



World Interfaith Harmony Week Interfaith Glasgow Explores Interfaith Harmony

Interfaith Glasgow is a charity promoting positive engagement between people of different religious traditions and none in Scotland's most religiously diverse city. At a time when forces of prejudice and hate threaten to destabilise relationships between communities both locally and globally, World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW) provided a perfect opportunity for us to bring together people of goodwill from different traditions to reflect on what interfaith harmony consists in, why it matters, and how we can most effectively work towards it. To this end, Interfaith Glasgow organised a series of three events during WIHW exploring three key elements of interfaith harmony: dialogue, friendship, and cooperation. Reports on these events are provided below.



(1) Scriptural Reasoning: Why Engage in Dialogue?

Interfaith Scotland Dialogue Centre. 5 February. 6-8.30pm.

This special WIHW Scriptural Reasoning event invited participants to consider why Jews, Christians, and Muslims should engage in interfaith dialogue by focusing on two questions: what do the sacred texts of these traditions tell us about how we should engage with others who believe and practise differently from us and how can we apply these lessons in today's fractured world?

Scriptural Reasoning as a Method

Scriptural Reasoning is an internationally renowned method of interfaith dialogue where people come together to discuss a passage from each of their scriptures on a common theme. The goal is not to build consensus, but greater understanding. Speakers from each of the traditions set the scene by introducing a text from their tradition, and then all are welcomed as equals to join in discussion in small groups. The idea is that participants have an opportunity to be mutually hospitable towards one another. Playing the role of both host and guest, they welcome others to read their sacred text with them and learn about another text and the important role it plays in the lives of others. What is gained is not only a better understanding of others' traditions but also greater insight into one's own.

The Event

The event brought together 22 participants: Muslims, Jews, and Christians. About the half had been to Scriptural Reasoning events before, for the other half it was their first time. Participants were asked at the point of booking what they hoped to gain from the event. The main motivations for the participants were to learn more about the different faiths, meet people of different faiths and to gain a greater awareness and understanding of different religious perspectives.

When the attendees arrived, they registered and were offered refreshments. Following a period of informal socialising, they were welcomed by Interfaith Glasgow Development Officer, Dr Magdalen Lambkin, who introduced the concept of Scriptural Reasoning and the three speakers for the evening. The speakers, each long standing advocates for interfaith dialogue within their communities, presented texts (given to participants at the start of the event) from their respective traditions which they felt spoke to the question 'Why should Jews, Christians and Muslims engage in interfaith dialogue?'. Small group discussion followed each presentation, facilitated by Interfaith Glasgow staff and volunteers. Each of the presentations took about 15 minutes and the subsequent group discussions took about 20 minutes. Every group had participants from all three religious traditions.

Speakers and Texts

Our Jewish speaker was Fiona Brodie. A member of Glasgow Reform Synagogue where she regularly leads services, Vice Chair of Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, and a Director of the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, Fiona is also currently studying biblical Hebrew. She presented 'Shema Yisra'el' from Deuteronomy 6. 4-8 and Deuteronomy 11. 18-19. Fiona spoke about the centrality of this prayer in Jewish life, and drew out lessons for dialogue from the alternative translation of 'Shema' as 'listen!', rather than the more common 'hear!'. Fiona said: "it is our desire and our ability to listen that will make or break dialogue...It is not an accident that our most important Jewish prayer is the שמע (Sh'ma). But too often we do not really listen to others. We just wait for our chance to have them listen to us."

Our Muslim speaker was Shaykh Rehan Raza al-Azhari. Shaykh Rehan is a public speaker and Islamic scholar. He studied Islamic sciences in Pakistan, Syria, and Egypt. He is an active member of his community working with various segments of society promoting both intra and interfaith harmony. He is a board member of the Muslim Council of Scotland and President of the Muslim Youth League, UK. He presented *al-Hujurat* 11-13 and *Ale-Imran*: 64. *Al-Hujurat* 13 exclaims, for example: "O people! We created you from a male and a female, and (divided) you into (large)

peoples and tribes, so that you might recognize one another. Surely, the most honourable amongst you in the sight of Allah is he who fears Allah the most. Certainly, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware”.

Our Christian speaker was Revd. Roy Henderson. Roy was ordained as a minister in 1987 and has served in three Church of Scotland parishes. He was first challenged to take part in interfaith dialogue at university and remembers when Mrs Gandhi, a Hindu and one of Glasgow’s pioneers in interfaith dialogue, visited his church youth fellowship in 1981. Roy has been a board member and trustee of Interfaith Glasgow since it was founded. Roy presented ‘The Parable of the Good Samaritan’ from Luke 10. 25-37, which ends: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” Roy explored the question: What kind of engagement does it recommend and with who? “The parable of the Good Samaritan invites the hearer to ask things such as ‘Who is my neighbour,’ ‘What is neighbourliness?’, ‘Can I ever contemplate receiving aid from an enemy’. This asks for both inner dialogue and outward engagement across boundaries.”

