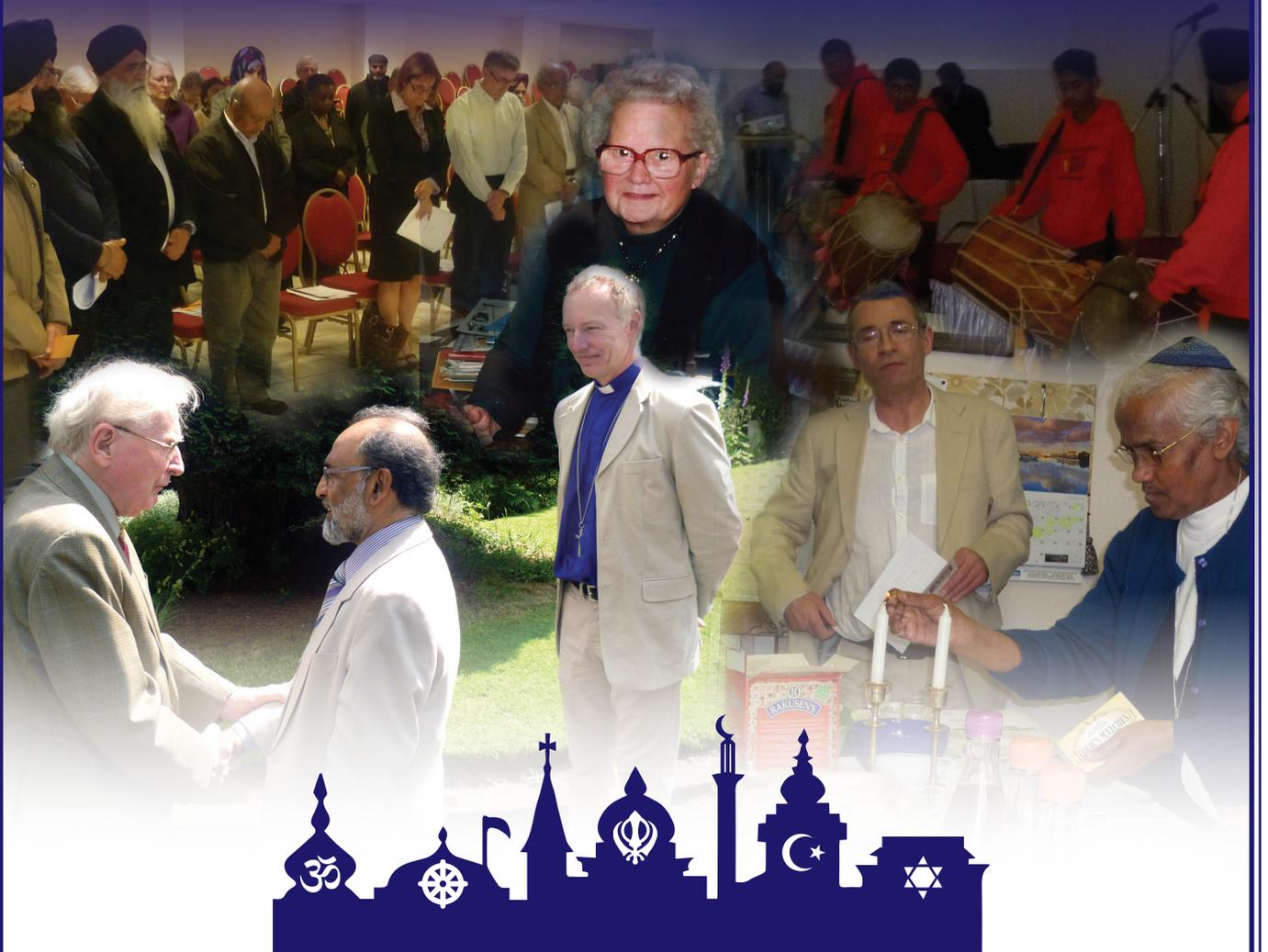


IFW NEWS



Reflections and Aspirations

Celebrating the 40th anniversary of Interfaith Wolverhampton

October 2014: Issue no. 55

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Reflections and Aspirations

2014 marks the 40th anniversary of Interfaith Wolverhampton. The foresightedness of our pioneers, the determination of some 'can-do' individuals committed to dispelling darkness surrounding other faiths and cultures and their resolve to overcome social, cultural and political impediments to welcome diversity gave birth to the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group.

Although the Group has, over the decades, taken on a variety of names, its message of mutual respect, peace and harmony has remained unaltered. Incidentally the Group is now called Interfaith Wolverhampton rather than by its previous name Wolverhampton Interfaith and Regeneration Network. The new name is much simpler, more succinct and captures all the key aspirations and targets including regeneration in its constitution.

This special issue of the newsletter has as its focus the 40th anniversary of Interfaith Wolverhampton. Many

people who have contributed significantly to its thinking and activities in recent past have shared their reflections and thoughts about its future developments. I hope you will enjoy reading the enormous diversity of views in various pieces here. Any feedback on this issue that you might wish to send will be gratefully received

Editor
Sehdev Bismal MBE

Editorial Board
Sehdev Bismal
The Reverend David Wright
Erik Pearse

40th Anniversary Celebrations

Following the infamous 'rivers of blood' speech by Enoch Powell in 1968, Wolverhampton morphed into a town where mutual suspicion and unfounded prejudices flourished. The large number of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent made some indigenous people unwelcoming to the newcomers as they feared the loss of their jobs and felt alarmed at the changing social fabric of society in their neighbourhoods.

