

OXFORD DIOCESAN SYNOD

Inter-Faith Relationships

in a Global Context

An Overview of Inter-Faith Relations for Oxford Diocesan Synod: 21 March 2015

Introduction

The *Oxford Diocesan Committee for Inter Faith Concerns* (ODCIC) are delighted to have the chance to lead a session at the March synod. We hope to address the global context as well as looking at the current state of inter-faith relations around the diocese, with statistics and reports from local areas. There will be some opportunity for questions and feedback. The following paper gives some background, questions and links.

The Changing Context

Its easy to see 'Inter-Faith' as something unusual, exotic even, but quite separate from the main work of the church. 'Odd' in other words, and something that can easily get 'kicked around' in the struggle for funding and relevance. Perhaps it's not surprising that the main body overseeing Inter-Faith relations in the diocese has been called ODCIC! In the past it has been possible to see Inter-Faith relations in that way. Inter-Faith dialogue was wonderful for those who 'liked that sort of thing' but nothing more than that. Inter-Faith relations mattered in places of high immigration perhaps, but outside of those areas seemed to have little relevance or importance. But this is no longer the case. Inter-Faith relations now play a part in every parish in the diocese.

For example, a parish in the diocese experienced a major civic upheaval. A group of Muslims who lived in the town were wanting to rent a vacant shop to use as a prayer room. Letters of outrage appeared in the local paper, and a group threatened to firebomb the shop if change of use was agreed. This town was not Reading or Slough. It was Chipping Norton. Applicants for the vacant incumbency were asked how they would have responded if they had been in post. A number were completely floored by the scenario. 'I had no idea there would be any of 'that' in Chipping Norton' was a common response, though not from the successful candidate!

In the last few months a Church of England primary school in the diocese has had objections from some parents of no religious faith to the Christian ethos that 'pervades' the school. The diocese has naturally encouraged this ethos in its church schools, but 'How is this different from the 'Trojan Horse' schools in Birmingham?' they said, where Muslim governors have sought to bring in a pervasive Muslim ethos and been condemned for it?' OFSTED are now very sensitive to this question. Is there a difference between a 'Faith' school and a Church of England community school? What are 'British Values' and how should schools be expected to teach them? These are live questions in all our schools, in whatever part of our diocese.

Statistics

In the last ten years alone we have seen considerable change. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of parishes in Oxford Diocese with over 25% of the population being adherents of another faith was only three. In 2011 this had more than tripled to ten. Nationally parishes that have over 25% in total or at least 10% of one non-Christian faith have been classified as '*Presence and Engagement*' parishes. In 2001 Oxford Diocese had ten such parishes. In 2011 it had twenty-nine (see Appendix).

In 2001 70% of the adult population in the diocese declared themselves to be 'Christian'. In 2011 this had gone down to 58%. Adherents of other faiths have increased, notably 'Muslim', up from 3% to 5% in that period. To put that in perspective, the fastest growing religious category in the diocese is 'No Religion', up from 17% in 2001 to 26% in 2011.

The top three parishes for 'other faith' populations are all in Burnham and Slough Deanery: Manor Park, Slough St Paul and Upton cum Chalvey, with 49-58%. The parishes with the highest proportion of self-declared Christians are West Woodhay, Combe and Drayton. The parishes with the lowest level of any religious affiliation in the diocese are all in Oxford, where some parishes record up to 50% stating 'no religion' on the census. The high student population affects these figures, though an increasing trend across the diocese is clear. The highest proportion of Muslims in a parish is in High Wycombe St Mary with 37%. Reading has a significant Hindu population, over 30% in one parish, while Langley Marish is over 15% Sikh.

Interestingly the three parishes in the diocese with the highest proportion of religious affiliation overall are also Manor Park, Slough St Paul and Upton cum Chalvey. 'Presence and Engagement' parishes are the most 'religious' parishes in our diocese as well as the most diverse. I can say from experience that they can be wonderful places to live and to minister. Apathy about religion is not normally an issue there!

