BUILDING BRIDGES, NOT WALLS

BACKGROUND TO THE BIRTH OF

WOLVERHAMPTON INTERFAITH GROUP

On Its 40th Anniversary

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Vice-President, WIFRN

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Index

Foreword

In the following pages Sehdev Bismal MBE tells a story, a story of profound significance and continuing relevance, not only for the people of Wolverhampton but for the people of any community who wish to engage seriously with the challenge and the reward of understanding neighbours of different faiths and cultures.

Every story has a setting and the historical, sociological and political backdrop to the formation of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group is sketched for us with authoritative and vivid brushstrokes. Momentous events and inspirational characters are brought to life as the story unfolds. Sehdev Bismal's narration is characterised by its even- handed and measured tone, with commendable understanding expressed for those fearful of the effects of immigration on their neighbourhoods, but his repeated use of the word 'pioneers' for the founders of the Interfaith Group is surely right. It is the vision, the courage, the willingness to take risks and the wholehearted dedication associated with all those who pioneer, which leaps out of this story. And, as Sehdev Bismal illustrates, the fresh ground that they broke through their tireless efforts, has yielded a harvest of excellent inter–faith and community relations in the City of Wolverhampton that persists to this day.

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. This generation has challenges all of its own and to meet them we will have to draw heavily on the experience and example of the pioneers, of which Sehdev Bismal himself, although far too modest to mention it, is undoubtedly one of the foremost.

Rt. Revd Clive Gregory

President of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith & Regeneration Network

A Tale of Two Cities

1974 was a turbulent year in the history of the UK. The year was scarred by the three-day week, two General Elections, one disruptive change of government and a state of emergency in Northern Ireland. To add to the all-encompassing misery of the year, the Provisional Irish Republican Party began its bombing campaign of the British mainland. The Houses of Parliament and Westminster Hall suffered extensive damage following IRA bomb explosions. Locally, Wolverhampton, too, witnessed many seismic events: the beautiful Victorian Central Arcade went up in flames and had to be demolished; the construction of the Mander Centre finished and the shopping centre became operational. Wolverhampton Wanderers played against Manchester City at Wembley Stadium and got their first major silverware since lifting the 1960 FA Cup. Wolverhampton was changing appearance and looking different than in its previous lives. There were many new communities arriving here and becoming more and more visible in its neighbourhoods.

The air in town carried a whiff of tension from time to time as it blew through a series of unforeseen changes. To adapt Charles Dickens, it was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the epoch of belief, but also it was the epoch of incredulity. It was also the year when the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group was born.

Wolverhampton now is a thriving, vibrant multicultural city with a wide range of ethnicities and faiths living in harmony. Despite its undeserved poor media

image, the city is sometimes held up as a good example of community cohesion. It is a city where the different traditions and mores of residents originating from other countries are not only tolerated and accepted but also given acknowledgement as contributing to the richness of the city's cultural life. The multiplicity of places of worship set up by faiths other than Christianity speaks volumes of the freedom, status and recognition accorded to those who have made this city their adopted home.

It was not always like that. When we look back at the city only a few decades ago, it seemed to be a very different place. Migration from Commonwealth countries was creating ripples and evoking different reactions in the population here. Inevitably, there were some people who were sceptical, and to some extent, albeit unwittingly, hostile to the newcomers in their midst although, thankfully, they were not in the majority. Fearing the loss of their jobs, scared of the changing social fabric of society in their neighbourhoods, the lack of knowledge of their backgrounds –all contributed to their reaction to the large numbers of people of different colour arriving in the city. Misconceptions about their cultural norms, religious beliefs and their moral compass rightly plagued their minds. Besides it was the sheer number of migrants that fuelled their anxieties. Where is it going to end? - was the question haunting their minds.

The political circumstances in the country were not very supportive of community cohesion. There were no significant initiatives on the horizon for bringing communities together or for combating festering misunderstandings and prejudices arising from the huge gap in their cultures, religious beliefs and traditions. It was inevitable for the newcomers to gravitate towards their own

communities and not to have any meaningful social relationship with the indigenous population. Fear, hearsay, unchallenged prejudices and rumours did not lead to any active interaction. Wolverhampton, in common with many other large towns and cities, witnessed the same isolating phenomenon. Furthermore, the pronouncements by the local Member of Parliament stoked the fire of suspicion and sometimes resulted in behaviour that turned equality considerations to cinders.

However, a meeting on 10 February 1974 in the middle of winter changed the landscape of community relations bit by bit, incrementally, but surely. A number of people with a hunger for peace and understanding gathered together in All Saints Church hall on a raw, bitterly cold February evening to listen to a speaker from Birmingham who in a powerful plea commended the setting up of an organisation similar to his organisation "All Faiths for One Race' (AFFOR). AFFOR had earned its spurs in the campaign it had launched to stop the 1970 Test Match of England versus Apartheid South Africa. The meeting was addressed by Professor John Hick of Birmingham University and was instrumental in persuading those present to meet again and develop an organisation to bring people of different faiths together. His argument was that much of the racism witnessed in society at that time stemmed from ignorance of other people's faiths, beliefs and life-styles. It was also acknowledged that although much of this racism was to be found among white Christians, many people of other faiths, too, were shackled by ignorance. The high walls of ignorance that people of all hues had built around them did not let any tolerance or respect for others through.

Most of the people present in the hall were strangers to one another but were united in their agreement to set up an organisation specific to Wolverhampton, rather than a replica of something from elsewhere. They had been invited to come to the meeting by the Reverend Neville Platten, the Methodist minister in the Park Village area of the town. He was working with the Reverend Bryan Rippon, another Methodist Minister at St John's Methodist Church.

Neville's vision must have been communicated with persuasive eloquence. Those present at the meeting exchanged names and addresses and agreed to meet again. A decision was taken to meet next in May 1974 and to have one meeting a month. That signalled the start of an exciting project, which in later years was to have a very positive impact on community relations in Wolverhampton. The project was named as the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group. As it transpired later, it was one of the oldest interfaith groups in the country. Wolverhampton was blazing the trail for such ground-breaking work in the country.

It was not an easy ride by any means. It never is when you start doing something with a new idea. There were many people who had reservations or even objections to having an organisation where people of different faiths could talk together or work together without any dilution of their individual faith. Some people felt that it might entail compromising their own beliefs whereas some Asian members felt the conversion to Christianity was the hidden agenda of this new campaign. As they started meeting together at monthly intervals, those who could separate the wheat from the chaff, became convinced of the imperative to have commitment to the idea of promoting interfaith dialogue.

The reluctance to be part of the interfaith movement on the part of people approached was not based on any philosophical and religious grounds. Almost all religions promote peaceful co-existence and being loving and kind to your neighbour.

