

For Friends involved in local ecumenical and interfaith work

Published by the Committee For **Christian & Interfaith Relations** of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain to encourage the exchange of news and views

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Opinions in articles and letters are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent those of this Committee.

Any contributions from Friends are welcome

Editorial

"The unity of Christians never did nor ever will or can stand in uniformity of thought and opinion, but in Christian love only." Thomas Story 1737 (*QF&P* 27.12)

In this spirit Friends on the Christian and Interfaith committee of Britain Yearly Meeting seek to promote ecumenical and interfaith work at all levels, international, national and local. Responsible for appointing Friends to many ecumenical and interfaith bodies, we also seek to share with Friends throughout BYM our own thinking and insights as a committee, and to learn from what many Friends are doing locally.

This edition of CIRcular, the first that I have edited, seeks to reflect the concern of members of several different faith communities about the dangers of division caused by recent events, and the desire to reach out to those who express their faith in different ways, and from within different cultures. In this way a creative dialogue can be maintained.

We know from the Talking Wall at Yearly Meeting at York that many Friends are involved with ecumenical and interfaith work in their own locality. I would welcome receiving from you letters, short articles or photographs, particularly concerning events which are groundbreaking or innovative. I hope that CIRcular, which will continue to be produced 3 or 4 times a year, will help Friends feel part of a bigger network, and help engender mutual encouragement, whilst at the same time not being afraid to tackle difficult issues.

Linda Pegler

The London bombings: to whom do we look?

A statement from the London Mennonite Centre

As Christians serving in London, and seeking to be a resource to British churches, we are left with numerous questions following the bombings here in London on 7 July. We centre them around the question: To whom do we look?

We look to the victims, their families and those serving them. We are conscious that we and our loved ones came close to being caught up in the explosions. Our relief is tempered by our desire to offer support for those whose lives have been directly affected, and our prayers for them.

We look to Muslims in Britain. We look not to blame but to understand and to draw alongside them – knowing that the Christian tradition has also given rise to violence and extremism, and aware that our understanding of Muslims and Islam is too limited. We want to grow in relationship and understanding with Muslim neighbours, and, as fellow people of faith, to stand against any efforts to scapegoat them and their communities.

We look to the perpetrators. We pray for those who have tried to make themselves our enemies, and ask for God's mercy and that they will turn away from violent methods.

We look to this nation. We ask: How has the British Government conducted itself within the international community? How has the UK served the interests of the poor, marginalised and powerless, particularly in the Middle East? What

has the UK done over the years that has provoked anger and hatred? We are conscious that honest answers will make us uncomfortable, and not leave our nation free from responsibility.

We look in the mirror. As workers from different nations, we ask: How have we been complicit in the destructive actions of our governments? How has our passivity and lack of action contributed to our governments' willingness to use violence? How have we failed to reflect God's love in the world? We know that we are not without fault.

We look to our God. As the Psalmist reminds us: Where does our help come from? Our help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. We know that it is only God's strength and justice to which we can look with confidence in a time of anxiety and uncertainty. The Lord is our keeper.

The Way Forward? Leeds Civic Interfaith Event

'The momentum of the moment can be used in a positive way. It has caused us all to be meeting together and talking together for a start'...was the feeling expressed at a meeting in Leeds called by civic leaders in late July and attended by some one hundred interfaith and community leaders.

There was a good spread of faiths, men, women, civic representatives and police. All were trying to seek positive ways forward for the city from the tensions due to local connections with the London bombings. This was against a backdrop of intense police activity and international media encampment in the tiny multi-cultural streets of the inner city areas of Burley and Beeston, and frequent underreporting of "incidents" due to fear...

I had just come from a planning meeting in Burley area for an interfaith event in "Together for Peace", a city peace festival for November. This event, "Heroes for Peace", is to highlight lives lived through and for peace inspired by each of nine world faiths. The original idea and impetus for this music, drama and film presentation came from a young Turkish Muslim couple who hosted this particular gathering at the Turkish students' centre, where we met over

apple juice and coffee. Some streets were still cordoned off and local people at the centre were nervous about the experience of the past few days.

At the civic meeting much discussion focussed on the needs of Leeds young people of various faiths. But those most obviously missing from the meeting were – young people! Reference was made by more than one faith group to the "geriatric mafia" meaning controlling groups of elderly in powerful roles in worshipping communities., who alienate the young. Everyone felt they knew the experience.

We discussed ways forward in small groups we formed by mixing. I met up with a woman I knew by sight from events I had attended at the grand mosque, so sat with her. At our table we had two other (male) Muslims of different national origins and with very different politics from each other, three Christians, and one Sikh. A group of elderly male Sikhs had stayed all together at one table rather than mixing, until groups started to say "We need a Sikh at our table..." and they responded and joined us.

The value of on-going local interfaith work becomes apparent at times such as this. It is other churches, especially Anglican inner city parishes who are doing a lot more as organisations. One particular church has developed links with several nearby mosques. This has included travelling to London for anti war demonstrations, as well as local peace activities over a period of years. Of course individual Friends are always to be found, but we are not there collectively. Maybe less criticism of other churches and more humble learning from their contribution would be in order?