There were no significant national or local initiatives on the horizon for bringing communities together to combat festering misunderstandings and prejudices arising from the huge gap in their cultures, religious beliefs and traditions. That was the time when Wolverhampton Interfaith Group was born in 1974. Some people with foresight such as Revd Neville Platten, and many other like-minded individuals, strongly felt that there was an urgent need to bring people of different communities together in order to dispel fear of the unknown. A small initiative but with enormous implications for community cohesion in Wolverhampton!

The 40th anniversary of the birth of Wolverhampton Interfaith Group was celebrated on 5 September 2014 at the Gujarati Association Hall. It was a magnificent occasion, attended by over 100 people at a venue that was spacious, well furnished, light and, above all, warmly hospitable.

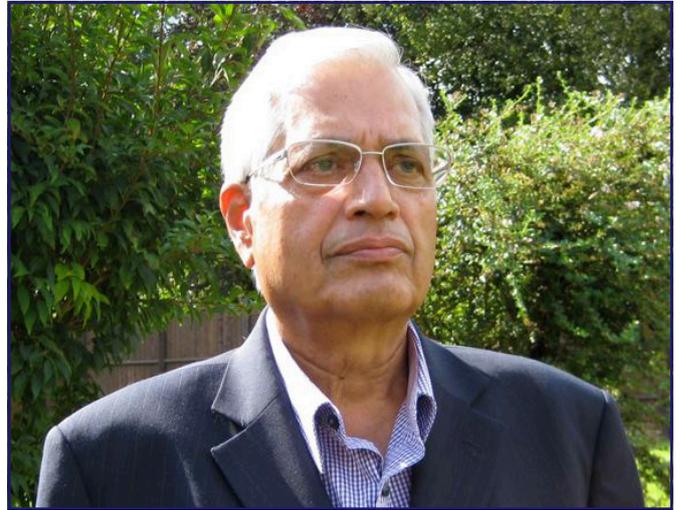
The 40th anniversary of the birth of Wolverhampton Interfaith Group was celebrated on 5 September 2014 at the Gujarati Association Hall

The proceedings included a speech by the WIFRN Chairman and a kaleidoscope of performances by children and adults. A rousing drumming of dhols led by Harjeet signalled the start of entertainment. It was followed by a scintillating Bollywood dance by Roshani, a semi-classical dance by Jai Jashn, melodious gospel singing by Shantelle and Miranda, a narration of the story of Mohammad by Ali and Esa, traditional Irish and Scottish music by Pete and Jez, and dancing by children from the Gujarati Association. All in all, there

was a melange of activities to feast the eyes and ears on.

A booklet especially written on the background to the birth of the Group Building Bridges, not Walls by Sehdev Bismal was launched by the Right Reverend Bishop Clive Gregory. The Bishop in his speech added: “This is a story which deserves to be widely read, partly as a celebration of all that has been achieved in this, the Interfaith Group’s 40th year, but perhaps, more importantly as an inspiration to those of us who, as citizens and faith leaders, bear responsibility now for building on all that has been achieved.”

The evening concluded with a delicious vegetarian meal, which had been kindly coordinated by Councillor Elias Mattu.



Sehdev Bismal

Challenges of Interfaith Future

Earlier this year I paid my first visit to Israel. I was accompanied by a good friend of mine who is Jewish. We devised an itinerary which took us to places of spiritual and historical significance to both Christians and Jews. It was a wonderful and illuminating trip.

My friend returned speaking of our visit to Capernaum (the town on the shores of Lake Galilee where Jesus lived for a while) as his highlight, and I returned clutching the complete works of the Jewish historian Josephus. We both came back significantly more enlightened as to one another’s religious traditions, as well as our own.

This experience encapsulates for me the value of Interfaith encounter and friendship, and is the type of experience that Interfaith Wolverhampton has

Interfaith Wolverhampton needs to build on its achievements and ensure that we continue to offer our City a wonderful resource for embracing and holding together our ever diversifying citizenry

been encouraging and enabling for 40 years. Endless opportunities to meet, share and learn together – in social, religious and learning environments.



Opportunities to travel together to many places of worship within the UK, if not abroad. But most importantly of all, opportunities to deepen understanding of one another in Wolverhampton.

As a Christian I gain insight and wisdom from my religious scriptures and tradition, but I also believe, out of personal experience, that I can learn much about God through a deeper understanding of humanity, in all its rich religious and cultural diversity. Interfaith Wolverhampton needs to build on its achievements and ensure that we continue to offer our City a wonderful resource for embracing and holding together our ever-diversifying citizenry. We will need to do things

differently in the future to achieve this aim, not least because a younger generation must be at the helm, with very different ways of communicating and networking. There is a sense in which, to reflect a truth from the teaching of Jesus, we may need to die to some of our past in order to be born again to face the challenges of our Interfaith future.

Rt. Revd. Clive Gregory

A Message from the Mayor of Wolverhampton

When I came with my family to Wolverhampton in 1971, it was with trepidation. Its reputation for racial harmony was, quite frankly, rock-bottom and like many others I had serious concerns.

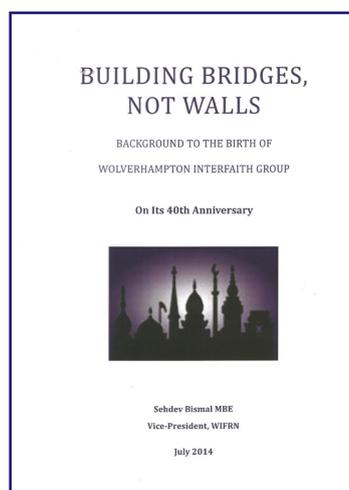
The inspirational establishment of IFW some three years later has in my estimation, been the most single most important factor in transforming Wolverhampton into what is surely a model for the whole country of religious toleration and racial harmony and I am proud to be known and accepted in Wolverhampton.