The Hindu concept that the entire world is but one family lays great emphasis on the unity of all religions. All the Hindu holy books highlight the sacredness of all other religious faiths that must retain their individual identity. In Islam, the formula for social peace, social harmony and interfaith dialogue is based on peaceful co-existence. The principle of dialogue propounded by Islam is: '*Follow one and respect all.* ' People may have their differences in belief, religion, culture etc., but while following their religion, they have to have mutual respect for others and discover a common bond between them, which shows them all to be human beings. Similarly, Sikhism actively promotes love for all humanity and the planet. In Shri Guru Granth Sahib, it is said: "*Practise within your heart the teachings of the Koran and the Bible. Restrain the ten sensory organs from straying into evil… and you shall be acceptable (to God)."*

We could say the same thing about Buddhism. Buddhism is a religion that teaches people to 'live and let live'. The current Dalai Lama believes that the "*common aim of all religions …is to foster tolerance, altruism and love."* Although traditional Christian doctrine is Christocentric, meaning that Christ is held to be the sole, full and true revelation of the will of God for humanity, they aspire to lead a life fit for Jesus' commandment to love their neighbour. Pope John Paul II was a major advocate of interfaith dialogue promoting meetings in Assisi in the 1980s. Many Christians in different denominations now engage deeply in

interfaith dialogue as learners, not converters, and desire to celebrate as fully as possible the many paths to God.

The reluctance by some people to join in the interfaith movement was also caused by fear of the unknown. The primary anxiety in some minds was: Is there an ulterior motive? This was something so far removed from their common experience in this country that they became suspicious and tried to withdraw into their shells. But time and later developments went a long way to allay their fears.

However, in order to grasp the significance of this pioneering work, it is important to understand its context. Without knowledge of what was happening in the background in the country in general and Wolverhampton in particular, it is not possible to comprehend the enormous gap that it was designed to bridge.

The Impact of Immigration

Migration was not a new phenomenon that this country had experienced for the first time. There have been newcomers from other countries settling in the UK for many centuries. However, the scale of migration was much smaller than what people witnessed in the 1950s and 1960s. On 22nd June 1948 the SS Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury and 450 Caribbean passengers arrived on these shores after having travelled for 22 days to reach England. At the end of the Second World War, some servicemen from the West Indies remained in England. The numbers were still quite low though. In the 1931 Census for Wolverhampton, Bilston and Wednesfield there were 2,461 people born in Commonwealth countries and colonial Territories who lived here. Similarly, in the 1951 Census, figures for the County Borough of Wolverhampton show 512 persons born in Commonwealth countries and 153 born in Colonial Territories and Protectorates and a further 3,460 born in foreign countries.

As Wolverhampton saw migrants from the West Indies arriving, there were migrants coming over from the Commonwealth countries of India and Pakistan. The point to bear in mind is that the numbers of migrants leaving their homelands and settling in Wolverhampton was very small. The sudden spurt in the numbers of immigrants witnessed arriving in the 1960s was something that grabbed many people's attention.

To put things into perspective, in 1954, there were ten Indian families living in Wolverhampton. Two years later the Indian Workers Association had a membership of one hundred and fifty.

The reason why migrants chose Britain was the labour shortage following the Second World War. There was a widespread recognition that this shortage, if not addressed, would severely restrict the economic development of the country. At the same time, the Commonwealth countries where the migrants were coming from were experiencing a surplus of labour. The twain met and the movement of people to fill that void was in place.

In the 1960s, a government minister, Enoch Powell**,** who was a Conservative Member of Parliament from South West Wolverhampton took the initiative and actively encouraged people to come to Britain to seek work. The dream of finding a better economic life and the support from the minister provided the incentive for migrants to enter unchartered waters, leave their homelands and decide to make Britain their home.

The sight of persons of different attires, habits, traditions from countries about which the general public did not have much knowledge or awareness gave rise to a great deal of prejudice and resistance to their acceptance into mainstream society. Many newcomers chose to live in neighbourhoods and streets where some of their compatriots had already settled. That was a normal thing to do. Expatriates from Britain are drawn to areas where they have people from similar backgrounds resident during their assignments in Bangkok, Bangalore, or Dubai. They regularly congregate in bars to share their experiences away from home, and find sympathetic ears to give vent to their frustrations, nostalgia and gripes about what they perceive as the flawed system of governance they are currently encountering. Sharing of experiences and complaints gives them a sense of

catharsis and security in numbers. That is exactly what was happening in the neighbourhoods of Wolverhampton. Migrants were drawn to areas such as Blakenhall, Whitmore Reans and Heath Town where they could find solace in familiar company and thus feel less vulnerable.

The presence of large numbers of people from other cultures, of different colour and backgrounds gave rise to issues some of which have remained intractable even today albeit in a different form. The environment of mutual suspicion nurtured by ignorance, fear of the unknown and self-interest gave rise to widespread racism. As there was not much intermingling between communities going on except at work where much of the communication centred on getting the designated jobs done, there was, understandably, an ideal climate for harbouring prejudices. The government of the day tried to address the issue of racism in stages in a trial and error fashion. In 1965 a Race Relations Act came into force making racial discrimination unlawful in public places. The Act made it illegal to discriminate on the "grounds of colour, race, or ethnic or national origins" in public places. However the sweep of the new Act did not cover huge swathes of the public life of its minority ethnic residents. The Act did not extend to housing and employment. Also the new Act did not make racial discrimination a criminal offence –only the worst offenders would be referred to the county court.

The Conservative opponents of the law forced the government to make racial discrimination a civil rather than a criminal offence. Even shops were excluded from the remit of the new Act. In 1966, the first Race Relations Board was set up and in its first annual report in April 1967, it called upon the government to

extend the Act to housing, employment and financial facilities such as mortgages and car insurance.

In consequence, the law was tightened in 1968. The amended Race Relations Act had powers extended to other spheres of public life and made racial discrimination illegal in any place of public resort, such as hotels or cinemas. In order to deal with complaints of discrimination, the Community Relations Commission was set up and tasked to promote "harmonious community relations." A considerable amount of direct discrimination was on its way out although indirect discrimination still continued to grow like a malignant tumour.

The Race Relations Act still had several flaws, chiefly because it was not mandatory and did not require positive steps to remove discrimination and the possibility of discrimination. The Act was amended again in 1976 and made it unlawful to discriminate against anyone on grounds of race, colour, nationality or ethnic or national origin. A great improvement on the previous Race Relations Act but still it did not include a positive duty to promote racial equality. The impetus for that much-needed change was provided years later by the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. The McPherson Report (1999) into Stephen Lawrence's death for the first time defined institutional racism as "the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes or behaviours which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people". The Macpherson Report provided the trigger to make the amended Race Relations

Act 2000 more robust and enforceable and imposed new general and specific duties on public bodies.

The general duties made it mandatory for public bodies to eliminate unlawful discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and proactively promote good race relations between people of different racial groups. Specific duties set out what a public authority must do in order to comply with the general duty.

