

East of England Regional Meeting of Inter Faith Groups

**Organised by
The Woolf Institute, the Cambridge Interfaith Programme
and the East of England Faiths Agency
Working In Partnership**

**Venue – The Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge
Tuesday October 22nd 2024, 10:00 am till 2:00 pm**

Introduction to the day by the Chair

- Dr Iona Hine, Programme Manager (Partnerships & Engagement) at Cambridge Interfaith Programme welcomed participants and explained the structure of the day.

Who are we and why are we here?

- Participants introduced themselves and their groups and were invited to share their hopes for the day which included:
 - To gain insights on how to help local communities
 - To meet new people
 - Renew the sense of the ways in which interfaith can build peace
 - Reach hard to reach communities
 - Make contacts and see how we can work together as a group
 - To re-invigorate dormant local groups
 - That this meeting led to further meetings in other places in the region

Re-invigorating Interfaith

- Dr Hine began the session with a presentation on the themes that emerged from a survey taken of the attending organisations. That would then be used as a basis for broader discussion on re-invigorating interfaith. Salient points from her presentation included:
 - Out of the 28 organisations [planning to be] present, 20 had responded to the survey. It could not be seen as a scientific survey, but insights could still be gleaned about organisations and their health.
 - Not all organisations were dominated by over 70s. Some organisations had significant membership of [or involvement from] people under 40.
 - Having more money tended to also be an indicator of younger membership. However, there were some groups with a small financial turnover that had younger members.

- All 20 organisations said that they were impacted by Covid. One organisation had come into being during Covid, and over half of the organisations surveyed said that Covid had resulted in an increase of online activity.
- The biggest challenge expressed by organisations was lack of resources, a category which included money, people and marketing. There were only a couple of mentions of events such as riots or conflict as a challenge.
- Following her presentation, reflections were invited on two questions: What are our healthiest organisations doing and how might others benefit? What kinds of activity show promise for inter-generational engagement?
 - Martin Weightman said that the best way for engagement is by attending each other's events as you get to know people and their festivals. It was also important to talk about how faiths contribute to society collaboratively.
 - James Holland suggested that focusing on young people and schools were good ways of doing interfaith well. For example, many catholic schools didn't have a multifaith student population and visiting these schools – as well as the interaction of the multifaith student population – was a great way of undertaking interfaith activity.
 - Dr Stephen Vickers noted that the shift to a worldviews approach to RE reflected the fact that there were an increasing number of people who weren't religious but saw the value of faith. Young people were also more interested in social action and that could be used as a conduit for greater involvement in interfaith activity from that demographic.
 - Emel Soylu reflected on whether social action should be understood as interfaith work; for example, did it help people realise differences and could you discuss these differences with hard to reach communities? She added that artwork towards a shared goal can take you away from your identity, an activity that could be generative for interfaith encounter.
 - David Rennie spoke on the ways in which art can overcome prejudice. He used the example of Abrahamic women's choirs and how these were a great way to break down divisions between groups.
 - Dr Hine added that University of Cambridge research showed that singing together before a difficult conversation can make the conversation easier.
 - Martin Weightman explained that the All Faiths Network (AFN), in collaboration with a number of other bodies, was trying to continue Inter Faith Week and there was a greater need to build that up. AFN had previously held events during the Week which had included Hindu dancing, gospel singing and African drummers.
 - Sidra Naeem noted how food always went down well at interfaith events and Havering Interfaith Forum often encouraged participants of their events to bring

- their own dish. Interfaith cricket matches were also a great way of getting intergenerational engagement and of generally getting younger people involved.
- Emel Soylu highlighted a previous citizenship programme, funded by the British Council, which hosted talks at religious schools. They aimed to widen students' horizons and included speakers such as a gay, humanist who was born catholic.
 - Julia Ewans suggested that students and younger people were more open than older generations as they were brought up in a completely different world. RE used to focus on making British citizens good Christians, but now the entire context had changed.
 - Navleen Kaur cited the Wisdom project as being a great example of interfaith activity. That had been hosted at Eton College and involved bringing different schools from varying faith and financial backgrounds across Berkshire. Pupils came into schools together for two or three hours and had lessons on themes including: the body; terrorism; and religious beliefs. Following that, students dialogued and learned from each other in a safe, non-judgemental and secure setting.
- Dr Hine asked the younger people in the room for reflections on why young people sometimes don't engage in interfaith activity and also about the barriers to their engagement. Responses included:
 - Julia Makin said that interfaith activity sometimes felt like a lot of very nice, predominantly white people engaging in surface level conversation, but that didn't lead to deeper dialogue. Interfaith activity is also perhaps not understood by younger people.
 - Maira Guardascione spoke from the Italian context and how interfaith activity only became a priority when conflicts and fractures had already become visible.
 - Elliot Vanstone explained that there is sometimes reluctance from people to hand over the reins to younger people. He was very grateful to his colleagues for trusting him enough to give him his role when he was in his early twenties.