“Sometimes, when you engage in dialogue, it is the most unexpected people that you find a connection with”

(Scriptural Reasoning participant)

Discussion



Participants were very engaged and much common ground was found. “Islam teaches that the whole of humanity are my brothers and sisters”, noted one participant, to which another responded: “Yes. But you might only really discover what that means when you dialogue with people from other traditions. And sometimes, when you engage in dialogue, it is the most unexpected people that you find a connection with”. Difficult

issues were also discussed with openness and sensitivity. In her presentation, Fiona had urged those present to “disagree without being disagreeable.” This advice proved helpful in encouraging participants to push beyond politeness and discuss the more contentious aspects of the texts. One Christian participant responded to the following Qur’anic text: “O People of the Book! Come to common terms between us and you: that we worship none but God, that we associate no partner with him...”. She said, “I don’t want to disagree disagreeably, I know this text has been presented as encouraging dialogue, but I actually find this a very difficult text, because it seems to be aimed against the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.” The discussion that followed was honest and respectful, and it was agreed that it would be helpful to explore the nature of God as understood in the three traditions further at a future Scriptural Reasoning event.

Feedback

The comments left by participants in feedback questionnaires were extremely positive. They valued the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds and to learn something about each other's faith. They praised the "excellent discussion" and the "good choice of texts" and found "a common ground" and "a lot of similarities" between the different faiths. The following comments also give a flavour of how people felt about the event. "Thoughtful dialogue. Quite inspirational... We would like to see more events like this"; "Tonight really opened up difficult areas of belief which we shared openly"; "[As the Qur'an says, God created humankind into different tribes] 'so that we may recognise each other' [This was] an evening of re-cognition. Very enjoyable & worthwhile"; "A lovely opportunity to meet new people from different traditions in serious conversation ... an excellent evening"; "Great discussion and a variety of views and perspectives. A great table"; "Helped me understand other faiths!"; "I really enjoyed the dialogue and the chance to speak to others from different faiths. To speak openly!"; "Islam teaches that humanity is one big family. And so of course dialogue is needed for a healthy society".

In addition to the feedback from questionnaires, we also received written letters of endorsement for this event from distinguished attendees: Sr Isabel Smyth, SND (Founding Director and Chief Executive of the Scottish Inter-Faith Council [now Interfaith Scotland]; Scottish Catholic Bishops' Secretary for Interreligious Dialogue and Vice Chair of Advisory Board for the UK's Council of Christians and Jews; and holder of an OBE for services to interfaith relations) and Canon Professor David Jasper DD FRSE. These endorsements accompany our submission.



(2) Community Meal: Building Friendships Across Religious Boundaries

Glasgow Gurdwara. 7 February. 5-7pm.

This WIHW event brought together 25 members of Glasgow's diverse faith and belief communities to share a community meal provided by Glasgow's Sikh community and to explore interfaith

friendship-building. Participants came from Christian, Jewish, Muslim (Sunni and Shia), Pagan, Hindu, and Sikh backgrounds. Distinguished guests included Glasgow's Lord Provost Eva Bolander and Councilor Hanzala Malik, as well as Dr Muhammad Adrees of the Muslim Council of Scotland, Azzam Mohamad of the Ahl Al-Bait Society Scotland, and Glasgow Gurdwara committee members.

The Meal

Interfaith community meals go a long way in helping to create social cohesion by enabling people from diverse faith and belief backgrounds who might not normally have occasion to meet to get to know each other. The question of how we can build bridges more effectively between communities provided an apt focus for the occasion. Upon arrival, guests were greeted by Interfaith Glasgow staff and Glasgow Gurdwara committee members, and invited to remove shoes, cover their heads, and wash their hands in accordance with Sikh etiquette. They were then escorted to the Langar Hall where they enjoyed a traditional Punjabi meal provided by the Sikh community. The theme of the event was interfaith friendship-building and, during the meal, participants were encouraged to



reflect in small groups on these questions (provided on handouts):

- (1) What does it mean to work towards interfaith friendship? What is the vision of society that we are trying to bring into being?
- (2) What are the most effective ways of building interfaith friendships?
- (3) How can we be more active in building goodwill and trust between faith communities?

(4) When there is an incident of hate, how can we respond constructively together so that relationships are strengthened rather than weakened?

Discussion was lively and diverse perspectives enriched the dialogue tremendously.