Everywhere Frances, the Mayoress, and I have been in the City, the absence of any kind of prejudice or intolerance has been very evident.

However, we must never be complacent and it is vital that the brave, innovative and determined steps taken 40 years ago are maintained and strengthened by the Network to ensure that Wolverhampton remains the best place to live in England.



*Councillor Mike Heap
Mayor of Wolverhampton*



Building Bridges not walls

If you have not already got a copy of this publication, as a member, you can collect one free from the Interfaith Wolverhampton office at 24 School Road or request one to be sent to you by sending £3 for packing and postage. (Cheques to WIFRN) The cost to non-members is £3 plus postage and packing.

The publication contains a deliberate mistake. If you pay one pound

extra and give your name and address, you can enter the competition to spot the deliberate mistake. You will need to send your answer to the Interfaith Wolverhampton (IFW) Office at 24 School Street, WV1 4LF before the end of November 2014. The winner, drawn from a hat if there are several correct entries, will win £10.

A Sikh Perspective on the Concept of Interfaith

The importance placed upon Interfaith dialogue for the Sikh Gurus is best highlighted through the principles by which the Sikh Holy Scripture, the Adi Granth (which became the Guru Granth Sahib in 1708 CE) was compiled in the early Seventeenth Century.

The Guru Granth Sahib is indeed, unique amongst the World Scriptures in that it contains the hymns of individuals from a number of religious traditions. Alongside the writings of the Sikh Gurus, it also contains the religious compositions of Hindu and Muslim Sants. Guru Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikhs born in the Fifteenth Century, was the pioneer in Interfaith relationships. His emphasis on honesty, integrity and a hard day's living became the key message of his teachings. Sikhi (the teachings of the Sikh faith) encourage individuals to be 'good' and moral beings without necessarily being over-burdened with religious labels. His often repeated words: 'There is no Hindu, There is no Muslim... I will follow God's path' have been interpreted in a number of ways. One thing for certain is that Guru Nanak's emphasis through his teachings was on the liberation of all human beings, regardless of one's faith, gender or caste. This message was carried on by his successors. In this respect, Sikhi is positive towards claims of truth in all faiths. It is truly inclusivist in acknowledging that all religious paths lead to the same goal. Hence many Sikhs are involved in Interfaith matters around the globe. The three key principles of Sikhi - Nam Japo (meditation on the Name of God) Kirt Karo (hard work) and Vand ke Chakko (sharing with others) - enable a devout Sikh to be a good citizen whilst remembering God at all times. It is because of these principles that Sikhs are encouraged to take part in charitable events and to engage in Interfaith dialogue. A fine example is of the Sikh organisation 'Khalsa Aid' flying out to Haiti from Britain to perform



sewa (selfless service) with the victims of the abhorrent earthquake, regardless of the faith (or non-faith) of the recipients.

*Dr Opinderjit Kaur Takhar,
University of Wolverhampton*

A Trail blazing Initiative in Wolverhampton

It is a privilege to have been invited to offer a reflection on the 40th anniversary of the creation of the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group, one of the first local inter faith organisations in the country and also, in 1987, a founder body of the Inter Faith Network for the UK.

At this time many of us will recall, with deep gratitude and affection, the truly pioneering inter faith work of Ivy Gutridge. Not only did she play a key role, together with her colleagues, in the setting up of the Wolverhampton group and in its subsequent activities, but she contributed too to the formation of the Inter Faith Network and in due course served as one of its Vice Chairs.

When Wolverhampton's trail blazing initiative was launched in 1974 inter faith work was still very much a minority concern and indeed was viewed with suspicion in some quarters. The new group played a valuable role in providing advice and encouragement in the formation of other local groups. The situation has changed a great deal over the last forty years. Today the importance of building and maintaining good inter faith relations is taken for granted. It is widely recognised that this involves respecting the distinctive character of different religious traditions as well as seeking common ground. But it is vital that this work is tackled sensitively and in depth. There remains a continuing need for the

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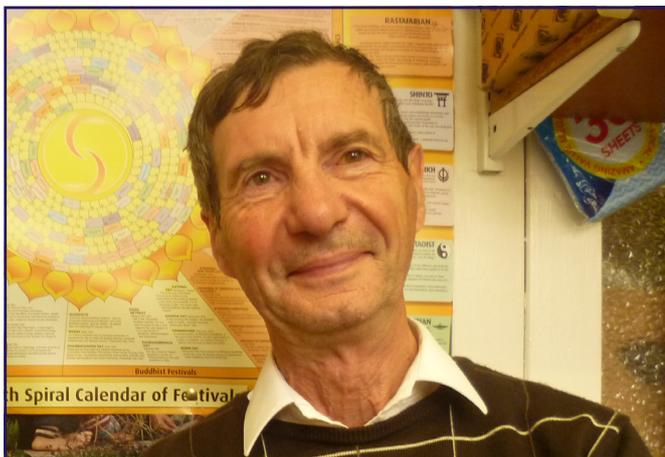
combating of prejudice and ignorance, often linked to stereotyping and a lack of the mutual engagement if there is to be mutual understanding; and also to develop greater joint social action, drawing on the values which are held in common, not just by people of faith but many others within our society as well.

