

## Faith and Society Files: Inter Faith Journeys

Thirteen people, who have been engaging in inter faith encounters, reflect on questions about their involvement in inter faith matters to help you gain confidence to develop encounters in this multi faith world.



The Baptist principle of freedom of belief has been part of our DNA from our very beginnings, but is often seen as the hardest to work out. This resource, from the BUGB Inter Faith Working Group, is designed to see how inter faith engagements happen on the ground today. In 2011 the Mission Department set out to develop a number of resources to help individuals and local churches to engage in the whole area of Inter Faith empowerment.

This is one of three new resources to come out of a report to Council recognising the need to develop our ministry, engagement and mission in the multi faith communities which churches find themselves in. The other resources we developed are, *12 Myths of Inter Faith engagement* and *A theology of Baptist inter faith work*. There is also a great deal of other work from a Baptist perspective including the Baptist response to the common word, and the excellent BMS edition of *Mission Catalyst* on the rise of Islam (Issue 1, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

We are grateful to the 13 people whom we interviewed who told their stories of their own inter faith encounters. There were so many more that we could have told. It is hoped that through these stories a renewed confidence is gained to continue to have encounters in this multi faith world.

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1 [www.bmsworldmission.org/resources/magazines/mission-catalyst/the-rise-islam](http://www.bmsworldmission.org/resources/magazines/mission-catalyst/the-rise-islam)

This Faith and Society File contains the responses which have been submitted by these contributors as they reflected on the following questions:

- How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?
- What has been your involvement, both past and present?
- Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.
- Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?
- What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith engagement?
- What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?
- In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?

The joy of resources such as this is that they can grow. If you have a story that you feel is worth telling, do contact us with your response to the questions that each of the people in this File have answered, along with a short bio of yourself. We will then consider using it for a future update.

For centuries it was possible to live in Great Britain without encountering people of other faiths. However, for those called to be mission workers the situation was completely different. Going overseas to serve God, Christians were in the minority within their communities, living and working alongside people of other faiths.

**Edward and Rosemary Williams** went to Serampore, West Bengal, in India in 1959 with the Baptist Missionary Society. When they returned to Britain, they became pioneers of Inter Faith engagement bringing an informed and positive understanding of people of other faiths which has made a major contribution to Baptist life ever since.



### **Edward, how did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

I taught in the Physics Department at Serampore College from 1959-68 as a BMS mission worker. All my colleagues were Hindu, and a right mixture! Many of the college staff became strong personal friends. A Parsee family living nearby also became lasting friends. From 1969-85 I was minister of Stratford Road Baptist Church, Sparkbrook, in a multi-racial and increasingly Muslim area of inner-city Birmingham.

In 1980 the Baptist Union paid for me to attend a two-week course as a 'mini-sabbatical' at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations, at the Selly Oak Colleges, on condition that I wrote about it in the *Baptist Times* afterwards! This course was formative, with Christian and Muslim participants including converts (in both directions), and in particular two from the Sparkbrook Islamic Centre who became lasting friends. It was at this course that the conviction crystallised that I have promoted ever since: **'You do not magnify Christ by belittling others.'**

### **What has been your involvement, both past and present?**

My articles for the *Baptist Times* resulted in my being invited by Graham Routley, a Baptist minister who at that time was working in Rochdale in a predominantly Asian community, to the conference which led to the formation of the Joppa Group. The name was actually my suggestion, as Baptists' attitudes to Inter Faith relations fall on a very wide spectrum, and we wanted to include all - any 'descriptive' name would have turned off many.

I was on the committee from the beginning. When in 1985 I moved to a church in Alcester, in 'the white highlands' twenty miles south of Birmingham, I compensated by offering to be secretary of Joppa. Soon after, when I retired to a village near Malvern in 1997, I 'moved sideways' and became editor of *Joppa Journal*. For the first ten years of retirement, I became involved with Bangladeshi Muslims in Worcester as an ESOL teacher. I have led several visits of Malvern Christians to mosques, gurdwaras and temples. And my wife and I have a great friend in the village who is a devout Malaysian Muslim lady!

**Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

The head of the Physics department at Serampore College had a scholarship. He was also a deeply spiritual Hindu. When he invited my wife and me to his home, he showed us the first room inside the front door: "This is my prayer room". His home was respectable but modest, and it was no small matter to devote one entire room to this purpose. And I remembered my theme text as a mission worker, 'To open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light' – that now needed serious re-thinking!

Sometimes there have been contrasts. At one session of a Summer School in 1980, a very distinguished Muslim from the USA addressed us, with copious citations from the Bible and Christian literature. His theme was basically: 'Whatever you Christians say, you really believe in three Gods – stop it!' At the end of his harangue, we Christians were all on our feet to reply, but a Muslim lady beat us to it: "Would all those Christians in this room who believe in three Gods, please stand!" No one moved. "Would all those Christians who believe in one God, please stand!" It was the most dramatic moment I have ever experienced, and it encapsulated many lessons. No doubt his talk would have been hugely acceptable in many Muslim circles as 'arguments to use against Christians!' [Talks in similar vein about Islam are also highly acceptable, in some Christian circles, and very prevalent!] He knew his Christian texts, but was too arrogant to accept our testimony to what we really believed. If anyone were ever to convert us, it would not have been he but the Muslim lady, because she understood us. The occasion underlined the need to take seriously the commandment, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness'.

Two Christian speakers provided another striking object lesson in Inter Faith attitudes. One was a well-known Christian scholar of Islam at the time. As he spoke, one could sense increasing unease among the Muslims who were present: "This man does not really understand us". The other speaker was

Kenneth Cragg, whose Christian commitment no one could doubt – but the atmosphere was totally different. He understood.

As for difficulties, from time to time in Sparkbrook we would get requests to use our church hall for religious events; since the groups concerned had no place of worship that they could call their own, it seemed right to offer hospitality. But I felt very uncomfortable when on one such occasion I went to see how things were going on and found Shia Muslims' black flags outside our church, and self-flagellation taking place in the hall! On another occasion a Hindu group placed one of their images in the centre of the hall and performed puja. One of our younger deacons proposed a motion at the next church meeting that our premises should never again be used by other faiths for worship, and this was carried. At least half of me felt that the deacon might be right; but I hated writing to the leader of that group saying that we could not offer such hospitality again!

**Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

One or two have already been named above, and to these could be added Christopher Lamb, Mary Hall and Andrew Wingate. But most formative of all was Yisu Das Tiwari, who joined the Theology staff at Serampore College three years before I left. I had first known him during my final year at Regent's Park College, when he came for in-depth study of Greek in order to produce a fresh translation of the New Testament in Hindi.

Then aged about forty, Yisu Das Tiwari had a Brahmin's quiet dignity and poise. Ours must have been a culture far-removed from his, but he never looked anything but calm and serene, even when we, lively youngsters of half his age, took him punting on the river! His story was remarkable. Brought up in a high-caste family, he had gone, like so many, to a Christian college where he learned about Jesus Christ but remained a devout and active Hindu. His crisis came after leaving college, when he found himself quite unable to overcome the temptations that came to him as a young man.

One evening in desperation he tried praying to Christ: "Lord, if you are, save me from myself." From that moment those temptations lost their power, and from that point onward he followed Christ. He sought out local Christians, and was baptised. His parents were very distressed, and did all in their power to persuade him to return to the old faith. His mother beat him, and he accepted it patiently. They put things in his food that made him ill. After a while, they had him committed to the local mental hospital, from which the local Christians obtained his release. Then they tried a different tactic, and sent him to Gandhi's ashram, which he counted a privilege. In the end, when he could not be dissuaded, the Mahatma said to him, "Since you have become a Christian, be a good one!"

And indeed he was – my wife and I have often spoken of him as "the finest Christian we have known." In the end he would say, "I have often regretted joining the Christian church, but I have never ever regretted following Jesus Christ."

### **What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith engagement?**

Much of what excites me will be clear from what I have written so far, but the change within the Baptist denomination specially thrills me. At first, Joppa members were regarded by middle-of-the-road Baptists as 'wishy-washy liberals' (forgetting that the root meaning of 'liberal' is 'generous!') but the mood was changing.

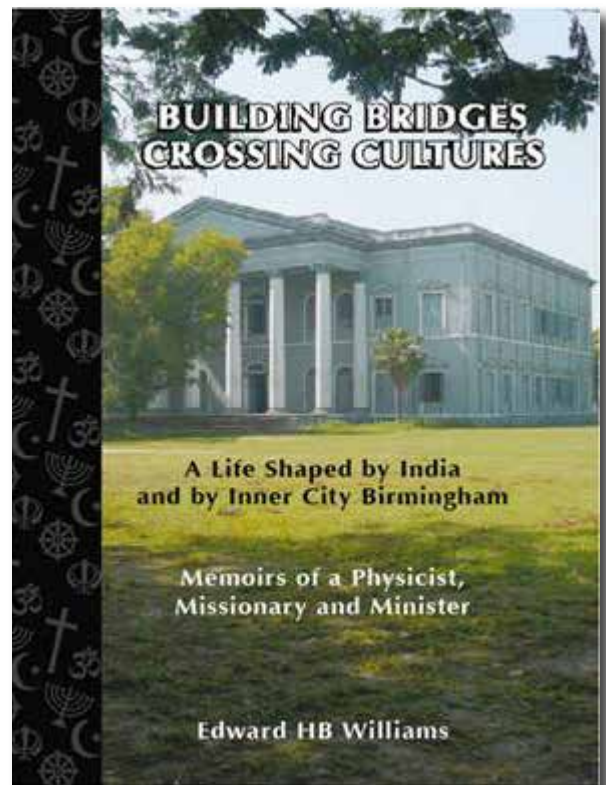
Few were regarded as more 'sound' than David Coffey, but he publicly commended Joppa and eventually was honoured with an OBE for 'services to Inter Faith Relations'. BMS World Mission has also changed; when I retired from editing *Joppa Journal* David Kerrigan wrote, 'Inter Faith dialogue does now seem to have become a subject whose hour has arrived. Certainly within BMS a dialogue engagement, with Islam in particular, is high on our agenda.'