Plenary

Following the meal, participants moved to a plenary room where, seated in a large circle they were invited to share with everyone some of the most important points from their discussions. Given recent terrorist atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion, Brexit and the corresponding rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, the rise of the far right in many countries, and reported rises in hate crime, it is perhaps unsurprising that a certain amount of discussion focused on the importance of friendship-building in relation to these negative trends and the need to supported targeted communities. Comments ranged from observations about the impact of symbolic gestures of interfaith solidarity after hate crimes occur, to the fundamental importance of making efforts to get to know each other during stable periods so that existing relationships can be brought into play in times of crisis. Other points covered in discussions included, for example, the importance of interfaith work in creating contexts where minorities are welcomed as equals, given that there may



be other contexts in which they do not feel equal; and the need for better engagement with the media so that more coverage is given to positive stories of communities coming together. Other comments focused on the importance of accepting differences while concentrating on commonalities, and the role of education in tackling misconceptions and removing fear of the unknown.

Closing remarks were offered by Interfaith Glasgow Director Dr Rose Drew, Glasgow Gurdwara Committee Member Jaspreet Kaur, and the Lord Provost. The Lord Provost was clearly impressed by the level of engagement she had witnessed and emphasised her support for interfaith initiatives such as this. She stated, moreover, that she was keen to show leadership by being seen to be interacting with people of many faiths, so as to challenge negative perceptions of difference. She emphasised that there is no substitute for personal contact in terms of breaking down barriers of ‘strangeness’ and ‘otherness’. She called on those present—people clearly open to difference—to also be leaders in this respect. And, should anything awful occur, she exhorted participants to come together “as friends; to stand against hatred and *for* love, for friendship, for peace”.

Following the close of the plenary session, participants were given a tour of the Gurdwara by volunteers from the Sikh community, during which discussions continued. In the course of these discussions it emerged that a number of participants were visiting the Gurdwara for the first time, despite having lived in close proximity to it for many years, and all agreed that the work of Interfaith Glasgow had been crucial to creating opportunities in which people felt able to step out of their comfort zones and visit places of worship other than their own.

Feedback

At the conclusion of the plenary session, participants were invited to fill out feedback questionnaires, enabling us to gauge the impact of the event. Their feedback was overwhelmingly positive, including comments such as the following: “[I found it worthwhile] meeting lots of different faiths and people who have the goodwill to make things happen”; “It was good to have an event like this in a place of worship and religious places could be used in this way more often”; “I found it invaluable in helping me find common ground and direction in my work. And of course personal contacts”; “Some very good discussion on building friendship, based on trigger questions. Always good to have this in a host faith community—learning about their traditions and enjoying a meal together!”; “Made me more positive to want to help people in need where it is needed”; “This... has provided me with hope about the future”.

Our submission is also accompanied by a letter of endorsement for this event from the Lord Provost.

(3) The Value of Interfaith Cooperation: a Time for Reflection

Interfaith Glasgow Offices. 3 February. 10-12.30am.

Our third WIHW event brought together our Weekend Club volunteers for a special meeting to reflect on interfaith cooperation as the core principle of their work.

“This chance to come together in friendship has provided me with hope about the future”

Community Meal participant



Background ...

Interfaith Glasgow’s ground-breaking Weekend Club project, running now for nearly three years, is an interfaith response to the social isolation experienced by the many refugees, asylum seekers, and new migrants who arrive in Glasgow (Glasgow being one of the largest dispersal areas for asylum seekers in the UK), often with poor English, little or no money, unable to work (in the case of asylum seekers), and struggling with the effects of trauma. Their plight is a concern shared by many across Glasgow’s faith communities and so the Weekend Club was conceived to give people from different faith backgrounds a chance to work cooperatively to improve the lives of these ‘New Scots’.

A team of ten volunteers from different faith and belief backgrounds (some of whom are themselves from refugee backgrounds) work together to plan, deliver, and evaluate monthly family-friendly events which enable newcomers to make friends, get to know Glasgow better, enjoy a good meal, improve their English, learn about Scottish culture, and share aspects of their home traditions. Events have included, for example: Burns Suppers (celebrating Robert Burns—Scotland’s national poet); Hogmanay celebrations; visits to museums and places of worship; and trips to Edinburgh Castle. Since the Weekend Club began more than 600 refugees, asylum seekers, and new migrants from over 20 different countries have attended events. The Weekend Club’s innovative interfaith approach is attracting increasing recognition in Scotland and beyond. David Bradwell of Scottish Faiths Action for Refugees writes: “I believe that the intentional interfaith and intercultural approach which has been adopted is ground-breaking, not just for Scotland but for the UK and indeed for many places in Europe”.

