



East of England Faiths Council, Essex County Council and Parliamentary Outreach

FAITH IN PUBLIC LIFE: THE BIG QUESTIONS Monday 27 June 2011

The Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, Bishop of Chelmsford, opened the event which followed on from the successful conference The Big Conversation held in Cambridge in January. Delegates had asked for more time for debate and to follow up on specific topics, and this event was designed to give those opportunities. It also provided invaluable information about how to interact with central government. Bishop Stephen expressed gratitude for the partnership of Parliamentary Outreach who provided lunch, and Essex County Council, who have not only provided the venue, but also given so generously of their time and knowledge to bring together the excellent speakers and workshop leaders.

This was followed by a welcome from Councillor Ann Naylor, Cabinet Member for Adult Health and Community Wellbeing at Essex County Council, on behalf of the leader, Councillor Peter Martin.

She said:

“Peter and I and worked together in Children’s Services and met many faith groups working to support children and families in Essex. In my present role in Adult Services I continue to meet many faith groups who support the disabled, the disadvantaged, the needy, the homeless, the sick and their families and carers. It was this experience which led to the idea of this conference – to look at ways to support grassroots organisations that are delivering or seeking to deliver public services and to think of ways to create more efficient partnerships with Local Government at every level.

“A conference with the theme of “faith in public life” seems timely, particularly with the issue having been thrown sharply into focus by the furore caused by Archbishop Rowan Williams’ editorial in the New Statesman earlier in the month. A church leader speaking out on a matter of public life and seen to be playing politics seems like a perennial occurrence -. Rowan Williams in this sense is part of the long tradition in which faith groups are all too often seen as being in opposition to those in secular positions of authority.

“But as the hyperbole dies down and the headline writers lose interest in the view from Lambeth Palace, where does this leave those of us at the front line? From both the public sector and from faith groups. Those of us in local authorities for instance, trying to deliver social care to the elderly and the vulnerable, or those of us in the church or faith groups caring for our parishioners, neighbours and communities? And how do we make the right arrangements to include other non-faith voluntary organisations?

“We could spend the day debating theology - which would be interesting but possibly a distraction. It is really a question of how we each understand our communities and how our remits match and how they differ. The remit of the EEFC is clearly stated – to be a clear point of contact for public, private and voluntary services; to support local faith-based and inter-faith based services; and to provide a strategic input to future developments.

“Eric Pickles, a local MP and Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government stated – “for years faith communities have been quietly making a huge difference, day-in and day-out, to every single neighbourhood in the country – something which has not been sufficiently recognized by central Government”. I should like now on behalf of ECC and from both Cllr Peter Martin and me to express our genuine thanks and appreciation for all that you do.

“So, going forward, how we can make sure that we find an appropriate role for faith groups in trying to influence and shape discussions of public policy and in the delivery of public services? This is not an easy question, but the conference today will, I hope, allow us to consider where faith groups and statutory authorities overlap and where there must (surely) be value to be gained by seeking, at the very least, mutual understanding, and hopefully even co-operation.

“That is why we will today be looking at how faith groups can lobby and influence public authorities, how faith groups can be involved in the commissioning of public services, how faith groups and the public sector can work better together signposting and delivering services, in order that we can all serve the community we live in.

“As Rowan Williams said, the state can be seen as a ‘community of communities’. I think our presence here demonstrates that we are already a community of interest, covering not just the people of Essex but also the wider region. There is a lot to be done so let’s see what progress we can make today.”

The first speaker of the day was Dr Harriet Crabtree OBE, Director of Inter Faith Network for the UK on **Faith in the public square**. The Inter Faith Network links faith community representative bodies and inter faith bodies in the UK and works with them to promote good inter faith relations.

This was followed by **Engaging with central government** by Naomi Kent of Parliamentary Outreach who has worked at the Houses of Parliament as an Outreach Officer for nearly two years, covering the South West of England. Before that, she worked for the Mayor of London, and then a Sector Skills Council, managing various projects including a new Apprenticeship scheme for the creative industries. Her PowerPoint presentation is available on request.

The practical realities of engaging with the House of Lords were discussed by Baroness Sal Brinton, member of the House of Lords. Sal Brinton was made a life peer, sitting on the Liberal Democrat benches, in November 2010. She chairs the Liberal Democrat Diversity Engagement Group, and speaks for her party on diversity, education, further and higher education in the House of Lords. She has spoken twice on the importance of multi-faith religious education in the future syllabus for schools since taking her seat in February.

Formerly she was the Executive Director of the Association of Universities in the East of England until March 2011 and was the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Candidate for Watford in the 2010 election.

Sal is an active member of her church, St Luke’s, Watford. She is involved with Christians in Politics and serves on the Executive of the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum.

