

CIRcular



For Friends involved in local ecumenical and interfaith work

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Editorial

The Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR) is approaching the end of its current triennium and is, at last, within reach of agreeing its terms of reference! One outcome of the discussions around these has been a determination to take a more coherent approach to inter-faith work, recognising that many Friends find spiritual nourishment in their inter-faith relations, and that many Friends are concerned that the tensions that may develop in a multi-faith society are not being adequately addressed.

In this issue, we have a report of a local inter-faith initiative and of a government-sponsored inter-faith initiative.

On the ecumenical front, we have a report on some of the re-thinking being undertaken by one local ecumenical grouping facing the failure of the established approach of seeking formal covenants between churches.

Oxford Council of Faiths is launched

Nearly three years of discussion and planning culminated on 19 June 2008 in a joyful launch party attended by over 80 members of a wide variety of faiths. The weather

being kind, the party was held in the garden of the Friends Meeting House, which many of those present discovered for the first time and delighted in. Bede Gerrard, Oxford's Ecumenical Officer and Chair of the Steering Committee for the Council of Faiths, presided and briefly described the planning process and the hopes for a future full of creative initiatives for working together in an atmosphere of friendship and mutual understanding. The Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire and the lady Lord Mayor expressed their pleasure at the inauguration of the Council of Faiths and their good wishes for its future. The rest of the evening was devoted to making lots of new friends and enjoying delicious vegetarian refreshments (samosas, pakoras, dips, fresh fruit and fruit cup) provided by the small interfaith catering committee consisting of Chinta Kallie (Hindu), Penny Faust (Jewish), Elisabeth Salisbury and Marigold Best (Quakers).

The Council will not officially come into existence until it first meets in October and does, or does not, approve the Draft Constitution drawn up by the Steering Committee. It is hoped that all representatives will be selected by mid-September. Representation was the most difficult question in the Steering Group's discussions –

how to combine the widest possible participation with the need for the Council to be of a manageable size? It was decided that it should have 25 voting members but meetings would be open and anyone could speak with permission from the Chair. The six major world faiths (Christianity, Islam, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist) should have three members each, appointed for a 3-year term (renewable once). The remaining 7 places should go, in rotation, to representatives of the smaller groups, of which there are many. All groups which subscribe to the aims and objectives of the Council can join in, including humanists and pagans.

It will be very interesting to see how the very wide range of Christian denominations manages with just three representatives. Three constituencies were identified: (1) the ecumenical Churches Together grouping (Churches Together in Central Oxford, on which I represent Quakers, includes liberal C. of E., Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, URC, Salvation Army and a Unitarian observer); (2) the Evangelical churches and (3) the black-led and ethnic minority churches.

The main aim of the Council of Faiths is to promote friendship, trust and understanding between people of different faiths so that we can all work together, in cooperation with social and civic organisations, for the benefit of the whole community in Oxford. It is definitely not an opportunity for proselytism. It is hoped that the different faith groupings will initiate projects to carry forward concerns which affect us all. There are sure

to be problems along the way but the friendly and joyful spirit of the launch celebration is a good omen for the future.

Marigold Best, Oxford Local Meeting.

Face to Face and Side by Side

On the 21st of July I attended a Face to Face and Side by Side Meeting at Central Hall, Westminster, London, hosted by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears. The Face to Face and Side by Side initiative is a framework for partnership in our multi-faith society.

I was there as the Quaker representative on the Interfaith network. When I arrived, I was given a badge and the rest of the afternoon was a do-it-yourself affair. The agenda said lunch at 12 and an exhibition at 12.05. So it was a matter of figuring out how lunch was to be served, eaten and digested in 5 minutes. But of course it became apparent that it was a stand-up cold buffet that enabled us to eat and wander round looking at the exhibits on display, which were pretty impressive.

The number of Faith Organisations/ Multi-Faith activities and people involved in bringing groups of people together was quite an eye-opener for me.