Proposals for next steps

- Participants engaged in an interactive activity designed to make them think about where we could go as a group next. They were asked to write down one thing that we should or should not do as a group together i.e. a specific type of activity or a way of approaching things. Each card was then swapped multiple times and then rated out of five by pairs of participants. The swapping and rating parts of the activity were repeated four times and then the average rating was calculated for each suggestion. The top 10 suggestions can be seen in the Appendix to this document.

- The following proposal was then brought for consideration: that the Woolf Institute, CIP and EEFA in partnership provide a network and run occasional regional meetings under the EEFA umbrella. Responses to that included:
 - James Holland said that it was important to establish what will happen at the meetings and what the purpose of these meetings would be.
 - Elliot Vanstone added that it would be helpful to have a kind of database or central hub that people could access to see all of the interfaith meetings in the region. Dr David Capey said that EEFA's website added many events in the region.
 - Sean Finlay noted that hatred and enmity were palpable in the contemporary climate, but politeness was masking the wounds and scars that were opening up. Those difficult conversations needed to be addressed.
 - David Rennie said that any proposal would have to be written formally before it could be agreed upon by his organisation's trustees.

- Some people expressed support for the proposal, but no consensus was reached. It was agreed that EEFA, CIP and the Woolf Institute would have further conversations in the weeks following the meeting and come back to the attendees with what sort of umbrella support that they would be able to offer. Then a decision might be made.

- The meeting was brought to a close.

Attendance list

Canon Tim Alban Jones (Peterborough Interfaith Support Group)

Michael Berkson (Cambridge Inter-Faith Group)

Stephen Bourne (Newmarket Inter-Faith Forum)

Cynthia Capey (Faith and Spirituality Network (Suffolk))

Dr David Capey (East of England Faiths Agency CIC)

Charles Croydon (Ipswich Faith and Community Forum)

Julia Ewans (Cambridgeshire SACRE)

Hilary Finlay (Wisbech Interfaith Forum)

Sean Finlay (Wisbech Interfaith Forum)

David Griffith (Norwich Interfaith Link)

Maira Guardascione (Cambridge Interfaith Programme)

Lesley Habibi (Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Cambridge and Interfaith Connection Cambridge)

Moira Head (Stevenage Inter-Faith Forum)

Roger Head (Stevenage Inter-Faith Forum)

Dr Iona Hine (Cambridge Interfaith Programme)

James Holland (Westminster Interfaith)

Navleen Kaur (Sahara Sisterhood)

Erica Leith (Welwyn Hatfield InterFaith Group)

Bridget Macdonald (Norwich Interfaith Link)

Tariq Mahmood MBE (Havering Interfaith Forum)

Julia Makin (Cambridge Interfaith Programme)

Sidra Naeem (Havering Interfaith Forum)

David Rennie (Interfaith Milton Keynes)

Barbara Richardson Todd (East of England Faiths Agency CIC)

Reynold Rosenberg (Herts Inter Faith Forum)

Raj Shah (Cambridge Inter-Faith Group)

Emel Soylu (South East England Faiths Forum)

David Sparrow (South East England Faiths Forum)

Natalie Steel (Loughborough Council of Faiths)

Dr James Sunderland (The Woolf Institute)

Leo Taylor (The Woolf Institute)

Elliot Vanstone (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales)

Carolyn Vetter (Loughborough Council of Faiths)

Dr Stephen Vickers (South East England Faiths Forum)

Martin Weightman (All Faiths Network)

Professor Daniel Weiss (Cambridge Interfaith Programme)

Luke Wilkinson (Cambridge Interfaith Programme)

Appendix