I wish Interfaith Wolverhampton every success in taking forward its crucial agenda in the coming years.

Brian Pearce,
Director of the Inter Faith Network
for the UK 1987-2007

My own faith strengthened by inter-faith

I am a cradle Catholic, and deeply rooted in the Catholic Christian religion. My many years' involvement with inter-faith has keenly helped me to deepen and broaden my understanding of my own faith. I was brought up to believe that 'Nulla salus extra ecclesia' – there is no salvation outside the (Catholic) Church.



I now realise how rigid and limiting that concept, now happily rejected by the Catholic Church, really was. Meeting Christians from other denominations, and people from different faiths, has taught me that the the Holy Spirit, working, I believe, through God the Father and through Jesus Christ, is way beyond our understanding and embraces humanity in all

As the Dalai Lama says: "The ultimate reason to accord respect to other religions is to see that they, too, engender the beautiful qualities of the human heart and foster compassion and loving kindness – exactly the qualities one is striving to attain through one's own faith"

its glorious diversity. Keen friendships nurtured over the years with deeply spiritual people from all faiths highlight the inadequacy of words to convey the essence of what we believe. Words like 'God', which should be a source of profound unity, can so easily become limiting and merely reflect the narrow ideas I may have about 'my God'.

As the Dalai Lama says: “The ultimate reason to accord respect to other religions is to see that they, too, engender the beautiful qualities of the human heart and foster compassion and loving kindness – exactly the qualities one is striving to attain through one’s own faith’.

In Wolverhampton, we are so lucky to have exemplars of the deeply-held values of most of the world’s great faiths and to have had pioneers such as Ivy Guttridge (who could possibly resist the warmth of always-welcoming smile and her bear-like hugs?) to see us on our way to our 40th anniversary.

What of the future? More involvement from young people; a wider membership; an even better training programme about our different faiths for schools and organisations; an established group of faith leaders which can speak ‘truth to power’ on the many critical issues we face; a spirit centre in the redeveloped Mander Centre... We need to dream of what could be. IFW has achieved much in its first 40 years – there is a long way to go.

Erik Pearce
Secretary

What does it mean to be human?

After living in Ealing for 5 years and witnessing some social tension there, I arrived in Wolverhampton in 1969 as a College of Education lecturer with some trepidation.

I happened to be the sole non-white and Muslim member of the staff of about 75 or so. Moreover I knew no-one in the town nor very much about it except the fact that one of its most well-known MP’s had made the *‘Rivers of Blood’* speech the previous year.

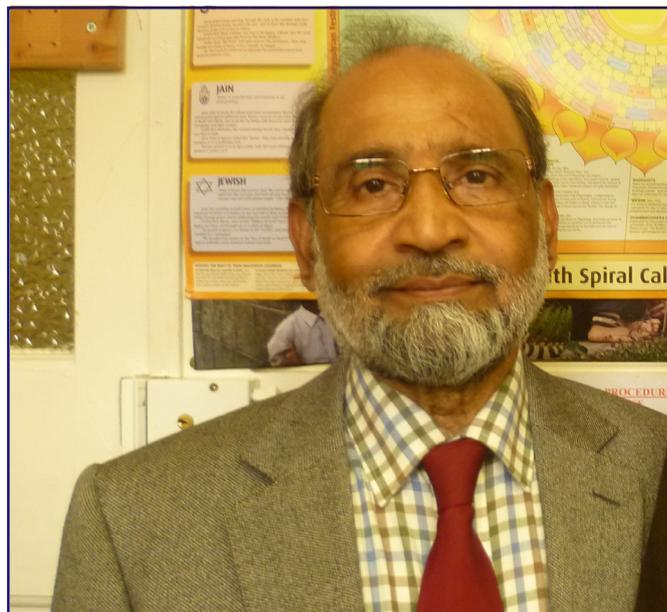
Fortunately for me the College welcomed me with open arms and a great deal of warmth. Working together and sharing hospitality with me, some colleagues changed their long and strongly-held attitudes in no time and some took longer, but change they did.

Things were working well for me but in my inner heart I was longing to be more useful to my newly-adopted home town. The opportunity came when one day Rev. Neville Platten, the Minister at Stratton Street Methodist Church, came to see me. We met and spent nearly 2 hours together discussing various issues, particularly racial tension resulting from ignorance and fear of the unknown, Enoch Powell’s *‘Rivers of Blood’* speech adding fuel to the fear. We agreed that something needed to be done and we fixed a date to meet again.

Several others gradually joined us and we met monthly, each meeting chaired by an individual chosen at the meeting from various faiths. Then in 1974, we decided to formalise things and Neville was unanimously elected President, with me as Vice-President. Those who took courage and joined the movement despite initial misgivings soon found that, instead of being shaken, their own faith was deepened.

In the early stages, our meetings took place in different places of worship. We used to participate in one

Our difficult and turbulent times need a strong interfaith movement as much as ever. Each of us needs to ask *‘What is the purpose of life?’*



another’s prayers without compromising our own and then conveyed our message of building bridges for peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

We gradually started to diversify our activities. One most important task we undertook was to support the planning application for a Hindu Temple on Penn Road opposite the Goldthorn Hotel. After a long struggle planning permission was granted on appeal.

