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YES, FAITH CAN BE FUN!



"Making new friends", "Having lots of fun", "Trying different food", "Playing sports", "Meeting the mayor" and "Learning about what others believe". These were some of the answers from the 40 children from Sikh, Muslim, Hindu and Christian faiths when they were asked what they had just enjoyed. They had been spending an afternoon together at Hamstead Hall Community Learning Centre in Birmingham at the aptly named Faiths for Fun event last Sunday.

Children worked in multifaith groups and visited 6 bases at which they learned some aspect of 6 faiths by carrying out a fun activity, such as making a coloured collage for Divali, playing a reincarnation board game, making Celtic crosses, eating Sikh langar, singing Baha'i songs and learning about the 5 Pillars of Islam.

The day concluded with circuit training, football and tennis in the spacious sports hall with the help of Hamstead Hall sports instructors. Finally all children were presented with a certificate verifying their activities...and a much appreciated goodie bag.

The participants were boys and girls aged 8-11 years, some of whom were cub scouts and some from faith groups. We believe that this is an appropriate age to target because it is when attitudes are formed and children of different cultures and different faiths can play and learn together in a relaxed atmosphere. The event also brought together 50 adults, also of different cultures and faiths, who worked together in a way that they would not normally do, through providing activities for the children.

Sikh leader Harminder summed it up: "The benefits are immense. When children understand each other they start to respect each other's differences as well as similarities". And Muslim leader Nasma suggested, "perhaps events like today's will start to change the stereotypes some people have about Muslims". Bahai leader Nasreen observed, "We cannot have unity without friendship, and today we have promoted friendship above all else".

The event was officially opened by the Lord Mayor, who showed great interest in the children's activities. It was jointly organised by Birmingham Council of Faiths and Birmingham Scout Association and sponsored by VSO (Voluntary Services Overseas) Active Communities Programme. The community learning centre with its sports hall and instructors are given free, as is the time of everyone involved in the event.

This is the second year Faiths for Fun has been held. Lessons are learnt from the evaluation forms completed by participants, and planning has begun for 2010. Please contact us through the paper if you or your children would like to be involved.

Peter and Jean Rookes are 3rd Sector Liaison Officers for Birmingham Council of Faiths and also members of Birmingham Scout Association. The photo shows Peter enjoying the day with the children

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WHAT TALK CAN LEAD TO

THE Government is a bit like the junkmen that come down our streets, tootling a trumpet from the cab of their lorries. They're always on the lookout for what might come in useful. About ten years ago they picked up on faith and have been trying to bend it to their own agenda ever since.

In 2007 there was a Commission on Integration and Cohesion that came to the conclusion that people get on better if they talk to each other. That's common sense, really, but you know what Government's like – they don't think it will happen unless they organise it for us.

Now the trouble was that there were all these folk belonging to different religions, of which there are over a dozen. Well, much more than that if you count up all the sects they're divided into. And it really is true that they don't get on particularly well, they're suspicious of each other and tend to call those that believe differently from themselves rude names like heathen, infidel and heretic.

Even before the Government got interested, those of goodwill among the faiths decided that they ought to find out more about other religions and whether what was generally said about them was really true. In the 1970s, when the interfaith movement started to get under way, they were few on the ground. In the latest *Directory of Interfaith Organisations in the UK*, published this year by the Inter Faith Network, 270 are now listed. But I know there are many more even than that.

Last year the Inter Faith Network proposed to the Government that they should declare an Inter Faith



Week for this November. And that, after a good deal of thumb twiddling, is what eventually happened. That date is not far off now, between the 15th-21st this month.

What's more, it has been left to individual organisations to arrange their own activities. The ambulance service has offered to turn up to places of worship and show people round their vehicles and equipment. Community fire stations are eager to have events happen on their premises. The adoption and fostering agencies want to explain how they are trying to fit children into their original faith background. And, of course, all the green agencies are out in force, telling us it is our religious duty to care for the planet's future.

But over and above that, places of worship are inviting people to come in and get to know them – and offering an exotic meal into the bargain. For the truth is that most of us dare not go into such places or ask questions about them without the excuse of such occasions. And yes, it's also true that we will all get on much better if we are prepared to open our minds in this way.

So let's be brave and take a chance this once.

Yann Lovelock is one of Be Birmingham's Faith Champions and Chair of the West Midlands Buddhist Council. The photo shows Yann with Ranjit Singh Wahiwallah at the Bhatra Singh Sabha gurdwara in Balsall Heath.

