

*Memories  
and  
Visions*

*— twenty years of inter-faith in  
Wolverhampton*

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Editors:  
George Chryssides  
Ivy Gutridge  
Margaret Wilkins

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## INTRODUCTION

The immigration of the 1950s and 1960s changed the face of British religion. From a formerly 'Christian country' Britain became, in a very short space of time, a multi-faith society. With the richness of the new cultural diversity came some tensions and problems. Some difficulties were caused by ignorance and prejudice; others through Christianity - historically a missionary religion - having to co-exist with its former 'competitors'.

It was with the aims of tolerance, mutual understanding and trust that the various inter-faith groups up and down the country arose. The Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group was probably the second of these (the first being in Leicester) and it is the largest and possibly the most active - no doubt a result of its multi-ethnic character, accompanied by a number of controversial and potentially explosive occurrences.

The Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group celebrates its twentieth anniversary in 1994. As part of the celebration of this landmark it was decided to produce a short publication which served a record of at least some of the Group's activities over the years.

As a preparation for WIFG's twentieth birthday, an open invitation went out to members and friends, inviting them to submit brief recollections of the Group's inception and progress, snap-shots - both photographic and literary - of past events, and ideas of the future direction WIFG *might* take.

We were greatly encouraged, not only by the number of contributions which were received, but by the variety of slants which were offered. We have therefore divided the booklet into four sections - first, accounts which impinge on the Group's history; second, things which contributors believe they have learned as a result of inter-faith encounters; third, 'snapshots' of incidents or people who have coloured the Group's life. The final section contains 'visions' of the future direction and purpose which the Inter-Faith Group might hold in mind. A few writers elected to write in verse rather than prose - a practice which is particularly prevalent amongst Punjabi communities to mark family celebrations, particularly weddings.

For those who have lived through these activities over the twenty-year period we hope that the book will bring back memories of its achievements. For those outside the Group, we trust that this publication will serve as a record of the Group's history - how it began, the things it learned through its experiences, and the events it enjoyed.

Not all the contributors or active members have seen the full twenty years of inter-faith in Wolverhampton. Inevitably, death has taken its toll, and the Group has lost several of its staunchest supporters. The editors are pleased to include posthumous contributions from supporters Saber Hussain ('Recognition') and Ray Turner ('City of Bent Saplings').

On the brighter side, however, there are others who have not seen the full twenty years of inter-faith in this city because the group has attracted new blood. We are pleased to include some of their memories and visions too, and it is encouraging that the Group continues to grow and attract new faces.

The contributors do not speak with the same voice, coming from their various different backgrounds. We doubt if readers would wish them to do so, even if were possible. The editors, therefore, have made no attempt to reconcile any differences between the various contributors - which means, of course, that they all speak for themselves, rather than as official mouthpieces of WIFG. But, of course, it is precisely the acceptance and understanding of such diversity that WIFG seeks to encourage.

George Chrissides  
Ivy Guttridge  
Margaret Wilkins



## Greetings from the World Congress of Faiths -

### 'THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY'

People sometimes argue whether local or international inter-faith work is more important. My belief is that good inter-faith relations are required at all levels of society and that local and international influence each other.

On one of my first visits to Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group, the family I was staying with had on the TV news, and we suddenly were saddened by reports of a speech by Enoch Powell about immigration. The Salman Rushdie Affair, the Gulf War, the attack on the Ayodhya Mosque, problems between Palestinians and Israelis all have had an effect on local inter-faith relations. Equally the example of the Pope in inviting members of other faiths to pray with him for peace at Assisi made it easier to arrange similar gatherings in other cities.

National and international events affect local relations. Equally, little is achieved by leaders greeting one another if neighbours do not speak to each other.

The Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group has acted on the saying 'Think globally, act locally'. Ivy Gutridge, in particular, is often at national meetings and has travelled widely to international conferences, but this has inspired her to even more energetic local work, whilst sharing with the wider world something of Wolverhampton's enthusiasm. In this, as in so much else, Wolverhampton is an example to us all.

Good wishes from the World Congress of Faiths on your twentieth birthday.

Marcus Braybrooke



## and from the UK Inter Faith Network -

### CONGRATULATIONS FROM THE INTER FAITH NETWORK

The Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group is one of the oldest - and strongest - local inter-faith groups. It was a founder member of the Inter Faith Network for the UK in 1987. In addition to the work which it has done in the Wolverhampton area, to which many can testify, I know how invaluable its advice, encouragement and support has been to those planning the formation of local inter-faith groups in other parts of the country.

Very many people have benefited through being able to draw on the experience and expertise of the Wolverhampton group, and the existence of its office and resource centre has been a very important element in this.

Within the Network we have always received strong support from the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group and in particular from Ivy Gutridge who became one of our Vice-Chairs in 1992. We have all rejoiced in the award of an MBE to Ivy as a fitting tribute to the work of the group as a whole but also to her own tireless and committed devotion to the cause of promoting better understanding between people of different faiths. It was a personal delight for me to be present at the splendid celebration event in Wolverhampton last autumn marking this important honour.

Many congratulations and every good wish to the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group on the occasion of its twentieth birthday.

Brian Pearce  
Director, The Inter Faith Network for the UK



## Part One - from the Beginning

### AN INTER-FAITH LIFE

I was born in India and when I was about three I went to Kenya with my mother. In Kenya we spent our lives very socially and religiously; there are many communities, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Buddhists and other faiths, so I had experience of inter-faith work over there. Our teachers were Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, so we came to know several other faiths. We also had the celebrations of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, and we had opportunities to visit temples, mosques and churches over there. So we had a good time there, good experiences and good friendships, and knowledge of other religions.

I came to the UK in 1964. When we came here I found life very different. We found difficulties in getting jobs with turbans and beards; some factories did allow them and some did not, and there were a lot of difficulties. There was also difficulty in getting housing. Many people had to live in one house, because when relatives and friends came they couldn't throw them out.

Sometime in 1973 we met someone called the Reverend Neville Platten. One day he visited my home, because he had known me for some time, and said, 'Vasdev, how do you feel about making a joint effort to create a group to give people a better understanding of each other's religions and problems?' The first meeting was some time in 1973, with representatives of various communities, and the next month we had a meeting at the Sikh temple in Cannock Road. We didn't have a secretary or president but Mr Platten's message was spreading and people needed this sort of group. Very early in 1974 the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group was formed. It was a great group and people were anxious to know about it, but at the same time people, mostly in the Asian community, were wondering if this group wanted to convert them to Christianity. But this was not the reason; this was a group to listen to people talking about their difficulties, religious and social difficulties, immigration difficulties and many housing difficulties.

This group went through so many difficulties. Some people joined us and some people left us, including some Asians who thought that sooner or later they would start converting people to Christianity. Many people returned when they came to know that the real purpose of this group was to bring harmony, peace and knowledge. I was one of the founder-members of the group and I have carried on with the group until now, and for the future too it will be my lifelong activity; it is like a food I cannot live without.

We have achieved a lot. The group has built bridges between the communities. Ivy Gutridge and her husband Ken joined us, and Ivy really became the backbone of the group. She works very hard and we have been good friends for many many years now. Last year, when I was the chairman, it was the unanimous recommendation of the Inter-Faith Group executive committee to put forward her name for the award of MBE. It was great that our recommendation was received by the Prime Minister's office and that it was accepted. The honour she has received is not only for herself, but it is an honour for all the group and all the communities of Wolverhampton. We are proud of her: she has done a lot.

Now we have a library, we have school visits, we hold many conferences, and we provide information to schools and individuals. The group is honoured everywhere in the country and even abroad. When His Holiness Satguru Jagjit Singh Ji Maharaj, head of the Namdhari Sikhs, paid an official visit to our Inter-Faith office he was very happy to know all about the work we have done, and he said, 'This group is doing what we and all religious communities should be doing ourselves to create harmony and peace.' So Satgururji blessed all the members and especially Ivy Gutridge for working for the group without any pay but with great interest and belief in inter-faith work.

I am very proud to be a member of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group. For the Inter-Faith Group member this group is not only a community, but also a family.

**Vasdev Singh Bhamrah**





## MY MEMORY OF THE BIRTH OF THE WOLVERHAMPTON INTER-FAITH GROUP AND ITS IMPACT

I came to Wolverhampton from the London Borough of Ealing as a College of Education Lecturer in 1969 at a time when the town was receiving extraordinary publicity as a result of the 'rivers of blood' speech made by one of its Members of Parliament, Enoch Powell, in 1968.

In my view, the unhelpful press the town received (and still does to some extent) was unfair and unjust as it was no worse than any other multi-racial town in England.

In my post I was engaged in teacher initial training as well as in-service training, so naturally I came into contact with many headteachers, teachers and a variety of other people. I found them courteous and accommodating, and most of them were more helpful than I expected. However, it was not too difficult to notice that most of the indigenous people were quite ignorant about the new settlers and their cultures and were doing very little about it. Again, Wolverhampton was no different to any other town in that regard.

Even the college courses contained very little material in this respect, and very little understanding on the part of the college management of the need for such provision. The Wolverhampton Community Relations Council, as it was known at the time, was treated with suspicion as an extremist organisation. Very little effort was being made by any other organisations for multi-cultural and inter-religious understanding in the borough.

In early 1973, I had a telephone call from the Reverend Neville Platten, a Methodist Minister in Park Village. He wanted to come and see me to discuss the possibility of creating a forum for inter-faith dialogue. My heart leapt up in delight - it was something I was dreaming about for a while, so it came as a breath of fresh air. Our meeting lasted for over an hour. Soon after that the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group was formed.

Initially there were no officer bearers, and the meetings were chaired by somebody chosen from the people present. This worked all right for a while but when the activities of the group increased and correspondence started to flow,

it became imperative to have a formal set-up. Thus the posts of President, Vice-President, Secretary and Treasurer were created. The Reverend Neville Platten became the first President and I was elected to be the first Vice-President, Ivy Gutridge the Secretary and the late Albert Goodwin the Treasurer. We used to hold our open meetings in different venues (the same as now) and the Executive Committee used to meet in each other's homes, as at present. The group made rapid progress and very quickly established itself as a fighting force for the good of all in the borough - a champion of justice and fairness.

Not long after this, maybe a year or so, Neville decided to step down as President, in spite of very strong and persuasive pleadings from most of the stalwarts, including me. He was totally determined, so the group had no alternative but to accept.

Naturally attention was focused on me and, although I did not feel ready for the presidency, I could not refuse the challenge and, of course, the honour at a time when the group was beginning to make its mark and going through its formative stages.