Key Issues

- Is Britain a Christian country with other faiths living here too? Or is it a multi-faith country with a proud Christian heritage? How we answer this question will affect many aspects of life. I see this in my work with Chaplains. In hospitals, and generally schools and universities, the lead chaplain is usually still an Anglican, though the teams themselves are multi-faith. The Prison Service has gone a different way however. The lead Chaplain in our largest Prison, Bullingdon, is no longer an Anglican, as they always had been, but is a Muslim Imam with an Anglican amongst his staff team. The Imam oversees all religious provision in the jail, as well as visits from faith groups from outside.
- Inter-faith tensions are visible in world news as never before. The so called Islamic State is the most obvious example as they overtly fight a war against 'unbelievers' that is biblical in its savagery. Israel-Palestine has an obvious inter-faith element, as do headline conflicts in Nigeria and the Central African Republic.
- The dream of a new Caliphate and a pan-national Islamic State is nothing new, but we should not underestimate its power as an idea. It is in many ways a messianic and apocalyptic movement that has been spoken about with great expectation by disaffected Muslims for at least the last two decades in Britain. Satellite TV, the ease of global travel and the rise of internet and social networks have all fuelled its explosive rise. It is not surprising that so many have gone to join it, or will feel inspired to work and even fight for it here in this country also. Some recent high profile arrests have been from this diocese.
- All of this creates a climate of fear and distrust, open to exploitation by far right groups such as the English Defence League who carry the cross as their emblem, or at a lower level by parties such as UKIP who have identified allegiance to the Church and Christianity with 'being British'. Polarisation is easy on all sides. We may discount the EDL as extremists, but they will be seen as 'Christian' by many people in other faith groups, just as 'we' tend to accept ISIL extremists are 'Muslims,' without questioning what that can mean.

- The Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Muslim Council of Britain made a joint statement recently, that as a nation we need, 'Not to import conflict from elsewhere, but to export peace.' We are still a fundamentally free and open society, where faith is practised without coercion and communities live peacefully together. That is something to celebrate, but not to take for granted.
- The word 'Theology' has been a byword for irrelevance in journalistic parlance. However a recent Sunday Times article by Tom Holland on the rise of ISIL said, '*The more successful the fighters of ISIL are on the battlefield, the more urgent it becomes to defeat them in mosques and seminar rooms. This is a battle that has to be fought and won by theologians.*' The recent assassination of the orthodox but moderate Dean of Islamic Studies at Karachi University shows the battle for hearts and minds in Islam is a real one. Oxford as a globally recognised centre of academic excellence may have a key role to play in enabling freedom of thought and study in the Muslim world.

Our Response

- We have the Oxford Diocesan Committee for Inter-Faith Concerns, ODCIC. This is a valuable umbrella body chaired by the Archdeacon of Oxford, who also acts as Inter-Faith Adviser for the diocese, linking into national structures. The diocese was recently commended by the Archbishop's Adviser for Inter-Religious affairs for having a member of the senior staff with that brief.
- As Inter-Faith Adviser the Archdeacon has represented the diocese at national meetings of IFA's at Lambeth and in 2015 at Swanwick. He is also able to seize opportunities to enable Christ Church to be a place of creative encounter with people of other faiths, most recently with the Young Muslim Leaders Programme held in the college and is able to develop links with the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, the Centre for Muslim Christian Studies, Centre for Hindu Studies, Centre for Jewish Studies and the Theology faculty.
- ODCIC has held a number of important conferences on inter-faith matters, run an annual study week for Cuddesdon ordinands, produced publications and resource materials such as the 'Who am I' schools DVD, and arranged Study Days such as the recent 'Who Cares' day conference on Faith and Mental Health. Its members are drawn from all areas of the diocese and are often active in local faith forums and developing inter-faith relations locally.
- ODCIC would like to change its name to one less 'Odd' and less likely to be 'kicked around!' We have suggested calling it the Committee for Inter Faith Relations.
- Under its revised constitution, also on the agenda for the Synod's approval (see paper ODS 15.5), ODCIC has as its aims:
 1. *To support, resource and enable individuals, churches and clergy in 'Presence & Engagement' parishes.*
 2. *To keep members of the Diocese aware of other faith communities, and to enable and encourage constructive engagement with them.*
 3. *To be a forum in which inter-faith relations, as they affect the Diocese, can be explored.*

