

Commission on Integration and Cohesion

Submission on behalf of The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Church and The United Reformed Church

Introduction

The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Church, and The United Reformed Church are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Commission's consultation. All three denominations have for many years been involved in promoting community development, inter faith relations and anti-racism and we are pleased to be able to offer this experience to the Commission.

There are some 150,000 members of Baptist churches associated with the Baptist Union of Great Britain. The Methodist Church has about 295,000 members and 800,000 people are connected with the Church. The United Reformed Church comprises about 150,000 adults and 100,000 children. The three denominations are the largest of the Free Churches in Britain.

This submission was prepared after a written consultation seeking views and experiences across the three denominations, and a seminar held for a small group of practitioners. Whilst a range of views was expressed in our consultation, this submission is representative of the responses we received and of the work being done locally by the three denominations.

This submission is divided into three parts:

- a. a commentary on some of the main issues which we would like to draw to the Commission's attention
- b. answers to the "Questions for Faith Community Organisations" drawing particularly on local examples within our churches
- c. summary recommendations to Government, local authorities and faith communities.

Section 1 – Comments on the main issues

Terminology

The Commission will have received many comments on the terms "cohesion" and "integration". Whilst we do not wish to become bogged down in semantic discussions, we wish to raise a number of issues connected with terminology.

We assume that the Commission intends both integration and cohesion to be perceived as positive terms and concepts. However we came across a degree of negativity in our consultation. For example our consultees reported that some Muslims expressed suspicion of the term "cohesion", fearing that it was a code word for requiring Muslims to bring "extremists" under control, enhanced perhaps by the fact that the term "cohesion" was first used in this sense in a response to rioting in

which Muslims were involved. Other people expressed concern that “integration” was a synonym for assimilation. Our consultation found that there was widespread support for the concepts – a society which functions harmoniously allowing individuals to express their identity, have a sense of belonging and fulfil their potential – but we point out that neither the Commission nor the Government should assume that everyone has the same interpretation of the key words used in this debate.

Two further questions were also raised in our consultation: Around what should our society cohere? And what kind of society are people being asked to integrate within? In connection with the first, the concepts of nation, of Britishness, and, even worse, of Englishness are very slippery ones, which residents of many generations have difficulty defining. For newcomers to this country, they are opaque, meaning that some people have difficulty in opting in to a culture they cannot grasp. Consequently cohesion often works much better at a local level than a national one. We were given the example of how people of various faiths in Bradford identified themselves as “Bradfordians” first, before being English or British. This is particularly important for a London-centric government to realise.

With reference to the second question, many Christians find the dominant values expressed by our culture – materialism, individualism – antipathic to the values inherent in our faith. That does not mean that we refuse to participate in the society, but we do not wish to buy into or adopt wholesale the values of the society in which we live. This is equally true of people of other faiths, particularly if they are newly resident in this country. Therefore Government should be cautious when talking about expecting all people to “accept our values” without articulating what is meant.

Internal diversity

Our consultation drew attention to the internal diversity within religions, not just between religions. These divisions are rarely discussed objectively, often because faith members find them difficult to acknowledge, especially to people of different or no faith or those in authority, as it reveals that religions are falling short of the ideal of unity. These divisions come from many different “identities” – generational, gender, ethnicity, geographical origin, social class or caste - as well as the theological differences between different branches of a faith.

Although much has been achieved through inter faith and multi faith work in this country, some attempts at multi faith work have colluded with a monolithic approach to religion, by taking the view that if you talk to one Muslim, for example, you have the views of a whole world religion. Sadly local and national government – not to mention the media - have sometimes also replicated this approach. Speaking as Christians we know how much frustration is created within our communities when, for example, the Church of England is assumed to speak for the Free Churches. How much more frustrating in the current political climate must it be for Muslims to feel they are being misrepresented.

We recognise that it is very difficult, particularly for Government, to become aware of the internal diversity of religions. This can only be achieved by sustained listening on the ground, and has to be repeated as personnel change and demographic identities shift.