GLOBAL POVERTY, SEEKING JUSTICE: SIKHS IN ACTION WITH OTHER FAITHS

Last week's Inter Faith Week was enthusiastically celebrated across the country in events of all kinds: some mainly social, others demonstrating what has already been achieved - and in a few cases, breaking new ground. The launch of the Jubilee Debt Campaign's Multi Faith Project in Birmingham's Bordesley Centre was a mix of all these three. Around the hall were stands publicising the work of participating organisations, including the Nishkam Centre. Taking part were Jewish, Hindu and Sikh speakers, Buddhist and Christian choirs and young people from a Muslim school, all showing how their faiths inspire them to work towards eradicating global poverty and to campaign against unpayable debts.

The programme was chaired by Stephen Rand, Co-Chair of the Jubilee Debt Campaign. He drew attention to the key role that Birmingham has played in the campaign ever since 70,000 people from all over the country gathered in the city to put pressure upon the G8 leaders in 1998. Their message was that the cancellation of debts 'owed' by many of the world's poorest countries must become a priority for international policy makers. Back then, many of those people were Christians. What motivated them were the words of Jesus: '*Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*' (Matthew 25.40). By demonstrating, they showed that their faith had led them to tackle the root causes of poverty, as well as working to relieve the suffering it causes for so many.

However, a commitment to end the suffering of the poor is shared by people of all faiths and no faith, on the grounds of our common humanity. The Jubilee concept, used at the time of the Millennium in the form of Jubilee 2000, is rooted in the *Torah*. Last Wednesday this ancient seven year cycle was explained by Rabbi Yossi Jacobs, Chief Minister of Birmingham Hebrew Congregation. He was followed by three lively songs from a Christian choir from Ladywood, led by the Revd Jo Mason. They sang of breaking the 'chains of poverty' and forging instead 'a chain of love' reaching out across the world.



Four young people from Al-Hijrah school made a heartfelt presentation, using the words of the Qur'an to show how Muslims are not only commanded to give sacrificially for those in need but also to encourage responsible lending through risk-sharing between lender and borrower, to avoid imposing unbearable debt burdens on either individuals or nations. This was followed by Dr Bhavana Chawda, a Hindu psychiatrist, who shared examples from the ancient scriptures of India calling for wealth to be distributed fairly. She quoted the words of Mahatma Gandhi: '*Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed.*'

After a Buddhist choir had sung movingly of the need for loving kindness reaching out to 'all beings', the evening ended with a passionate plea from Bhai Sahib Dr Mohinder Singh to work harder to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and to extend awareness of the urgency of the needs of the world's people to much wider circles.

Ruth Tetlow is the co-ordinator of the Birmingham-based Faith Encounter Programme. The photo above is of the Birmingham Buddhist Centre choir performing.

LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE

If you'd told me back on 18 October 2004 that the group of assorted representatives of faith communities and non-religious belief organisations that I was sitting down with that day would still exist five years later, I would have dismissed the idea as ludicrous.

And yet the Religion and Belief Consultative Group on Equality, Diversity and Human Rights (RBCG for short) still meets, still talks in depth about the impact of equality legislation on religion and belief groups, still reflects on the relationship between religion and human rights.

We are representatives of the nine faith communities in membership with the Inter Faith Network for the UK (Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Sikh), plus Faithworks, the Evangelical Alliance, CARE, the British Humanist Association, and the National Secular Society.

We started out as a reference group for the two religion and belief strand representatives on the Department of Trade and Industry's Commission for Equality and Human Rights Steering Group in the days when what became the Equality Act 2006 was up for consultation. Later we expanded the group's remit so that other relevant issues could also be discussed.

As of last year we have an informal agreement with the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to act as a non-exclusive religion and belief advisory group. We meet every two months in the Commission's offices in London with their view over the Thames to Tower Bridge and the Tower itself.

Our current major focus is the Equality Bill, as it makes its way through the dying days of the present parliament. We also consider the latest developments in the Commission's work on the codes and guidance that will show how to give practical effect to the provisions of the Equality Bill once it becomes law. At our next meeting, for example, we'll be looking at ideas that the EHRC is developing in relation to the duty proposed in the Equality Bill to promote good relations across all the equality strands, and in particular as it relates to the meaning of equality in a religion and belief context.

A key characteristic of RBCG is that it includes a diverse range of views and practices. This diversity is to be found not only between the different religion and belief organisations but also within the broad faith traditions of Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and so on. Naturally, then, it is not often that there is general agreement, but over the years we have developed expertise in listening to and co-existing with sharply opposed views.

Despite its diversity of beliefs and views, our Group recognizes that we also hold common human values and have achieved a strongly co-operative ethos. Members have established trust, recognition and respect for the widely differing opinions within the Group, while still being able to speak frankly, to address contentious issues, to achieve understanding, and to reach consensus on occasion, thus making it a model for the end envisaged by the legislation.

Barney Leith is a long-serving member of the Baha'i National Spiritual Assembly and lives in Hertfordshire. He is Chair of the Religion & Belief Consultation Group on which he reports.

