

Birmingham Council of Faiths – aims and contribution to the city

for launch of National Interfaith Week November 11th 2016

Birmingham Council of Faiths was inaugurated, as one of the first such councils in the country, in November 1974. It grew out of the work of All Faiths for One Race (AFFOR) a campaigning body promoting racial justice in the Handsworth area of the city. Leading lights in AFFOR were Professor John Hick and Clare Short MP. Around that time there was also the pioneering work of Dr Mary Hall in setting up the Multi Faith Resource Centre in Selly Oak and Christine Harries who started the informal group known as the Fellowship of Faiths in 1981.

Initially the intention was to bring together the 5 faiths of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. Buddhists joined a few years later. The aims were to provide a forum for people of different faiths to meet and promote mutual understanding, to try to resolve any problems that arose for religious minorities and to provide a framework for interfaith dialogue. In those early days the Council was concerned with issues such as right wing activity (National Front at that time), equal rights for all religious groups, securing places of worship and issues to do with the ritual slaughter of animals.

In 1987 the Interfaith Network for the UK was founded and Birmingham Inter Faiths Council (as it was known then) joined in the same year. A practice was established, which is still followed in a modified form, whereby the role of chair of the committee was taken on each year by a person of a different faith, taking the faiths in alphabetical order. This ensured that all faiths were equally involved in the leadership role, with a number of women playing an active part as the Chair. Activities in the 1980's included multi-faith bus tours to different places of worship and a celebration of Creation held in St Philips Cathedral.

In 1995 the name was changed to Birmingham Council of Faiths and charitable status was granted. The support of the City Council has been embodied in the presence of successive Lord Mayors as our President throughout the years, which has been appreciated. Although Birmingham City Council has never been able to support BCF financially, it has taken a series of valuable parallel initiatives such as the Faiths Round Table and the Faiths Map. The difficulty or even impossibility of being truly representative of all faith bodies in the city was, and still is, a continuing issue for BCF. There have also been differences of opinion about addressing socio-political issues which had religious implications. Gradually more faiths joined the Council. Baha'is, Zoroastrians and Confucians made a total of 9 faiths, until very recently when the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has also become a member. Women have continued to play key roles, although it has often been difficult to achieve the active participation of all the member faiths.

In the last 20 years or so the number and variety of interfaith bodies in the city has grown enormously. The range of activities undertaken has also become much more diverse. In 2001, following the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York, the Faith Leaders Group was set up and still continues to meet. I expect you know the story of how Rabbi Leonard Tann of Singers Hill synagogue was so shocked and moved by the horror of the attack and the unjustified accusations against Muslims, that he went to the Central Mosque

and, together with the Anglican bishop of Birmingham, the three faith leaders set up the Faith Leaders' Group. Anglican bishops of Birmingham have continued to appoint respected scholars as their advisers, and they have made significant contributions to interfaith understanding in the city. An example that springs to mind is the many series of study sessions run by Dr Chris Hewer on 'Understanding Islam'. Incidentally, he is returning to the city to hold another one next Saturday. Dr Andrew Smith continues in this important role today.

In 2007 the Birmingham Council of Faiths adopted a new constitution and the object became:

'to promote knowledge and mutual understanding of the beliefs and practices of religious faiths, sects and denominations.'

This included promoting awareness of all faiths and dialogue between faiths, being alert to issues and acting as a public voice on matters of mutual concern.

In more recent years notable developments have included the annual 'Faiths for Fun' event for young people which has been run for the last 9 years in partnership with the Birmingham Scout Association and Hamstead Hall Academy. BCF has also organised twice yearly 'Faiths, Health and Wellbeing seminars for the last four years, now held at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. There have been a number of interfaith peace walks and an associated group, known as Sacred Space, has met regularly over a meal for speakers and interfaith conversation. A year ago, at the time of the UN conference on climate change in Paris, a new project, 'Footsteps: Faiths for a Low Carbon Future' was launched and is affiliated to BCF. There will be a Footsteps event next Sunday afternoon at the Central Mosque.

All this and much more has been achieved through the voluntary service of dedicated people of all faiths. BCF has worked without an office base or paid staff for most of its existence and yet continues to be a place to which bodies such as the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery can turn for advice and guidance on faith matters. A range of interfaith events are held throughout the year, and networks continue to be established across faith boundaries. However, probably the most valuable and profound benefit of BCF, speaking as one who has been involved for many years, has been the personal friendships that have developed and been treasured, showing how trust and respect **can** be built up, despite differences of belief and culture. My prayer is that this commitment will continue to make a vital contribution to the life of the city.

Ruth Tetlow

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