### **What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

A major anxiety is the 'demonisation' of Islam in particular. Some (by no means all) of those who are specially concerned to support the Persecuted Church imply in their literature that Islam as a whole is at fault - as if Christians are not!

### **In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

Again, the above will indicate many ways in which my involvement has led me onward in my faith. In particular I see the need, in the words of one of Joppa's declared aims, 'to hold together our Baptist traditions of respect for religious freedom and conviction, and our obligation to proclaim the Gospel.' I had the opportunity to set down my thinking on this in the sermon which I quote at the end of my memoirs, *Building Bridges, Crossing Cultures*<sup>2</sup>.



<sup>2</sup> Published by Aspect Design (22 Dec 2011), ISBN: 978 1 9057 9597 0, RRP: £10.00

**Rosemary** adds some further reflections.

Firstly she draws attention to the resource *Good Neighbours*<sup>3</sup> saying, "We have already covered much of this material in the Housegroup Notes that Nick Wood, Mark Burleigh and others in the Joppa group prepared several years ago, where some of the stories mentioned below are told in more detail."

I first became involved in Inter Faith matters through working with BMS in Serampore, India, for ten years and through my close relations with Hindus and Parsees. Second, through living in Birmingham in the 1970s, when I joined the Multi-Faith Resource Unit in Selly Oak, and taught in two Secondary Schools with pupils of all major faiths.

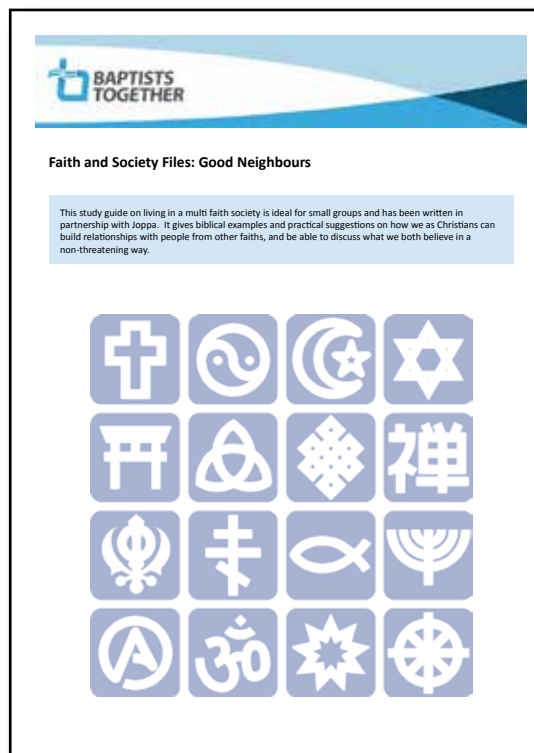
In the past, in school, I was teaching RS in all major faiths, and preparing Assemblies with girls of different faiths.

I invited outside speakers in from other faiths, especially for 6th form General Studies and arranged Pilgrimages round the different places of worship in Birmingham.

At home, we entertained a Muslim family for meals, dealing with the difficulty over providing separate rooms for men and women, and over halal food.

In the present I have been teaching English for 15 years to a Bangladeshi Muslim lady, and I have had many discussions with her about our respective faiths and practices.

The person who has inspired me is Dr Mary Hall, the Roman Catholic leader of the Multi-Faith Resource Unit in Birmingham, as she was so enthusiastic, experienced and knowledgeable.



I am excited by the feeling of being very close to people who worship God in different ways, compared with vast majority of people who have no faith at all today.

I am concerned that more people should be involved in Inter Faith, especially from our Christian churches.

Inter Faith has made me think very deeply and carefully about the certainties of my own faith and the truths contained in other faiths.

<sup>3</sup> Available for free download from: [http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366526/Faith\\_and\\_Society.aspx](http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366526/Faith_and_Society.aspx)

While Edward and Rosemary Williams were in India, the immigration which had begun in the post-war years continued. On their return they found a growing number of communities which were culturally and religiously diverse. Today, when mission workers leave Great Britain this demographic change may mean that they have lived alongside people of other faiths already.

**The following interview was given by someone in this situation who now lives and works abroad in a country which is predominantly Muslim.**

### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

The homegroup we led in England was located in an area of many faiths. Several leaders from our faith group saw the benefit of opening discussions with the other faiths in order to exercise influence in the physical and economic regeneration of our inner city area. We also saw benefits that could come to each of the faiths from being involved in regular dialogue and from making visits to each other's buildings and events. At this stage I was also involved as a committee member of Joppa and found friends there who were similarly engaged in dialogue with other faiths across the country. Now in the Delta our relationship with the majority community is intended to be transformational for them and the experience of dialogue and of making visits continues. But the motivation is not primarily for economic and physical regeneration, it is now concerned with a transformation agenda.

### **What has been your Inter Faith involvement?**

Six years leading a homegroup in the UK and now six years leading a business in the Delta in what is described a restricted environment.



### **Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and give examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

My meetings in discussions with members of the Sikh and Muslim faiths around my homegroup in UK gave me a much better understanding of how to work cross-culturally, and by having these friendships it made it possible to rebuild an out-of-date church into a modern multi-use centre that is now regularly used by people from many faiths during the day.

My friendship with Muslims in the Delta has been wholly positive and my membership of a Rotary Club in the Delta has facilitated deeper insights and understanding of the culture and the community here.

Through my involvement with the majority Muslim Rotary Club in the Delta the Club has funded several educational and health care projects run by members of our faith.

Our business in the Delta employs a majority of Muslims. We meet each week for a sharing time when we read and discuss passages from the Bible. Our staff share freely, we offer prayers together and they are able to learn of our faith through discussion, as well as their experience of us living in their country.

**Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

Before I was a leader of a homegroup in the inner city in the UK I had been a social worker in the area for a long time, and so already had a lot of Inter Faith experience. No particular individual inspired me but I did have a lot of friends from a variety of faith communities.

**What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership engagement?**

In inner city UK I was impressed by people from several faith groups being willing to co-operate for the greater good of the wider community.

Here in the Delta, I am impressed by the earnestness with which many members of the majority community seek to please their Maker. I am also pleasantly surprised by their openness and readiness to discuss faith matters - more open here in the Delta than I have found the community around me in the inner city and the white members of my Rotary Club in the UK.

**What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

Inter Faith dialogue should not be used as a vehicle for seeking to move members from one faith to another. Friendships should be real, co-operation should be real and the intention of the relationship should be transparent from the beginning.

Here in the Delta I have deliberately refrained from Inter Faith dialogue because my purpose here is transformational. This is not to say that education or health care or welfare projects have not benefitted from my discussions and friendships, but I am clear that my purpose here is transformational.

**In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

The enthusiasm with which some people in the Delta follow their faith, the sacrifices they make and the time they commit makes me feel my commitment is not comparable to theirs. I have come to recognise that there is but one Maker and though only our faith has the full revelation, members of other faiths have a Maker-inspired desire to seek the Maker. Life in the Delta convinces me there are tremendous opportunities and openings here for transformational work, but the door might not remain open long-term.





When someone feels God's call on her life, the future is unknown. **Julie Aylward** had been living and working in London's suburbia before she began her training for Christian ministry. Although there were some people from other cultures in the area and Julie encountered the children in the schools where she worked, she had not had any contact with them in a faith context.

### **Julie, how did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

After studying at Spurgeon's College I was called to minister in a church in Leicester. The area surrounding the church was 90% other faiths. We lived in a road where we were the only white family. Around the church, within a 10 minute walk, you would find a Hindu temple, a Jain temple, an Orthodox and Reformed synagogue, two Sikh Gurdwaras, and more than ten Mosques. One mosque and one Gurdwara were within a few yards of the church building. Inter Faith engagement was a necessity rather than a choice

### **What has been your involvement?**

Firstly I was involved with my neighbours, who were mostly Muslim, and welcomed us with open arms. They helped me understand cultural as well as faith issues and smiled and advised when I got things wrong.

Thanks to the St Phillip's Centre, an Anglican initiative, I quickly became involved in various dialogue meetings: Mixed gender Muslim/Christian; women only Muslim/Christian; Mixed gender Sikh/Christian. The centre also put on training and visits and generally supported me. I gradually started helping with training courses for people coming to the centre. I attended an Imam/Clergy conference organised by the Christian/Muslim forum.