We continued with the good work started by Neville and were much heartened by the degree of commitment and active support that we received, not only from the membership but also from the people of the borough and the neighbouring areas.

We used to hold our meetings on a monthly basis in various places of worship, churches, gurdwaras, mosque (only one in Wolverhampton in those days, now four) and temples. The regular worshippers of the place of worship concerned used to carry on with their normal routine service of worship or prayer, with us either joining in or passively observing. At the end of it they would make a presentation about their faith and tradition, followed by questions and open and frank discussions. The evening would be rounded off with light refreshments.

By building bridges between various faith communities and by addressing educational issues in general and religious education in particular, the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group very soon established credibility with the local authority, which culminated in receiving a small Inner Area Grant for a period of three to four years. A good working partnership also developed between the Wolverhampton Education Department and the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group without a formal declaration.

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We prepared a formal constitution and started negotiations with the Charity Commission for the purpose of registration as a charity. At that stage I had already served two years as Executive President, so I decided to step down, but the Group created a special position for me - as Community Consultant and, now under its revised constitution, Vice-President.

I remember the utter disbelief and shock in people's faces, including some very active and enthusiastic committee members, when I suggested the idea of a centre of our own. They thought it was an impossible dream and that the Group did not really need it. They were proved wrong, not by me but by events not too long after the idea was first mooted. As is well known, the Group has a thriving centre of its own in the town centre, which is extremely well used and employs two people.

The group has defused many potentially explosive situations ever since its birth in 1974. To cite an example - during my tenure as President, a primary school headteacher sent a Sikh child home for attending school wearing a turban. This created a good deal of tension in the borough. I remember how Ivy and I spent many, many hours, from late at night until the early hours of the morning, meeting various people in secret venues to resolve the most complex problem ever faced by the group - indeed, the town.

In the end a compromise was reached and the boy in question went back to school wearing a turban in the school colour, resulting in a happy ending for the headteacher as well as the family. But for the direct involvement of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group, Wolverhampton might have experienced a nasty situation, which easily could have got out of hand.

I should like to mention another personal anecdote. Some seven years ago, I was invited by the Bishop of Wolverhampton to sit on the interview panel for the appointment of a Church of England vicar. A Muslim and a local government officer had hardly any claim for this honour. I have no doubt that it was because of the trust and credibility the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group had established for itself that one of its longest serving members was accorded this rare but great honour.

One other achievement of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group was the assistance it was able to offer towards the setting up of a Standing Conference for the construction of Wolverhampton L.E.A.'s first ever Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education, which was formally launched in November 1987.

Among the many activities - seminars, conferences, visits, and so on - organised by the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group, one significant event deserves mentioning: the Multi-Faith Peace Service held annually on the last Sunday of January in St Peter's Collegiate Church. It is an extremely important event and an attempt on the part of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group, perhaps an unconscious attempt, to help 'evolve the common visions and structures necessary for sustaining an integrated but richly diverse community without either assimilation or fragmentation, and drawing upon the resources and distinctiveness of all for the common good' (Weller).

As we celebrate our twentieth anniversary we must continue our inter-faith dialogue. Over the past twenty years the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group has promoted wider education and better understanding among different religious communities in and around Wolverhampton. It has developed amongst its members, in spite of strong religious differences, deep and lasting friendship, and has also, through exposure to each other's faiths, helped to strengthen and deepen their own faith. This bridge building work remains as important as it was twenty years ago. As Hans Küng says: '... in order to get an increasingly better understanding of our contemporaries, the men and women with whom our lives are becoming ever more closely linked. But also to understand ourselves better, which we can do only through comparison and encounter. "If you only know England, you don't know England" ... Inter-religious dialogue is anything but a private, personal, local or regional matter. Its global dimensions are obvious and so are its repercussions on the communal life of the nation and the world. These days, nobody would seriously dispute the fact that peace in the world very much depends on peace among the various religions.'

In my view, the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group has just begun this process. I should like to conclude by quoting Professor John Hull: 'Loyalty to one's own faith is not inconsistent with a sympathetic insight into the faiths of others.'

**Harun Rashid**  
Vice-President

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## A VISIONARY RESPONSE TO NEED

The founding of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith 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 people of 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 Inter-Faith Group, which began which began very modestly but hopefully, quickly became the sign of a new sort of 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. Never powerful and always searching for new ways of relating people of different beliefs, the Inter-Faith Group has not only been a sign of the way a multi-racial town can live, but in very many ways has provided the means of achieving such a way. I regard it as a very great privilege to have been there at the beginning and will always be grateful for the friendships of those early years and the sometimes painful discoveries of the 1970s in Wolverhampton which have affected the whole of the rest of my ministry. Congratulations on twenty amazing years!

**Bryan Rippin**

Co-ordinator of the original inter-faith project

## MUTUAL ENRICHMENT

'Look out for "The Fighting Cocks". The church building is a bit further on, on the other side of the road.' The lady's voice at the other end of the phone sounded warm and welcoming, and a few hours later we were in St John's Methodist Church for our first experience of the newly formed Inter-Faith Group. The body of the church was comfortably filled with a mixture of different races and faiths, and Bryan Rippin was speaking, with quiet sensitivity, about the deeper meaning of the coming festival of Christmas.

That was in 1975, and it marked the beginning of a link with the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group which happily still exists, although we have for a long time now lived in Birmingham. And the welcoming lady at the other end of the phone was, of course, Ivy Gutridge whom we have come to admire and cherish as a very good friend.

What memories there are! Inter-faith visits to different places of worship when we all moved around the town, experiencing a warm welcome and a helpful introduction to the various faith-communities. And the winter parties when we played and sang and ate together and felt at ease as members of one big family.

At a deeper level, we remember the Sunday afternoon when Darlington Street Methodist Church was crowded out with people of many faiths and backgrounds in an expression of solidarity which helped to release the tension after a controversial arrest and death in the town centre. And for us, January would feel incomplete without the moving gathering of Prayers for World Peace in St Peter's Church.

Much of the success of the Inter-Faith Group must surely come from the way it has centred not primarily on differences, but on the human experiences that we all share. 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'm a Believer' which showed how, in different ways, the various traditions celebrated the rites of passage that mark our journey from the cradle to the grave.

Wolverhampton Inter-Faith has done so much to create real friendships and to build up trust and respect across the divisions which might otherwise keep us apart. There can be few towns in the country where an inter-faith group is so widely respected and valued in its public life as in Wolverhampton. Long may it continue!

**Sylvia and Irwin Barnes**

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## WORKING TOGETHER

At the start of WIFG I was General Secretary of the Guru Ravi Dass Dharmik Sabha, Guru Ravi Dass Temple, 181 Dudley Road, Wolverhampton, from 1962 to 1977, then I moved on to be President. As part of my work I was involved in both groups, and we organized the different celebrations of the various religious communities at regular venues every year. This work was very enjoyable and extremely rewarding, as our horizons broadened and new friends and experiences, stretching across our varied cultural backgrounds, were established. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Ravidassis and Christians of all denominations worked together for the benefit of the community at large. In the beginning we had a small yet promising turnout. As the years went by, the attendance figures flourished, our hard work and enthusiasm reaping benefits.

I would like to make a special mention of Mrs Ivy Gutridge who was Secretary of the Inter-Faith Group from its commencement, and also her husband Ken Gutridge, both for their endless help and support which helped the group take off so well.

Swaran Chand

## INTER-FAITH RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

John and I recall vividly the murky October - or was it November? (Well it was Diwali time!) We made bus journeys around so many welcoming places of worship. The fun of sitting together on top of the bus and then the quite serious business of the Qur'an recited by a brilliant young Muslim in the mosque and an elderly Hindu gentleman in the Sri Krishna temple showing us his yoga meditation. Rabbi Gold was a most erudite fellow, whom I got to know well for sixth form visits to the Singer Hill Synagogue in Birmingham; sadly he died and I lost touch. Then, the planning of the five visits was balanced with such open joy as expressed in the Salvation Army Citadel and with the Sunday-best-dressed Pentecostals who made us clap and 'unbend'. The silence of the Friends provided the contrast - as indeed, did Diwali itself; my pupils came and were mesmerised by the dance, the smoke, the glorious new saris. So many cultural, spiritual variations in a town only fourteen miles from Bridgnorth.

Peter Barnett (Vicar of All Saints) had linked Oldbury Wells School with All Saints Primary and so began experiences for pupils of fifteen years and upwards in the school itself - meeting little Sikhs and Hindus and West Indians. So much prejudice had been around in our lovely, 'separate' rural setting. How can you be prejudiced when you help with football and the laces in the school playground, and begin to learn what the turban means? The pupils were welcomed into West Indian homes, like Enid's - a bus driver with many stories to tell - and Sikhs and Hindus explained the food they offered, and talked of their joys, and weddings, and unhappinesses and fears.

This enlightened education began with Peter Barnett's and Ivy's visits to Oldbury Wells itself. With her would come other members, her 'helpers', who shared their faith and customs; walking with dignity and learning to tie a sari was practised often. A couple of Quakers came too, and enabled role-playing a Friends' wedding! The idea of writing your own service was truly novel.

I hope the new curriculum with the 'competitive', 'success' elements so prominent now, does not lessen too much this kind of education. The very word 'education' comes from Latin 'to lead out' - and that was what the Inter-Faith Group in Wolverhampton was doing for Bridgnorth, and still does for many others.

Jill and John Lewis



## WALKING TOGETHER: THE VIEW FROM CHRISTIAN AID

I don't go to the Inter-Faith Group office very often, but whenever I do I can be sure of a warm, probably two-handed, handshake from Bando, and a welcoming hug from Ivy. I feel like I'm a special person. I feel valued.

That's what my link with the Inter-Faith Group feels like, from the first day I came to Wolverhampton to work for Christian Aid in January 1983. Then Ivy and her late husband Ken enthusiastically introduced me to friends and allies and made me feel straight away that the Inter-Faith Group and Christian Aid were partners on the same journey. Since then our paths have crossed, and we have walked together, on many occasions.

We shared the journey closely one year when Ramadan and Lent coincided and the WIFG recommended all its members to support a joint appeal for Muslim Aid and Christian Aid. It was a joy to share a platform and to have the chance to make a presentation to WIFG members on the work of one of Christian Aid's partner groups in the Philippines, the Muslim-Christian Agency for Rural Development, MUCARD. There Christians and Muslims are reaching out across centuries of enmity to understand their common problems of poverty and landlessness, to share their spiritual resources and their creativity, to find new ways to live together and renew the land.