As alluded to earlier, despite the attempts by the government to eliminate racial discrimination, race had become a major issue following the speech in April 1968 by the Enoch Powell MP, against immigration into Britain from Commonwealth countries.

The sudden influx of migrants inevitably inflamed latent prejudices and an inbuilt sense of superiority in swathes of the public. In 1967, the Wolverhampton Transport Committee decreed that its Sikh employees would not be allowed to wear a turban. Matters came to a head when one of the Sikh drivers, Mr Tarsem Singh Sandhu, decided to make a test case of it in July 1967. Wearing a turban is one of the essential requirements for a Sikh, particularly a baptised Sikh. The ban on turbans created a considerable amount of disquiet and protestations in the local Sikh community but the members of the Transport Committee were adamant on continuing with the ban. Probably, as Mary Beard points out in 'Veils, Turbans and Rivers of Blood' in the Times Literary Supplement, 9 October 2006 "they still had the old-fashioned assumption that men on the buses would look the same if wearing peaked caps!"

A Sikh leader, Mr Sohan Singh Jolly, articulated the deep concerns of the Sikh community over this ban and threatened to commit suicide on a Sunday in

January 1968 unless the ban was lifted. Mr Jolly was an ex-Kenya police inspector who had lost an arm in Burma. There were quite a number of other Sikhs who declared that if Mr Jolly committed suicide, they, too, would follow suit. They protested against this blatant weapon of racism being used to suppress the basic tenets of their religion.

In the end, the Wolverhampton Transport Committee reversed its decision and rescinded the ban on turbans. Mr Jolly gave a mild dressing down to the Transport Committee before the announcement was made by the Council. Even though the ban on turbans was lifted, the Transport Committee refused to concede with generosity and dignity. It said in a statement:" The Committee remains strongly of the view that its original decision was right and its rule both reasonable and clearly non-discriminatory."

However despite the incidents alluded to above, considerable work was being done to accommodate the additional needs of the newcomers and enable them to access mainstream facilities, particularly in schools. As in other local education authorities, Wolverhampton's schools were not equipped to accommodate new pupils because of the language barrier. Large numbers of immigrant children were not confident enough in English and were thus disadvantaged in their attainment in other subject areas. Courses were organised to raise awareness of language issues emerging in schools and strategies to teach English as a Second Language were offered to mainstream and specialist teachers funded under Section 11 of the 1966 Education Act. There were separate language centres set up to offer intensive practice in English and to lessen the burden on mainstream schools. The initiative to set up separate language centres originated in good

intentions but resulted in unnecessary seclusion and the pupils remained cut off from mainstream schooling while attending them.

The decade between 1961 and 1971 was the main period of Asian immigration. Settlement from India and Pakistan rose from 1,756 in 1961 to 12,120 in 1971. That period saw the proliferation of separate language centres in most local authorities in Britain. Obviously schools in neighbourhoods with a large concentration of immigrants had a sudden and substantial rise in the number of their pupils, as was the case with Bingley Infant and Junior School in Pennfields. Later on, special provision for teaching English as a Second Language to immigrant children was made at Grove Junior School and many pupils from other schools were bussed to that school for that purpose. The discrete language centre within that school attempted in its own way to accommodate the needs of its new pupils but there were inevitable problems. Pupils did not have the opportunity to interact with indigenous pupils and since they were not offered good models of English except through their teachers, their development of language acquisition was slow, erratic and riddled with syntactical errors. Although the school was making regular checks on pupils entering the school to identify any language issues, the procedures adopted were not standardised and were often ad hoc. As numerous research studies began to highlight the negative impact of separate language centres on the educational development of pupils, decisions to remove them became almost inevitable in almost all local education authorities. Eventually all language centres were closed down and provision for providing additional support to newcomers was integrated within the mainstream provision.

‘Rivers of Blood’

Enoch Powell, MP for Wolverhampton South West, played a crucial role in augmenting the debate about immigration. He was the shadow defence spokesperson Secretary under the leadership of Edward Heath. Powell delivered a speech in Birmingham on April 20, 1968 at the General Meeting of the West Midlands Conservative Political Centre. As Health Minister eight years earlier, Powell had been encouraging immigrants from the Commonwealth to work in the understaffed National Health Service. Now in his speech Powell was scathing about immigration and anti-discrimination legislation and claimed that ‘*Britain must be mad to allow in 50,000 dependents of immigrants each year’*. The speech became known as the **‘R*ivers of blood*’** speech because of the line: ‘*As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see the river Tiber foaming with much blood.’* Powell was an erudite scholar and alluded to classics to emphasise his point, and added: *‘...it is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre.’*

His friends claimed that since Powell was an avowed Christian, he would have never wanted his warnings to have such a divisive effect. Many

of his supporters mentioned that Powell had served with the army in India and that he had a diploma as an Urdu interpreter.

Enoch Powell was right, it seems to me, to highlight the danger of communities not willing or trying to integrate and also right in saying that sheer numbers of immigrants coming into a country can profoundly affect its culture. However, the language he used was full of highly charged emotions. His popularity grew exponentially after this speech. In July 1965, Powell came a distant third in the

Conservative party leadership contest. After the speech, he became a national figure with a realistic chance of leading the party.

Powell's speech had a visible effect on the minority faith communities who had settled in Wolverhampton. The resultant suspicions and the pervasive ignorance about their culture, faith and ways of life became palpable and increased their sense of isolation. Their will and confidence to interact with mainstream society was severely dented. The corrosive feeling that they were inevitably going to be misunderstood made them cling on to their close communities and seek shelter in what could be termed as small, insulated islands in the middle of towns and cities.

There were some people, a small minority though, who could appreciate the pernicious impact of emotive rhetoric on the society and raised their voice in protest. The Reverend Jefferey Spratling, the Minister at the Lea Road Congregational Church was one such person. On 2 May 1968, he addressed a letter to his congregation on this issue and said:

"The greatest objection to Mr Powell's speech on 20 April on the effect of immigration was the emotive manner of its presentation. Virtually all responsible members of our society, both of Church and State, including the Editor of the 'Times' who called it an 'evil speech', are united in condemnation on this point. .....It is evident that there are more white immigrants of varying nationalities in Wolverhampton than there are coloured immigrants but with these Mr Powell is not concerned. We do not doubt the cogency of some of his arguments but his violent emotional approach on coloured people, from the assumption that they are undesirable and unwanted, can only be compared to the Nazis' use of Jews as a

scapegoat for the failure of their economic policies." (Wolverhampton City Archives)

It is true that many youngsters today may not recognise the significance of Powell's speech today, but the toxic impact still lingers on in the minds of older immigrants in the City. He circulated copies of his speech to the media in advance and deployed the raw views of his Wolverhampton constituents to validate his assertions. Prior to his speech, there was very little evidence of antipathy between communities in a tangible way. He instilled fear into the minds of many immigrants by championing his proposal of repatriation. His speech was so powerful because by his statements about the 'swamping' of Britain by black people, he portrayed the white man living alone in fear in a black neighbourhood. The backlash against minority ethnic communities manifested itself through marches organised by Tilbury dockers or Smithfield porters.