Baroness Brinton made the following key points:

- When approaching MPs (House of Commons) bear in mind they can only deal with their own constituents
- When approaching peers (House of Lords), although they do not have constituents, they do have portfolios so carefully select who will have an interest in your topic. There are a lot of faith and inter faith groups in Parliament. Find out who to target by using the parliamentary web site Register of Interests, or the web site called *They Work for You*. Whether or not the Peer you approach agrees with you, they will value the information you send.
- Do not send the same information to all the Peers, only the small selected group. If you send to all of them, each will think someone else is dealing with the matter.

- Very few Peers have PAs or secretaries, they do their own administration, so it is worth appreciating that to be the case.
- In the UK, unlike e.g. the US, there will be politicians of faith who do not necessarily discuss their faith. However, some secularists are becoming very aggressive in their approach, using arguments and language that politicians are beginning to find distasteful.

Panel discussion

The Panel comprised Baroness Sal Brinton, Dr Harriet Crabtree, Cllr Anne Naylor, Naomi Kent and Revd. Carol Smith.

Morning workshops:

Lobbying and advocacy (Lorraine Jarvis, Chelmsford CVS and Nick Shuttleworth, Rural Community Council of Essex)

Questions for discussion:

- What are the different situations where lobbying or advocacy may be needed?
- What is the difference between lobbying and advocacy?
- What are the different methods of lobbying or advocacy?
- What works in different circumstances? Why?

Key points arising:

- Lobbying – MP in central lobby. Issue specific.
- Timing – who would be interested?
- Advocacy can lead to lobbying.
- Value or otherwise of media.
- Is a faith access group for ECC needed?
- Support others to lobby.
- Profile – What do we do? Who are you? Who do you speak for? Where is your expertise?
- Identify and target – Need to be there? Prioritise. Pick the right body. Suss out their interests.
- Build a relationship

Faith values in public life (Revd Carol Smith and Revd Paul Trathen)

This workshop was about the impact of faith values on public decision-making and services.

Questions for discussion:

- Is it legitimate for faith groups to try to influence public policy in the light of their values? Why is this controversial? Is opposition to this based on misunderstandings, and if so, what are they? If there are legitimate fears, what are they?
- Many people say politics and religion shouldn't mix. Are they right?
- What values and approaches would faith groups want to recommend in the public sphere? Do these differ between faiths and groups within faiths? How do they differ from Humanist values – or are Humanist values not one philosophy but several?
- What ways of influencing are effective?

The role of interfaith work (Dr Harriet Crabtree)

Questions for discussion:

- What methods are there for understanding each other (ie conversations between local authorities and faith communities)?
- What challenges are there for smaller faith communities?
- Are there helpful ways that government can engage with faith communities?
- How visible should/can interfaith communities be?

Harriet Crabtree's opening remarks coalesced around the necessary work of laying out the variables (including questions such as: who should be at the table? Must all faiths be represented in these conversations?) and the fostering of good will between faith communities and local authorities.

Regarding Question 1: *What methods are there for understanding each other (ie conversations between local authorities and faith communities)?*

This conversation began by engaging in an exercise.

What do local authorities wish faith communities would understand?

- Be aware of your constituencies
- Understand practical limitations (time and resources)
- We might have conflicts of interest (example of rough sleeping in a city, where the faith communities are providing food, but the local authorities want to get people off the streets permanently)
- Yet, we can still work together (in the above example, the local authorities just wanted to be kept in the loop and help)

Local authorities need to know:

- What faith communities are out there
- How to get them to engage

What do faith communities wish local authorities would understand?

- Be aware of the discrepancies within and amongst faith communities (landscape issue)
- Religious Literacy is necessary! (knowledge about who is out there)
- Faith Communities defy the perception that there are always innately conflicts between communities, nor are they constricted by labels
- Fear of treading on toes should not stop you from engaging with faith communities

What would be important if you were to do training to improve understanding?

- Who trains (one faith or all? Local authorities staff or outsider? How does the anti-discrimination law play into these decisions?)
- Defining certain terms and how they are used (culture v. religion; faith v. secular)
- Equipping staff with the tools to address individuals (not just generalizations)
- Not simply data, but meeting people and perhaps visiting faith communities
- Awareness of what faith communities do at the grassroots level

The day of the training would be a balance of advocacy and consultation, including:

- What the pattern of this faith community is
- Not scaring the participant
- Tracing contours of faith
- Mechanisms for engaging with faith communities
- Concrete and useful examples

How would local authorities like to have faith communities trained?

- Define what commissioning means
- An overview of what is out there, what people need, and where their points of contact are

What can EEFC and organisations like it do to create these conversations?

How are these faith communities able to engage with local authorities?

Regarding Question 2: *What challenges are there for smaller faith communities?*

Is there a level playing field for all faith communities?

Do some groups not have a voice?

Is applying for funds more difficult?

What role, then, do inter faith councils have?

It is the role of the local authorities to promote good relations.

Regarding Question 3: *Are there helpful ways that government can engage with faith communities?*

The conversations under questions one and two relate to and tackle the heart of question three.

Regarding Question 4: *How visible should/can inter faith communities be?*

How do multi faith and inter faith groups explain their purpose?