Following a discussion with Graham Sparkes at the Baptist Union Faith and Unity department, I was invited on to the executive of JOPPA and then to join the newly-formed BU Inter Faith Task Group. In this capacity I have been involved with seminars at Baptist Assembly and



one or two other conferences. I also serve on the Inter Faith Network Food Advice group.

### **Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement.**

For me it has been the relationships I have built with others that have enriched me. My discussions with my neighbours, and dialogue groups, challenged me to think deeply about my faith so that I could share it with them in discussion. I found that we shared so much in terms of understanding faith and spirituality – whole life faith. They encouraged me to be a stronger Christian and wanted us all to stand up for our faith and moral standards in the public space.

I have made friends for life. Their generosity, hospitality, and openness blew me away. Contrast the bowl asking for money for a cup of coffee in many of our churches with the offer of a free meal at any and every Gurdwara, 24 hours a day. My neighbours gave me food every night through Ramadan and an overwhelming amount of sweets and food at Eid. We received free gifts at every place of worship we visited. Meetings were always accompanied by food as well!

The time when the council decided to update the city centre which meant there was no Christmas tree for one year (although we still had lights and a crib), the other faiths 'went mad' and demanded that we got our tree!

**Please give examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

I think being careful about trying to find too much common ground and not acknowledging the problems and divergence. (Being able to do this comes with deep relationships that build trust.)

There was a time when I was asked about the Gospel of Barnabas – and that sent me scurrying away to find out and buy a copy! I realised how much others knew of my faith (although wrong in places) and how little I knew of theirs.

Not being clear about what we mean by certain terms can cause difficulties: in one group there was a discussion about the 'blessings' we can get through certain religious observances – in this case Lent and Ramadan or Hajj. Many thought we were talking about the same thing but we quickly had to explain that our concepts of 'blessing' were very different.

It is challenging to avoid the inclination of some Sikhs and Hindus to see no problems about the differences between the faiths – basically they are all the same. Muslims are easier to talk with in this respect, because they recognise differences.

It was difficult having to deal with Christians who condemned me for 'selling out' on my faith (I actually got to tell people about my faith almost daily!), or who saw all Muslims as terrorists and therefore had a hostile attitude and refused to see people as they were (mostly ordinary people living life just as they did, but with a different faith).

**Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

Rev Dr Andrew Wingate, the then Director of the St Phillip's Centre. He has worked so hard to create a positive atmosphere in Leicester and in many other places/countries with regard to Inter Faith relationships: the peace in Leicester, the willingness to respect and celebrate all faiths in the city (one part of the town or other had lights for various festivals all through the year) and to work closely together to avoid problems when events elsewhere - Twin Towers, London bombings, etc - threaten the shalom there. He has worked closely with people of all faiths to create this and to train others ... a shining beam of light.

**What most enthuses you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership/engagement?**

I am enthused by seeing the light of Christ in others, learning from them about whole life faith and being a confident Christian, and by building communities of respect and peace where we can work together for the common good for those around us and in the world.

**What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

None really ... except for people who think it's just all about converting others. I do want others to have what I have, out of my love and concern for them, but with Peter I want to do this with gentleness and respect.

**In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

As I think I have already indicated it has enriched and deepened it because I have had to explain it to people who are able to challenge it theologically and because I have seen God at work in their lives and their strong desire to follow God's will.

Like Julie, **Jem Sewell's** call to ministry brought him into active contact with people of other faiths; this has been a catalyst for Inter Faith conversations and personal reflection. Here he considers how his assumptions about other faiths, and the ways in which he thought their members viewed Christians, have been challenged. Jem highlights how these discoveries have had a constructive effect: his understanding of other faiths has broadened and his Christian faith has deepened.

### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

I became involved through the connection with people in my locality, about 30% of whom are Muslim; but we also have a significant Sikh and Hindu population. I met children and parents at school, invited friends round for food or parties, and similarly met with neighbours. All these things heightened my awareness and a desire not to offend.

### **What has been the nature of your involvement?**

I live with people of all faiths and none. I am not now involved in any organisation. I had helped promote (but not organise) Meetings for Better Understanding. These were open to people of all faiths but were mainly a Christian-Muslim dialogue. Each meeting had a topic to discuss, for instance: forgiveness, righteousness, life. The problem with these public meetings was the desire to 'win' a debate rather than better understand each other. I have found 1:1 dialogue has the ability to really find out what people believe. I have also been involved in School RE days, following a format similar to the Meetings for Better Understanding. I found in some ways I had more in common with a Muslim Mullah on some issues than I had with some Christian colleagues.



### **Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and give examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

A discussion with some teen Muslim girls on the hijab: their take was that it was a very positive thing, it protected them and they did not see it as imposed on them by men at all.

A discussion on the idea that all faiths lead to God with a local Muslim teacher: he was affronted that such an imperial idea should be imposed ... Often I have found that those holding that view would hate to be considered imperial and often are most liberal ...

### **Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

Martin Luther King, but not about Inter Faith - in fact Inter Faith is only about welcoming those who are strange, that is those to whom I am unfamiliar. Martin Luther King has inspired me that, like God in Christ, it is I that must make the first move; it is I that must be accommodating and seeking to understand. Faith, culture, colour, age and even class all require the same simple toolkit: a willingness to be uncomfortable and to think and learn.

### **What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith engagement?**

There is always more to learn. Working towards understanding something helps you gain perspective on one's own society, culture and faith. For instance, my children going to a Sikh wedding made me think about what a Christian marriage is all about: how much is distinctively Christian, how much a party, and how much of what we do is simply serving the state?

It is very hard to gain perspective on one's own society. Asking others to comment, who have a different view, is fascinating. In a similar way I was talking to a man from the Indian sub-continent about British Imperialism and in some way apologising. He corrected me and said that India would not be a modern state without it, and although it was far from perfect, and there were many wrongs, it was not all wrong and India has benefitted. This made me a little less apologetic ...

### **What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

My concern is the desire to blend, to homogenise, to downplay differences, to ignore the unique claims that some faiths make. I don't think that comes from the engagement itself but the desire to achieve something. Those with a political agenda for Community Cohesion are happy when people talk, but have no real idea of what they are asking different communities to stick to. Too often they are all right with meeting and talking but not on defining differences.



### **In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

It has been a two way process: my faith has informed and affected my involvement with those of other faiths, and my involvement has affected my faith. I have looked at issues such as family and fellowship quite differently; it has affected my understanding of honour and truth quite differently. Much of this is cultural but, in the cultures that I have engaged in, culture and faith are indivisible.

While some Christians are 'catapulted' into multi-faith communities, **Gale Richards** has rarely lived anywhere else. However her decision to become involved in Inter Faith engagement is deliberate and purposeful. Her experiences stand as an encouragement to those who hesitate and a challenge to those who refuse to get involved - that there is less to fear and more to gain ...

### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

I grew up in the UK in an area that had significant Muslim and Sikh communities. For most of my life I have lived and worked in very diverse faith communities. I would say that I developed a more conscious interest in Inter Faith engagement after a trip to Istanbul in 2007, when I heard first-hand stories about some of the challenges Christians faced seeking to live out their faith in a predominantly Muslim country. The situation greatly saddened me.

### **What has been the nature of your involvement?**

Since 2010, I have been employed by HEBA to help equip Baptist churches located in multi-faith areas to feel more confident in engaging with people of other faith groups. In this role I am invited to events and or help to organise events that encourage Inter Faith dialogue and relationships. This has included visits to places of worship of other faith groups; hearing reflections from young people from Christian and Muslim backgrounds dialoguing with each other on a range of life issues; dialoguing with people from other faith groups about appropriate ways of being 'witnesses' of our faiths in a multi-faith society.



### **Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

I recently attended a 'Scripture reasoning' event that included individuals from Jewish, Christian and Muslim backgrounds from all over the world reflecting together on scriptures from our respective traditions on the issue of wealth and poverty. It was interesting to note some of the common themes (eg stewardship) in our traditions. At the same time I and others became acutely aware of the uniqueness of Christian scripture with reference to us living in personal relationship with God, as played out in a scripture such as Matthew 25:35-36, which powerfully emphasises the impossibility of truly serving God without showing a sacrificial love to his people.

I found the whole gathering so helpful in forging greater understanding of different faiths and I felt certain that some people left with a greater respect for Christianity than when they arrived ...

**Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

Martin Luther King Jr (King) has been my greatest inspiration. He learnt from, and worked with, people of other faith groups in the struggle for social justice; for example, his famous visit to India (some years after Mahatma Gandhi's death) to meet with people continuing the work on non-violent protest which Gandhi had started. During the visit he identified common themes of love and peace in Christianity and in other faith traditions such as Hinduism. He was to take and use this commitment to non-violent protest to great effect in the USA.

King went on to forge friendships and march with people of all faith backgrounds as part of the Civil Rights movement in the USA. One of his famous references to this was in 1965: "There never was a moment in American history more honorable and more inspiring than the pilgrimage of clergymen and laymen of every race and faith pouring into Selma to face danger at the side of its embattled Negroes."<sup>4</sup>

For me, without a doubt, King leaves us with one of the greatest legacies as to the importance of Inter Faith engagement, as his prophetic work on social justice issues was clearly built on it.