Evelyn M. Shire

From a statement by the Methodist Church

'We encourage the Government to foster broad cross-part consensus as it explores changes to legislation in the light of the London bombings. There will be widespread support for some of the Government's anti-terror proposals. However some appear to go beyond what we need to ensure our security, raising questions

concerning fundamental rights and challenging our tradition of providing a safe haven for those who flee persecution. Other proposals raise questions concerning the independence of the judiciary or seemingly fail to recognise that there is often a gulf between "extremist" and "criminal".

Looking After One Another: The Safety and Security of Our Faith Communities

This document has been developed by the Interfaith Network in consultation with the Commission for Racial Equality, the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Chief Fire Officers' Association and with the advice of the Crown Prosecution Service. It offers guidelines for faith communities to respond jointly to threats to their safety and security. It can be downloaded from www.interfaith.org.uk

Promises, promises

Newport Interfaith Group (S. Wales) each year put on an event to highlight the work of 'One World Week'. Last year we hosted a group of very colourful and inspired young dancers from the Bharata Natyam tradition of India. This year, with the emphasis very firmly on 'Make Poverty History', we put on a debate afternoon, in the presence of the mayor of Newport, to discuss the wisdom or otherwise of the concept of 'making poverty history'.

A parallel aim was to raise awareness of our group within Newport, and we persuaded the local paper to carry an article on One World Week, which also advertised our events.

On the panel was a Roman Catholic priest who we knew is keen to promote understanding between the faith communities, and a muslim who we first met during a broadcast we attended for Radio Wales, and whose views resonated with ours; a core member of the presbyterian church where the event was held who also happens to be a Jew of Russian origin, and the very sympathetic MP for Newport West.

Geraldine Layton chaired the proceedings, and invited Valerie Evans to speak for the Make Poverty History campaign, then myself to speak against! Val emphasised the vast inequalities in today's world, and pleaded with us to make sure something was done to remedy the situation. I spoke, urging great caution, highlighting some incidences of misguided and misinformed projects, vast corruption and misuse of aid monies etc. After the two presentations, the members of the panel spoke from their own experience and standpoints before the audience of about thirty had their say.

The event was praised by all who went. Our Quaker meeting supported us very well. The best outcome was seeing the evident enthusiasm for interfaith work shown by our panel, two of which stated their intention to join us. My hope is that with faith leaders showing interest, a true dialogue of faiths, and real connections be made.

Mary Cook



Newport Interfaith Group debates the Make Poverty History campaign. Photo Mary Cook

If you are interested in attending a QCCIR Day Conference on "Families and Faith - A Quaker Interfaith Workshop" in Woodbrooke on June 17th 2006, please contact Anne Wilkinson of QPSW:
annew@quaker.org.uk 020 7663 1062

Scottish Interfaith Council

'We commit ourselves in a spirit of friendship and co-operation to work together as people of faith for a just and inclusive Scotland'.

The aim of the Scottish Inter Faith council is to advance public knowledge and mutual understandings of the teachings, traditions and practices of the different faith communities in Scotland including awareness of both their distinctive features and of their common ground and to promote good relations between persons of different religious faiths. It offers a religiously neutral forum where representatives of faith communities can meet on a basis of equality and engage in dialogue and conversation about matters of religious and civic importance. It also attempts to facilitate dialogue between the Scottish Executive and faith communities on a variety of issues. The Scottish Inter Faith Council's aim is to create opportunities for faith communities to speak for themselves in this dialogue rather than claiming to speak on their behalf. It encourages the formation of local inter faith associations and tries to assist and support them in their work.

RE Council of England and Wales

The RE council of England and Wales, founded in 1973, meets twice yearly and is represented by Friends by Janet Scott, Sarah Allen and Sarah Piercey. Since its inception its member organisations have been inclusive of the range of faith communities which thrive nationally, the different denominations of the Christian Churches, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs as well as Humanists. The Council also has representation from academic and professional associations, relating to all levels of education, teacher training, and advisory services.

The purpose of the Council is to help deepen and strengthen provision for Religious Education. After the July bombings in London it issued a bold statement saying that effective RE in schools can fight extremism and promote respect for others. However serious issues of funding this subject properly must be addressed.

Further information is available from <http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org/>

Patterns and examples: Experiencing the Spirit of Other Faiths

'On behalf of Hampstead MM's Interfaith group, Peter Jarman and Eva Tucker have edited an anthology of the interfaith experience of twelve Friends, a Jewish head of a Quaker school and a Muslim with close association with friends. In his foreword Adam Curle describes this book as "wise, stimulating and exceedingly interesting'.

Acknowledging the jewel of Love and Truth at the heart of all beings, the authors include in their experience entering into the spirit of Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Brahma Kumaris, Animism and the Green Goddess faith. The book is available from the Quaker bookshop, £9 plus £1 for postage, or from your local bookseller- the publisher is Sessions of York.

How the Christians came to be divided into so many branches

A talk by Richard Seebohm available on request from richardseebohm@onetel.com

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