

INTERFAITH WINTER NEWS 2020

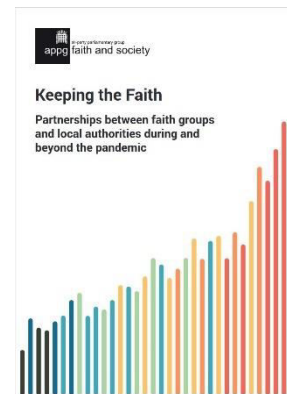
Since the autumn news sheet, we have witnessed the start of a mass Covid19 vaccination programme, for which I am sure we are all grateful. A triumph for scientific application, and international collaboration – the Pfizer vaccine is the result of a Turkish couple, working in Germany. The ramifications of Covid19 have also given rise to other collaborations, not least involving faith groups and public sector bodies, in a number of different contexts.

To distinguish between these different contexts in which church and other faith groups operate and contribute, I'm suggesting that they be considered in three areas: a) social; b) cultural; c) spiritual.

Social

According to a recent report from the Faith and Society APPG (all party parliamentary group), the pandemic has been a springboard for a rise in relationships between local authorities and faith communities, and for existing relationships to be deepened. The report, KEEPING THE FAITH <https://tinyurl.com/y4vfcyqy>

found that local authorities considered faith groups and faith-based organisations as being “essential in their civil society response to the pandemic”. This was seen in the provision of foodbanks, buildings, information, befriending, cooking and delivering meals, and volunteers for local authority programmes – all of which add to what might be termed ‘social capital’, our connections with others and the collective attitudes and behaviours between people that support a well-functioning, close-knit society. Local authorities reported their experience of working in partnership with faith groups as being overwhelmingly positive. One council leader said: “My personal admiration for faith groups has gone through the roof, just in terms of their commitment.”

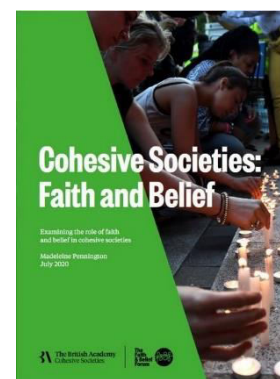


The level of response to the survey from local authorities was particularly high in the north-west, and this is reflected in the increased engagement many of us have noticed on the ground. Encouragingly many authorities said that going forwards they would welcome a changed partnership, with future priorities focused on deeper co-production of goods and services, rooted in named shared values and a shift from ‘authority’ to ‘enabler’. Importantly there seems to be less anxiety about working with faith groups – which is considered in the next section.

Cultural

As well as the practical activities associated with building social capital, a strong and cohesive society is one in which differences are understood, respected and tolerated. In this, knowledge, and awareness of different cultures, languages and traditions found in UK society is important, and contributes to ‘cultural capital’. Where this is lacking, there is the danger of tension between communities, as evidenced in the race riots of 2001, and in the growing issues of antisemitism, islamophobia and distrust of ‘foreigners’. Too often ‘faith’ has been seen as part of this divisiveness, including by local authorities, who simply do not ‘get’ faith!

Consequently, cohesion policy has been dominated by concerns for national identity, security and loyalty, rather than by a desire to pursue social cohesion as an end in itself. Here another recent report, produced by Theos and the British Academy, is useful, as it highlights the key role that many faith groups play in social cohesion and shows that integration issues are better addressed by approaching faith and belief communities in a spirit of partnership, recognising the positive role they



can play in creating a more connected and cohesive society. Indeed, it is recommended they should have much more influence on cohesion policy in the UK.

Full report can be found here: <https://faithbeliefforum.org/report/>

In this regard an example of faith groups contributing to cohesion is through the work of NEAR NEIGHBOURS, and it's good to report that they will be supporting further cohesion work in Burnley, where the Methodist church and Building Bridges Burnley are key players. Events like 'share faith, share food' are simple in concept, but profound in allowing a sharing of cultures, and contribute to what is crucial to strengthening the fabric of society, namely building of personal relationships.



Spiritual

As we've progressed through the pandemic there is increased awareness that people's mental and emotional well-being is suffering. At the same time, there is evidence that local authorities, and the health service, are recognising that faith groups are important in providing support in this area, e.g. through pastoral telephone calls, and moreover, that spirituality is an important element in the overall well-being of us all.



Spirituality can also be linked to the motivations for our actions in public life – the 'why' behind the 'what' that we do. When what we do is closely aligned to what we believe and our view of the world, then we are far more likely to feel energised, committed and engaged in what we do.

With many meetings now being held on-line, it's now possible to gather together far more people than was ever possible before. This has allowed the Lancashire Forum of Faiths to run webinars on topics related to spirituality which have engaged local authority and public sector staff in a new way. In a recent webinar on the topic of HOPE, held on Dec 1st, all 7 of the main faiths contributed, along with a psychologist, Dr Montasem, and the director of public health for Lancashire, Dr Sakthi Karunanithi. There was much in common, summarised well by Dr Sakthi who suggested that hope is 'an expectation of a positive experience'; that it involves both worship – connecting us to the divine, and service – self-less giving; and that to bridge the gap between current reality and future hope we need to overcome ego, ignorance and illusion. Full text of contributions to be available soon.



There does appear to be a great opportunity to build further on this sort of event, and for the spiritual aspect of faith to be more widely recognised, acknowledged and discussed.

If you have some good examples of where your church is involved in any of the three aspects of faith in society outline above, do let me know. And as always, if you would like to know more, or get involved in working in partnership with those of other faiths, please get in touch.

Peter Lumsden (district interfaith officer; pjlumsden58@gmail.com)