**What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership?**

Time and time again I see how barriers are broken down and purposeful relationships forged as people from other faith backgrounds engage in meaningful dialogue with one another.

**What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

My concern is that Inter Faith dialogue does not happen often enough! So many people seem so fearful of it - therefore, for me, the real challenge is getting people involved. I feel if progress is going to be made in this area, our churches and other faith communities need to be promoting a greater respect for religious freedom.

**In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

My own experience has been one of growing stronger in my Christian faith by engaging with dialogue with people of other faiths ...



<sup>4</sup> King, 'Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March,' 121, in *A Call to Conscience*, Carson and Shepard, eds, 2001)

**Andrew Swan** has also grown up in a multi-cultural community and sees his willingness to get involved with people of other faiths as a natural part of his life. However, this is not without risk, particularly when one has friends who can challenge deeply-held beliefs with considerable spiritual insight, but from the perspective of other faiths. Andrew's story is one of encouragement to be ready to explore what living out one's faith means in different circumstances.

### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

As odd as it sounds, I guess I was born into it. I grew up in Oadby in Leicestershire, one of the most multi-cultural shires of England. Everything, from the food I had in my packed lunch to the friends I made at school, had a twist from another culture. The friends I've ended up being closest to, for example, have been tremendous mixes of atheist, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu, and I've had the privilege of calling them friends. On top of that, having an amazing mum who's thrown herself into everything possible in my town has given me a whole host of opportunities.

### **What has been the nature of your involvement?**

I guess my 'involvement' is just holding on to those friendships where possible, and having some amazing conversations with them all, and generally showing that Christianity isn't just what the media portrays.

Slightly more formally, I've also helped my mum with a number of Inter Faith events. I've never taken a massive part, but just mucking in where needs be and being as friendly as possible, I believe, helps show Christianity in its best light.



### **Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

In terms of positive experiences, one of the most enjoyable moments was, while dressed up as a candy floss serving banana (as you do) at an Inter Faith event my mum had organised, I found myself slightly dancing through the hall. As the music picked up (I believe it was a live samba band) people of all faiths began to join in, forming a dance circle. It was incredible seeing so many people from different cultures come together to have fun.

When it comes to friendships, a random, last-minute trip to the Welsh countryside with my best friend, who happens to be a Muslim, was my best experience. He was visiting me at university in Cardiff when we decided we needed a trip out. Ten hours of hiking, including four hours of travelling, meant we had plenty of time to chat. And indeed we did. From the basic differences between Islam and Christianity to drilling down to life choices and the nitty-gritty, we debated and picked apart each other's faiths. And it was tremendous. Yes, it was challenging, and yes, it did lead to some arguments, but it made us both question our faiths and truly wrestle with God to work out what we actually believe as individuals.

Difficulties have only arisen when our individual faiths would respond to situations differently, and then it has affected our friendship more than our faiths. Our thoughts about alcohol, relationships, individual differences, these have created difficulties far more complex than just individuals having slightly different opinions where faith isn't a factor. However, as all those involved have been brought up on tolerating rather than hating, the friendship has always repaired with time.

**Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

The authors of *A Common Word Between Us and You*. A well-phrased, well thought-out letter from key people in Islam to key people in Christianity. It draws some amazing parallels between the two faiths, what they have in common and how they can work together to make the world a better place.

**What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership?**

It's going to sound geeky, but I'm constantly furthering my knowledge of what the other faiths believe. Having friendships and debates with those who believe differently are so much more useful in understanding other faiths fully than RE lessons and the like - they give real life views, rather than textbook answers. Numerous times in RE lessons I was frustrated when Christianity was taught in a very stereotypical and narrow way, without having someone's personal experiences of the faith involved, I would hate to think that way about someone else's faith.

On top of that, there is constant challenge to my own faith. People with other faiths are far more able to probe, question and debate, and so tend to make me look at my own faith a whole lot more. Because of this, I have been able to become more certain and learn about my own faith, and feel this is something that can continually grow with more Inter Faith engagement.

**What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

There are occasions I worry that those on the more extreme ends of many faiths bring difficulties – the conflicts around the world where people of all faiths are being persecuted by others in horrendous ways. But, the majority of the time, I don't believe there are issues. Friendships with other faiths are hugely rewarding to all involved, and no different to friendships with those with no faiths.

**In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

It's taught me a huge amount about other faiths, but also my own. It's led to debates where I've had to be able to support both my views and my faith's views. It's made me truly wrestle with God, on a number of occasions, to comprehend fully what it is I believe. And I think people with other, different faiths are sometimes the best guides in developing our own faith.





**Chris Swan**, Andrew's 'amazing mum', begins her own story with her parents and their positive values, identifying a foundation on which to build good relationships with people of other faiths or none. By immersing herself in community life, and taking on specific responsibilities within it, Chris has a depth of experience which witnesses to moments of tremendous fulfilment and enrichment, alongside the tensions and challenges which this level of commitment brings.

### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

I grew up in a home where my Mum taught ESOL to newly arrived Sikh mums from India and in school holidays I was taken along to their homes to be introduced. I remember loving the thick sticks from Bombay mix that some of the mums served, freshly made at home, as a treat – and the very sweet tea. We were sometimes invited to weddings in the ESOL families. My Mum and Dad were Methodist missionaries in Zimbabwe when I was born and Dad used that experience and applied it to lecturing on Inter Faith in the missionary training colleges in Selly Oak where we living by the time I was eight.

### **What has been the nature of your involvement?**

As an adult I trained as a teacher in Leicester and then taught in Small Heath in Birmingham, and the Inter Faith and multi-cultural aspects of education were very important in both cities.

I've been Chair of Governors for 10 years at the primary school which my children went to. This has a mixed catchment including Christians of various nationalities, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, some who do not follow any faith, and a small number of other faiths – approximately 65% of the children have English as an additional language. It's been important to make sure that we bear these things in mind when making strategic decisions; the school has a SACRE determination which exempts it from having an act of Christian worship every day.



I work as a volunteer community worker within school, church and community settings and I've made some lovely friends of different faiths as a result of the work. I chair a community networking group which puts on events and works to develop community cohesion in the town. For four years we've run an Inter Faith fair which was initiated by a 17 year old Muslim student who was really keen to make better links between the faith groups. She was so persuasive, and so lovely, that everyone found it hard to say no and she managed to bring together people who hadn't previously seen the value in meeting together. I've been part of the co-ordinating team each year since. I've developed a strong network of friends and colleagues during the 20 years I've lived here: sometimes if there are concerns linked to faith communities, people seek me out for advice, practical support or to ask who they could work with on an issue.

### **Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

For the Queen's Diamond Jubilee I was part of a team of five women co-ordinating a Big Lunch Party. The rest of the team was made up of three local councillors who were Jewish, Muslim and Hindu and a Sikh local council officer. We anticipated 500 coming along and offered free food. The Sikh community brought along pakora and chai tea, the Muslims and Hindus sourced samosas and other Indian snacks, folk from church made sandwiches and cakes and the Jewish community provided kosher pastries.

Lots of the churches came along with stalls offering free activities for children and ours ran an ice cream sundae stall. On the day 1500 turned up - we somehow managed to muddle through with frequent dashes to ASDA - and the need to battle through together helped to bond us as a group of colleagues and friends. Watching the men from all backgrounds putting up gazebos and marquees together, and joking as they worked, was a wonderful sight. It was a great team to be part of.

As Chair of Governors there are issues that arise that throw me back on to God for wisdom and guidance. Our Muslim families have often been mainly second-generation British, or have lived in several places abroad before coming to Leicester and worked in academia or business. More recently we've had families moving direct from a country which is predominantly Muslim and they have been more wary of our education system. Some would prefer it if we didn't have any form of dancing in the school because of the way they interpret the Qur'an. Others have struggled with their children joining in nativity plays. We had a workshop provided by the local authority as part of the build-up to the Olympics where children made the shapes of Olympic rings and posed as Olympians, and they billed it as 'Olympic Yoga'. One of the Christian families asked for her child to be withdrawn. When we had a visit from all of Years 1 and 2 to church to find out more about what we do, it took a lot of thought and prayer to work out how to phrase things so that we wouldn't be seen as evangelising, whilst not watering down the depth of our faith in any way.

Several years ago the Headteacher asked the governors to consider applying for a SACRE determination. After much consultation with parents and governors and thinking through what 'Christian worship' means in a non-church school I felt able to support the application but it wasn't an easy decision. At that time staff who had no faith were expected to present Christianity in some way in assemblies, and it led to our vibrant, life-changing faith being watered down into 'being nice'. Someone

described it to me as us inoculating the children against Christianity by giving them a small, weak dose of the real thing, and it really did feel like that's what we might be doing. We were also becoming more diverse at that time and it wouldn't have been long before parents would have asked for their children to be excluded from the assemblies because they were from other faith backgrounds.