We walked together in November 1991 when Syed Gofur joined Wolverhampton Christian Aid's Celebration of a pioneering health project in Bangladesh, Gonoshastaya Kendra. Among his many contributions were dancing children, delicious food, supportive friends, and his own enthusiasm and comradeship.

Another shared event was in October 1993 when Bando obligingly arranged a meeting at short notice of Wolverhampton Bangladeshis to talk with Ataur Rahman, Director of Gono Unnayan Prochesta, Bangladesh, a Christian Aid partner. Harun Rashid chaired a distinguished gathering of busy people. Bando and I reckoned an hour would be plenty - but two and a half hours later the discussion had lost none of its momentum, and new links were forged.

Bando and Ivy particularly have helped me out on numerous occasions. Bando has done some helpful translation work for Christian Aid. Ivy has arranged programmes for Shropshire school children. Both have done much else - as have others in WIFG.

May there be many occasions in the future when the Inter-Faith Group and Christian Aid link hands and walk side by side on the road together.

**Charles Worth**





## YOUTH AND FAITH

By far the most significant inter-faith event of 1985 was the 'Youth-Faith' conference. It originated in a remark made by the then chairman, Mr Ranjit Singh, who had said at an Executive meeting the year before, 'We should listen to young people on the theme of faith.' So, as 1985 had been designated UN International Youth Year, a day conference was initiated by the Inter-Faith Group and Wolverhampton Education Authority. Most of the organisation 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 the conference, which was a tremendous success, and stressed the need for multi-faith, multi-cultural education. We saw young people of different racial and religious backgrounds planning and working together with great joy and enthusiasm for the benefit of all in their town. They fed us with their rich thoughts in the conference, with food from different cultures at tea time, and then with musical representations to conclude a most stimulating event.

**Inderjit Bhogal**



## AN INTER-FAITH FUNERAL

The funeral service for Ken Gutridge, of St John's Methodist Church, Wolverhampton, was a most remarkable occasion. A teacher in a local junior school, Mr Gutridge accepted early retirement in order to become secretary of the Wolverhampton Council of Churches. This task brought him into close contact with members of other religious communities as did the work of his wife, who is secretary of WIFG. About 250 people of all races, religions and denominations joined together for the funeral service, which was a celebration of Ken's life, and a common belief in eternal life.

At their own wish, leaders of the main ethnic and religious communities in Wolverhampton joined with the Reverend Alan Harvey in conducting the service. Mr Bahri, a Hindu, spoke first in Sanskrit the Hindu prayers for the departed, which he then translated into English: he then 'said farewell' from the Hindu community. Mr Vasdev Singh, representing the large Sikh community in Wolverhampton prayed in the words of an English translation of the Sikh prayers for the departed, and then paid tribute to the work of Mr Gutridge. Mr Harun Rashid, the first chairman of the Inter-Faith Group, spoke as a representative of the Islamic community about 'my brother, Ken'. The Revd John Ward, the Anglican ecumenical officer, spoke on behalf of the Council of Churches. Father Tom Rock (Roman Catholic) led Christian prayers. Pastors from the black-led churches in Wolverhampton were also present at the service. Those who spoke all referred to the belief of their own faith in life after death. The reception in the Gutridges' garden after the service was once again a multi-racial gathering demonstrating the rich diversity of a multi-cultural town. Much of what was said at the service was quite spontaneous, and it was a remarkable tribute to a collaborative ministry in a multi-faith community.

I do not know of any other occasion on which Sikh, Hindu and Muslim have joined with the main Christian denominations and the black-led churches in a funeral service. In recent years, services of prayers for peace, and a civic service, have included inter-faith participation, but these were city-wide events, whereas this service was a spontaneous response of love and affection, and a mark of the deep respect for the joint ministry of Ken and Ivy Gutridge.

**Alan Harvey**

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## IN THE BEGINNING - ZOOM!

When, in Bombay in December 1963, I entered a Hindu temple as a sightseer and there found my soul responding to the spirit of prayer and worship that pervaded the twilight silence, I was astonished.

That astonishment was matched and echoed when, ten years later, I found myself newly arrived in Wolverhampton and was asked by a priest I met just once to be one of three Roman Catholics to attend a meeting with people of other churches and other faiths. Its purpose was to consider setting up an organisation that would enable people from different religious communities to know and understand each other. Again my soul responded and I was committed from the start.

We met in All Saints church hall on a dark, raw February evening - 10 February 1974. I made my way there on foot, map in hand, entirely unaware of any danger in the muggy streets. I remember the surroundings as being grey and uninspiring but what was happening was unquestionably historic. For the first time in my life I was making friends with people who were not just from another church but from another religion and culture! And I guessed that for many people in that gathering it would be the same story.

We had a speaker from Birmingham who recommended that we join 'All Faiths for One Race' (AFFOR) but, although we did not yet know each other, we were in agreement that what we would set up would be special to Wolverhampton, not an extension of something from elsewhere.

That evening, led by the Reverend Neville Platten, we exchanged names and addresses and agreed to meet again. By the next meeting, in May, we all wanted to keep it up and one meeting in the month seemed about the right frequency.

Very soon I was measuring the month by the inter-faith meeting because it became the highlight of my working month - the one evening I could rely on having a worthwhile exchange and - that rare commodity - shared genuine laughter. We were happy to be together and it showed.

That first winter, we had an unforgettable experience called a 'bus crawl'. A double-decker bus was hired and on a dark, murky November evening we piled on our bus and got off it to step straight from the drizzly West Midlands into the exotic East, the atmosphere of which was re-created in lights, colours, music, smells, the dress of the people and, above all, the atmosphere of reverence and worship, in Hindu and Sikh temples and in the mosque, which transposed us to another world. I can still remember the sobering influence of Friends' Meeting House where we finished our tour.

For about a year it was good, but a bit haphazard. The growing numbers (thirty on one meeting's record) and the interval between meetings called for some notification and recording of meetings. By January 1975 Providence had sent us a woman whose work would nurture the young organisation and enable it to grow phenomenally. Her name (you guessed?) was Ivy Gutridge. Her presence at first was quiet and unobtrusive. Her husband, Ken (who, alas, died in 1983, R.I.P.), provided a tape recorder for the proceedings - and did any talking necessary! - and lo, we received an accurate, thorough, comprehensive set of minutes from Ivy's typewriter from that meeting on. At last we could see where we were going and what was happening. We had *arrived!*

The rest, as the saying goes, is history. The visits to places of worship, going to festivals, sharing food, then outings, Friendship Afternoons, later conferences - even weekend long! - public meetings, mention in the local press. A Centre on the edge of town, set up by the hard work of Ivy and Ken in 1982, was replaced in 1986 by new accommodation at 43 Princess Street, more conveniently placed for public transport. Visitors began to come from elsewhere, enquiries began to pour in, local schools were immensely interested and asked for talks, visits to places of worship, visits to the Centre; office equipment was acquired with laboriously won grants - by now there is a desk top publisher and the paperwork produced is of an impressive standard. The grants! All of this could not be accomplished without money. Relentless efforts had to be made - and are still necessary - to persuade givers of funding of the worthiness of our cause. The local authority helped for a time and others have been generous. But it is always hand-to-mouth and there is urgent on-going need of help to keep things running and needs being met.

In recent years workers have been employed. They give generously of their time and energy, even beyond their contract. But new needs keep surfacing; besides the original racial harmony needs we are aware of needs in housing, social work, employment, social services, hospitals, police services. Support of the wider community is obviously beyond our resources but we provide information, make links. Besides our members, people who come to settle in

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the area, or people who have a query about something connected with religion - however remotely! - will ring the Centre. Up to now no one has been turned away without some help ... if only that of a sympathetic hearing!

Meanwhile these momentous developments were reflected elsewhere in UK towns and cities with the result that the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom came into being in 1986, not without a good deal of input from Wolverhampton. (Ivy is by now a Vice-Chair of the Network.) News also comes through of similar inter-faith questing going on in communities throughout Europe and in the USA. Some of our members have attended world assemblies of the World Conference on Religion and Peace which is held by rota in the five continents (this year in Europe). We keep in touch with the World Congress of Faiths and others.

So as we zoom out into the perspective of time and space we see that in the inter-faith developments of the late twentieth century Wolverhampton has been and is playing a full part. Thanks be to God.

**Mildred Reynolds**

## **ALBERT GOODWIN - A TRUE MAN OF FAITH**

People of many religious faiths and Christian denominations mourned the death in December 1990 of a man who gave himself in outstanding service to the people of Wolverhampton.

Albert Goodwin was a man of deep Christian faith. All his work, both in his profession as headmaster of St Andrew's Junior School, Wolverhampton, until he retired in 1979, and in his voluntary work in the town, was motivated and inspired by his faith. He wanted all to share in his vision of God as Creator and Father of all.

Albert was a founder member, chief fund raiser and treasurer of Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group, for which he worked relentlessly until prevented by ill health. He was also treasurer of Wolverhampton Council of Christian Churches for many years. These bodies owe a debt of deep gratitude to Albert for the unstinting and invaluable service which he gave in numerous ways through his wisdom, talents, expertise and dedication. It is fair to say that these charitable organisations in different ways owe their continuing existence to Albert's inspirational support and assistance.

Albert had a deep faith in the creation of a positive atmosphere in which people of different faiths and cultures could work together in harmony for the good of Wolverhampton. He had a strong sense of justice, equity and fairness. All who worked with him remember and appreciate his friendship, counsel and help.

**Ivy Gutridge**

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## THE EARLY YEARS

I have many good memories of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group in its early days, from bus tours around different places of worship to twenty-four hour Vigils of Prayer for Racial Justice in St Peter's Church. I would like to recall two particular events in which I was personally involved.

The first was a meeting that took place in All Saints Church, when I was parish priest, before the Inter-Faith Group was formally constituted. I believe (but I am open to correction) that this meeting, held during the summer of 1973, began the process that created the Inter-Faith Group. A group of local people invited some members of AFFOR (All Faiths for One Race) based in Handsworth, Birmingham, to share their experiences of combatting racism and working with people of different faiths. AFFOR had its origins in the successful campaign to stop the 1970 Test Match of England versus Apartheid South Africa - a happy coincidence that we have just witnessed the first Test Match since then against South Africa and the democratic defeat of that racist regime earlier this year. The meeting involved Professor John Hick of Birmingham University and inspired those present to meet again and develop an organization that brought together people of different world faiths that were active in Wolverhampton. The motivation for this was that much racism was expressed because of the ignorance of other people's faiths and life-styles. This ignorance (and racism) was found amongst white Christians, as much as it was amongst the population generally. The distinctive character of the Inter-Faith Group from the beginning was one of mutual respect for, and willingness to learn from, each other's faith.