Extremism

Unease was also expressed in our consultation about what the “cohesion and integration agenda” was expecting people of minority ethnic and faith groups to deliver, particularly Muslims. Some people feared that Muslims were being expected

to contain and combat extremism and that they would be judged enemies of cohesion or integration, if they failed to deliver.

The concept of extremism is a tricky one. Activities which claim the authority of the divine to legitimise mass murder are repugnant to the vast majority of believers. Yet the terminology of “extremists” or “fundamentalists”, and the use of the opposite term, “moderates”, does not always fit comfortably within a faith perspective. People of faith try to live their lives according to their understanding of their faith, striving to the utmost to apply its teachings as fully as they can to all parts of their lives. In this sense, to require a believer to “moderate” their beliefs is insulting to their faith. Within Christianity there are different traditions of biblical interpretation, which means that some Christians claim and others reject the label of “fundamentalist”. This should not be assumed to be applicable to all other faiths.

The Government should gain an understanding of what people of different faiths believe, becoming sensitive to the differences within and between faiths. However, we would point out that the Government’s proper concern is the behaviours which stem from belief, particularly those which limit other people’s right to safety and happiness. Faith communities themselves must take responsibility for the theological struggles within their faiths.

Faith and the state

People have raised concerns with us about local and national government becoming an arbiter between faiths. A number of people expressed disappointment that those appointed by local government as faith or equality officers, and those working nationally on inter faith issues, are often not sufficiently grounded within a faith tradition. One respondent said *“Authorities...need to recognise that serious interfaith work can only be done by people who have a firm base within a particular faith.”* Even then, just being a “believer” is not enough. A study of faith officers in the London area suggested that, whilst being of a particular faith, they did not have prior experience of inter faith engagement. Good inter faith work does not come from a position of studied neutrality but from a deep personal understanding of why faith is formative in people’s lives, experience of other faiths, and a commitment to dialogue and understanding.

A significant number of other people expressed concern about the “dumbing down of Christianity”. They fear that public expressions of Christianity are being quashed in misguided attempts to appease other faiths, referring to recent controversies over Christmas lights and the wearing of crosses. Whilst these actual incidents can be overplayed, they demonstrate that even amongst people who are predisposed to support cohesion and integration, this fear creates a groundswell of concern. This is unnecessary as most people of faith are pleased to see symbols of belief rather than symbols of secularism. But it shows the danger of the state interposing itself as a guardian of “neutrality”.

Thirdly the Government needs to be aware of the increased regulatory burden placed on faith communities. Whilst in themselves many of the new regulations are valuable – much of the legislation in the field of child protection, for example, has been vital – they can place heavy burdens on under-resourced faith communities and the voluntary sector more widely. This can feed a sense of concern and resentment in faith communities who fear that their contribution to the well-being of society is being made more difficult by increasingly restrictive regulatory frameworks. The Government needs to be aware of the unforeseen consequences of imposing more legislative requirements on faith communities.

Racism

The terminology and context of the Commission clearly focus on “faith”. However we are concerned that this should not result in the dismissal of issues of racism in Britain. Race and faith are often intertwined within individual or collective identity. Faith can be used as shorthand for race, for example the British National Party’s use of the word “Muslim” to single out people of Asian descent. And your faith can be as much part of your inheritance as is your race. But we would not want the Commission to forget the very particular experience of racism in this country. Although there has been legal progress in the prevention of racial discrimination, one of the greatest barriers to cohesion in this country is the day-to-day experience of racism. We mean by this individual experiences of racist violence or behaviour, the race-based differences in economic status, education, employment and housing, and the presence of institutional racism in society. Cohesion is not only about right relations between people of different faiths, but about justice for all people, regardless of their ethnicity.¹

Section 2 – Questions to Faith Community Organisations

1. How can faith communities help to build cohesion locally? In what ways is your own faith community contributing to this?