The decision has been a good one, I think. It's kept the whole school community together and means that when a Christian comes in to take an assembly they can be very overt and say 'as a Christian I believe...' and talk about how deeply it affects their life. That would never have been possible before, when it felt like we were all pretending we believed the same thing. Instead of a prayer, there's a time for quiet reflection where children from a faith background can pray silently. But it's not completely straightforward – there are times when I long to just be able to impose my understanding of the truth on the system. Instead I pray that when the children encounter Christians who talk about the faith, the children will hear what they have to say without having been turned off by bad experiences of assemblies, or feeling that they were forced a faith that conflicted with their parents' understanding.

I sometimes wonder with the community work that I do, where we run an event or bless the community in some way, whether it would be better if only the Christians were doing the work as a team and were known for bringing a blessing from God as we understand him. But I think that's a calling for others and my complementary calling is to express what *Sowing, Reaping, Keeping*<sup>5</sup> describes as 'God is good and Christians are OK' – to show that God loves Oadby and wants Christians to be the yeast that helps the kingdom grow there.

Then there are times when I have to make a decision as Chair of Governors or in the community and I'm aware that Christianity might be judged on the way I respond. For several years we had a Gujarati club for children at the school which was attended mainly by members of the Hindu community. When tutor costs rose and the numbers attending fell

5 Written by Laurence Singlehurst, published by IVP, ISBN 1 84474 138 9 - 2nd edition

we had to say that it would close. The Hindu community leaders saw this as an attack on their group and struggled to see the principles we were basing our decision on, not least of which is the wide number of languages in the school and the need to be seen to be fair in allocating school funds which are intended for all. The community leaders were angry and as Chair I had to be very firm. These are the same leaders who have joined in Inter Faith events in the past and who are part of the community networking group that I chair. When they didn't get what they asked for I wondered whether it might have a negative impact on their understanding of Christianity.

Several years ago the Muslim community was really struggling. They'd been trying to find a building that they could buy, or a plot of land on which to build a community centre and worship space, for 10 years and the younger generation was exasperated. There was a risk that they would become radicalised by their frustration. The Muslim community had worked alongside the local council for much of that time in searching for a possible purchase, but when the county council (which has a different political base) came to sell an old prefabricated building that had housed the library, they offered it to the Muslim community rather than putting it on the open market. It was felt by some that this was partly about making political gain, and the local councillors were angered that the deal seemed to have been done by the back door even though the county council had acted legally. There were several residents' forum meetings, which are generally attended by older members of the white community, where people spoke out vehemently against the sale and the Muslim community in a way that felt to some of us like a racist attack.

It was a difficult dilemma for the Christian community. If they stood in support of the Muslim community (who are lovely people and might evangelise more effectively than the Christians!) there was a risk that Oadby would attract more Muslim residents as had happened very rapidly in a local suburb. But Baptist history teaches us that everyone should be given the freedom to worship in their own way, and the Bible calls on us to welcome and support the strangers in our midst.

So I spoke out at meetings and within the wider community in defence of the right of the Muslim community to own their own space, and to emphasise that they'd been very clear that they wouldn't be having a call to prayer in the streets or a minaret, just a community building with a worship space inside. They've been there for around four years now and have been good neighbours to the community. But now the car park which adjoins the building has been incorporated into a Town Centre Masterplan, and if the plan goes ahead there could be a compulsory purchase order on the building. This was envisaged when the sale was made four years ago and at the time they were told that they would be rehoused in the same geographical area, but the local traders are campaigning against the Masterplan and have singled out the 'community building' on the plan, saying that it takes unnecessary space and will prevent shoppers finding parking. They feel the Muslim community building should be moved further away from the centre of town. The Muslim community feel under threat and I've worked with them to clarify their position and their rights, and to help them enter into dialogue with the shopkeepers. We're all wary that the tensions brought on by the original sale might resurface and I'm feeling drawn to supporting the community as an issue of justice and because they're my friends.

Meanwhile, some of the Hindu community are feeling disgruntled because they would also like a building ...

Recently I was invited, along with a small number of Christian women, to join in the women's meal to break the fast at the end of a day in Ramadan, the Iftaar. It was being held at the Muslim community centre, and around 20 Muslim women were there, based in one of the community rooms. The evening started with some of the women describing what they love about Ramadan and how they cope with fasting and less sleep. It was fascinating to hear, but their description of Ramadan as a time when each good deed or charitable act is multiplied 700 times during the festival made me realise how far apart we are in our understanding of grace freely given, and heaven as a home for

all who choose simply to respond to God's love. They also described it as a time when the veils separating God and people are lifted so that a different time of intimacy is possible, and talking to God easily and directly in prayer is so much easier. It made me think of the temple curtain being torn in two and made me thankful for a loving God who longs to be in relationship with us and without anything getting in the way.

When we were invited to join the women as they prayed in their area of the worship space, behind a partition, I sat at the back on a chair. As they prayed in unison I prayed quietly in my head asking the Holy Spirit to bless them deeply and to reveal all the depths of grace and closeness with God that is so freely available. Afterwards the food was lovely and I had some wonderful conversations about family life. Chatting to these lovely women reinforced my faith, making me grateful for the gifts that come to me from Jesus' death on the cross, and I was very glad of their generous hospitality, which will make it easy for me to offer an invitation to them in the future in return.

**Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

My Mum did some great volunteer ESOL teaching at a time when things were changing very quickly in the culture around us in Birmingham. By standing alongside families, helping them to communicate with the wider community and genuinely enjoying their company, she showed me that stepping outside your comfort zone had huge payoffs.

And my Dad helped me to see that following Christ is about standing by those who are marginalised in our society, and true dialogue is about loving the other as Christ loved us, through relationships and inspiration and not by forcing anything on anyone.

**What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership?**

It feels like an adventure and it constantly throws me back on to God as I hold my own faith up against my friend's and learn more about my faith in the similarities and differences.

**What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

I worry that if I get it wrong I'll let God down – my role as Chair of Governors demands that I'm objective in my response to issues of faith in the school and I worry about being too accommodating, or making Christianity less visible, by trying to offer support and encouragement to all the community groups.

Sometimes I struggle if I feel that other Christians don't understand, or see me as selling out. I pray and take their opinions to God to double check that he's OK with what I'm doing, and I'm usually reassured. But it's hard to feel out of step with the group.

**In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

Involvement definitely makes my faith stronger – I have to wrestle with my assumptions and beliefs, and I have to be able to articulate my relationship with God. In all those times my faith grows. There are times when I'm caught completely off-guard by something a friend says that is so close to my experience, or so insightful about the God I love, that I'm challenged to give more of myself to God. It's also honed my faith so that I have an understanding of the core of my beliefs which is defined and clear and strong - and a better understanding of what I don't believe as well!

There are many places to begin an Inter Faith journey and various people along the way who will help. Visiting Nepal, **David Skinner** was given a new sense of direction for his school-based work in Great Britain by someone with insight gained from working with people of other faiths. The network of relationships which was established created a stimulus for informed interaction among students in schools and greater appreciation of others' beliefs. This experience testifies once more that Inter Faith opportunities are less likely to endanger Christian faith but rather to extend its scope and influence.

In my first few years of ministry I was drawn reluctantly into supporting our local secondary school through leading assemblies. Local clergy were invited to meet in the head teacher's office. At the end of an hour of directionless conversation there was a sudden need to decide who was going to be doing what. Quickly offers were made for leading the assemblies for the lower school years and I found myself left with the sixth form, which my colleagues clearly felt was best avoided.

At my first 'Head Master's Assembly' I was led into a hall of students, listening to an obtuse piece of classical music. Introduced as a member of the local 'clergy', I was expected to speak for 15 minutes to a group of students, who had to sit in silence. Participation was not approved of, even if I sought it, and a little laughter led to students receiving detentions. It wasn't a promising context to engage students around Christian beliefs. Over subsequent years trust developed, and working with a youth worker alongside the staff we broke away from these rigid patterns to develop some very different approaches.

In particular we craved student participation and ownership. Surveys of student views, challenging subjects, group work and a more informal venue were some of the strategies employed to move towards a more positive approach. As we sharpened the Christian perspective one of the school's constant requests was for us to secure some input from other faiths. Statutory advice stressed the need



but the school had rarely managed to secure appropriate input from either parents or faith leaders whom they approached.

I took time out in my first sabbatical to try and address some key issues. I travelled with BMS to Nepal to make some connections with our 'link mission workers' there and to experience being immersed in a context where Christians were a minority faith group. I was particularly anxious to consider how we could engage students from other faiths positively in our assembly work. Whilst I was there I was privileged to meet with Christine Preston.

Christine stood out among the missionary community. A long-term mission worker, she had previously served in a Muslim country. More recently she had moved to Nepal and was leading a hugely impressive piece of community work which was transforming the community in a large area of Patan, an old city now absorbed into the capital Kathmandu. Remarkably, in the eyes of many, she chose to live as a single woman in the heart of the silversmith's quarter, working around the Hindu sensibilities of everyone around her. Her lifestyle was simple,

trusting her neighbours to protect her along with their valuable possessions; she had no lock on her door. As we talked about our work in schools in the UK she challenged me to make contact with my local mosque and to meet their leaders. Pointedly, she said not to agree or change anything about our beliefs but simply to begin to build a relationship.