It was not long after this initial meeting that the Rev Bryan Rippin (my neighbour and colleague at Parkfield Methodist Church) contacted me to say 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 gain their support and confidence. Her name was Ivy Guttridge! I am convinced that it was the hard work and sturdy shoes of Ivy (she did most of her visiting on foot) that gave the Inter-Faith Group firm foundations. Those personal contacts, often in people's homes as well as in places of worship, built confidence, trust and friendships that were a vital ingredient for the Group to succeed.

My second fond memory was that of the 'Ways People Worship' photographic exhibition that the Group organised in Wolverhampton Art Gallery. This took over a year to prepare, not least to allow the photographer, Nick Hedges, to get round all the different places of worship in Wolverhampton, especially at their festivals and seasonal events, and take photographs. My personal involvement was to prepare a tape of religious music from all the different faiths and traditions within them, to act as background music for the exhibition. The task brought me into contact with someone who has remained a close family friend ever since. Mr Paresh Chakraborty was Senior Lecturer in Fine Art at Wolverhampton Polytechnic; a Hindu, who had developed and learnt his artistic skills both in India and in the United Kingdom. He was an accomplished painter, who specialised in mural work and stained glass. However, it was his considerable musical knowledge and collection of records and tapes of both Western and Eastern traditions that I was particularly interested in. I thought a couple of meetings together for us to compare record collections and choose some suitable music would be sufficient. It took nearly six months of regular meetings for us to produce the sixty minute tape comprising music from ancient Vedas and Jewish chants to Christian plainsong and songs from Godspell. We discovered a contrasting world of religious musical expression with remarkably similar roots and origins. We became fascinated and found ourselves talking and playing music to each other late into the night! When I moved to be the parish priest of St Michael's Caldmore, Walsall, Paresh came and painted a magnificent mural in the Lady Chapel that expressed much of the fruits of inter-faith dialogue. His use of style and colours had much Indian/Hindu influence (with details such as Mary dressed in a sari and Jesus and the apostles with black and brown faces and St Thomas' cloak in the shape of the Indian subcontinent). One of my favourite stories is about a Muslim young man who was doing some painting in the church on a job creation scheme and he went and had a look at the mural, which was nearly completed. On his way out of the church he passed me and commented that he had always thought of Jesus as a white person until then.

The photographic exhibition was the first major project that the Inter-Faith Group took on and it was a great success in many ways. It gave the Group a public profile; it educated people about the variety and nature of all the world faiths and the many Christian traditions that could be found in Wolverhampton - their neighbours; it affirmed those who felt they were a small minority and above all the photographic material has been used many times in educational books and posters for schools, colleges and general use.

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## Part Two - on the Learning Curve

I shall always be grateful to the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group for giving me inspiration and vision of the true meaning of being ecumenical in this country and in our world at the end of the twentieth century. We can see all too clearly what can happen without this vision and its practical application when we look at places like Bosnia. My life and that of my family has been greatly enriched by our relationships and friendships with people of other faiths and cultures; on reflection I think it was the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group together with my wife's work at the Eastfield Language Centre that gave us the inspiration and contacts that have influenced us ever since. Thank you for all that has been achieved for so many during the last twenty years; may God bless your future.

**Peter Barnett**

### A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

The Inter-Faith Group has enriched my knowledge and understanding of the religions of the East in great measure. The discussions in the workshops have been of immense value and the informal social meetings during the course of a study day were always most interesting and delightful. At the same time it made me look more closely and deeper into my own religion - Judaism. Jewish values are of paramount importance to me, a Reform Jewish woman.

I would like to put my understanding of this in the following sentences, quoting from a Jewish publication:

Symbolically I stood at Sinai with Moses and the Israelite people and accepted the covenant with God.

It compels me to struggle for social justice.

As a student of Torah, I am encouraged to interpret scripture in a manner that makes it relevant to my life as a modern Jew.

I enjoy celebrating Judaism creatively in my Synagogue and in my home. Women in our movement participate fully in religious life.

I take pride in the power of Jewish philosophy and ethics which are the mainstays of Western civilization.

Reform Judaism teaches me to love all human beings no matter their colour, race or religion.

Reform Judaism obliges me to care for the environment.

Reform Judaism urges me to continue my search for God.

I wish Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group much success for its vital work in bringing people and ideas together in future days.

**Ruth Shire**

(© Merias, M. (1994) Ideas and more ideas for you. *Reform Judaism*, Spring, p.65.)



## LEARNING TOGETHER

When we came to Wolverhampton in 1975 one of our stimulating discoveries was the Inter-Faith Group, a lively corporate response to the exciting opportunities of the multi-faith, multi-cultural borough. It became for us a source of much learning together, of friendships and insights which enabled us to find joys without which we would have been considerably poorer.

There were solemn moments. We think particularly of meeting for prayers in the Hindu Mandir on the death of Indira Gandhi. Prayers were led by representatives of different faiths and we learnt together how sharing in others' pain and sense of loss knows no line of demarcation - for grief like joy has no religious or cultural boundaries.

There were times of joy and great excitement. When the Methodist Church held its national annual conference in Wolverhampton in 1984, we were personally delighted that members of the Inter-Faith group accepted the invitation to be involved in the multi-cultural celebration. It was held in the Civic Hall, entitled 'Rapport 84, Diversity in Unity', and showed how we can bring together in words and music our joy in the plural world in which we live and our hopes and dreams for its future.

And there was the straightforward getting to know one another and sharing of faith insights, in conversations and visits, and just being with people. Such experience was enriching for those of us who were involved, and enabled the group to establish itself as an independent, balanced promoter of mutual understanding, respected by all who had to do with relationships between people in the borough.

Nigel and Mary Gilson



## FAITH ENRICHED

In my limited experience there is nothing quite like Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group! I was involved, as vicar of St Chad's Penn Fields, from 1976 to 1986 - when I moved down to Battersea. Wolverhampton has a good cultural and religious mix, and is not too big a town. London is very cosmopolitan but it is just too big and difficult to get around in. The South London Inter-Faith Group meets occasionally in Wimbledon and Brixton, but we haven't got the involvement in and interest of leaders of 'other faiths'. It's largely Christian led, visiting places of worship.

Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group has had its difficulties, but through the personal friendship of committee members, under the leadership of Mother Ivy, we became a family.

As a result of my involvement I was lucky enough to spend eight months sabbatical leave touring India, studying inter-faith relations, from October 1983 until January 1984. I met Mother Teresa in Calcutta on December 8th.

My daughter Jane visited India in 1993, and my eldest son John is now working in Bombay. I'm convinced this is as a direct result of our living in Penn Fields, my involvement with inter-faith, and my visit to India.

My faith in God has been enriched through the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group. I am an Anglican priest because I was born in this country of Christian parents. Had I been born in Amritsar I could be a Sikh priest, or a Hindu holy man if born in Varanasi, or a Buddhist in Sri Lanka! However, for me, God revealed himself uniquely in Jesus Christ. But I now see God at work in other faiths, and after this life I'm convinced I'll meet my old friends from Wolverhampton in God's nearer presence.

Ian Forster



## FRIENDSHIP AFTERNOON

I have had the honour and privilege to know Ivy for the last twenty-one years. She visited me for the very first time to explain about a new organisation called 'Inter-Faith', which sought to bring all cultures and religious groups together.

Ivy used to visit me with Inter-Faith newsletters. One day she told me about the 'Friendship Afternoon' party which Inter-Faith was holding at Beckminster Church. At the beginning I was very reluctant to attend the party; in the end my daughter accompanied me.

It was a pleasant, hot summer afternoon. People of different ethnic groups mingled with the crowd in colourful outfits, and they were so friendly, shook hands with me and introduced themselves. It was like a family atmosphere. I had such a lovely time, exchanging news and views. The food was a mixture of different ethnic flavours - it was delicious.

The party was over, the singsong was over, the children had had a good time, and I went to help other members to wash up. It was great team work.

After a few years I set up a project in the Pendeford area of Wolverhampton, mainly for Asian ladies, who found themselves isolated at home. An afternoon of English, cooking, and crafts were taught. My achievement was due to one lesson I learnt that summer afternoon from the Inter-Faith friendship party: team work and support for each other.

**Dipa Ghosal**



## THE POWER OF PRAYER AND FRIENDSHIP?

Our tenth birthday celebrations were held on a beautifully sunny day in June on the lawns at the home of a Roman Catholic priest. We were entertained by Irish dancers, Indian musicians, gospel singers and others. Many friends relaxed in the beautiful surroundings renewing old friendships. Children romped on the grass and shared food was enjoyed,

I was chatting with a friend when I spotted a Buddhist monk arriving. He had been an active member of our executive and we had often worked in schools together. He had been visiting his homeland, Sri Lanka, and I thought he was still there, but here he was at our celebrations. I ran over to greet him and involuntarily threw my arms round him in greeting. A Quaker friend who had been in conversation with him admonished me, 'Ivy! you don't even touch a Buddhist monk let alone hug him!' But my Buddhist friend was laughing and not in any way perturbed.

I remember too, a few months earlier, that same friend phoning me and saying, 'Ivy, will you pray that someone will send me a car? I can't get round to all the people I should be visiting. I really need a car.' I answered him, 'But you don't believe in prayer, do you?' 'I believe in your prayer,' he replied. Uncertain how to answer him I offered what I suppose could be called a compromise. 'I don't feel that I can pray for you to have a car, but I will pray that God will bless you in your ministry to your people.'

A few weeks later I received an exultant phone call from my friend. 'Ivy, I've been given a car! Thank you for your prayers!' I was very pleased for him but not at all sure that he should be thanking me.

What has that to teach us? The power of prayer and faith? The power of friendship and good will? The benevolence of God (be he recognised or not) or plain coincidence? I was glad I had prayed for my friend even if it was rather unorthodox.

**Ivy Gutridge**





## A TRIBUTE TO A TRULY INTER-FAITH NUN

It was entirely appropriate that Sister Mary Pauline Leonard's recent funeral, and the later gathering at the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Poplar Road, should be attended by people from different faiths and denominations.

For many years Sister Pauline's strikingly visible witness included being with people of different faiths. She attended countless inter-faith meetings, conferences, and outings and was very much loved and respected.