Faith communities are based in every community in the country. In some parts of the country religious leaders are the only “professionals” ministering to a community in a particular place. Churches have premises, often under-used, which can be offered for community events or as a meeting place, although there needs to be sensitivity to some churches’ rules on the use of their premises for prayer by people of other faiths.

It should not be forgotten that faith communities have an impact wider than inter faith relations. At their best they are concerned with the holistic well-being of our society. This means offering support to people experiencing poverty, people without jobs, to refugees and asylum seekers, to parents and children, to people experiencing racism, to those who are lonely. All these activities help to build up the cohesiveness of a society.

Whilst faith communities undertake many activities as faith communities, acting alone or with others, many “secular” cohesion projects are in fact run by individuals of faith. Around the country people of faith are involved in Sure Start, credit unions, advice centres, homeless drop in centres and so on. They are not acting through their faith institution, but because of their faith. The Commission will want to consider the contribution of faith, not just through faith bodies but through the everyday activities of believers.

- The Darnall Forum Community Engagement Team in Sheffield is a secular project, but the vast majority of the volunteers are committed members of faith communities
- RESTORE is a project of Churches Together in Birmingham. “Befrienders” or members of the host community are linked with an individual asylum seeker or

¹ For this reason the Racial Justice and Multi-Cultural Ministry Office of the United Reformed Church will be making its own response to the Commission’s consultation.

refugee or family in the city. This project clearly meets a desperate need, and builds up integration in the city by challenging myths about asylum. But because many of the asylum seekers and refugees are people of faith, it also serves to build up an understanding of other faiths amongst the newcomers and the host Christian community.

- The Touchstone Project in Bradford focuses on city issues and interfaith relations. Among its projects the Pakistani Christian Faith to Faith worker, Awais Dominic, brings younger Asian women together to listen to Bradford women who have made an impact in various professional sectors and thus provide healthy role models.
- Beech Hill Methodist Church in Luton is being rebuilt, with the aim of starting a project “Linking Lives” in April 2008. This will link families from differing faiths and cultures with the aim of initiating friendships across barriers.
- The Methodist Church Racial Justice Projects Fund supports SARI in Bristol which backs individuals who experienced racial discrimination in fighting legal cases.
- In Handsworth, Birmingham, the Baptist Church made the decision to appoint a full-time minister from the Punjab in India. This is to enable it to effectively serve the local community that is now about 70% Punjabi.

2. How can faith communities help to build understanding between people of different faiths and also between people of faith and wider society? How is your own faith community contributing to this?

The churches have long-standing experience to offer in building understanding between people of other faiths. As early as 1978 the churches set up a committee for relationships with people of other faiths, made up of people who were actively engaged in building understanding between different faiths on the ground, in places such as Loughborough, Leicester and Bradford. Even in the most unlikely areas of the country there are Christians who have built relations with people of other faiths, slowly getting to know one another and breaking down the sense of “strangeness” between the faiths.

The Churches have over this time established guidelines for good practice in inter faith relations. The first of these were a response to guidelines produced by the World Council of Churches and appeared in 1982. They included: Dialogue begins when people meet each other; Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust. Further to these, the Methodist Church, for example adopted the Inter Faith Network Code of Conduct in 1994, adding eight further principles, which included: Opportunities must be given to Methodists to learn about the beliefs and practices of people of other faiths; Methodists must be encouraged to share the stories of their faith. We have learnt from long experience what works, and what doesn't work, in building understanding between people of other faiths.

Many respondents to our consultation stated that building understanding between faiths was not dependent on initiatives intended for this purpose. Undertaking a common task or purpose, even if it is unrelated to faith-sharing or cohesion, can have faith-sharing or an increase in cohesion as a fortunate by-product.