The Event

In recognition of the fact that this project is charting new territory by working intentionally across religious boundaries to welcome refugees, asylum seekers, and new migrants to Glasgow, our volunteers took WIHW as an opportunity to reflect on what has been learned so far about this way of working.

“Interfaith cooperation
can restore hope—to see
that faith does not have
to be a source of conflict
and division”

(Weekend Club Volunteer)

Instead of holding a regular planning meeting, seven of Weekend Club volunteers and Interfaith Glasgow's Weekend Club Project Manager, Lynnda Wardle, came together for a special meeting to share their experiences of cooperating across religious boundaries and to discuss the challenges, rewards, and significance of that cooperation. The seven volunteers who attended came from Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and atheist backgrounds and were from Scotland, England, Germany, Kenya, and Nigeria. Also invited to the meeting was Glasgow City Councillor, Jennifer Layden, in recognition of her interest in refugee integration. She is Councillor for Glasgow's Calton Ward and City Convener for Equalities and Human Rights.

For the first half of the meeting, participants split into two discussion groups; for the second half the groups came together to discuss the main points covered in their groups. Key reflections were recorded on flipcharts. Discussion questions were grouped under three headings:

1. THE WEEKEND CLUB AND THE INTERFAITH WAY OF WORKING
 - What motivated you to become involved in interfaith cooperative action as a way of helping refugees and asylum seekers?
 - Why does it matter that the Weekend Club is an interfaith project?
2. BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INTERFAITH COOPERATION
 - What are the benefits of this way of working? For us? For 'New Scots'?
 - What are the challenges of interfaith collaborative working?
 - How can we reach out to our faith communities to gain their greater involvement in this work?
3. FEEDBACK AND FUTURE ACTIONS
 - What other problems could interfaith cooperative action usefully address in Glasgow?
 - Action points

The meeting was very productive. Volunteers valued the opportunity to take a step back and reflect on the interfaith nature of their cooperation with each other and they engaged enthusiastically with the questions. All agreed that the Weekend Club's model of interfaith cooperation is a positive one for newcomers to the city to see because it provides a good example of the way in which people of different faith traditions can cooperate to achieve a common goal, especially since many Weekend Club participants are fleeing faith-based violence or come from countries in which there is significant interreligious conflict. The model not only presents a positive image of Glasgow as a city in which religious diversity is valued and celebrated, but also demonstrates that people of different faiths can cooperate with each other for the common good—something that many of Weekend Club participants may not have previously believed. This “can enrich participants and also restore hope to see that faith does not have to be a source of conflict and division”, reads one of the flipchart observations. It was also felt that cooperating, sharing, and welcoming strangers were aspects of most faith traditions and therefore working together in this way felt natural and part of the ethos of their different faith traditions. As one volunteer put it “for faith communities, helping people and cooperating is a common-sense thing to do”. They also felt that the interfaith nature of the Weekend Club enabled them to link in with different faith communities which offered valuable routes for spreading the word about the events to different groups throughout the city. The volunteers reflected, moreover, that, as individuals, they had learned a lot about each other's faith traditions by working together to plan the events. Our residential away weekend last year was also

mentioned as an important factor in bonding, developing mutual understanding, and improving team work.

Councillor Layden spoke of the need to provide refugees with a welcome from day one in this country, and for the city to support cooperative interfaith projects. Participants were able to share some of their individual frustrations concerning education and housing needs with her and she was hopeful that this meeting would be the first step in an ongoing collaboration between the Weekend Club and Glasgow City Council.



Looking to the future, participants agreed upon the following action points:

- to achieve closer cooperation with Glasgow City Council and better communication about upcoming events and activities
- to participate in future City Council information-gathering initiatives concerning refugee and asylum seeker integration
- to work harder to promote the interfaith nature of the Weekend Club, this being a unique aspect of the project
- to seek greater cooperation with—and support from—Glasgow’s faith communities in hosting events, providing refreshments, and securing volunteers and participants

Feedback

This event was greatly valued by those who participated. Reflecting their shared sentiments, one commented, for example, that he very much appreciated the opportunity to focus on the interfaith element of their work together: “Usually, we’re just engaged in doing the work of organising Weekend Club events and we don’t have much of a chance to reflect on the interfaith dimension of that work. It’s been great to be able to think about the value of that work—what it means to us and to others. Talking about it—finding out why people got involved and so on—has also helped us get to know each other better and strengthen our friendship”.

In Councillor Layden’s endorsement of the event (accompanying this submission), she describes Interfaith Glasgow as “leading the way in this work”. We hope that this event will leave our volunteers better placed to inspire others by sharing the benefits of interfaith cooperative action as a way of tackling shared problems.