Sister's decision to become 'inter-faith' was not made lightly, but once made was undertaken wholeheartedly. Our photographic collection shows her happily involved at many events, a cherished memorial to her significant role. Like many of us she wrestled with her conscience as she experienced the ways of worship and belief which inspired the various faith communities which have long been a meaningful part of the religious life of Wolverhampton.

'I used to believe that only Catholics had the true faith,' she once confided to me, 'but now I know that even Methodists have spirituality. What is more, I find that even Sikhs, and Hindus, and Muslims have spirituality!'

Heads often turned when our visibly varied group appeared in public, not least when sixteen of us travelled by train to Lambeth Palace to hear the Archbishop's Inter-Faith Lecture. A wonderful day! The return journey did not go according to plan. Long waits and diversions meant we arrived in Wolverhampton at about two o'clock in the morning only to find our cars had to be dug out of deep snow. During all the delays there was much laughter and good fellowship, but I was concerned for Sister Pauline, by then of very mature years; but I needn't have worried. My telephone rang very early the next morning. It was Sister Pauline in an excited voice saying, 'Ivy, didn't we have a wonderful time yesterday? Is everyone all right?'

Such was the spirit of our truly inter-faith nun and dearly loved Sister. May her soul rest in peace.

Ivy Gutridge

## RECOGNITION

At a meeting held at the Wolverhampton Mosque we listened and watched as the community worshipped and we were able to ask questions and be more aware of all that Islam means.

As the meeting ended a Muslim thanked us for honouring them by our presence and he said, 'There was a time when the people of Wolverhampton passed by this mosque knowing nothing about what was happening here or anything about us as people, to them we just didn't exist. Thanks to your visit we now feel we are recognized as part of Wolverhampton and growing numbers of people are aware of our presence and are learning about the beliefs and standards we hold.'

S Hussain

## EXPOSURE TO DIFFERENCE

*Tony:* Most of us don't find it very easy to cope with difference. For most of the time we prefer to live in our own way, on our own terms, in our own language and within our own culture. I must admit I tend to be such a person. What is more, as Christians we are encouraged to be committed to the Christian way and often this leads us to feel we are right.

*Barbara:* All my life I've enjoyed what you call 'difference'. I believe that our humanity and our future depend on us meeting with people who are different and learning from one another. It is an unending adventure and it's full of good things.

*Tony:* I have memories over many years of long meetings and lengthy celebrations - often in languages I didn't understand - in which, if I am honest, I valued what we were doing and trying to achieve more than I enjoyed the event in itself. This is partly personal temperament. But I am not surprised when people find the idea of meeting with people of different faith and culture hard.

*Barbara:* Well, you have to believe that, however long the transactions take and however slowly progress is made, you are building relationships. These are between individuals and between communities. What is the alternative? You have to listen in order to understand. You have to commit yourself to other people. You have to allow yourself to be absorbed in other cultures in order to move forward.

*Tony:* I know this is true but how do you persuade people, other than the enthusiasts, to join in?

*Barbara:* Many people have no choice. Many of us live and work in communities which are wholly multi-faith and in which many languages and many cultures are commonplace. So you have to show people that other people's ways are of value in themselves. You have to show that inter-faith dialogue is one road to peace and healthy community living and citizenship. And you need to point out to people that through the process we all learn more about ourselves. It is in fact through inter-faith dialogue, as much as anything I would say, that I have developed my own sense of identity and Christian faith.

*Tony:* Yes, I recognize that. There is no doubt that my life has been deeply influenced by people who have been committed to one of the great faiths other than the Christian faith, as indeed it has by some of my reading about world faiths. I think the future rests with societies which can encourage people to find and express their own deepest values and yet which seriously affirm difference. But such a hope flies in the face of all the tribalism and violence in the world.

*Barbara:* Nonetheless, I am utterly sure that inter-faith dialogue, especially at local community level, is one route to building a just, free and peaceful society.

**Tony and Barbara Holden**  
Founder members



## SIX FAITH ENCOUNTERS

1. *Tim*: In the long run, though, you'd really like me to become a Muslim, wouldn't you, Ataullah?

*Ataullah*: Not in the long run, Tim. Today.  
*Tim*: Snap!

That exchange sums up perfectly one half of what inter-faith means to me. I would love to see all my friends sharing the joy and fulfilment and challenge that I find in Jesus Christ. I enjoy meeting a Muslim friend who feels the same about Islam. Yet in the group at which the exchange took place (at a Methodist conference), the Christians had said that they would rather have a devout Muslim teach their children R.E. than a non-believing westerner, and the Muslim had said he too would prefer a Christian to a non-believer.

And, while working together in the inter-faith scene, both Ataullah and I felt secure that the other was not trying, in some backdoor way, to 'make a conversion'. We could therefore afford to be open and honest with one another.

2. *Prem*: But surely, if you are inter-faith, you can't want someone to leave their faith, and join yours.

*Tim*: I'm not sure about 'leaving their faith', but yes, I can and do want my friends of another faith to share mine.

That's the other half of the equation. Ataullah and I are both of so-called 'missionary' faiths. Prem is not. But he seems wonderfully prepared to work with me, who am, and not mistrust that somehow I am 'only inter-faith because I want to convert him'.

3. *Anonymous*: Tim, I've learnt from inter-faith that it is safe for us to handle one another's holy books.

My Christian faith has been strengthened, not weakened, by encounter with Holy Qur'an, Bhagavad Gita, Guru Granth Sahib. I know that Muslim, Hindu and Sikh friends have found the same with the Holy Bible.

4. *Ranjit*: How do Christians find time to pray, when they are always talking?

That was actually my first inter-faith lesson. At first I was angry. 'Why does he think that? It's not true.' Then, 'I wonder if it is true?' Since then, I've looked often at my worship and prayer times, and asked, 'Do we allow *any* time for God to talk?' I hope my prayer has improved a little. Thank you, Ranjit.

5. *Tim*: I think the heart of my faith is about Death and Resurrection.

*Chandra Bodhi*: I think the heart of mine is about loving.

It was a gentle rebuke from a Buddhist I didn't know very well. I now include in my morning prayer every day a Buddhist-based pattern: 'May I love all those who love me ... all those who hate me ... all those who are indifferent to me ... every living creature. May I not hate those who love me ... and so on.' It's helped me to recognise how often I do 'hate' (or reject) those who love me, let alone those who hate or are indifferent.

6. This time, not a quotation. Instead, an ongoing experience from T.R. Bhardwaj, that there was no time (even when I invaded his mourning) when he was other than totally courteous and 'affirming' in his response to my demands on his time.

I came into inter-faith out of a mixture of wanting to learn, and wanting to serve in a new field. I am in it now, and I suspect always, because of ten years of experience of its living reality.

Tim Fyffe



## WOLVERHAMPTON-NUERNBERG: INTER-FAITH INSPIRATIONS

What has Wolverhampton to do with the old Emperor's town in South Germany (population half a million)? A lot in the field of inter-faith work!

It was in 1986 when I first met Ivy Gutridge at the European Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) in Rovereto, North Italy. There was an immediate understanding between us - the senior lady (but always young in mind) from England with her warm and sensitive character and the German Professor for Religious Education. She told about the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group and all its horizon-widening activities: visiting the different religious congregations - in churches, temples, mosques, synagogues; sharing spiritual experiences; learning tolerance and mutual understanding; giving information to the public about religious communities, their problems and their interests.

In 1988 I was appointed delegate for the fifth World Assembly of WCRP in Melbourne, Australia. I took the opportunity to invite religious leaders of Nuernberg to our house in order to begin inter-faith work in the city and region of Nuernberg.

At the World Assembly in Melbourne - January 1989 (summertime in Australia) - I met Ivy Gutridge again, among six hundred representatives of all major religions from all over the world. We worked together in the 'Education for Peace' Commission. When I was asked to prepare the commission report for the final plenary session I agreed on the condition that Ivy would help me to put our ideas into proper English. It was a challenge for both of us and a co-operation that took hours and hours. The result was an excellent report with a good coverage in the media and among the public.

In October 1989 I was on a four-week trip through the United Kingdom together with my assistant, Werner Haussmann. He was just beginning to prepare the thesis for his doctorate which in 1993 was successfully completed. He wrote about the consequences of religious dialogue for education - a comparison of the developments in England and Germany. On this occasion we visited the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group. We had a chance to see the office and

resource centre. We met a number of inter-religious committed people and joined a bus tour to the different religious centres in Wolverhampton. We were very much impressed by the initiatives in Wolverhampton and learned a lot for our work in Nuernberg.

As Wolverhampton has done, we prepared a brochure with self-presentations of all the major religious communities in Nuernberg: 270,000 Protestants, 240,000 Roman Catholics, 30,000 Muslims, 8,000 Greek Orthodox, some thousands of Methodists, Baptists and Adventists, 400 Jews (before 1933 there had been 9,000 in Nuernberg!), a little Baha'i congregation, a little Buddhist and a little Hindu centre. In 1993 we had to bring out a second revised edition which is distributed to all schools in Nuernberg. We have also co-operated on a common declaration against racism, new nationalism and intolerance. It was registered as a special signal in the town where once Hitler declared the racist laws of National Socialism.

We hope to contribute to a new climate of openness, of encounter, dialogue and co-operation in our city.

In our opinion - and we learned that from Wolverhampton - it is necessary to think globally - and to act locally!

We wish the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group much encouragement on its twentieth anniversary and blessed results in its work in all the years to come!

**Johannes Lähnemann**



## REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

On the bright sunny Sunday afternoon of 15 September 1991 two rabbis gave of their time during the high and holy festival season between Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur to share with members of Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group the meaning and significance of the Day of Atonement. We met at the Friends' Meeting House where our Jewish friends regularly enjoy true Quaker hospitality. It was a deep learning and bonding experience and a joy to renew our friendship with local Jewish people.

Rabbi Peter Tobias of the Progressive Synagogue in Birmingham took us back to the origins of the Day of Atonement - Yom Kippur - in Jewish history. His presentation helped us to understand the basic belief and thought that lay behind the ancient sacrificial ceremonies which still remain in Jewish thought and practice.

Rabbi Norman Solomon, Director of the Centre for Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations at Selly Oak, spoke of rabbinic teaching which is used for theological reflection, for interpretation and for practical guidance. He stressed that the rituals of confession and forgiveness were not to be understood as a 'see-sawing' exercise; it is a much deeper process. The way of repentance is very difficult. This he illustrated with a story of a Jew wrestling with his sins and seeking guidance from his rabbi. 'Bring me a feather pillow', said the rabbi. This was done. 'Now', the sinful Jew was told, 'let all the feathers loose.' Feathers scattered everywhere. 'It's as easy as that to sin,' said the rabbi. 'Now', he said, 'go and gather up the feathers.' A daunting task for the sinner. 'It's as hard as that to truly repent,' said the rabbi. The sinner went away deep in thought.