I'd never been into a Mosque before. As Christians relatively few of us have many first-hand experiences of encountering people of other faiths. Although this is changing, especially among those at school, we somehow manage to avoid deeper contacts. So I was surprised when we arranged for a small group of local Christians to visit the Mosque and observe Friday prayers that we were clearly expected to stay for a meal. The Mosque leader (not the Imam) sat next to me on the floor. As I tried not to spill my curried chicken on the carpet the leader put his hand on my knee and began to speak to me about how important Christians were to Muslims - of the place Jesus had in their own faith - of the balance that the Christian teachings of God being defined by love brought to some of their traditions. This was no liberal Islamic centre and I was surprised again.

Later we would touch on a range of issues in our local schools. There is no speaking tradition within mosques that equates to the Christian sermon in church, and therefore it was difficult to identify someone who could work with us immediately in the 6th form. In time he linked me with a Muslim group working across the town on a range of issues. Among them was a young barrister, an ex-pupil of the secondary school where we were working. He was able with words - passionate that his faith should be understood - much more IT literate than I will ever be, and aware that proselytising might work at the mosque but was not appropriate in school.

As an evangelical Christian I was looking for ways theologically and strategically to underpin engagement with leaders of other faiths in schools.

Visiting Nepal had underlined for me how difficult it was for the Christian community when there was no acceptance or recognition of their beliefs. I have found great help in beliefs of the first English Baptists. In their struggle to worship as they chose they argued that all people should have the right to believe as their conscience directed them, even Muslims and Jews.

To be Christian I felt that it was important to offer respect and a certain degree of 'hospitality' to the varied beliefs of students present in assemblies. Participation by other faith leaders would greatly support this and offered a great opportunity to model respect and tolerance as we explored our differences in belief as faith leaders.

As we experimented I quickly discovered that students' experience of my contributions changed. There was stronger engagement and feedback, not only from the theists in the student group but more noticeably from the large group of agnostics and 'soft atheists'. I quickly realised that in this context the Christian gospel was more easily heard and respected.

There were several profound moments when there were further surprises. One of the most profound was in an RE Day exploring good and evil when my Muslim colleague was interviewed.

- Q What did he feel when he first heard about the 9/11 attack?
- R He was shocked and appalled at what had been done in the name of his religion.
- Q How had he reacted to these events afterwards?
- R He and Muslim friends had set aside significant funds and he had flown out to New York to find those who had become victims of the attack to assist them in their suffering.

You could have heard a pin drop as he spoke - no one - and, I confess, not even I had anticipated such a response and it caused me to reflect on the vitality of my own faith.

For two years my Muslim colleague worked with us, the school staff and the Jewish Rabbi, to plan together acts of collective worship for the sixth form students. It was an exciting time when I learnt a great deal and what we offered to the students was perhaps most stimulating. Feedback from the student group was always strong - clearly affecting their lives.

Maintaining such an input was hard. It was dependent on a shared understanding and trust. Looking back, it took a lot of time to find the right people and to build that up, and there have often been times when I would have liked to work in that way but not had the time to commit to the task. However, whenever I have engaged, most often in the context of school, I have usually found my expectations confounded and that there has been great opportunity for the gospel.



An openness to Inter Faith involvement and an evaluation of one's Christian faith does not equal 'selling-out', in fact, quite the opposite. From his early questions about Christian attitudes to people of other faiths **Paul Weller** has developed a life-long exploration of what it means to be a Christian in a world of diverse beliefs. Paul's on-going theological research is linked to practical engagement and grounded in personal experience. Here he reflects on the journey so far...

### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

My first involvement in organised forms of Inter Faith activity was when I was working as a Baptist Minister in the Tameside Fellowship of Churches in Greater Manchester in the late 1970s. I was asked by the local Council of Churches if I would represent it on the Tameside Council for Racial Equality, out of which involvement I began to visit the local mosques and temples in Ashton-under-Lyne and Hyde and to get to know Muslims and Sikhs especially.

However, before that, the earliest conscious Inter Faith encounters I can remember were in my senior school, when living in Margate, Kent, in the late 1960s and early 1970s: one of my best school friends came from an Orthodox Jewish family of Polish background and his father, having been a slave labourer under the Nazis, carried that tattoo on his arm to that day. I remember my best friend's mother asking me, at the time a young Christian with fairly Evangelical perspectives, two questions that had an impact on me, largely because I was not so sure how to answer the challenges implicit within them. One question was "Why do you Christians call our Bible 'old'?", to which I think I probably said we think that both the 'Old' and 'New' Testaments are important, but we look at the 'Old' Testament in the light of the 'New'. The other question was, "Why do the Christians bully [...the name of my friend.....]?" to which I think, at the time, I wanted to try to explain that there was a difference between 'nominal' Christians and 'real' Christians.



In many ways these two questions have shaped my engagement with the people of other-than-Christian faith, in the sense that the first question holds within it a theological challenge to the relationship between Christianity and other faiths, and the second question underlines the issues of power and justice/injustice in the relationships between different faith communities.

My other early Inter Faith awareness was of a Divine Light Mission shop opening in Margate. I was aware both of my sense of interest (consistent at the time with some of the 'Eastern religion' influenced rock music which I was listening to, such as John McLaughlin and the Mahavishnu Orchestra, and Carlos Santana, and with books that I was reading by Alan Watts and others) in visiting that shop and learning about what it stood for in a kind of intellectual and spiritual flirtation, but also of having some anxiety around that.

### **What has been the nature of your involvement?**

From the early beginnings in Ashton-under-Lyne, in the early to mid-1980s I worked for the Greater Manchester County Ecumenical Council, at first half-time and later full-time, with a brief for racial justice and Inter Faith relations. During the same period I contributed at a national level to the Church's work and reflection on these matters through



membership of the then British Council of Churches' Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF), for some years also chairing its joint (with the Community and Race Relations Unit) Social Policy Group.

I was also a founding member of the Joppa Group for Baptist Christians engaged in Inter Faith witness, dialogue and engagement. Between 1988 and 1989, I worked for the then quite newly founded Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom as its Resources Officer, which put me at the heart of organised Inter Faith relations in the UK. In my early days of working at the University of Derby at the start of the 1990s I formulated a proposal for what eventually became the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby<sup>6</sup> and of which I am currently a Trustee. I have been involved at a local level in the work of the Forum of Faiths for Derby, and in the mid-2000s chaired the then emerging Faiths Forum for the East Midlands. My Professorship at the University of Derby is in 'Inter-Religious Relations', and over the past decade I have conducted a number of major research projects into the nature and extent of religion and belief, discrimination and equality in England and Wales. I am at present a member of the Baptist Union Inter Faith Working Group.



Multi-Faith Centre, University of Derby

**Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

On the positive side (with a negative twist), I recall being part of a personal discussion between a Christian whom I knew who wanted to go and live in Nazareth and to live as a carpenter in the footsteps and after the pattern of Jesus as best he could as a spiritual journey and witness, and a Muslim colleague who – like many other Muslims – had never before heard the story of the Passion and crucifixion of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels. I recall that my Muslim colleague cried when hearing this, so deeply did the story touch him. I also recall that at an early Baptist consultation on Inter Faith matters, a leading Evangelical minister quizzed me as to why, perhaps, the claims of the Christian Gospel had not then been pressed home. At the same time, later in the same discussion, the same minister acknowledged never having previously spoken personally with a Muslim.

On the negative side (with a positive twist), while as a Christian and because of my Christian faith I was very pleased to be a part of the development of the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, I was sad when, in the early days of the project, the University's Christian Union put out leaflet material suggesting that the Centre (through being a place which was going, among other things, to provide a place of prayer, meditation and worship for people of various faiths in the University community) would be facilitating 'prayer to false gods and spirits' which might 'attract demons' to the Centre and to the University. However, this did itself become an occasion for dialogue with the Christian Union which was important to conduct since it was important that the Centre project should not be one for 'liberal' religious people alone.

One other negative experience I recall that gave me a sharp reminder of the difference between high ideals in religions and the practice of some of their official representatives was when, still as quite a young man on a visit to the Kali Temple in Calcutta, India, I saw a Hindu priest physically attack and chase away a poor woman who was begging from visitors to the

6 See [www.multifaithcentre.org](http://www.multifaithcentre.org)

temple. For me this manifestation of religion as a reinforcement of injustice and an embodiment of lack of basic human compassion contrasted sharply with the vision of the divine found in the Upanishads and other beautiful philosophical texts of the Hindu tradition. But I also did not see this as something relating uniquely to the Hindu tradition and its practitioners. In many ways it was another variant on the question from my Jewish friend's mother, "Why do the Christians persecute ...?"

**Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

Thomas Helwys, one of the early Baptist Christian leaders of the 17th century, because of his clear and theological arguments in favour of religious liberty for all, because of which he was prepared personally to pay the price of loss of liberty and eventually of life.

Brian Pearce, the first Director of the Inter Faith Network for the UK, because of the careful and sensitive way in which he, informed by both his own Christian faith and his professional experience as a civil servant, went about laying the groundwork for the formation of the Inter Faith Network for the UK, which has now stood the test of 25 years of life and work.