In Wolverhampton as in many towns and cities, many indigenous people found legitimacy for their prejudices. Powell's argument was that landlords and employers should be free to discriminate against ethnic minorities as they wished. It is no coincidence that the most emotive part of his speech involved inviting his audience to identify with a racist landlady, who would like to run a business as long as she can exclude blacks from it. Immigrants who were already feeling insecure felt even more vulnerable and marginalized.

What was permeating the society in Wolverhampton was mutual suspicion, misunderstanding and misconceptions even among some well-meaning people. As there was insufficient interaction between communities, prejudices got reinforced through heresy, irrational anecdotes and sweeping generalizations.

What we needed was a catalyst to bring communities closer to each other, slowly, incrementally, in unthreatening situations. It was not going to be an easy task and no one expected miracles to happen overnight.

A rather momentous event occurred thousands of miles away from Britain, which sent shock waves in the political community here and strengthened the hands of those people who were vociferous in their resistance to further immigration. President Idi Amin of Uganda unexpectedly, and without any forewarning, made an announcement on 4 August 1972 while addressing his troops at Tororo Barracks in eastern Uganda.

He said: *'I am going to ask Britain to take over responsibility for all the Asians in Uganda who are holding British passports because they are sabotaging the country.'*

He accused the Asians of encouraging corruption, siphoning off Uganda's wealth out of the country and not integrating with the rest of the society there. There were between 70,000 and 80,000 Asians at the time, about 30,000 held British citizenship, about 23,000 held Ugandan citizenship and the rest held Indian or Pakistani citizenship. In the end, almost all Asians left the country. They were given 90 days to leave and allowed to take £50 with them. The first flight left Entebbe airport for Stansted on 18 September 1972. Geoffrey Rippon went to see Amin as a special envoy of the Heath government but Amin remained adamant and became more and more stubborn.

Britain cut off aid to Uganda. The Asian businesses were parceled out to black Ugandans, mostly to Amin's military colleagues. Most businesses subsequently fell into bankruptcy. The sudden influx of Ugandan Asians caused a lot of hue and

cry among those Britons who were opposed to immigration to start with and saw it as evidence of what Powell had predicted in his speech.

Economically the majority of people were becoming more affluent and finding jobs was still relatively easy; the 1970s saw many turbulent events, which had an unnerving effect on the masses. Northern Ireland was a constant source of factionalism and violence, the slow collapse of Bretton Woods resulted in a world financial crisis, the miners went on strike and the three-day week was introduced. So great was the sense of turmoil that on five separate occasions Edward Heath, the then Prime Minister, declared a state of emergency. And whenever there is a societal crisis, newcomers are the first to have fingers pointed at them by people who are bewildered and don't know how to reflect on and understand the world around them.

The First Wave of Asian Immigrants in Wolverhampton

The Asian immigrants in the 1960's and 1970's generally tended to live in areas of considerable deprivation and poor housing. In the early 1960's it was quite common to see more than a dozen Asian men living in a small terraced house. They usually found it difficult to have their families come over from the Indian sub-continent to join them. Their main focus was on making money so that their families back in their countries of origin could have a decent standard of living. Similarly most of the jobs they took on were manual, requiring low-level skills and usually jobs that the indigenous people were reluctant to accept. The immigrants worked for long hours to augment their wages. It was only when their families started to trickle in that they felt the need to do something for the social, cultural and spiritual aspects of their lives. In 1956, they formed the Eastern Film Society for the 1,000 compatriots living at that time in the West Midlands. In 1957-58 there were 512 families on the mailing list of this film society. As many of the immigrants did not have confidence in English, the Eastern film Society provided a great opportunity to see films in their mother tongue languages and that helped them with combating the inevitable homesickness and loneliness that afflicts newcomers. The Secretary of the Eastern Film Society said in his report 1957-58:

"Very few of us are sufficiently advanced in the English language to enjoy the numerous entertainments available in this country. Our primary objective, therefore, was to provide suitable entertainment in the form of films in our own language."

Chairman Harun Rashid paying his respect to Namdari Sikh Guru in Wolverhampton

10th Anniversary Garden Party of WIFG with Ivy Gutridge, Ian Forster, Ranjit Singh, Inderjit Bhogal, Tim Fyffe and others

Executive Meeting at Mildred Reynolds' home—December 1982

Ivy Gutridge, Pastor Plummer, Ravi Khosla, Ian Forster, Sunil Abrol and Inderjit Bhogal

Visit to Commonwealth Institute in 1979

WOLVERHAMPTON INTER-FAITH GROUP.

PROGRAMME 1976

JANUARY
Friday 23rd. at 7.30 p.m.

"QUAKER WORSHIP AND BELIEFS"

Alice Steel and Frank Whidby.

at

SOCIETY OF FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE
8b, Summerfield Road.

FEBRUARY
Monday 16th. at 7.30 p.m.

"THE MARCUS GARVEY ADVICE CENTRE"
Mr. Christian Weaver.

at

17, Chapel Ash.

MARCH
Tuesday 16th. at 7.30 p.m.

"MARRIAGE CUSTOMS"

Five minute talks by members

at

STRATTON STREET METHODIST CHURCH
LINK ROOM.

APRIL
Thursday 8th. at 7.30 p.m.

"EASTER WITH THE WEST INDIANS"
Pastor Williams and members of his church.

at

CRANMER METHODIST CHURCH, Newhampton Road.

MAY
Friday 28th. at 7.30 p.m.

"PENTECOST WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLICS"
Father Patrick Kilgariff

at

OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL SUCCOUR ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, Cannock Road.

JUNE
Saturday 26th. from 3.00 p.m. to 7.00 p.m.

"FRIENDSHIP AFTERNOON" (Outside if fine)

at

BECKMINSTER METHODIST CHURCH,
Birches Barn Road.

JULY
Friday 23rd. at 7.30 p.m.

"MUSLIM WORSHIP AND BELIEFS"

at

THE MOSQUE, Waterloo Road.

AUGUST
NO MEETING DURING HOLIDAY PERIOD.

SEPTEMBER
Thursday 2nd. or 9th.
(To be confirmed)

"THE JEWISH FESTIVALS OF ROSH HASHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR"

at

COMPTON GRANGE ADULT EDUCATION CENTRE.

OCTOBER
Saturday 16th. at 6. 30 p.m.

"FAITH TOUR" Bus tour of various places of worship.

OCTOBER 16th. to 23rd. COMMUNITY RELATIONS WEEK.