After a tea-break Rabbi Tobias was obliged to leave us to prepare for congregational duties. Rabbi Norman Solomon then took us more deeply into the feelings evoked by the ancient ceremonies. We could almost hear the bells ringing and the shofar horn sounding, feel ourselves transported to the synagogue. It was as if we were experiencing the richness of chanted psalms, the ceremonial and devout rituals leading up to a crescendo at mid-day, and the quieter devotional reflection building up again at dusk and ending with the ceremony of the 'closing of the gates'.

Many of us felt deeply moved and privileged to share this experience. Inevitably questions arose which were met with grace and clarity but not without some pain. Christians present were made more deeply aware of the pain caused by insensitivity and misjudgement of Jews by some Christians. With a compassionate smile in his eyes but undoubted pain in his voice, Rabbi Solomon said, 'Christians say, "Jesus taught us that we must love our neighbours as ourselves," with no mention of the origin of that teaching. They steal our ancient scriptures and call them their own and then persecute us as murderers of their Jesus.' Regretting that such attitudes still exist some were keen to reassure our Jewish friends that there are many Christians who acknowledge and appreciate the rich heritage of the Jewish faith that Jesus himself honoured and which remains a rich heritage for Christians.

Ivy Gutridge



## Part Three - Snapshots

### LEARNING FROM MEETING

I was very impressed when a ten year old girl from a Wolverhampton school telephoned me and asked if I could come to her school to talk to her class about the work of the Inter-Faith Group. I told her I would be pleased to come if she could give more details about their expectations, directions to the school and details of the local bus service.

I learned that the current class topic was 'the community around us' and three girls had opted to learn about the religious communities around them.

The day came and I arrived at the school gates to find those three girls at the gate with a welcome card of their own design. As we walked to the school entrance the girl who had phoned me said, 'I didn't know you were going to be a little old lady.' 'I'm sorry to disappoint you,' I replied, 'But I'm afraid I am.' The session went well and about thirty-five children seemed to enjoy the stories I told, illustrated by slides, and many asked questions, keen to know more about the faith and worship of the people around them.

*Sequel:* The three girls who had arranged my visit, together with two members of staff, arranged an end of term visit to our Inter-Faith Centre in town. They showed great interest in all the resources on display and asked many questions. They were not the only ones learning. The girl who headed the group initiative was from a Jehovah's Witness family. Her parents had given their permission for the study they were undertaking and to their visit to the Inter-Faith Centre. I didn't expect that! I learned that I needed to be less prejudiced in my assessment of the beliefs and practices of another religion.

Meeting and sharing in faith is a powerful antidote to prejudice and ignorance.

Ivy Gutridge



## FROM THE BISHOP OF BRISTOL

I cut my inter-faith teeth in Wolverhampton, not least through the experiences and friendship of those who belong to other world religious communities. There are three particular memories which come to mind.

Firstly: a garden party held in Tettenhall to celebrate a previous significant anniversary. During the summer we'd had continuing reports of violence in Amritsar and not least involving the Golden Temple. A Sikh and a Hindu joined me at tea and, in conversation, we discussed the problems of religious and political violence in a rational and creative way. Without the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group there would have been no forum in which we could have begun to understand each other and share together our common concern for religious tolerance and peace.

Secondly: the bus tour to all the major religious communities during which we were given hospitality and a vision of their individual religious traditions. This has stood me in good stead as I have visited religious communities in many countries and certainly on an exciting occasion in San Pölten in Austria at a Christian-Muslim dialogue with people from all over Europe. The religious memories of what had happened in the last four centuries in the former Yugoslavia were all too real and destructive for us not to work at mutual understanding and trust.

Thirdly: there was an invitation to the Sikh gurdwara in the week after I was consecrated Bishop of Wolverhampton. I shared in their evening worship and was kindly offered the time to share with them my belief in Jesus of Nazareth as my Lord and Saviour. I was humbled by that community's generosity and openness and can only hope that many Christian congregations will be willing to take practical dialogue seriously. The second stage of dialogue is to allow people of other world faiths to explain their own beliefs in their own words.

Barry Rogerson  
Former President of WIFG



## CORRYMEELA JOURNEY

During the Spring Bank Holiday of 1986, ten members of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group travelled to Northern Ireland to visit the Corrymeela Community Centre on the cliffs above Ballycastle.

The poems which follow were impressions, from that visit, of a land oppressed by violence and bloodshed.

What I did not record at the time was the contribution our small group tried to give towards the daily work of healing by the Corrymeela staff (drawn from the Catholic and Protestant communities) whose aim is the reconciliation of a divided and suffering people.

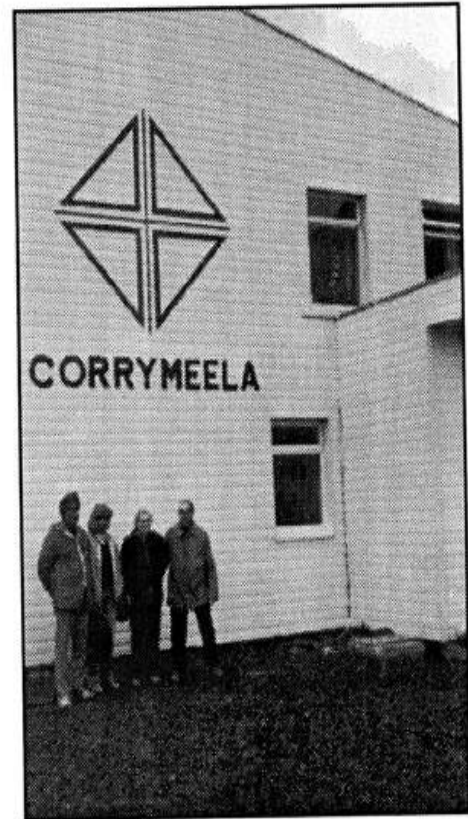
Group leaders, Inderjit Bhogal and Tim Fyffe, were keen to plan the daily meeting for worship one morning, in the community chapel. This is a modern circular building, beautiful in its simplicity, called the Crei - which means 'heart'. The prayers that day included contributions from the Sikh and Buddhist members of our party.

Our day tour of Belfast included a visit to a Hindu temple, housed in a disused chapel. There being no Hindu in our party, our Sikh member skilfully acted as interpreter between us and our hosts. As this followed a time of great animosity between the two communities in India, we were glad to witness the mutual respect and courtesy between Sikh and Hindu, meeting in a foreign land.

The highlight of our stay, on the last evening, was the challenging task of cooking and serving an unusual meal for the staff and other guests. (The other guests were a group of dedicated educationalists, meeting to plan and sponsor a mixed Catholic-Protestant school.) The main course was a selection of spicy, exotic dishes from traditional eastern recipes. The kitchen hummed with effort and concentration as strange aromas floated through the house.

This visit gave us all a clearer insight into a community living in crisis, while we were able to share with our hosts something of inter-faith ways of eating and praying together.

**Marjorie Turner**



Left to right: Ranjit Singh, Kathy Robinson, Ivy Guttridge and John Booth.

## BELFAST SKETCHES

### Street Urchins

In garish cast-off hats  
Small boys swagger down back alley,  
Thumbs stuck in hip pockets  
Like junior Clint Eastwoods -

Kick discarded pop cans,  
Swig from empty bottle,  
Take aim with stick for gun  
And grin at passing tourists -

While round them hate wrecks homes,  
Lives; builds walls between  
Neighbours; sends armed soldiers  
Searching through the streets.

### Refuges

Behind traditional facade  
Exotic shrines gleam in tinsel  
Temple, where East and West  
Exchange dignified greeting,  
Listening words, and  
Hospitality, generously given,  
Gratefully received.

### Hindu temple housed in disused chapel

Bold red door<sup>1</sup> in quiet street  
Of strife-torn city, -  
Sign of beckoning welcome  
To enter and share continuing  
Friendship, bonded in peace  
Of wild green places, by lonely  
Shores of a northern sea.

### Hallelujah at Corrymeela

Within a short life-span  
Through vision and endeavour  
This place of refuge offers hope  
To embittered, troubled minds;

A chance to bury deep  
An age-old enmity,  
Exchanging thoughts and fears  
Common tasks and tea;

In quiet shared worship  
To discover mutual pain  
And joy, and seal  
A needed friendship.

So neglected Corrymeela  
Is once again transformed  
To lively hill of harmony.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Corrymeela HQ, Belfast

<sup>2</sup> Before the war, Corrymeela, which means 'hill of harmony', was a busy Holiday Fellowship Guest House. After war-time use, it became empty and dilapidated, until the Corrymeela Trust felt it was the ideal 'retreat' for those suffering trauma from terrorist violence.

Marjorie Turner

## PILGRIMAGE BY BUS

One of our favourite early memories of the Inter-Faith Group goes back to the first 'bus crawl' in the 1970s, when it was decided to pick up an idea that had been very successful in a similar community. The 'guinea pigs', who warily joined the 'co-operation bus' had little idea what they would be involved in but we remember the driver even more vividly!

He had two shocks - first when he discovered the 'route' - Penn Road - Town Centre - Cannock Road - Town Centre - Dunstall Road - Town Centre, and so on - it must have seemed to him the last word in a lunacy mystery tour! His second shock was that nobody ever seemed to check who was on the bus (usually a major concern) but on this occasion some got off at one destination and stayed there with new-found friends while apparently total strangers then joined the bus to see where we were going next!

As we send greetings to the present thriving organisation and its efficient officers we are privileged to have been involved in the 'early days' and trust that the joyful unpredictable chaos and the fellowship that characterised those times will continue to be experienced by the now established organization in its status as a significant influence for good in Wolverhampton and far beyond.

Hilary and Eric Prichard

## AN AGM WITH A DIFFERENCE

Hosted by the Particular Ukrainian Catholic Church, July 1991

Having been unable to attend the inter-faith memorial service for Rajiv Gandhi held at the Krishan Mandir, Father Matyczak, after consulting with the Inter-Faith Group and Hindu leaders, led special prayers in memory of the statesman whose assassination had appalled people of all faiths, and in support of the Hindus and others from India whose pain we shared.

The official business was deliberately short so that we could have a chance to meet the Ukrainian community who had laid on wonderful refreshments and entertainment in colourful Ukrainian style. This was delightful to watch and hear but was also a learning experience which took us to the heart of Ukrainian culture, faith and suffering.