- Contribution to the community
- Considering new possibilities
- Being a mode for dialogue and discussion
- Unquantifiable effect (how can one measure how much conflict has been avoided through dialogue in inter faith communities?)

In closing, Harriet Crabtree remarked on the relative newness of this territory. England is more and more diverse and religion has become more alive and more powerful. It is imperative that these conversations continue.

Afternoon workshops

Faith and resilience planning (Muhammad Ahsan, Essex Fire and Rescue and Mark Conway, BLEVEC)

Mark Conway introduced himself as an emergency planning expert from Bedfordshire. He has been present for emergency services after five major disasters around the world.

Muhammad Ahsan introduced himself as working in Fire and Rescue from Essex. He commented on the importance of seeing religion not as a problem, but as part of the solution. He emphasized the importance of religious literacy for emergency services workers, highlighting his own resources for fire fighters and in regards to Ramadan.

The session ran as a series of brainstorming exercises followed by a short reflection on the challenges facing Emergency Services.

What are disasters? Answers included:

- Heat wave
- Nuclear Melt down
- Hacking (IT)
- Transportation incident (automobiles, planes)
- Industrial accident
- Natural incident
- Chemical incident

Emergency Services are responsible for planning for the consequences of all these disasters, which might include:

- Emergency accommodation
- Death
- Food and water shortage
- Psychological damage
- Sanitation problems
- Injury

What types of issues might these consequences raise that would affect people of faith?

- Blood transfusion
- Hygiene
- Building necessities

- Dietary concerns
- Gender dynamics
- Proper burial rites
- Decontamination issues (propriety)

What can faith communities offer?

- Advice
- Physical resources
- Volunteers
- Sense of calm/compassion
- Community structures/network of people
- Efficient means of disseminating information
- Translators
- Appropriate set up of spaces (ie: decoration, religious symbols)

Final questions facing Emergency Services:

- How do we get in touch with someone 24/7?
- Which organizations do we get in touch with for a given incident?
- How do we find a network of people in an interfaith context for this purpose?
- How do we build a network for this advising?
- What plans do we need in place before something happens?
 - Information and training (mock accidents)
 - Means of getting in touch with faith communities
 - Which person in the faith community can take on responsibility and time requirement
- How do we access this help?

Helping faith communities respond to unemployment (Robert Findlay, Diocese of Chelmsford)

This workshop aimed to explore the various ways that faith communities can help with a response to unemployment, including such different things as helping individuals through difficult times (spiritually, psychologically and materially); helping communities to survive and revive; helping provide employment; and arguing for policies that reduce unemployment.

Some questions discussed included:

- Is unemployment a bad thing? Why?
- How can faith communities influence political and business decision-making on employment?
- What actions by faith-based organisations can increase, reduce, mitigate or worsen the impact of unemployment?
- What can a faith community do to help in a geographical community hit by large-scale and long-lasting unemployment?

What can the faith contribution be in dealing with:

- Feeling of worthlessness
- Need to reassess where one's life is going, recognise new opportunities and embrace change (but not just any change)
- Practical counselling
- Volunteering opportunities
- (For managers) having to make hard decisions and convey bad news?
- How much of this is relevant to change at work other than redundancy?
- Is this relevant to people who themselves do not have a faith commitment?

Issues raised included:

- Effect on young people – skills.
- Work with graduates/unskilled school leavers.

- Funding squeeze for voluntary organisations.
- Churches/faith group communities offer:
 - Volunteers (useful occupation and experience)
 - Listening ear
 - Therapeutic communities
 - Food banks/soup runs
 - Mentoring/support.
 - Foundation training on a one-to-one basis.
- Voluntary sector training course on mentoring (recommended)
- Hold together pastoral with prophetic society changes – expectations of young people.

Commissioning public services (Liz Chidgley, Essex County Council and Louise Hobbs, Age UK)

This workshop was intended for people from faith-based organisations which might bid to provide services, for public sector people who might commission those services, and for voluntary organisations like CVSs which might mediate and facilitate between the two. There is widespread awareness that more and more public services are being outsourced and opened to bidding. What does this mean? Some questions discussed were:

- What shifts are happening in public policy on provision of public services?
- Might these be reversed? If so, to what extent?
- What do commissioners want to see from bidders/providers? Include the concepts of outcomes, outputs and evidence of likely effectiveness.
- What help do organisations considering bidding for the first time need?
- The role of the Compact
- What are the barriers – in law, in institutional culture and practice, in assumptions and prejudices – to faith-based organisations delivering public services? Consider barriers in the faith sector as well as those in the public sector!
- What factors should make a voluntary organisation think twice about bidding or accepting a contract?

Plenary: How do we care for our communities?

This was a facilitated discussion taking further the themes raised at the previous conference in particular, how do faiths both engage and challenge in the public square; what role do faith values play; and how should faith groups work with others to support people in difficult times.

The event closed at 3.15 pm.