NOVEMBER
Friday 9th. at 7.30 p.m.

"INDIAN MUSIC FOR WORSHIP"

at

SHRI GURU RAVIDAS TEMPLE, Dudley Road.

DECEMBER
Friday 17th. at 7. 30 p.m.

"CHRISTMAS WITH THE WEST INDIANS"
Pastor Joseph and members of his Church

at

Ivy Gutridge at work

WOLVERHAMPTON INTER-FAITH GROUP

In preparation for plans to organise the Inter-Faith Group on a firmer basis and with wider responsibility the following has been drawn up for consideration.

Will you please spare time to look at this and write in your comments or suggested amendments so that we can have our ideas pooled for consideration in October.

They are my attempt to summarise the feeling so far expressed and are in no way meant to be decisive or confirmed at this stage.

Possible statement of aims.

The Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group is committed to the following principles and aims.

.....To encourage and promote understanding and friendship between people of Wolverhampton whatever their religious tradition.

.....To work for harmony and peaceful co-existence in our multi cultural town

.....To seek opportunities for dialogue about faith, religious beliefs and cultures.

.....To endeavour to help minority groups where problems arise concerning needs requiring local government co-operation, or knowledge of community resources.

.....To oppose the rejection of any ethnic groups and cultures wherever this appears.

.....To avoid any activity, attitude or persuasion that in any way compromises the integrity of sincere believers, whatever their religious convictions.

.....To acknowledge with thankfulness our mutual standards and codes of behaviour but to accept with honesty and respect fundamental religious differences.

Until the mid-1970s provision for mother tongue teaching in schools was non-existent and did not receive serious consideration from the local authority. The Bullock Report (1975) was the first document to articulate a sympathetic awareness of the contribution of mother tongue teaching and bilingualism to the general attainment of pupils in schools. Subsequent research has shown the unequivocal role of the mother tongue in raising not only attainment but also self-esteem and an active participatory awareness of one's cultural and religious traditions. As in the rest of the country, there was a strong and discernible resistance in Wolverhampton to any meaningful dialogue on the added value of introducing mother tongues in schools. The only response from the local authority was to organize special tuition in English as a Second Language at language centres or in small, separate groups. In 1978, in a random survey conducted by N S Noor and S S Khalsa, it was found that 81% of parents favoured the idea of their children learning their mother tongue in the curriculum. However, the results of the survey were not given credence by the local education authority and its schools. The emphasis was on immersion in the host culture, on assimilation rather than integration. Then there were the low -paid manual jobs, poor housing and the general antipathy of the society around them that made many immigrants isolated, resentful and disempowered.

It is not, therefore, surprising to find that immigration has always raised the temperature of debate in the UK for many decades. The very thought of letting more foreigners in has proved incendiary and most the ills and deprivations existing in British society are, without any hesitation, attributed to the presence of strangers and newcomers in our midst. Many Acts have been passed by the UK Parliament to slow down the intake of foreigners and successive governments

have taken a variety of steps to curtail their numbers. Before the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 was passed, citizens from British Commonwealth countries had extensive rights to move to the UK. In order to maintain stability and in their bid not to ruffle too much the feathers of the anti-immigration lobby, the Conservative government tightened the regulations. Only those people who had government-issued employment vouchers, which were limited in number, were allowed to settle. Hugh Gaitskell, leader of the Opposition, called the act *"cruel and brutal anti-colour legislation."*

The Act, however, failed to pacify those who opposed immigration, notably members of the Conservative Monday Club. The Act was, in consequence, amended by the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 before being superseded by the Immigration Act 1971.

The 1968 act restricted the future rights of entry, previously enjoyed by the citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies, to those born there or who had at least one parent or grandparent from there. There were fears that up to 200,000 Kenyan Asians fleeing that country's 'Africanization' would take up their right to settle in the UK. The Bill was rushed through Parliament hastily and passed in three days. That was the time when Powell made his infamous 'rivers of blood' speech. Even that Act was further tightened in 1971 when Commonwealth citizens faced the same restrictions as any other person applying to live and work in Britain. A requirement to produce a work permit relating to a specific job in a specific place was introduced and those admitted were required to reapply for permission to stay after 12 months and only allowed to stay in Britain after they had lived and worked here for five years.

In contrast another massive change was introduced. This was the introduction of a partial “right of abode” which lifts all restrictions on those, mainly white, immigrants with a direct personal or ancestral connection with Britain. Many immigrants saw this change as a camouflaged colour bar.

The Birth of Wolverhampton Interfaith Group

The time was ripe for creating an organization that could bring people together and shorten the yawning distance between communities. The concept behind the formation of an Interfaith Group was quite radical yet very simple. Despite the repercussions caused by Enoch Powell's speech, some people deeply felt that racial harmony, understanding of other cultures and peaceful co-existence were still possible even though the fabric of society was changing with the presence of people of different faiths and colour. Much of the anxiety triggered by other communities stemmed from ignorance, the different cultural traditions of people living in a somewhat insulated environment were rather disconcerting. I came to this country in 1967 and I joined the education system as a classroom teacher, by sheer coincidence, in 1974. It was quite common for some colleagues to ask me if I had experienced eating a loaf of bread in India or whether people there lived in houses. In my first year as a teacher, it was not uncommon for me to experience the wide gulf between 'them' and 'us'. It took some time before most of my colleagues realised that my compatriots and I shared the same aspirations, dreams, and apprehensions as the general populace. The fact that I was not a Christian had no bearings on my dreams for my family or for my own betterment.

The Reverend Neville Platten, in consultation with the Reverend Bryan Rippin, resolved to approach some prominent members of local faith communities with a view to formally setting up the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group. While that idea was fermenting in Neville's mind, Bryan contacted the Minister at All Saints, the Reverend Peter Barnett, to advise that he thought he had found an ideal person to

act as Secretary to this emerging group. She was also prepared to go and visit the key leaders of the different faith communities to galvanise support and confidence. She was, of course, Ivy Gutridge! Ivy was able to inspire confidence and a warm feeling of friendship in her contact with people. Once a critical mass of members had been identified, the monthly meetings began to take place in earnest.

Meetings began to be held regularly, friendships were formed over a period of time, leading to trust and dispelling of fear of the unknown. The most important spin-off was the encouragement for tolerance; individuals talked, albeit in very simple terms, about their faith and what motivated them to adhere to their traditions. Others would listen without raising any challenging questions. Nor would they ask for the difference in other faiths to be justified. A by-product of these meetings was the social pay-off attendees enjoyed. They visited one another at times of crises, such as illness or bereavement and joined in their community celebrations.

The Reverend Neville Platten was a Methodist Minister at Stratton Street Methodist Church in Park Village. The church was in an area of the town where there were large numbers of Sikhs settling down after migrating from the Indian sub-continent. As the growing numbers of Sikhs keenly felt the need to have their own place of worship, they set up a gurdwara, primarily for prayers butalso for meeting their social needs. As they found themselves in an environment where they were not yet part of mainstream society and a sense of isolation pervaded their community, the setting up of the first gurdwara was an important step towards addressing their religious and social hiatus.