Miss Sonia Cebenko first played a tape of an unaccompanied Ukrainian quartet chanting the 'Our Father'. It was beautiful to hear but significant to know that it was recorded in the Ukraine when the church was enduring suppression. Sonia then gave a brief but enlightening talk on the history of the Ukrainian Community, and showed how the strong spirit of the Ukrainian people survived oppression.

Three young people from the Ukrainian Youth Association provided delightful entertainment by singing Ukrainian folk songs accompanied on the piano.

Mr Nahaylo, the President of the Ukrainian Community Association in Wolverhampton, gave a moving account of the feelings of his people now things are changing in his country. He struck a note of caution that all is far from well although there have been reforms recently. He referred to the pain and horror of the past saying, 'There is no-one in our community who does not still grieve for a relative who suffered and died in the war. Feelings of revenge come into my heart when I remember the past and still fear for the future, but then I remember that I'm a Christian and I turn to the weapon of prayer.'

The 1991 Annual General Meeting showed the true spirit of inter-faith relations! Father Matyczak and Bishop Chris both pronounced blessings on the gathering to end a memorable evening.

*(from the AGM minutes, in consultation with Father Matyczak)*



## AUGUST OUTING 1993

An elegant bullock-cart, on rubber-tyred wheels, drawn by two powerful but placid matched black bullocks, stood outside Bhaktivedanta Manor as our two minibuses arrived. The monk driver wore a check shirt, grey baggy trousers and wellingtons as well as an American baseball cap and, when he assured us that he was really a monk - despite the gear - we heard his American accent. Meanwhile the wiry young man in a white dhoti and genuine monk's garb was an Englishman who knew Wolverhampton well, having grown up here and gone to school in Brewood.

There was a warm welcome for us (despite our being half an hour late!). The bullocks had waited patiently to give us our first treat of the day - a ride around the grounds in the slow-moving bullock-cart with a view of the undulating backs of the well-groomed bullocks to add to the soothing effect of the gentle movement. We saw the gardens, the farm and its animals, all of which were lovingly and carefully tended by our hosts. Here and there young women sat, dressed in saris, withdrawn into prayer and telling their rosary beads. For them we scarcely existed; their whole attention was being given to their devotions.

Then it was shoes off and into the house where, again, we were surrounded by prayerful worshipping people, most of them young. We heard that the community numbers about a hundred and that schooling is provided for their fifty children. Life-like statues of their founder preside over the two prayer rooms. A gathering of people prayed gently in one and we went to the other to hear the fascinating story of their acquisition of the manor and of their lives there.

Having done a tour of the extensive house we were invited to have lunch, first course served daintily in the front hall, then the main course as a picnic in the rose garden. We sat in two lines, one on either side of the paved garden path, along which our generous hosts moved with buckets (literally!) of cooked food. It was not easy to leave but our next hosts waited ...

Cornerstone Church, in new town Milton Keynes, is shared by all the Christian communities and is situated centrally, its round gleaming dome showing up in the distance among the square buildings.

However, although it is spotless and pleasant and staffed by agreeable people, the square design meant that the proportions felt odd. The sound of constantly running water for the walk-in baptistry behind the altar added to the impression of strangeness. Then the visit to the roof to look out over Milton Keynes from the four sides was very different from the sensation of doing the same thing from St Peter's Collegiate Church's vibrating tower. It did not feel like the traditional church and it had features such as the small triangular gardens visible from the circular corridor at each of the four corners of the building, a minute shop for souvenirs and a small cafe in which we could buy ourselves tea and scones. It is a church which offers a sense of community to late twentieth century town dwellers so perhaps its departure from tradition is well justified.

Two of the staff escorted us from there to the Buddhist temple at a short distance from the town. Once again we were expected! We received a smiling welcome from a young nun in Buddhist dress with a closely shaven head and a gong which she struck occasionally.

When she offered to lead us to the pagoda across the fields we did not understand what she meant. The pagoda was visible and, as she was detained, we ambled across the field towards it. We were all there waiting when we heard the slow, rhythmic, staccato beating of the gong interspersed with chant, and we saw that the nun was approaching alone in the manner in which they are accustomed to approach the pagoda (which they encircle with prayer three times every morning). She was followed at a distance by a young German woman Buddhist who beat an answering rhythm - slow, single, resonating notes that seemed to wrap us round with the prayers of the chant.

We meekly followed around the pagoda, obedient to the lead of the two women and then (after photographs!) we were led back by them to the temple building where we crowded into the temporary but highly-ornate prayer room and continued the reverend rhythm. This time we were all given gongs and batons and we joined in a slow rhythm that immediately centred us down and seemed to hold us in a common bond that was intangible.

The nuns afterwards gave us tea, for which we sat low at knee-high tables. They told us of the progress of the building - the temple proper is still in course of construction. Though all three of them had closely shaven heads and every appearance of an austere way of life they were brimming over with smiles and vivaciousness. One was Japanese and was so small of stature that we thought she was a child apprentice. This made her laugh with delight.

We got back to Wolverhampton on time but with a new awareness of the unsuspected amount of praying that is going on each day in those houses where so many young people have undertaken a life of complete dedication to ideals.

May the spirit of God bless their endeavours and keep them happy and dedicated.

Mildred Reynolds

### WESAK AT THE BUDDHA VIHARA

The festival of Wesak celebrates the birth, the enlightenment and the death of Gautama Buddha, and takes place all over the world on the full moon day in May. Celebrations vary from country to country, but the most important part of the day for all is to pay respect to the Buddha and his teaching. Members of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group were privileged to visit the Buddha Vihara in Upper Zoar Street on Wesak Day, 28th May 1991, where they heard the Venerable Pandit Vajiraghana, Abbot of the London Buddhist Vihara, speak about Wesak and the way of the Buddha.

The Vihara is one of Wolverhampton's newest and most interesting places of worship. Most Buddhists in Wolverhampton are Ambedkaris, Indians converted to Buddhism by the social and political teaching of the reformer Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who found a way for so-called low caste people to escape their social prison. There are perhaps two hundred such families. There are also some Sinhalese Sri Lankan Buddhists, and English converts who come regularly to the Buddha Vihara. About two hundred people come to the evening full moon programme every month. In addition there are meditation classes, a women's group and children's classes including classes in Sinhalese and Punjabi.

Ivy Gutridge  
Ven Pidiwille Piyatissa

(The second half of this contribution is abridged from an article in *World Faiths Encounter*, 5, July 1993, and is reproduced by kind permission.)



### DARING TO DIALOGUE

I am a relative newcomer who joined the Group in 1986 with one objective in mind: to learn something about the people of different backgrounds and the faiths they practised in our town, where I have lived for the past thirty years. It came to me very quickly that whilst culture and tradition are the dominant hallmarks by which a particular community is recognised, the religious teachings of the various faiths are similar in essence and meaning. This point I have often discussed with my colleagues in the WIFG but more often than not, we have agreed to disagree.

I remember quite vividly when a crew from BBC Manchester was filming the Group during one of our Executive meetings, Harun had jokingly said that he would love Tim to become a Muslim. Tim's quick reply was 'Touché!' Of course all this was said with tongue in cheek and indeed the objective of WIFG is to foster greater understanding between all faiths and work for peace, harmony and justice. As a consequence of all these activities, the members feel more secure in their own faiths. I have certainly found myself drawn a lot closer to my own faith since I joined the Group.

All true religious teachings have come from the one and only source, one God, and the Group advocates being 'true' to one's own faith. It is only tradition and custom which makes them look different from the outside. Once the outer layers are peeled off one begins to see stark similarities in the core of the teaching of all great masters who were able to tap the same infinite source.

I also remember when the Group visited the Mount Shiloh Church where hymns were being sung in praise of the Almighty. I was at that time a regular reader of our holy scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Standing among the congregation, my mind was going through similar verses and couplets (some almost word for word) from this holy book in which Guru Ravidass Ji's scriptures are enshrined.

In matters of inter-faith dialogue and understanding most people feel apprehensive which, in my opinion, is largely attributable to the following:

- (1) Fear of diluting one's own faith. This seems a common misconception since most of us in the Group have found ourselves drawn closer to our own individual faiths.
- (2) The premise on which they try to reach out towards other faiths. People must be encouraged and assisted to start out to find similarities among the various faiths. It is all too easy to harp on about the differences, important as they are, but it is areas of commonality which often draw people close together.

In striving to work for peace, harmony and justice, Hans Küng in his book *Global Responsibility - In Search of a New World Ethic* points out that, 'There can be no world peace without religious peace. No peace among nations without peace among religions and no peace among religions without a dialogue between religions.'

**Prem Lal**  
Chairman



## Part Four - Visions

### LOOKING TOWARD A NEW INTER-FAITH ERA

It has been my good fortune to visit Wolverhampton a number of times and to take part in the activities of its Inter-Faith Group. It has been one of my regrets that I have always lived in places which are about five or six hours away by car. Nevertheless, I am kept in touch with events by receiving the publications and publicity, and sometimes have the pleasure of meeting some of its members at conferences or other gatherings up and down the country.

The Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group is a living witness to the achievements which are possible when men and women of many faiths come together in good faith to celebrate their common humanity and the beliefs which inspire their daily lives. It is my hope and prayer that its work may continue for as long as there is a human race and that this anniversary will enable it to share its vision with other places in Britain where, perhaps, inter-religious dialogue has scarcely begun.

Developments in Religious Education will require schools to teach the subject which they have often avoided in the past. Classrooms will become places where religions which have sometimes been at loggerheads and even at war with one another are taught side by side. This will demand a sensitivity which only those who have matured together possess. Inter-faith groups will be called upon to ensure that the messages given to young people in churches, mosques, mandirs, and other places where communities meet, match the atmosphere of peace which teachers are trying to create. A new era in the story of Britain's religious development could be beginning and a task being set for Wolverhampton's twenty-first year!

Meanwhile, congratulations on the present occasion and best wishes for its future work.

Owen Cole





## INTER-FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY - A VISION

Men and women are known to be incurably religious. For them religion is a relationship with God or gods or spirits. Religions are journeys of explorations and individual experiences, where they touch Truth in ways that cannot be arrived at by any other route. Religion is also the realization of the divinity within all human beings - the prime object of life. That's why religions matter so much to those who belong to them.

Yet in the name of religion the world has witnessed unparalleled bloodshed, misery and death among the nations. Religious conflict and violence have disturbed the peace of the world again and again. Hans Küng therefore, has said that 'there can be no peace among the nations, without the peace among the religions; no peace among the religions, without dialogue between the religions.' Based on this vision inter-faith dialogue has assumed such great importance in the world today.