Groups like, Community Development Foundation, which had a logo saying 'Strengthening Communities'; Church Urban Fund talks of 'Investing in the poorest';

Faithnet asks 'What's the difference'; West Midlands Faith Forum says 'Believing, working in the region'; East of England Faith Council advertises bringing together different faiths in the region; North-West Multifaith Tourism Association says 'Having Faith in Tourism'; The Board of Deputies of British Jews has a school link project; London Peace Week asks 'What's the Point'; Interfaith Dialogue and Social Action asks for greater Community Cohesion; The Hindu Forum and faith is dealing with its caste issues. Faith in Action, Faith in the Community, Faith based Regeneration Network, and the Inter-Faith network were all there to present their wares.

I walked round the hall and looked at all the exhibits displayed by all these organisations. I cannot truly say I was moved by any of them, but I was very impressed!



The formal session started with a group of Sufi singers, followed by Hazel Blears talking about the success of the whole Side-by-Side consultation project and saying how Faith groups often succeed in recruiting people from the fringes of society where others fail. Harriet Crabtree from the Inter-Faith Network then spoke, followed by Reverend Nims Obunge, the Chief Executive of the Peace Alliance

who came across to me as a very charismatic speaker and spoke quite passionately about Peace and Interfaith. The last speaker was Pamjit Dhanda the Minister for Community Cohesion who spoke without a script and told an interesting story of all eggs being good eggs. It then ended with more singing.

There is now a document, which sets out how faith communities, Government and wider society can work together, at all levels, to encourage and enable greater local activity which brings people with different religions and beliefs together. According to the document it draws on research and on the responses of a three-month public consultation and contains examples of effective practice, practical suggestions for communities and local authorities and links to further sources of support and guidance.

What did I think of it all? That there are all kinds. There are People who are honestly keen to work together to bring peace and harmony to our society and there are those who jump on the band wagon crying 'Inter-faith' at every turn.

There is a lot to do and keeping our Quaker responses widely known and being aware of all the activities taking place regionally and nationally may contribute to an understanding of how we are evolving as a society – Multifaith, Interfaith or just Faith in Society.

Shanthini Cawson
Quaker representative from QCCIR to the
Interfaith Network

Britain Yearly Meeting's response to the consultation may be found here:

<http://tinyurl.com/4pel4y>

The future of Local Ecumenical Partnerships

Fifteen years ago, Norwich Central churches agreed a covenant as the basis for establishing a Local Ecumenical Partnership (LEP). The Quakers, Unitarians and Orthodox declined to sign the covenant, but agreed to be associated with the work.

At a recent meeting, representatives of the participating congregations, almost entirely Anglican, expressed the opinion that the partnership had not worked, and that it was time to reconsider how the congregations could work together. There was a feeling that a better way forward might be for individual churches to develop their own programmes, while keeping neighbouring churches informed. It would then be possible to collaborate on an *ad hoc* basis with particular projects without the necessity that all such projects be owned by the partnership.

The rise of independent churches, which are frequently unable or unwilling to sign covenants, or to enter into such formal relationships with other churches has cast further doubt on the helpfulness of the 'Covenant approach'. It seems that Friends' view that another way of acknowledging common purposes is required has become mainstream.

Peter Varney

Interfaith Research

I am looking to interview inter-faith couples about the way they decorate their homes. This study will explore the feeling of 'home' and 'belonging' between a couple with different religious or cultural backgrounds.

I am most interested in interviewing couples consisting of a Muslim man and a Christian woman, although other inter-faith couples are welcome to contact me for the pilot study.

The interview would take an hour and would be completely confidential.

Please contact:

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QCCIR keeps Quakers informed of movements towards co-operation within the Christian Church and opportunities for interfaith dialogue, and it responds on their behalf to other churches and communities of faith.

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The opinions expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent the Committee.

We welcome contributions.