Contact was made with a number of individuals from these communities

including, *inter alia*, Ram Aithal, TR Bhardwaj, Harun Rashid, Vasdev Singh Bhamrah, Eileen and Colin Gardener, Len Brandes, Ravi Khosla, Saber Hussain, Mildred Reynolds, Ian Cowie, Ranjit Singh, Saber Hussain, Tony and Barbara Holden, Albert Goodwin, Eric Pritchard, Valerie Burgess, Mr Shankland, Mr Dhanjal, Ganga Ram Kauldhar, Mr Bahri, H. Holder, Dr Roger Peadon, F. Whitby and Mr R. Clarke. Others who joined in included B S Purewal, Dr Percy Young, Sylvia and Irwin Barnes, Lekh Raj Bawa, Pastor Joseph from the New Testament Church of God, Keith Elder and Swaran Chand. In consultation with them and others, the Reverend Neville Platten set up some informal face-to-face meetings, primarily to give everyone an opportunity to talk about their beliefs and individual faith. The AFFOR meeting, in February 1974, provided the catalyst for this giant step in community cohesion in Wolverhampton.

Although it is very important for people of diverse backgrounds to plan and work together to foster deeper understanding, having face-to-face encounters at that time was the most productive strategy to bring people together in a non-threatening environment. Some people had the misconception that the interfaith meetings were a ploy by Christians to convert members of minority faiths. As expected, some, although initially involved, withdrew their support and ceased to attend those meetings. The same reaction was discernible in many Christian people who felt that hobnobbing with people of other faiths was perhaps not the done thing. It might dilute their own faith and go against the teaching of their Church.

A powerful example of resistance to the idea of working together with people of different faiths emerged years later in June 1986. Gerry Anderson, a columnist at the Express and Star, wrote a brief piece on the Wolverhampton Interfaith

Group. The piece was entitled '*Sharing in a Religious Heritage*'. The article said quite a few positive things about Neville Platten's vision of forming links between people of different faiths in the town. The author alluded to the statement by the then Secretary of the group, the Reverend Tim Fyffe, explaining how the group aimed to share in the richness of each other's cultural and religious heritage. The article listed some of the activities undertaken by the group and was, on the whole, positive about its role in fostering understanding in Wolverhampton. Unsurprisingly, it attracted a few letters full of a diatribe against the very concept of working with non-Christians. One such letter said:

"*These 'interfaith groups' are utterly deplored by all true Christians and condemned by God's word as sheer apostasy against the Word of God. Bishops and ministers involved, and others who support them, need to read their Bibles, for it is patently obvious that they have never read them."* The letter, written by a Pastor, further added:

*"Britain used to be a Christian country, but it is now a Godless country which has given itself over to worldliness, affluence and violence of every kind; and is steadily giving itself to heathen religions imported due to our former colonial policies."*A brilliant rejoinder from a resident in Compton in the Express and Star highlighted the positivity in some sections of the society. The letter said:

"I would have thought the Christians involved with such groups are more entitled to call themselves Christians by virtue of the fact that they are putting into practice the basic command of Christ to 'love thy neighbour as thyself', and are doing more to help make this society a God-centred one."

However, those who joined the group were confident that by trying to understand faiths other than their own, they were not endangering their own

beliefs and they persisted with their support for this new venture.

There was a sudden spurt of energy among the members who joined this pioneering group. Their first task was to arrange monthly meetings to keep the momentum going. A decision was taken to meet in different places of worship and have notes of their meetings. In the first a few months of the Group's existence, they met at St. John's Baptist Church, the Sikh Temple in Dunstall Road, St Peter's and Paul's RC Church, Cannock Road Community Co-operative Centre, and at the Friends Meeting House in Summerfield Road. It was much later on that they decided to hold their meetings in members' houses.

In July 1974, it was decided to draw up a programme of events and produce literature to update members. One of the activities, which became a regular event in years to come, was a new experience called a' ***bus crawl'***. A 72-seater double-decker bus was hired and the passengers visited different places of worship with stops for briefings and refreshments. It is interesting to note that the Interfaith Group's quest for funding began in earnest immediately after its inception. They spent a considerable amount of energy knocking on many doorsbut success, on the whole, remained elusive. Anyway, the bus-crawl was financially a viable venture. At their November 1974 meeting, Neville Platten reported a surplus of £1.95 following the historic bus-crawl! Financial considerations aside, the outcome of this adventure was very positive. For many members who had had very little contact with people outside their own faith, it was a new illuminating experience being transported to another world.

The members of the new Group improvised things in the first year. You could discern creative but slightly haphazard developments but the main thing was that the group continued to grow in strength. In order to introduce some

framework within the Group, it was felt important to formalise structures despite the initial reservations. In January 1975, it was felt that the appointment of a Secretary for the Group would relieve the Reverend Neville Platten of some of the detailed work in order to continue and develop the Group as "he would wish".

As has been mentioned earlier, the Reverend Bryan Rippin nominated Ivy Gutridge who was duly appointed to this role. Instead of having a permanent chairman, it was agreed to have a rotating Chairman, to be chosen at each meeting to preside at the next. However, it was suggested and agreed that there was a need for the guiding and co-ordinating influence of a President. Neville Platten was unanimously agreed for this appointment.

Neville Platten remained President of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group from 1974 to 1978. Ivy Gutridge was Secretary of the group from 1974 to 1986. Harun Rashid was appointed the group's Vice-President in 1977 and its President for the year 1978-1979.

The first Executive Board was appointed in July 1977 for one year until July 1978 with a resolve to reconsider or re-elect the officers at the group's Annual General Meeting. The new Executive consisted of the following officers:

President:	Rev. Neville Platten
Vice President:	Harun Rashid
Treasurer:	Ian Cowie
Secretary:	Ivy Gutridge
Assistant Secretary:	P S Chodha
Other Members:	Mrs Leonora Williams
	T R Bhardwaj
	Pastor Cunningham
	Vasdev Singh
	Rev. Ian Forster.

The general feeling of the members at that meeting was that the Group should continue to meet monthly in places of worship but smaller groups should be encouraged to meet in members' homes to discuss 'vital matters of interest or to undertake an agreed course of study to consider any topical issue worthy of deeper consideration.'

At their meetings, members of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group discussed a wide range of topics and also agreed a full statement of aims. After much discussion, the following aims were approved:

"…. to encourage and promote understanding and friendship between the people of Wolverhampton whatever their religion.

…. To work for racial harmony and peaceful co-existence in our multicultural town and oppose racial prejudice wherever it exists.