Our achievements have been well explained in the booklet *'Building Bridges not walls'* by our vice-President Sehdev Bismal. As an illustration I should like to mention one incident which might have caused a riot in our City but for our behind-the-scenes intervention. In the mid-seventies, the head-teacher of an inner-city primary school sent a Sikh child home for coming to school wearing a turban. Ivy Gutridge, our Secretary and I as President worked tirelessly behind the scenes, secretly talking to the head-teacher and the parents and many relatives of the child as well as community leaders from about 11.00 pm to 3 am every night for over a fortnight. The happy ending was that the child went back to school wearing a turban in the school colour.

Inter-faith dialogue in the City has brought about many positive changes in the statutory, voluntary and

community sectors, as well as in schools, colleges, the University and New Cross Hospital. Because I worked for the City Council, which was always very supportive, I was able to carry through a number of inter-faith projects on its behalf, such as, notably, Wolverhampton's first-ever agreed RE Syllabus; the establishment of the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE); a Community Cohesion Forum; an annual Diversity Celebration in the Civic Hall by the City's schoolchildren and so on.

We are so very fortunate that we enjoy peace and tranquillity in our City. We have come a long way on the path of peace, harmony and mutual respect and understanding with the support and cooperation of all Wulfrunians and thereby built many bridges as well as broken down many barriers. However this task is not yet finished. Our difficult and turbulent times need a strong interfaith movement as much as ever. Each of us needs to ask *'What is the purpose of life?'*

Dr. Harun Rashid, Chairman

Reinvigoration of Interfaith Work in the City

Events in the Middle East, where people have been told by Isis to "convert or die" seem a world away from the mutual respect championed by Interfaith Wolverhampton. And they are.

I have never believed that what ISIS is doing represents a clash of civilisations. That is not the case. This is not a battle between Christianity and Islam, or Islam and the West. Islam is one of the world's great religions and is practised freely and peacefully by millions, including here in Wolverhampton.

The problem is not a religion. The problem is when religious beliefs are perverted into a rejection of co-existence with others.

Co-existence is very important to our society and, locally, to the successful functioning of our city.

In the United Kingdom, we are fortunate to live in a society where anyone is free to go to the Mosque on a Friday, Synagogue on a Saturday, church or temple on a Sunday and of course to do none of these things if they so wish.

Similarly, people are free to express different political opinions, to join different associations and so on.



That these freedoms are familiar should not make them any less important. In our pluralist society there cannot be a single truth to which all must subscribe. That way lies tyranny.

Instead we must uphold freedom of religious belief, respect for what different faiths hold dear and value the right of others to follow a different faith if they so choose.

That has been the mission of Interfaith Wolverhampton for many years. I have learned a great deal from representing a multi faith constituency in Wolverhampton for the past decade. This city has a lot to teach about how to live side by side in one community, and to be hopeful rather than despairing about its evolution.

There are always siren voices telling us that the real problems we face stem from someone who is a little bit different from us. But in today's world, inter connection is where the opportunity lies.

Just as globalisation has torn down barriers and made movement of people, capital and ideas easier, there has been a tendency to retreat back into nationalism, fundamentalism and a rejection of co-existence.

This city has a lot to teach about how to live side by side in one community, and to be hopeful rather than despairing about its evolution.

I understand the importance of history, of belief and of tradition. It should not be trodden on or cast aside. But we can preserve what gives us identity without closing ourselves off from the rest of the world or from those who may be a little bit different from ourselves.

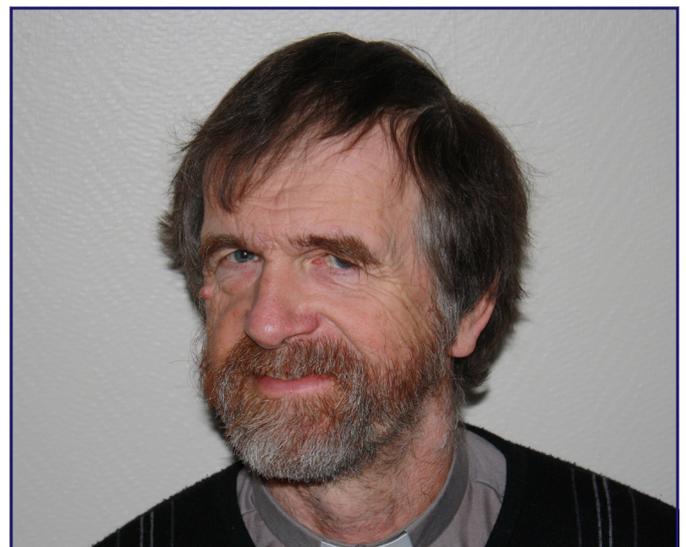
Wolverhampton's inter faith success is because of good leadership from Interfaith Wolverhampton and others in the city and a determination to reach out and respect people of different faiths. This is tremendously valuable. But as the debate intensifies about Britain's place in the world and how we have changed as a society, we have to be vigilant and renew our efforts. The truth is this role is needed now more than ever.

Pat McFadden MP for Wolverhampton South East

Where are we today? – A view from the Methodist Chair in Wolverhampton

Nine years ago when I first got involved with Interfaith I was introduced to three organisations. Wolverhampton Interfaith Group (WIFG) was more or less "what it said on the tin" a group developing Interfaith relations across the city.