**What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership?**

Today I find particularly inspiring the example of Muslim friends, many of Turkish ethnic background, who are themselves inspired by the teaching and example of the Turkish Muslim scholar, Fethullah Gülen. His understanding of the place of Islam and Muslims in the modern world is deeply rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, and the classical thought of Islam, together with aspects of Sufi tradition, while also being fully engaged with the modern world. It is a religious perspective that promotes dialogue, education, and the relief of human suffering. It rejects the instrumentalisation of religion in the service of politics, or of politics in the service of religion, and also promotes a deeply spiritual and human vision. It is a vision which I believe can offer much to the renewal of Islam, while contributing much to people of other religions and none, including Christians.

**What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

I am concerned that it can sometimes either be, or be misunderstood as, 'we all believe in the same things don't we...'; when I think it is clear that we do not, even if we do share many important values and perspectives.

**In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

It has made me more self-critical of the poverty of my own faith and practice, and more able and willing to recognise the importance of learning from, and being challenged by others, whoever they may be, and in whatever religion or belief tradition they may stand. I was, for example, deeply moved by the commitment to a network of prayer and human concern that these friends created for me and my family throughout the difficult period of my wife's terminal illness and eventual departure from this world in Christian faith, hope and love. Only recently when visiting Turkey, I was privileged to meet the mother of one of these friends who had herself, at the time, been asked to join in this network of prayer which stretched also to Turkey, while some of our close Turkish Muslim friends travelled personally to Derby from London to visit me and my wife during her terminal illness in hospital. During this visit they offered prayers and recitations from the Qur'an, while another close friend came and did the same within the framework of the Christian service of Thanksgiving for my wife.



The conviction that spending time with peoples of other faiths deepens one's own faith is a constant theme running through these Inter Faith journeys. However, the starting-point for **Paul Hills**, as Team Leader of the Eastern Baptist Association, was a more official one when he was invited to represent Christians in an Inter Faith context. In recognising that people of different faiths, working together, may share a common purpose and similar values, Paul also insists on the integrity of individual faiths as the basis for meaningful engagement.



### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

When the previous Labour government was moving ahead on regionalisation it became clear that Christian churches and other faith groups would need to work together to present their views and needs to regional structures. The East of England Faiths Council [EEFC] arose to do this and, as a regional church leader, I was involved with this.

### **What has been the nature of your involvement?**

The EEFC has a number of co-chairs from different faith groups for its general meetings and I was one of the Christian co-chairs in the initial stages. I now chair the board of the EEFC which has representatives from the major faith groups on it.

### **Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

When the Regional Assembly existed, the EEFC provided input, especially concerning social and community issues. It has also given evidence to planning forums regarding new developments. This has led to it being designated as the body to help any process of establishing provision for faith communities in a new development. Very occasionally, when there has been some potential friction between faith groups, the EEFC has provided advice which has defused the situation. Increasingly it provides a meeting place for leaders in different faith groups to develop their own relationships.

### **What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership?**

In the present climate and culture 'faith' in general is increasingly not seen as significant, especially by local and national government. There is a work of education and advocacy which is vital for the well-being of the country as a whole. Secularism and apparently 'value-free market forces' approaches need to be seen as the empty vessels they are when it comes to containing the essence of any country. Inter Faith partnership is a way of making that clear.

### **What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

The faiths are most effective when they are strong in themselves and respect one another. Syncretism does not help this and is both patronising and fails to value the diversity within faith communities. We need to be aware of this danger, whilst celebrating what the faiths do have in common in their valuing of people and their promotion of the necessity for a moral and spiritual basis in personal and community life.

### **In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

My involvement has given me greater understanding of faiths other than my own. Personal contact with people of other faiths has resulted in a less anxious approach to navigating the multi-cultural country in which we live and a stronger sense of the value and uniqueness of my own faith.

**Andrew Smith** has had to speak of Christ as a natural part of his working life. But the context of his work has brought the realisation that listening to others speak of their faith is also essential, in order to build trust and respect - and have the privilege of sharing one's faith. The determination to provide opportunities for dialogue has developed in various ways, particularly among young people, as Andrew has actively encouraged others to listen to one another.

### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

I live in Birmingham and started working for Scripture Union as a Schools Worker in 1994. My experience prior to that was in working with white and black secular young people and I assumed those would be the pupils I would work with. However, the schools which were most interested in my work, and who contacted me, were ones where the overwhelming majority of students were Muslims.

During this time I also started to get involved in some of the Christian-Muslim dialogue events that were being run by evangelicals such as Colin Chapman. I became convinced that entering into dialogue was an important task for evangelicals as it encouraged me to listen, but gave me lots of opportunities to 'give the reason for the hope I have within me with gentleness and respect' (to misquote slightly 1 Peter 3:15-16).

### **What has been the nature of your involvement?**

I spent 10 years as a Schools Worker for Scripture Union visiting primary and secondary schools teaching Christianity in RE lessons, leading Christian assemblies and serving on a governing body. We also ran residential trips and set up a holiday club in a church, which was very well attended and still runs, though now in the capable hands of Birmingham City Mission. During this period I spent a lot of time wrestling with what Christian mission should look like when working with Muslim children and young people.



Having become involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue during the late '90's I was convinced of the necessity of this, but I was disappointed that no young people were involved - and indeed very few under the age of 40. So in 2000 I ran an event for Christian and Muslim teenagers which went well enough for me to repeat it. This work developed over the years to the point where in 2008 I founded a charity called 'The Feast' to develop and expand this style of youth work. I serve as Chair of the Board of Directors and we currently employ four staff to deliver the work.

During this time I also had the privilege to serve on a number of bodies including CRiB (Christian Responses to Islam in Britain), Faith to Faith and the Christian-Muslim Forum.

In 2011 I left Scripture Union and started work as Director of Inter Faith Relations for The Bishop of Birmingham. This role includes encouraging churches in their mission amongst people of different faiths in whatever form this takes, whether that be dialogue or evangelism or some mix of the two. It also means working with those from the Anglo-Catholic tradition who have a profound understanding of 'presence' as both mission and ministry.

I also support the Bishop in his work in relating to people of all faiths which in Birmingham includes Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews.

**Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

**Highlights**

Setting up the holiday club in 2000 was a real highlight. Having worked in the schools for six years building up trust and confidence we launched the club in the February. It was going to be held in a local church, run by Christians and would involve lots of high quality activities and clear teaching from the Bible in a way that made sense to the children without forcing them into a commitment or making them feel uncomfortable. We had space for 50 and over 100 applied to come. Since then it has run twice a day every year to allow all the children to come. The parents are welcomed at any time to see what goes on and are invited to a special event on the Friday. It allows the Christian leaders to serve faithfully, love unconditionally and explain clearly what they believe and why they run a club like this. It usually has as much of an impact on the team as it does on the children because they spend time with Muslim children and have to think carefully about how to live out and share their faith in that context.

Whilst serving on the Christian-Muslim Forum I was concerned that there was little discussion about evangelism or Da'wah (Muslims invite people to 'revert' to Islam) yet Christians and Muslims were engaged in this work day by day. I therefore proposed and wrote some guidelines for 'Ethical Witness' to encourage people of both faiths to be honest about the activities that were going on and to encourage good practice by all. These were adopted by the Forum and have caused a good deal of discussion and some controversy. Not everyone agrees with them, but it has enabled some good discussions about the techniques we use and the rights and treatment of converts.

At an event run by 'The Feast' we were discussing how to stay firm in our faith in a world that challenges us. Two girls shared stories of what spiritual resources they drew on. The Christian girl spoke very powerfully about an experience of the Holy Spirit she had, whilst the Muslim girl spoke of how close to Allah she felt in Makkah. It was a privilege to hear them both share deeply and an encouragement that in that context a Christian could give her testimony to interested peers without it being confrontational.

**Challenges:**

There have been many but these can best be summed up under three headings:

*Indifference:* It never ceases to amaze me how many Christians don't see engaging with people of other faiths as important. (I also see this indifference in other faiths.)

*Fear:* I feel sad at how fearful some Christians are of Muslims, but I also get angry when I hear Christians use sweeping generalisations to describe Muslims or happily believe everything they hear about Muslims in the media. Sadly not all Muslims are peace-loving, good citizens; but after 17 years I have to say that the overwhelming majority of the ones I meet in Birmingham are.

*Repetition:* If I'm told once again that the Bible has been corrupted I'll scream. I love discussing faith with people of all faiths and none. But I hate been asked rehearsed questions over and over again.

**Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

I'd like to suggest many, but I'll stick to two (although I mentioned Colin Chapman earlier as well)!

Ida Glaser

I've known Ida for a number of years and have learnt so much from her writings, her teaching, and her attitude. Her love of Scripture and her willingness to engage seriously with Islam, particularly through reading the Qur'an has been an inspiration. I can't recommend her book 'The Bible and Other Faiths' highly enough, and have been challenged by her

humility and dedication to hard study and willingness to ask awkward questions.

Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra

I worked with Ibrahim on the Christian-Muslim Forum and was so impressed with his humility, integrity and willingness to listen to me as I sounded off about one thing or another. I'll never forget sharing a platform with him when someone said, 'This Inter Faith stuff's all very well, but don't you just want each other to convert'. We turned to each other then looked at the speaker and both said 'Yes'.

### **What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership?**

The amount there is to learn about others, but also about our faith.