- The aims now include supporting ‘Presence and Engagement’ parishes for the first time. Clergy and lay workers from these parishes have come to Christ Church for ‘Coffee and Conversation’, with the group sharing stories and focusing on a different topic each time. The next meeting will be in Slough. Other relevant people are also invited, e.g. a Schools Adviser when schools issues are being looked at. Encouraging and resourcing clergy and parishes in multi-faith areas, which historically have often been areas of multiple deprivation too, is vital, and this is just a start. We have also been able to contribute to clergy going on relevant training, e.g. a joint Muslim and Christian leaders’ study visit to the Holy Land and an MA at St Philip’s Centre in Leicester.
- The national ‘Presence and Engagement’ team is a great resource nationally, not least the excellent new website, with relevant statistics for each parish amongst many other things. Why not look up your own parish, or one where you go to shop, or work:

www.presenceandengagement.org.uk

There are Presence and Engagement centres in Bradford, Birmingham, Leicester and East London, with another likely to develop in Southall just over the border of our diocese. We have worked with the Leicester centre and look forward to doing so with the King’s Centre in Southall as it develops.

Conclusion

Inter-Faith Relations matter. They are no longer something esoteric or peripheral but lie at the heart of what it means to live in Britain today, and what it means to be British. The context in which we live is changing rapidly and we need to be at the heart of things as a church to work always for the common good as we build our country together under God. We need to ensure we do not ‘import conflict, but export peace’. Peace always begins with a secure understanding of our place in the world, and is worked out where we live and where we work. From the anchor point of our shared humanity we need to witness confidently to our faith in Jesus Christ, in a way that is always respectful of others, whilst also being ready to listen and to learn.

Finally we need to remember that none of this is new. Jesus grew up as a Jew in a multi-faith society, and St Paul and the first apostles lived, worked and witnessed to Christ amidst a market-place of faith choices. They show us a way to live that is courageous, truthful, vulnerable and faithful.

‘Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.’

Martin Gorick
Archdeacon of Oxford / Chair of ODCIC
February 2015

Questions you may wish to think about

1. What do you need as an individual to live more effectively for Christ in multi-faith Britain?
2. How can your church or school engage more creatively with people of other faiths?
3. Are their Presence and Engagement parishes in your Deanery? How can they best be supported and encouraged, and how can their experience best be shared by the wider church?
4. How could ODCIC best be a resource to you and to the diocese as a whole?

Some Links

www.presenceandengagement.org.uk

The main Church of England website: well worth exploring.

www.christianmuslimforum.org

National forum encouraging good relations between Christians and Muslims.

www.ccmr-wycombe.co.uk

An example of a local faith forum, this one for Muslim-Christian relations in High Wycombe.

<http://cmcsoxford.org.uk/>

The Oxford Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, with seminars and lectures.

<http://se-faithforum.net/>

South-East Faiths Forum

APPENDIX

Table 1: Presence and Engagement Parishes from 2001 Census

Parish	Total pop.	Christian %	Buddhist %	Hindu %	Jewish %	Muslim %	Sikh %	Total %
High Wycombe, All Saints	13353	59.8	0.5	1.6	0.4	10.4	0.6	13.3
Reading, Holy Trinity	6071	52.8	0.6	1.6	0.4	10.2	0.7	13.6
Maidenhead St Luke	10484	62.7	0.5	1.4	0.6	10.1	1.8	14.5
High Wycombe, St Birinius	15879	58.4	0.3	1.3	0.2	16.9	0.5	19.1
Reading St John	5878	47	0.8	2.8	0.1	14.2	1.6	19.5
Terriers	6865	58.7	0.2	1.2	0.1	18.3	0.3	20.1
West Slough	45744	55.1	0.3	3.9	0.1	12.4	8	24.7
High Wycombe, St James	8409	42.3	0.3	0.9	0.1	32.7	0.4	34.4
Upton-cum-Chalvey	18693	45.4	0.2	4.8	0.1	22.1	9.3	36.5
Slough St Paul	14639	35.1	0.2	6.6	0.2	26.3	15	48.3