers, it also had a knock on effect on the type of service that could be provided for participants. For example, it was not always possible to provide ESOL due to the high cost involved, or to work with people on a one to one basis.

The time taken to set up and work with groups from different faith traditions is not reflected in the time allowed for a project. Recognition of successful projects should be reflected at strategic level, by the continuation of funding.

Training for clients and staff ie awareness raising sessions. was also suggested.

Several ways were suggested as a means of actually getting people to attend classes, or sessions:

- Choose activities common to all cultures.
- Taster sessions were also popular with participants.
- Advertising what was available by word of mouth, and via other organisations
- Keeping up to date with other providers and organisations to provide information
- Networking to share good practice
- A directory of who was working with faith groups in your area would be welcomed
- Being adaptable and responsive to the needs of clients was important
- Being clear on expectations of sessions so people knew what was expected of them.
- Using people's own cultures to share ie food, music, stories, craft
- Celebrate different faith festivals
- Practical provision such as crèche, transport and an appropriate venue

3. Faith and Identity

Some people felt that while celebrating the diversity of different faiths, it was equally important not to focus on 'faith' itself. Others felt that was hard to separate their faith from themselves as it was part of their identity. This raises a whole raft of issues, which it was not possible to address in this workshop.

Identify any support/training issues which would enable you to engage more effectively with people from different faith and cultural backgrounds (Service Users' Perspective)

It was considered important that service providers and project workers actually **asked** what the views of people who access their services were. This was not always done and as several participants said 'I will ask, listen and learn' in future.

The suggestions for a network were again raised to meet regularly to discuss relevant topics and issues. A lead organisation would initially have to instigate the network, and at this stage it was uncertain who would actually do this, as the CRC project was drawing to a close.

A regional event was suggested in order to bring everyone together at a Regional level to discuss some of the issues which were discussed at the workshops.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Did the workshops meet the outcomes?

The workshops identified the main issues and barriers, faced by workers and participants/service users, and identified ways in which these might be addressed. As there were similarities in the findings from both workshops the same categories have been used throughout the report ie: Language and communication; culture and knowledge and faith and identity.

The support and training issues for both workers and for participants and service users were also identified and have been highlighted separately in the report. The main findings from the workshop can be summarised as:

Language was identified as a key factor in the ability of both workers and participants being able to communicate and engage with each other, and in participants' ability to access services and support groups. It is vital that the provision of ESOL is continued, and this needs to be raised at a strategic level.

The workshops highlighted the need for training in diversity and communication skills to ensure everyone is treated equally.

The workshops raised many difficult and complex issues around culture, ethnicity and faith, not all of which could be addressed within the confines of the workshops.

One of the main barriers and issues identified for workers was a lack of knowledge of other **cultures** and faiths, and the fear of offending people. This can in part be addressed by training, by networking and support from other colleagues working in the same area, and by not being afraid to ask questions. In order to create an atmosphere of respect and knowledge it was important to have activities which celebrate the different diversity of cultures and many examples have been given of how to achieve this. It was also important to 'challenge' where appropriate, the misconceptions and attitudes towards people of different cultures, in a sensitive manner.

From the participants' and service users' perspective, a lack of understanding of British **culture**, was much broader, encompassing the need to know about how services and organisations are run in this country, and the need to understand what is expected of them in a social context. One to one mentoring was valuable in this context and funding needs to be available to ensure that this facility is accessible to participants and service users.

The issue of **faith** was important for workers and participants/ service users. For workers with a personal faith it was important that they felt able to share this faith, with the people they were working with, if the situation was

appropriate. It was an important pre-requisite to recognising diversity within as well as between faiths, that all faiths were treated with respect with no one faith being promoted above another.

THE WAY FORWARD

The findings from this report will be used to inform any CRC report for the 'Faith in the North East Regeneration project'.

Members of the workshop have agreed to their details being circulated to each other and these will be sent out with this report. (A recommendation from the workshops was to have a regional directory of those working with faith groups)

The Chat Shop would like to consider forming a localised West End of Newcastle network for workers working with people from different faith traditions and cultures. The remit for this group could be to:

- Network and share good practice with other organisations
- promote the understanding of culture and faith
- look at how clusters/networks interact with each other
- review how other community development groups in the area, network and share information within organisations or outside between organisations.

The process involved in getting people together for the workshops, and the recommendations that have emerged from the report, could be the basis for forming similar faith worker networks across the region.

One of the main outcomes of the workshops was that if any of the issues and recommendations in the report were to be effective, (ie as the continuation of funding for ESOL, or the need for continuation of funding for successful projects) then it was important that this was taken up at a more strategic level.

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