…. To promote dialogue about faith, religious beliefs and customs, while honouring the integrity of believers, whatever their convictions.

…. To endeavour to help minority groups where problems arise concerning needs requiring local government co-operation or knowledge of community resources.

…. To acknowledge with thankfulness, agreed standards and codes of behaviour but to accept with honesty and respect fundamental religious or cultural difference."

Realising Dreams of Hope

A central tenet of the new Group was to emphasise the significance of interfaith dialogue between communities and also to ensure schools reflected the urgent need to include multi-faith components to their RE Syllabus. Contact was made with the then Director of Education to ascertain the situation locally and to offer input into their RE Syllabus. A decade later, Harun Rashid, Vice President of the Interfaith Group, became the first Asian Inspector of Humanities in January 1984 with responsibility for Religious Education. He approached the Local Education Authority and eventually got approval for the setting up of SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education) with a brief to prepare an Agreed Syllabus for RE. Similarly the difficulty that some Muslim girls encountered in respect of their school uniform was also raised with the local education authority. Leaflets from different faiths were collected and evaluated with a view to making them available locally.

While the group was still in its infancy, support was given to the planning application to the local Council submitted by Shri Krishan Mandir for change of use of their building. The land where the Mandir stands now was acquired in 1972 but there was no provision for the usual temple activities to go on there. The trustees of the Mandir submitted a planning application for a purpose-built building on site. A public enquiry was set up to assess the feasibility of the Project. Wolverhampton Interfaith Group was at the forefront of those who supported the building of the temple at its present location. The chairperson of the Enquiry Commission, Mrs Margaret Langley, was impressed by the supportive views of the Christian members of the Interfaith Group who attended the enquiry meetings.

Plans were also made to organise social gatherings of members to break down barriers to aid understanding. Approaches were made to the Wolverhampton Art Gallery to obtain the *East comes West* Exhibition held at Birmingham City Art Gallery. They agreed to explore the problem of finding a suitable venue for the Exhibition and agreed it should cover Welsh, Scottish and Irish cultures as well as English and Asian. Speakers from the local community were invited to talk about their beliefs and the core principles of their faiths. Mr Kauldhar, for example, agreed to give a talk on Guru Ravi Dass.

The new surge in energy in interfaith work was triggered by the Group's focus not on differences but on the human experiences that we all share. In the words of Sylvia and Irwin Barnes: *"This was well expressed when one 'One World Week' found us at a meeting in the Civic Centre thinking about our common responsibility for the environment as members together of one family. And the same message came out clearly in the exhibition of photos entitled 'I am a Believer' which showed how in different ways, the various traditions celebrated the rites of passage that mark your journey from cradle to grave."*

What gave the pioneers of the Interfaith Group impetus to persuade people from different faith communities to set up this particular Group? First, they had a sense of empathy towards the newcomers in the town. The sudden largenumbers of Sikhs in the Park Village area, for example, aroused the curiosity of the Reverend Neville Platten and the Reverend Bryan Rippin. They wanted to find out more about their new neighbours, what made them tick. Secondly, they were people who had been exposed to other cultures either through their contacts or through their ministry and study. They did not have many preconceived ideas to distort their image of newcomers.

The Reverend Bryan Rippin was Co-ordinator of the interfaith project and he remembers the very difficult conditions that gave rise to the creation of the interfaith group:

"The founding of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group came at a critical time in the life of the town. There was considerable support for the racist views of its then MP Enoch Powell. The Christian Churches had become used to working together but were largely ignorant of the people other than Christian faith. The education department was struggling with a new situation and trying to reconcile a variety of attitudes towards children whose mother tongue was not English. Ethnic and religious groups were speaking to their own but were inevitably working hard at maintaining their culture and their faith. Wolverhampton Interfaith Group, which began very modestly but hopefully, quickly became the sign of a new community, which would not consist of people suspicious of each other and anxious about losing their identity, but a community of people prepared to share their experience and give enrichment to each other." (Memories and Visions: Twenty years of Interfaith in Wolverhampton 1994)

Attendance at meetings in different places of worship was a new and refreshing experience. The mutual trust evident in discussions about sensitive matters wasvery re-assuring. Most of the people at those meetings were receptive and open- hearted. There was a good deal of listening taking place and people felt confident enough to be honest and frank about expressing their views and concern. It brought home the fact that interfaith dialogue is not saying that all religions are the same and, therefore, it does not lead to a dilution of one's faith; there was no intention there to syncretism or of the merging of all religions into one. Soon people attending those meetings realized there was no need for

anyone to compromise their religious beliefs.

The emphasis at these seminal meetings, therefore, was on listening, seeking clarifications, and accepting what they heard. The initial meetings started to take place in 1974 and from the simple conversations about each other's faith traditions, they extended to other educational objectives being articulated, too.

A photographic exhibition was put together with the help of the Wolverhampton Polytechnic and small grants from a number of organisations.

The photographic exhibition that the newly formed Interfaith Group produced in collaboration with the Wolverhampton Polytechnic was called the '*Ways People Worship*' and it had its first showing at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery. It took more than a year to prepare. Nick Hedges and David Richardson, the photographers, went round all the different places of worship, particularly at religious celebrations, festivals and other special occasions. The Reverend Peter Barnett and Paresh Chakraborty, who was Senior lecturer at Wolverhampton Polytechnic, collaborated to put together a tape of sacred music from different faith traditions.

The photographic exhibition featured more than 250 photographs of the different religious communities at prayer and was designed to illustrate the variety of worship in Wolverhampton. The exhibition was loaned out to many organisations, including schools, to educate people about the diversity of faith in the town. Two RE teachers at Colton Hills School, Campbell Miller and Celia Collinson, were so impressed with the photographs that they felt these would play a significant role in promoting multi-faith RE in the classroom. They planned to produce a teaching pack with suggested activities. Fortunately, their idea was taken up by the educational publisher, Edward Arnold. The happy

outcome was the eventual publication of a secondary school textbook – *"Believers –Worship in a multi-faith community".* The book included photographs from the Interfaith exhibition. The book was so successful that the above two teachers were asked to produce another two RE titles. In total about 114,000 copies of those books were sold. So, in a way, the influence of the Interfaith Group reached far beyond the local area!

In order to make the work more authentic and meaningful, pupils from local schools visited religious communities to witness worship at first hand. The exhibition was a success and gave the Interfaith group a public profile. What is even more important, it made many people in Wolverhampton aware that there was a delightful variety of world faiths on their doorstep. All they had to do was to have a conversation with their neighbours.