There was also a group called Wolverhampton Interfaith Network, (WIFN) which had been set up to respond to a government initiative to bring together groups from differing faiths. The original funding – and I suspect vision had been lost however it still was able to bring together various faith groups. The third group was Wolverhampton Faith Regeneration Unit (FRU). This had been set up as a joint initiative of the Methodist and Anglican churches in the city, to employ a person to develop faith buildings as resources for community regeneration. Since large amounts of Methodist money were supporting FRU I got involved in its board and rapidly discovered the problems it had – linked in with a community project in Bilston that had serious financial liabilities it couldn't meet. We found



a way to separate FRU from this failing project and were soon able to bring it into a merger with WIFN to form the Wolverhampton Faith Regeneration Network (WFRN). By 2008 then we were down to two interfaith organisations in Wolverhampton: I was by this time chair of WFRN.

Some time later I was approached by Devinder Kalhan, at that time Chair of WIFG to ask whether we could see the way clear to bring the two organisations together – FRN had rather more funding, and a full time lead officer WIFG didn't – however it did have a considerable membership. There was agreement right across the two organisations that bringing together the two interfaith organisations in Wolverhampton had to be the best way for coherent interfaith work in the city, but there was considerable work needed in order to merge the two. However the work was undertaken and in October 2010 WIFRN had its first board meeting.

The charitable aims of the new organisation were:

- To advance knowledge and understanding of religious faiths for the advancement of racial harmony.
- To develop the skills and facilities in the poorest areas of the city, both by advice given and by supporting key projects.
- The promotion of sustainable development, especially in the poorest areas of the city.

(I have paraphrased for brevity from a document almost a side of A4).

They remain our charitable objectives today.

I go through this long narrative to illustrate both my commitment to the existence of organisations dedicated to the bringing together of the major world faiths, and of the similar commitment of the Methodist Church which I serve. WIFRN being one organisation in Wolverhampton open to all the range of faith communities represented in the city, dedicated to doing what we can to bring about the wellbeing of the city, a peace building organisation that shows by its actions that diverse faiths can live together – but more than that can when living together be a crucial asset to a city community – is the vision I have for Interfaith Wolverhampton.

The Methodist Church has far less money than it did at one time and we have had to take hard decisions not to fund the work we did for many years, however our commitment to the vision and to the work remains unchanged

*John Howard
Chair
Wolverhampton & Shrewsbury
Methodist District*

Quakers and Wolverhampton's Inter-Faith commitment

In 1974 Quakers in Wolverhampton joined in with the need to establish a more formal relationship with all faiths in addition to the ecumenical arrangements within the Christian churches.

The name which first comes to mind is that of Ivy Gutridge. It is impossible to imagine those early days without her energy and commitment. There were a number of us involved, our first formal representative on the then Inter-Faith Group being Ian Cowie, who remembers cycling around the town delivering leaflets for Ivy: reports of targets achieved, and plans for work to come. Now we use emails.

As we look back on the past 40 years we celebrate that relationships among the different faiths in the city have become steadily closer and more understanding. Most people who enter seriously into inter-faith dialogue

As we look back on the past 40 years we celebrate that relationships among the different faiths in the city have become steadily closer and more understanding.

recognise the extensive similarities between the great religions, not least the fact that there is wide diversity within each of them. It is helpful to spend time exploring these similarities to break down prejudice and to build trust. There are, however, real differences between the world faiths, and these need to be recognised. As inter-faith encounter proceeds it becomes possible first to acknowledge and then to transcend these differences.

Early Quakers had encounters with other faith communities. Mary Fisher visited Turkey in the 17th Century to speak with Sultan Muhammad. She said: "They are more near Truth than many nations; there is a love begot in me towards them which is endless ..."

In the last few years the need for inter-faith encounter has greatly increased. Recent history and insensitive media coverage have turned an unwelcome spotlight on faith communities, particularly Muslims, making them feel isolated, threatened and fearful. Quakers, who themselves were once persecuted and considered a threat to the state, may be able to play a valuable role in supporting such faith communities and in witnessing their right to maintain their faith as part of our multi-

cultural society. All should learn to appreciate the complex interplay between faith, culture and race. This can be seen as part of our work for peace and justice as well as a means of deepening our own spiritual life.



Win Sutton
Wolverhampton Quaker Meeting

Diversity and Interfaith

Faith communities play an important role in building diverse, inclusive communities and in eliminating racism and promoting multiculturalism.

In cities like Wolverhampton that are ever more diverse, the dialogue among different faiths and religions is very important to enhance mutual understanding, harmony, and cooperation amongst

people. The significance of dialogue has perhaps never been as important as it is today. People and societies are more interconnected than ever, but new inequalities are arising. These are times of great opportunity but



Hindus in the UK come from a wide range of backgrounds. They come from different parts of India and the world

also of instability and economic crisis. Interfaith plays an important role in maintaining cordial relationship amongst people of all cultures, religions and faiths.

Diversity is a reality for our societies. It should be considered as a positive and enriching force

for innovation and renewal and as an engine for development. Today we need such strength as never before. The interfaith community has an opportunity – and a responsibility – to speak out against extremism, to advance tolerance, to stand for social justice, dignity, and mutual understanding.

Each faith has its unique identity, traditions, and practices. At the same time, we recognize and celebrate the values that are shared across religious traditions. These common principles form a common ground that unites us in our rich diversity.

Hindus in the UK come from a wide range of backgrounds. They come from different parts of India and the world. They speak different languages and observe varying religious customs. They bring with them a vast range of Hindu belief systems and practices. The world is now a much smaller place; we no longer have the luxury of living in our own exclusive

framework of beliefs.

I think that my work experience and my educational experience have all been in working with people and I love working with people, and I think that's so necessary in an interfaith role to be familiar with lots of diverse groups. In dealing with people, you have to be able to take care of anyone regardless of their background and whether you agree with them or not. I think those are really key ingredients of being a member of Interfaith as well.

