

Interfaith Groups

The BHA welcomes the opportunities offered by participation in interfaith organisations and does its best to find volunteers to take up local invitations. Experiences in these groups vary and a couple of contrasting experiences are given below.

Some humanists report very positive experiences. The London Borough of Barnet invited BHA and North London Humanist Group member Douglas Eyeions to their first inter-faith conference, and then onto the inter-faith steering group, and Margaret Nelson writes below about her membership of the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE).

Suffolk Inter-faith Resource was founded in 1993 by a small group led by Cynthia Capey (a Humanities lecturer at Suffolk College). There've been Humanists involved since the beginning. We've been accommodated by the college since 1994 and currently occupy a bungalow on the campus. We have charitable status and offer an educational resource to the wider community. I'm a SIFRE tutor, contributing to courses for schools and adult organisations such as the WEA, and I've been a member of SIFRE's board for the last two years.

SIFRE has a good relationship with Suffolk local authorities; we've contributed to civic events, for example. On 11 September 2002 I led an Inter-Faith commemoration of 9/11 in Ipswich Corn Exchange, where the contributors included a group of Kurdish refugees and a Chinese children's dance class. Last summer we had a successful one-day conference for local authorities, the police, social services and others, and our group had a stall.

We've contributed to several SIFRE publications: a directory of local faiths (and Humanism), with descriptions of their activities; a collection of writings by women; a Community Handbook, updated several times; a similar publication for the North Essex Mental Health Trust. Our most successful venture so far has been 'Diversity', a board game which teaches players about the beliefs of people who live in the county. It's been popular in schools and for training with the police, local authorities and those in the caring professions, who can hire a team of tutors to play with them.

A recent survey for Suffolk County Council demonstrated what I already knew: that racism is rife in the rural areas. Although playing Diversity may not have much impact, it's one way of dispelling some myths about minority communities. I recently played with sixth formers at a school conference, who'd never talked to a Sikh before, and found my SIFRE companion to be a friendly, warm human being, despite his turban, and my Muslim companion to be a non-militant representative of her faith, despite the negative media representation of Islam.

There's a 'Forum of Faiths', with Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Humanist, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, Sikh, Taoist and Zoroastrian representatives.

Proselytising and preaching are not permitted. I've never encountered hostility from my colleagues, though I have encountered hostility from some so-called 'Humanists' who seem to think we ought not to have anything to do with religious people. This is silly and short-sighted, since there is much to gain from involving ourselves with such organisations. One of my clergy friends in Ipswich, a retired hospital chaplain, once raised an eyebrow when he kissed me in front of a crematorium chapel attendant (I'm an officiant). 'You kissed an atheist!' the attendant said. 'That's all right,' said my friend, 'it's not catching.' I have a similar attitude to working with religious people. I know that many more people in Suffolk have heard about Humanism as a result of our involvement, and I've learned a lot too.

SIFRE's website is at www.sifre.org.uk.

BHA member Jon Miles responded to an invitation from Redbridge Council to attend the inaugural meeting of the Redbridge Faith Forum. At meetings he met with a mixed reception from the other 'faith representatives.' Below he reports Episodes 3 and 4 of the saga:

Before the rather formal meeting we were all sent a questionnaire which included a question on the involvement in the Forum of people with no religious faith, but no reference was made on the night to the results, if any, of this survey. Despite having been invited to the first Steering Group meeting a couple of months ago, I noted that there were colour-printed name badges for members of the Steering Group, but not for me. As soon as she arrived, Jane from the Salvation Army pounced on me in the most friendly way and made a point of sitting next to me in the meeting. Those who'd been less friendly before avoided eye-contact.

The keynote speaker was the Reverend Chris Beales, who was seconded by the C of E to the Dept of the Environment to set up a national multi-faith body, the Inner-cities Religious Council, some years ago. He argued that the different faiths must have a dialogue with each other and acknowledged that many conflicts in the world are the expression of inter-faith arguments. He added that now is a time when the door is open for faith groups to influence Government: "The faiths are the best resourced, best organised and best connected of all in the not-for-profit world," he said. Two of the questions asked afterwards swerved dangerously around my head: "How can we listen to someone like Government Minister Hilary Armstrong when she announces herself to be an atheist?" and "Should people of no religious faith have a role in our Forum?" to which he replied: "We who have faith believe that there is something of God in everyone, whether they are aware of this or not, and we have to place our trust in the sovereignty of God, here, " and "We should welcome them, and perhaps we might learn something that surprises us."

I'm now unsure whether or not there will be an Episode 4 in this series.

Jon received just one day's notice of the next Faith Forum meeting, which was then postponed because of snow. He attended the postponed meeting, in March

2004, where he found that a decision had been made between meetings to exclude non-faith group representatives. Jon reported "an other thought-provoking experience representing the BHA" where his questions on the procedure and decision were answered as follows: "The exclusion was approved by the Forum when they agreed its new Terms of Reference. These described the proportional representation for faith groups to be included in the Management Committee that were based on the 2001 Census data on religious belief in Redbridge. The decision was taken on the basis of questionnaire responses. The relevant question was: "Co-optees from non-faith organisations to sit on Management Committee?" 17 out of 34 people said No; 9 said Yes; 8 said Don't know."

Jon then asked some further questions: "The questionnaire showed an equal split at 17 each between those saying No to 'me', and those who didn't (said 'Yes' or 'Don't know'). The census figures used totalled 92.21%. One category was missing, that of "No religion" - which is the 3rd equal highest single group represented in the Redbridge census, alongside Hindu and after Christian and Muslim. Why were the non-religious excluded from these figures where the relevant Steering Group issue was exactly that of non-faith group representation (raised by two faith-group representatives, initially)?"

I closed my observations by saying I had no intention of raising this matter again in the future, but that it would be useful to me to understand how the decision was made in order to feed back to those I'd been invited to represent. I also expressed my sadness that mere discussion of the issue was felt to be divisive. If I felt my mere presence was divisive because of its effect on others, I would withdraw further involvement from the whole Forum (to which I'm still invited in future) to avoid this: it was not my intention. No further information helpful to my understanding was forthcoming, and we passed to other matters. I contributed throughout the meeting and, as the intention is to hand over to the new Management Committee at the next Forum meeting, I imagine my contribution to this initiative is now over. I am pleased I made some suggestions as to how this Management Committee might best function and actively engage the community. My final contribution was to suggest that an event not simply advertising/focusing on "Faith" would be more successful in attracting a big audience to the coming Forum meeting. Many might be put off by the idea that people were coming specifically as members of faiths. To illustrate, I referred to a text I'd read earlier in the day, from the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno:

"Reason is that in which we are all agreed, or at least the majority... Reason is social; truth, usually, is completely individual, personal and difficult to communicate. Reason unites us and truth separates."

I was pleased that the Steering Group remaining (people had begun to leave) took this suggestion forward, agreed that the purpose should be to come together as

people, and not members of faiths, and selected the issue of Community Health as a first focus.

Updated March 04