- In Beeston, an inner city suburb of Leeds, the Faith Together in Leeds 11 was begun by faith groups to develop regeneration projects, but it had the bi-product of building a level of cohesion, trust and understanding between the different faith communities which stood them in good stead in the days following 7 July 2005.
- People from local churches and Mosques came together over several years in the work of the Manningham Mills Community Association in Bradford. This eventually led to one of the largest urban regeneration schemes in the North of England involving the restoration of the huge Lister's Mill on a 27 acre site. Contacts built up over the years led to more interfaith understanding, while contributing significantly to the healing of community wounds following the 2001 riots in Manningham .
- In February the Methodist Church is holding a month of prayer for better relationships between people of different faiths. This will be marked by the whole of the Methodist Church, but the initiative for it came from the Methodist Youth Conference. It will be accompanied by a photo competition open to all ages and all faiths to raise awareness of different faiths
- A URC minister in Basford, Nottingham, is involved in a local "Faith in Action" group in which Muslims, Christians and Sikhs are active. The group initially began as a forum for dialogue, where speakers from different faiths would talk on a topic such as the environment. From this came specific pieces of work: for example the *Eco-Congregation* resource material, aimed at helping churches to become environmentally friendly, is being translated into different community languages, and a video on climate change has been produced by local young people.
- Faith groups in Nottinghamshire organised a hustings meeting before the last election entitled "Celebrating Migration". Each party's candidate was invited to speak on the topic for 5 minutes, before meeting members of the community and joining them for food
- Many chaplaincies, to hospitals, prisons and colleges are now inter faith. This transition has not been an easy process for all, but where it has worked well it has opened up institutional relations with people of all faiths. Across the country people of faith act as volunteer or paid chaplains in places where people feel under pressure.
- Both the URC and the Methodist churches have produced resources to help Christians reflect on the issues raised by the presence of other faiths in Britain. One of these is 'Faith Meeting Faith', which takes questions frequently asked by Christians, such as 'Can different faith communities work together?'
- The Baptist Union of Great Britain is holding a consultation entitled 'Good Neighbours?' in March with the aim of helping churches deepen their understanding of what it means to live within a multi faith society. This will include meeting with members of the Muslim community in Leicester.

3. What role do you see for inter faith initiatives in helping build cohesion and contribute to integration? Are there any local initiatives you are aware of that you think are particularly helpful and might serve as models for wider use?

As mentioned above, initiatives do not have to be about faith or cohesion in order to build them up. They can be a happy by-product of a decision to co-operate on a joint project.

- In Bradford a Christian-Muslim women's group brings women together who want to know more about cultural differences. This does not only improve inter faith understanding: the Muslim women are from different families/clans and would not normally encounter one another at all.
- In Blackburn bowling matches have been held between Churches Together and local mosques to foster closer links. In Leicester, there have been football matches between Christian pastors and imams.
- In Luton the work of Grassroots, an ecumenical organisation, includes the promotion of inter faith work amongst women. A worker facilitates a women's group involving Hindu, Christian and Muslim women to talk, listen to speakers and share meals. This group helps to break down misconceptions.
- In Tottenham, London, a nun is funded by the Methodist Church Racial Justice Projects Fund, to identify families living on the margins and find ways in which they can be supported – perhaps through befriending to build confidence in English – to integrate with society

4. Do you see faith communities having a role in helping tackle such problems as alienation, racism and extremism? What is your own faith community doing on this front?

Faith communities, rooted in society and with a concern for its well-being, naturally have a role in combating evils such as alienation, racism and extremism. As stated above, this might be through the faith communities themselves, or through individuals inspired by their faith, working in a secular setting.

- Our churches support Church Action on Poverty, which works to tackle the root causes of poverty and to support those living in poverty; they are running pilot projects in conjunction with local authorities in North Wales in Participatory Budgeting and in Thornaby (Thrive) to enable a local community to develop sustainable livelihoods. Churches across the country support refugees and asylum seekers. Others run Parents and Toddler groups, or drop-ins for homeless, isolated or elderly people. Some Black Majority churches have started Saturday or Supplementary schools to tackle educational disadvantage amongst Black young people, and others have begun the difficult task of tackling gun crime in their communities.
- Nationally the Methodist Church has set up a project to tackle political extremism and particularly racist political parties. It has produced resources to prepare churches when such parties are standing for election, and will shortly issue guidelines for churches in those council wards which are represented by extremist councillors.