During my term with Interfaith, I have come across many dedicated people such as Sehdev Bismal and Devinder Kalhan who have been an inspiration and role models and working with them so much more closely has been really exciting for me.

Satya Pal Sharma
Shri Krishan Mandir

My Jewish Faith and Interfaith

My husband Len and I came to Wolverhampton 50 years ago after living in the north of England. Len was approached by a member of "Interfaith" if he would like to become a member representing the Jewish Faith and he was pleased to say of course, so I would say we were amongst the Founder Members.

I have always found such friendliness and warmth amongst other people of different faiths and think it is so important that in a City where there are so many different religions and denominations, that groups like ours should be formed, especially when there is so much antagonism and media against other faiths: we need an association where people will stand together.

I noticed also on Holocaust Remembrance Day the number of kind people who come to support, and also the beautiful services at the "Prayers for Peace" which are held every year and organized so very well by Sehdev and others.

Len often took part reciting a portion from our Jewish Prayer Book, and now Martin Gomberg has kindly taken over.

All in all I am so glad I belong to such an organization such as "Interfaith" and hope to do so for many years to come.

Doreen Brandes

The Role of Faith Communities in Promoting Community Cohesion

I recently attended the 40th Anniversary celebrations of Interfaith Wolverhampton which has done so much, over four decades, to promote Community Cohesion in the City. Wolverhampton remains one of the most diverse and cohesive cities in the West Midlands.

Communities are well integrated, get on well together and respect each other, the city actively celebrates its diversity. Outcomes for many young people from minority communities are good. Asian young people do better at school, they have lower rates of teenage pregnancy, they are less likely to be taken into care, they are more likely to end up in employment. African Caribbean young people also do well in most of these areas. Wolverhampton's black and minority communities do not suffer from the disadvantage that bedevils many cities and creates the environment in which unrest and extremism can flourish.



The faith sector historically has played a key role in laying the foundations for this. *“Building Bridges not Walls”* by Sehdev Bismal sets this out admirably. The role of the faith sector is both recognised and valued and the level of community cohesion in the city is something we should be proud of.

However there are challenges ahead. Community Cohesion is fragile. It requires continued effort - and there are a number of threats facing at the moment which I would summarise as Demographics, Austerity, Safeguarding, Deprivation and Extremism

Demographics across the city are changing and, as a consequence, the needs of the city continue to evolve. The city's population has increased by 6% since 2001 resulting in increased levels of overcrowding. Some communities have become more transient partly because of new waves of immigration, for example from Eastern Europe. Transient communities create new challenges for community cohesion. They create instability and

are harder to engage with. At times like this Faith communities can play a vital role. In the way that they have always done, they can welcome people to the city, they can help people put down roots and engage them with their local community.

Austerity is another challenge to community cohesion. The impact on the Council has been to create a funding gap of £123 million by 2018/19 with the resulting requirement to lose up to 2,000 jobs, several hundred of which have already gone. Other services are under equally severe financial pressure too. In these

Cohesion is fragile. It requires continued effort - and there are a number of threats facing at the moment which I would summarise as Demographics, Austerity, Safeguarding, Deprivation and Extremism

circumstances there is a risk that the quality of life services that we all depend on as well as services for the vulnerable could all start to decline creating increased tensions and hostility within communities.

It is clear the public sector will need to support communities to do more for themselves than they have done before.

High profile failures in safeguarding children have also become a challenge to community cohesion. Rotherham is the most recent example of this but the deaths of children within particular immigrant communities from Victoria Climbié to Daniel Pelka have also stoked racism and intolerance.

Sadly the abuse of children and young people happens in all communities. But communities, partly because of their revulsion of the abuse that is revealed, will always want to look for scapegoats and the media often jumps on that creating a toxic atmosphere of blame and hostility. This is something we all need to resist by openly discussing the issues and speaking out against abuse in all communities.

The fourth threat to Community Cohesion is deprivation. The city continues to suffer deprivation and under the Indices of Deprivation 2010 Wolverhampton is now one of the 10% most deprived local authorities

in England. History tells us that deprivation and financial insecurity can very easily become a breeding ground for extremism and hostility towards other communities. There are positive signs of improvement in Wolverhampton's economy. The new Jaguar Landrover plant has already started to make engines, there is new investment in the City Centre and a new construction skills training centre opening in the city. Until these developments feed through into jobs for the most disadvantaged in Wolverhampton, the threat to community cohesion caused by deprivation will remain

Finally the fifth threat is Extremism. The murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich in May 2013 incited race hate demonstrations and counter-demonstrations by the EDL and Muslim Defence League.

Similarly, Conflicts Abroad such as in Israel/Palestine or the sustained fighting or murderous acts or kidnappings such as in Iraq, Syria, Algeria or Nigeria can also create mistrust and tension between communities and inspire a susceptible minority towards extremist ideology – often in the name of religion.

And there will always be those few within our society whose primary goal is to undermine the very diversity that we value so highly. The murder of Mohammed Saleem and the mosque bombings undertaken by Pavlo Lapshyn showed how places of worship can be directly targeted and used in an attempt to undermine cohesion in the West Midlands;

In the face of those attacks, the resilience of our faith communities, in standing together in defiance was testimony to the value we place on our cohesion and to the direct role that our faith sector plays in promoting this.

We should all be very proud of the tradition of tolerance, cohesion and successful integration that Wolverhampton has. *Building Bridges not Walls* tells a great story about the contribution that faith communities and this group in particular have played.