A corollary of that work was the hope that religious understanding would lead to racial understanding and determine future attitudes to racial problems in Wolverhampton. The work of the Interfaith Group began to expand gradually. From simple explanations of their individual faiths, members at meetings would talk about their other traditions such as marriage customs, the mode of worship, the attitude towards the elderly and so on. The next natural progression was going on a faith tour, visiting different places of worship and witnessing rituals and customs in practice. It was a continuation of its predecessor 'bus crawl'. The visiting members were able to share in other communities' worship and learn a little about their religious beliefs. Another activity flowing from that was the setting up of friendship afternoons. Members would come together, usually at lunchtimes, communities providing and sharing traditional foods and talking in a relaxed setting. Many friendships were thus formed in consequence of these

activities and brought people of different faiths together, demystifying their faiths and shedding some light on the rationale of their traditions. A very simple agenda, which admittedly was not going to be illuminating about other faiths nor something that could attempt to obliterate the difference between 'them' and 'us'. The aim was simple -namely to bring people together, albeit not in any profound way, but in dialogue with each other, promoting understanding.

As has been stated earlier, one of the key players in making the interfaith Group effective was a self-effacing person called Ivy Gutridge. Ivy came to Wolverhampton from her hometown of Swindon with her husband Ken. She was a member of St John's Methodist Church in Wolverhampton, close to her home. After a member of her family died following a long illness, Ivy took on the role of Note Taker at the newly formed Interfaith Group. She did that reluctantly because there was a considerable amount of misgivings in her faith community about what she had taken on. She became Honorary Secretary from 1974 to 1986 and then again from 1991 to 1994. Throughout her time with the group, she displayed unconditional passion and commitment to the cause being espoused by the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group. She had patience, resilience and fortitude to work with an astonishing range of faith people without seeking any glory for herself. It was her enthusiasm and dedication, which made the group a credible organization. Wolverhampton society was at that time reeling from the shock waves created by Powell's speech and the absence of any official credence given to the cultures and faiths of the newcomers to the town. As the Reverend Inderjit Bhogal, a former President of the Methodist Conference, who had worked with the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group as its co-ordinator from 1984 to 1987, said in her obituary:

"Ivy worked behind the scenes to resolve conflicts, heal divisions and build relationships of mutual trust and respect". Ivy also travelled to other UK towns and cities to help develop interfaith groups, and was elected the first woman Vice-Chair of the national Interfaith Network (UK) in 1992. She was honoured for her interfaith work when she was awarded the MBE in 1994.

Inderjit Bhogal's words resonate with everyone who knew or worked with Ivy: *"She regarded interfaith dialogue as her life's work. She conducted it with humility and was an inspiration to other. She was known in Wolverhampton as 'Queen of Interfaith'. Ivy's interest in interfaith dialogue was not academic but arose out of an intense desire to find out about, and honour, other people's faith at a person-to-person level. "*

Alex Cosgrave wrote an insightful piece about the early days of the Interfaith Group after having interviewed Ivy Gutridge and remarked:

"While the group's activities are not an exercise in unity, but designed to create understanding and respect for other faiths, one obvious by-product is a greater understanding between the Christian denominations themselves.

In recent years there has been a much greater interest in Eastern religions, particularly among young people. However, it is only when you see a Catholic listening intently to an explanation of why silence is a central part of Quaker worship or a Methodist being shown the significance of the Easter Candle that you realise how hazy our knowledge of the practices of other Churches really

is. " (Catholic Herald 26 November 1976)

While the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group was still very young, trying to find its feet, an explosive situation arose in the local authority. A new school was built in the town and it was opened by Enoch Powell almost a decade after he made his

'Rivers of blood' speech. This school was called the Grove Primary School and it was one of schools in the local authority where newly-arrived immigrant children were being bussed for their education. Some mainstream schools were reluctant to admit the newcomers who did not possess much confidence in English. Their argument was that they did not have sufficient resources to teach English as a Second Language to enable those pupils access the curriculum.

So a significant number of children arriving from the Indian sub-continent ended up in that school. The gulf between many indigenous whites and the newcomers from minority ethnic groups had widened and a wall of prejudice, misconceptions and ignorance risen between the two communities. The mortar between those impervious bricks was provided by Enoch Powell's speech. The head teacher of that school, Mr. Ernest Rhoden, sent a Sikh boy, Kulbinder Singh, home for coming to school wearing a turban on the first day of term after Easter 1979. There was a lot of hue and cry in the Asian communities and a lot of hand wringing went on.

It was, however, Niranjan Singh Noor of the Indian Workers' Association, who publicly condemned the school for not allowing Sikh pupils to wear a turban. Mr. Noor issued a statement to the press and said it was nothing but a racist decision by the head teacher. The Indian Workers' Association was in disarray by that time as most of its members regarded the Association as a secular body and were keen to steer clear of religious arguments and, therefore, did not support Mr. Noor's championing of the turban case. The head teacher Ernest Rhoden complained to his Head teachers' Union and Mr. Noor was taken to court in a protracted defamation case. He was fined £50,000 plus costs. Mr. Noor almost suffered a nervous breakdown but managed to pay off the penalty imposed with

donations from the local communities. The Wolverhampton Interfaith Group also played a significant role in persuading minority ethnic communities to keep calm and not to take any action to jeopardise harmony in the town. The Interfaith Group, represented by Ivy Gutridge and Harun Rashid, worked behind the scenes, met with Ernest Rhoden and some community leaders to defuse the situation. It was all done without seeking any publicity.

The seeds sown by the pioneers in 1974 burgeoned and became a blossoming plant. Many new, exciting developments happened and the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group, under different names, made its contribution to peace and harmony in the City. One example, though it happened years later, is worth mentioning. The Reverend Inderjit Bhogal who was involved with the development of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group since its early days,became its coordinator from 1984 to 1987. He organized a day Youth-Faith conference in collaboration with the Wolverhampton Education Authority in 1985. Most of the organization was done by a group of fifth and sixth formers, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians from local schools. About 120 people of all ages attended this successful conference highlighting the need for multi-faith, multicultural education. Apart from rich thoughts in the conference, they fed the delegates with food from different cultures. Organising a conference on a diverse range of community issues has since become a feature of the annual programme of interfaith events.

Many of the events initiated by the Interfaith Group in those early years became a regular feature for decades and are still going strong. Events such as Prayers for Peace, seminars and lunchtime meetings on themes of Peace and mutual understanding, pilgrimages to well-known places of worship, working with

schools and having a successful programme of visits by pupils and students to different places of worship, participating in festivals of different faiths, producing literature to promote interfaith dialogue, establishing and contributing to chaplaincy at New Cross Hospital and raising its voice against discrimination on religious grounds.

The Interfaith Group has worked under different names but the key driver has always been its avowed aim to bring different faith communities together, to dispel misconceptions and to garner a bit of light to penetrate the darkness of ignorance.

Committed men and women have worked hard to realize the dreams of hope that the pioneers of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group once had back in 1974. They have significant achievements to sustain their belief in the central role of their group in bringing people of different faiths together. It is a mammoth task that looked impossible decades ago but the continued peace and understanding between communities in the city today makes them even more resolute in their commitment.

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