The chance to speak about Jesus and bear witness to him in all sorts of interesting situations.

The fun we can have when spending time with, and getting to know people, from different faiths and cultures.

### **What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

I am concerned by the way in which Inter Faith is becoming polarised, especially amongst evangelicals, with those who seek to share their faith through dialogue and those who want to engage in more direct evangelism being seen as on opposing sides. I'm also concerned at just how negative some Christians are about people from other faiths.

### **In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

It's made my faith so much stronger and forced me to deal with questions and concerns that people have about the Christian faith honestly. It's made me more aware of the uniqueness of Christ and what he's done for us, and especially I've seen just how much God loves each of us and commands that we express that love to all. I've gained a much deeper understanding of the cross, as both the way of salvation but also as a way of life. To take up one's cross and to be in that place of vulnerability, day by day, is deeply challenging but hugely rewarding as we encounter people of other faiths not as superiors but as vulnerable disciples.



Although **Andy Williams** was slow to recognise the responsibilities of living in a diverse community, he has made up for lost time! While some of the projects he has helped to establish are specific to his own Christian-Muslim situation, his story invites Christians to step out of their 'small corner', where their neighbours are only the not-to-be-known 'other'. In such a journey of discovery, it will be necessary not just to meet the neighbour but also to live out the gospel more fully as a Christian in communities where 'difference' does not equal 'barrier', and bridges of understanding become crossing-places.



### **How did you become involved in Inter Faith matters?**

In the summer of 2001 there were 'riots' or 'civil disturbances' in some of the northern towns and Burnley was one of them. On that weekend, I was on holiday and out of the town for most of the time. It was only on Monday morning that I became aware of what had happened, when a friend phoned from Manchester to find out if we were all right!

The church I serve as minister is Sion Baptist Church and the church building is at one side of the town centre. I went down to the church and saw that some of the shops opposite had their windows boarded. The church building was fine, so I drove over to the next district, Duke Bar, where there were some burnt out cars at the side of the road, many boarded up shop fronts and a pub which had been damaged by fire. The atmosphere seemed heavy and tense. I drove further round the town to two other areas where shops had been damaged and boarded up. Most of the damage seemed to be to Asian-owned shops.

I went back to my room at church and wondered what I should do. I wanted to phone someone in the Asian community to see if they were all right and how they'd been affected. It was then that the penny dropped! I couldn't do that because I didn't actually know anyone in the Asian community, never mind a phone number. "How could I have been the minister of a town centre church in Burnley for almost three years and not made any contacts or relationships in the Asian community?"

The answer was that it was easy. There were no natural meeting points for me as a Baptist minister with Asian people, or their community. I realised this was wrong. I realised that I needed to change and to go about ministry in a different way in future. I went home for lunch and watched the BBC national and regional news programmes. There was coverage from some of the same streets I had driven through earlier. I still remember the deep sense of sadness, shame and depression I felt that the town I had made my home and in which I was working, was being reported under the headline of 'race riots'. This strengthened my resolve to be different and to make a difference.

A few days later, I was invited to a meeting of clergy and Asian leaders to reflect on what had happened and begin to think of how to respond. It was the first time I'd been to a meeting where members of the Asian community were included. The conclusion we reached at the meeting was that we wanted to act together to try and ensure that riots would never happen again in our town. We recognised that, while there were differences of ethnicity, culture, dress and faith between the white and Asian heritage communities which tended to keep us separate, as Christians and Muslims, faith was something that we shared. We would start with faith as our common ground from which we could work together to explore other common ground, as well as differences.

A year later, on the first anniversary of the riots, as Christians and Muslims together, we officially launched Building Bridges in Burnley, our Inter Faith project.

### **What has been the nature of your involvement?**

Since Building Bridges in Burnley was launched in the summer of 2002, I have served as the Baptist representative on what was the management committee and is now the Board of Directors. This has involved working with Muslim colleagues and staff and organising Inter Faith events to explore topics like prayer, the role of women, the place of fasting and festivals. With members of my church, I have been on mosque visits and also shown Muslims round our church. Building Bridges has worked with faith communities to hold a number of 'community feasts' in places of worship. It was our privilege as a church to host one of these feasts on a Sunday afternoon and hundreds of people came to explore our church, share a feast of curry, Lancashire hot pot and of course cakes! It included an opportunity for me to give a short address to people of all denominations and faiths on 'the Baptist Way of Being Church'!

I went on to lead Building Bridges in Burnley in negotiating a partnership with Lancashire County Council for how local faith communities could support the redevelopment of the local secondary schools, under the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme. This led to the establishment of the 'Burnley and Pendle Faith Centre' and the appointment of a co-ordinator; it also led to each of the eight new secondary schools having a faith room, or spiritual space. These rooms are used for prayer and activities that help to develop spirituality and a holistic and inclusive approach to life. A variety of activities are offered from the central Faith Centre throughout the year for school pupils and the community. The management group, on which I serve, comprises school staff and members of the faith communities.

Over the last ten years, I have been involved in all kinds of Inter Faith work, including facilitating the visit of a Muslim Imam to a Baptist College and to a regional conference of Baptist ministers.

### **Please share some stories to illustrate the positive nature of this involvement and examples of any difficulties you may have encountered.**

One of the programmes run by Building Bridges was for faith leaders. The idea was to share significant experiences by going away together for a number of days. The first event was a three day trip to London, visiting places of interest from a historical or faith perspective.

There were eight Christians, mainly clergy and eight Muslims, mainly Imams. We visited the Houses of Parliament where we met our MP and then toured Westminster Abbey and the East London Mosque. All the time, as we got on and off tubes and buses and shared meals together, we got to know one another better. It was a great experience.

However, the greatest experience in this programme was an Inter Faith pilgrimage to the Holy Land. A similar mixed group of Christians and Muslims went to stay in the old city of Jerusalem. We arrived late on a Thursday evening and the next day at 3pm on Friday there was the opportunity to walk the Via Dolorosa, in memory of the journey of Jesus to the cross. Naturally, all the Christians wanted to do this, but what touched us was that all the Muslims wanted to walk with us. In Islam, Jesus is a revered prophet. So we walked together, fellow pilgrims from Burnley, Muslim and Christian, in the footsteps of Jesus. We were all deeply moved, both by the journey, with all its significance and the fact that we had walked it together, Christians and Muslims.

There were many other experiences over the eight days which, on my return, I described as either 'fantastic' or 'disturbing'. Among the disturbing experiences was the way in which, on arrival at Tel Aviv Airport, all the Muslims under the age of fifty in our party were detained for six hours without reason. It was disturbing to hear stories of the effects of the security wall on the lives of ordinary people. It was disturbing as a white tourist/pilgrim to be able to walk through the check point in the security wall at Bethlehem without question, whilst the Muslims in the party had to place all their metal objects in a tray and be scanned, before they could pass through. It was fantastic that the Muslims



in our party were able to negotiate for us as Christians to visit the Dome of the Rock, which would not otherwise have been able to visit.

After the Tsunami which happened over Christmas 2004, Building Bridges in Burnley invited Christians and Muslims to collect in the town centre in pairs for Christian Aid and Islamic Relief. Yvonne, from our church, went collecting with a young Muslim student. They were delighted to be responding to the crisis together and enjoyed a rich conversation, which inspired the young Muslim to be involved in Inter Faith initiatives in future.

### **Is there someone who has been inspirational to you in regard to Inter Faith matters?**

It's difficult to single anyone out from many wonderful Christian and Muslim friends in Burnley.

### **What most excites you in the journey of Inter Faith partnership?**

I am excited by the opportunities to work in partnership with people of other faiths to build understanding, respect and friendship among people of other faiths and none. For example, in Building Bridges in Burnley, I lead the Faith Friends Project where Christians and Muslims work in pairs as joint 'chaplains' or 'Faith Friends', as we call them, to secondary schools. Together, they offer friendship and support to pupils and staff, act as role models of people of different faith working together in friendship, and contribute to the life of their school in all kinds of ways.

I am learning and receiving from people of other faiths in terms of their understanding of God and how they live out their faith.

I find that my own faith and discipleship is both challenged and enriched by engaging with people of other faiths, though my experience is mainly of Muslims. For instance, exploring the Muslim understanding and practice of fasting led me to look again at the teaching of Jesus on fasting. This led me to the new understanding that Jesus expected his followers to practise fasting. "And whenever you fast..." (Matthew 6: 16-18). Will it do for western Christians like me to say, "I don't fast, so this doesn't apply to me"? This is what I used to say, but I am beginning to discover the value in faith and life of fasting!

### **What concerns do you have regarding Inter Faith engagement?**

I am concerned by the reluctance that most people of all faiths seem to have to exploring faiths other than their own. Is this because it seems disloyal, or because of a fear of contamination, or a fear of how people of our own faith may perceive our engagement?

I am also concerned that Inter Faith is somehow seen as seeking to reduce the faiths to the lowest common denominator. This is definitely not what I am about in my Inter Faith work.

### **In what ways has your involvement affected your faith?**

I think I am a better, more rounded, well-founded, Christian disciple, more open to people, and more open to difference and able to work with it. I am more confident that faiths can contribute positively to the future of the world, rather than be a threat, or be manipulated or abused for the agendas of others.

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