- We have raised the difficulty of “extremism” within faith communities earlier on. We believe that the illegal behaviours resulting from extreme politicisation of religion is the responsibility of government, but tackling the ideologies which feed this behaviour has to be taken seriously by faith communities themselves. Faith communities should be supported in this, but this responsibility cannot be taken away from them. One example that we have come across of Christians standing up to extremism is from Luton where a number of churches in a multi-faith area have refused to receive certain lay preachers from outside the area who express critical views of Muslims in their services.

5. How can faith communities act or speak together at times of tension and difficulty to encourage a sense of community solidarity?

Faith communities can only act or speak together at times of tension if the relationship already exists. Joint statements or shared acts can be hugely effective in reducing community tensions, but they cannot be pulled out of the hat if the personal trust has not been built up before.

- After the identification of the 7 July 2005 bombers, faith leaders from their home area of Beeston, Leeds, used the already established Faith Together in Leeds 11 project as a platform to issue statements and make joint public appearances. The existence of shared trust was one of the reasons that community disturbances were avoided.
- Faith leaders in Bradford are part of a Civic Network initiated by Churches, University Peace Studies and police, which prepares for times of tension and difficulty. As at the outbreak of war in Iraq and when the bombs went off in London, a joint press statement was ready for immediate release.

6. Are there values or grounding principles within your faith tradition which you believe may be held in common with people of other faiths and beliefs and should be at the heart of shared life in the UK?

Faiths share many values – which are also shared with many people of goodwill – and are crucial for a society to prosper and be at peace. Values such as hospitality, welcoming the stranger, valuing the individual and treating others as you would wish to be treated are common between many faiths, and encourage people to think in terms of cohesion. And while Christians have differing attitudes to authority and Government, most would agree that there is a requirement to live within the system, even if you work hard to change it.

Section 3 – Recommendations

Recommendations to Government

- there needs to be an awareness that the terminology used in the debate over the cohesion agenda is not necessarily commonly understood and therefore not universally perceived as positive
- people of faith, as with all people, belong to many different groups and so have many layers of identity. This leads to internal diversity within religions which has to be recognised in any work undertaken with faith communities

- the only way to build up an understanding of faith is through sustained and repeated listening on the ground
- cohesion is more likely to be built around local than national identities
- government action on “extremism” should focus on behaviours not beliefs
- it does not help to identify particular people as “moderates”
- whilst some local authorities are very active in inter faith work, others have failed to engage. Government action can be very helpful in setting out frameworks and encouraging action across the country.
- it should not be forgotten that racism is a separate factor that works against community cohesion

Recommendations to local government

- people of different faiths, cultures and races need shared spaces in which they can meet and engage in shared common purposes. The desire to support centres for individual communities should not be carried out to the exclusion of spaces which facilitate the meeting of different communities
- the public celebration of religious festivals (Eid, Diwali, Christmas) is an important way of building public understanding of other faiths and building a sense of community in a locality
- faith officers and equality officers appointed by local authorities should be rooted in their own faith tradition but be open to and have experience of inter faith work and not only diversity issues
- effective community projects come out of local communities and are responsive to their needs. Short-term funding and funding targets that are solely economic militate against community cohesion
- communities in multi-ethnic, multi-faith areas are usually communities in transition. Therefore work on building relationships and understanding can never be considered “complete”. Instead it has to be sustained and repeated.

Recommendations to faith communities

- faith communities need to be confident about sharing their festivals and beliefs with those outside their faith tradition to build understanding, respect and relationships
- premises owned by faith communities are a valuable resource which should be shared as far as possible to provide community space
- members and leaders of faith communities need to prepare themselves for possible future tensions, and build the relationships and understanding which will make possible joint working at times of pressure
- faith communities should indicate their determination to stand together against intolerance and extremism by engaging in joint initiatives such as “non-tolerance agreements”, whereby an attack on one place of worship is considered to be an attack on all faiths.

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