Religion has two main aspects. One is pure 'religion of spirit', eternal and universal in time and space - common to all great religions of the world. Love is its essence. The other aspect is of creed, ritual and dogmas, with much myth and superstition intermixed. Nonetheless, all religions, when followed faithfully, lead us alike to the same goal of the correct path to divinity.

No doubt humanity has made much scientific progress. But have we been able to make corresponding moral and spiritual progress? Unfortunately not - let us be honest and admit it. Our inner world, the heart, cannot be changed from without by any scientific laws. It can only be changed from within through love and understanding. Science has been able to bridge the distance between the earth and the moon but it has not been able to bridge the gap between our own heart and the heart of others. Scientific progress has narrowed down the 'outer world' to make the moon our 'neighbourhood' but it has not been able to broaden the 'inner world' of humanity into 'neighbourliness'.

What we need therefore, is to cultivate 'love' from within through the teaching of our faith traditions, and encourage inter-faith dialogue, understanding and co-operation. Love alone can unite people above class, creed, colour, race, religion and nationality. The knowledge of 'spirit' also can provide the common base on which men and women can meet each other on equal terms, shorn of all ethnic, social, cultural, political or religious trappings. The spirit that fills the cosmos also fills the human heart. It is only through understanding and love that we can lead others by example to change likewise.

In fact, religion, love and reality are essentially one and the same thing. The spiritual vision of different faith traditions should also illumine our minds. We may derive strength and inspiration from the cosmic greatness of Hinduism, the one God of Jews, the joy of truth of Buddha, the spiritual victory of Jainism, the redeeming radiance of Christianity, the glory of God of Islam, and the harmony of the Sikhs to build bridges of understanding between the faiths. We need to 'think globally and act locally' wherever we are and in whatever way we can. Shall we endeavour?

I write this as a Hindu. Our scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, is a book of light and love. It is also the science and art of living. We have faith in it - a faith based on spiritual vision and tolerance. In that vision there is light. Shall we see? This Song of the Lord calls us to love and live in peace and harmony. Shall we hear?

**D. Bandopadhyay**  
Development Officer



## THE UMBRELLA OF PEACE

Peace is a marvellous word! Therefore, for God's sake more much attention must be devoted to maintain peace.

Peace is a gift of God, and God has elected to declare a blessing and happiness upon peace-makers. Peace is a sympathetic agreement of minds of true mutual interest among all ranks of persons of the human race.

It is possible to have the peace of God. Let people of all faiths seek for peace.

Not war, but only peace can make  
The whole world calm and quiet  
Peacemakers are those who, for others' sake  
Stand firm to stop the fight.

M.A.Baig



## EMBRACE EACH ONE AND LOVE ALL

I have been a individual member of the WIFG for the past four years. During that time I have been pleased to meet persons of different faiths and have had interesting talks with other members on several occasions. I feel that WIFG plays a very important part in getting the different faiths together on one common platform. I have written a poem which expresses my feelings.

Embrace each one and love all  
Otherwise we will fall,

If everyone has God's light,  
There are no reasons why we should fight,

There is only one human race in God's sight,  
That is why we should all unite,

Wearing different clothes, eating individual foods,  
And we also have our own separate moods.

It does not matter what our differences are,  
As long as for each other we care,

The nine elements are for everyone,  
With God's grace we should all have fun,

Let us all accept this call  
To embrace each one and love all.

T.S.Dhillon



## IS THE AGE OF AQUARIUS DAWNING?

Being a relative newcomer to the Midlands, my memories of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group are from its reputation. When the Wolverhampton Group was taking off, I was living deep in the South West of England - a part of the country to which some people retire because they 'don't like the blacks further north'. Plymouth was not at all multi-faith, then. Apart from mainstream Christians and a very small synagogue, there was a small Baha'i community and an assortment of 'New Agers'.

Fortunately I was not out of touch with inter-faith activity. Being on the United Reformed Church's Other Faiths Committee, I used to come up to Birmingham twice a year for meetings. It was exciting to be, even temporarily, in a climate where churches were working out their relationships with other faith communities, where selling churches to Hindus was a live issue, and where Sikh motor-cyclists were campaigning for their right to wear turbans instead of crash helmets.

The problems of inter-faith relationships, of course, were obvious, even from afar. It was with some disappointment that I read press reports of the Sikh schoolboy who was turned away by his headmaster, who stated that his turban was 'like something out of a Christmas pantomime', but it was encouraging, too, to learn of the role of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group in attempting to mediate in the situation. Clearly the Group was no mere forum for friendly discussion, in which Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were simply 'nice to each other'.

I was, of course, delighted when I was offered the lectureship in Religious Studies at the University of Wolverhampton two years ago. Although we were not sorry to leave the South West, the somewhat limited inter-faith work there enabled me to share something by way of a vision of inter-faith activities in the Midlands. Because of the small numbers of adherents to traditional religions, the small inter-faith group which we helped to start in Plymouth inevitably consisted of minority groups: the Baha'i, Unitarians, a western Buddhist, New Agers (including a Pagan), and a couple of self-styled western Sufis. This somewhat unlikely assortment formed the nucleus of inter-faith work rather than its periphery, and I think they found it encouraging to be 'on the map'.

Very often the minority religions tend to be neglected in inter-faith work. Yet it is only too often that the new religions come off worst. While followers of mainstream religious traditions have some (albeit limited) protection in law - for example under the Race Relations Act and blasphemy laws - no such privilege is afforded to new religions. Pilloried by the press, and attacked by anti-cultists, they are often the worst victims of prejudice and harassment.

It was encouraging to learn that the Wolverhampton Group has welcomed involvement from minority religions, principally the Nirankaris, Namdharis and Ravidassis. If only such relationships were also possible with those new religious groups which tend to attract westerners - for example, the Mormons, the Unification Church ('the Moonies') and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON - the Hare Krishna movement). The Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group is not necessarily to blame: often members of new religious movements assume that if they attempted to make contact they would receive the kind of rebuff that they so often experience elsewhere.

Notwithstanding the enormous successes of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group, I would offer a further horizon to envision. From time to time the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group has received an isolated enquiry or a visit from Mormons, pagans, even a Jehovah's Witness (despite the JW's stated disapproval of inter-faith activity). I hope that the future will see a greater follow-through by these, and other enquirers, and that the Group's map label 'Christian deviations' will be renamed 'New Christian Groups', or with some similar title which acknowledges the fundamental principle of dialogue, that 'dialogue partners should be free to define themselves'.

Of course it is true that new religions have their share of charlatans and deceivers. Yet there are many which are wrongly maligned, and some who very much regret their past errors and seek to mend their ways. Traditional religions have had their share of false prophets, deceivers and misdeeds, and would not wish these to be continually cast up to them. I would very much like to see the day when the mainstream Christian could begin to understand and trust the 'Moonie', and the Muslim acknowledge with friendship the Baha'i and the Ahmadiyya. After all, friendship and tolerance does not have to mean endorsement or agreement. Inter-faith relationships remain incomplete until we learn to understand groups outside the mainstream as well as the traditional, more established religious communities.

George Chrystides



## MY VISION

Hey! Interfaith, Interfaith,  
who are you really?  
Convincing faiths what to do?  
What is your real message?

What is your lasting aim?  
Which direction would you take?  
After existing two long decades,  
people will still have memories.

If you want to know,  
my name is co-existence  
of different global faiths.  
I can only exist with support.

My aim is perfect harmony  
among co-operative human race;  
mixture of virtuous ethics of faiths.  
Who knows this ethos may prevail.

Life is invaluable and a godly gift.  
Who knows you may cut this life circle  
if you lead your life virtuously  
with grace on a path of righteousness.

Disagreements and difficulties of many sorts  
are the common factors of many faiths.  
I must not lose my chosen sight.  
God will help and bless if need be.

Pick up your stake of courage!  
Stand like a strong pillar!  
Who can undo and shake you,  
if you are committed to the soul?

My struggle must not  
be wasted in vain  
Stick together to work  
for harmony in faiths.

**T.R.Bhardwaj**



### THE GOOD HEART

Because I moved to the West Midlands quite recently, and have only been involved with the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group for a year or two, my memories, and perhaps my visions, aren't anchored in Wolverhampton as those of most of the other writers are, but I hope they may still contribute something.

I was lucky enough to be born in multi-cultural North London. Just up the road from the house where I was brought up there was a synagogue - now a South Indian Hindu temple - and half my friends at school were Jewish, so I grew up living very happily with another religion almost literally next door. Most of my adult life has been spent in London and Bristol, and so till very recently I took life in a multi-racial society for granted. Then I moved to Plymouth, and experienced severe culture shock. It was all Anglo-Saxon. I realised very sharply just how much I missed the multi-cultural Britain I was used to, and vowed to do something positive if I ever escaped to a more interesting part of the country. Two years ago I made that escape when my husband found a job up here, and one of the pleasures I found in the Midlands was the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group.

Inter-faith work is one of those rare situations where everybody wins; not only does one grow to know, respect and love other people's faiths and cultures, but one understands one's own faith more at the same time. As a Christian I have to say that I am conscious of belonging to a religion which has a history of being aggressive, and sometimes murderous, towards its neighbours, and which has used often very inappropriate (and very unJesus-like) methods to coerce others into accepting its beliefs. Perhaps for that reason I find that it comes more naturally to think about the differences between our various religious traditions rather than their many similarities. There are very real differences between members of different faiths, and although not much is usually said about it there can be a great deal of pain involved in inter-faith relations, pain that many of us do have very real and irreconcilable differences of belief.

Which is where 'the good heart' comes in. It's a phrase used by the Dalai Lama to describe something shared by members of all religions and none, the human impulse to compassion and love, which unites us in the most basic and vital way. It doesn't agonise over doctrinal differences but gets on with the practical work of doing together whatever needs to be done to bring new life to our communities, new life to our world.

Margaret Wilkins



### CITY OF BENT SAPLINGS

There are few trees in Wolverhampton's heart,  
No precious river glides towards the sea,  
Yet here where concrete cuts old streets apart  
Someone has planted hope and amity.

Old men recall a black and blighted past  
Where now the glittering windows draw the throng,  
And though the tinsel store is dwindling fast  
We can be thankful that we've fed so long.

Deal to the men of spite, rejoice to share  
Our windy streets with friends of every race  
And if a stem is snapped, then plant with care  
Another pledge of effort in its place.

R.D.G. Turner