Sarah Norman
Strategic Director Community
Wolverhampton City Council

Join IFW – and Live Longer!

Humans need each other. We are a social species. Research indicates that those who have frequent face-to-face contact with their friends are more likely to survive cancer, HIV/AIDS, heart attacks, and strokes. People with the best social networks have the lowest incidence of dementia. Those who often get together with close friends to eat – and, yes, to gossip! – live 15 years longer on average.

The Nobel Prize winning French author and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre famously said that “hell is other people”. Well, to me, hell is much more likely to be the lack of other people.

Neighbours

In the past, lots of people had the necessary and enjoyable contact by talking to their neighbours. Yet, in a recent study of 2,000 Britons, one third of respondents said that they would not be able to recognise their near neighbours in a police identity parade.

So, if people are not talking to enough of their neighbours, are folks talking to others in different places; for example, at their places of worship? The answer is probably mixed, for two main reasons. Firstly, regular attendance at many – but not all – places of worship is almost certainly lower than it was 50 years ago. Secondly, just because someone attends a place of worship does not necessarily mean that he or she

The hard work of IFW over the last 40 years has helped many, many of us to understand each other better



actually interacts socially with his/her fellow believers – whether there or in some other place.

Here's where IFW can play a very positive role. It gets us talking to each other; thinking and discussing – and even gossiping! Personally (and I cannot cite any evidence for this), I think that interacting with those who are different can extend one's life even more, simply because those interactions are likely to be spiritually and intellectually stimulating.

Understanding differences is part of being a mature and rounded human being. The hard work of IFW over the last 40 years has helped many, many of us to understand each other better. It takes effort, but it's fun as well, and it helps us to live longer.

Rejuvenation

So, given that IFW is so useful, how do we – literally – rejuvenate it?

We need to ensure that IFW events remain enjoyable and warm-hearted, as well as fulfilling and enriching. One way is to “sell” the idea that involvement may mean a longer life! Another way is to remind people that involvement is helpful to the individual, and to our city; that it is healthy to work together to learn more about different faiths and different cultures – about the ways in which we differ, yes; but also about the many ways in which we are similar, sharing a human commonality and community of interest.

“Faith seminars”

We need a process of renewal. Can I open the bidding by suggesting a series of “faith seminars”? Although it's been done before in our 40 year history, nevertheless I feel that now would be an appropriate moment to repeat the process. We could have, say, a series of 3 sessions of 45 minutes each, one session per month, on Christianity. Then 3 months devoted to Islam, then 3 on Buddhism, et cetera.

Each session would focus on one faith, led by a knowledgeable believer from that faith. In the first of the three sessions, the session leader would briefly set out the key tenets of their faith, and then lead a theological discussion encouraging questions and contributions, particularly from those of another faith. Subsequent sessions from that faith could cover its history (lots of young people love history) – the “stories” of that faith, as it were.

I realise that three sessions per faith will only scratch the surface, but we are fortunate to have a multiplicity of faiths represented in Wolverhampton, so we have a lot of faiths to explore. Moreover, we must not forget that time is limited (even with our longer lives!), especially for younger people who may be bringing up children and/or working long hours.

Rob Marris

News from the AGM

Our new name

Members voted by a large majority (30-5) to change our name to Interfaith Wolverhampton.

Changes to the Board of Directors

Prem Lal., a former Chair of Interfaith and one of the three vice-chairs prior to the AGM, stood down due to inordinate pressure on his time. His wisdom and constant good nature will be sadly missed on the Board.

Ganesh De, our former much-respected but reluctant Treasurer, was delighted that he could pass on his responsibility. He will remain a Member of the Board.

Kamaljit Kaur, a former vice-chair and long-standing member, has stood down from the Board due to work commitments.

Bhajan Devsi, who has become increasingly involved in various aspects of our work in the last couple of years, replaces Prem Lal as vice-chair.

Suki Sunner has become Treasurer and **Rinder Salan** has become Deputy Treasurer.

Mohammad Khalil has been re-elected for a further period of 3 years; **Geoff Boswell**, **Pinki Sharma** and **Janette Watson**, all previously co-opted, have been elected to the Board; **Suffiea Ahmad** and **Devinder Kalhan** have been elected to the Board and **Harjinder Singh Chatta** is being co-opted.

George Tonks has agreed to continue to be our Independent Examiner and to offer us his highly professional services and advice for free.

Dates for your Diary

Tuesday November 18th Bring and Share Lunch Irene Jones/David Bruton (from the
(12.45-2.00) Spiritualist Church)

Tuesday November 25th 40th Anniversary Visit by VIP (to be confirmed)
(early afternoon)

Tuesday December 16th Bring and Share Lunch Tim Fyffe (Anglican)
(12.45-2.00)

Tuesday January 20th 2015 Bring and Share Lunch Arshang Jahedi (Christian)
(12.45-2.00)

Tuesday January 27th Holocaust Memorial Service
(11.00)

Tuesday February 17th Bring and Share Lunch – Inderjit Bhogal on Corrymeela
(12.45-2.00)

Tuesday March 17th Bring and Share Lunch
(12.45-2.00)

Monday April 20th Film - *The Lunchbox* at the Lighthouse
(5.30 for 6.00)

Also of interest

Satsang meetings at Friends' Meeting House, 8b Summerfield Road, WV1

Saturday November 8th (10.30-4.30) Living in the Eye of the Storm

Saturday February 14th (1.30-4.30)

Saturday March 14th 2015 (10.30-4.30) Day of reflection

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