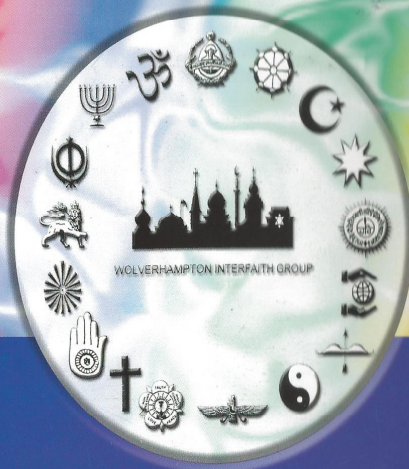


WOLVERHAMPTON  
CITY OF MANY FAITHS  
WORKING IN HARMONY, LOVE AND PEACE



Wolverhampton Interfaith Group  
Office and Recourse Centre  
2 Clarence Road  
Wolverhampton  
WV1 4HZ

Tel/Fax 01902 427601  
E-mail [admin@WIFG.eclipse.co.uk](mailto:admin@WIFG.eclipse.co.uk)

Established 1974 (Registered Charity No. 513201)

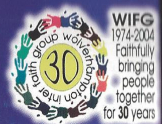
# WOLVERHAMPTON INTER FAITH GROUP

30 Years Of Dialogue & Community Cohesion

## REFLECTIONS ON THE PAST VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

REVIEW OF THE PAST & SPIRATIONS FOR THE NEXT 30 YEARS

FEBRUARY 2006



## CONTENTS

	<b><u>Page</u></b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	3
<b>Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group</b> <i>Sehdev Bismal</i>	4-5
<b>Future Directions for WIFG</b> <i>Michael Bourke</i>	6-8
<b>Community Cohesion in the City</b> <i>Derrick Anderson</i>	9
<b>Wolverhampton Inter-Faith</b> <i>Dr. Owen Cole</i>	10-11
<b>Prayer, Justice and Reconciliation</b> <i>Lord Turner of Bilston</i>	12
<b>A Message from the Mayor of Wolverhampton</b>	
<i>Councillor Phil Bateman</i>	13
<b>A Message from the City Police</b>	
<i>Gareth Cann</i> <i>Andrew Armstrong</i>	14
<b>WIFG in a Changing World</b> <i>Harun Rashid</i>	15-16
<b>Challenge at the Heart of Aspirations</b>	
<i>Ian Millard</i>	17
<b>Inter-Faith Work in Progress</b> <i>Rob Marris</i>	18
<b>Inter-Faith and Community Relations</b>	
<i>Pat McFadden</i>	19
<b>Role of Inter-Faith Dialogue in Building Peace &amp; Understanding</b>	
<i>Devinder Kalhan</i>	20-21
<b>The View from the Millennium City Building</b>	
<i>Deirdre Burke</i>	22-23
<b>Time for Reflection</b> <i>Sehdev Bismal</i>	24-25
<b>Pioneers in Inter Faith Work</b> <i>Brian Pearce</i>	26-27
<b>My journey with Interfaith</b> <i>Kamaljit Kaur</i>	28
<b>Commonalities across Faiths</b> <i>Parveen Brique</i>	29

## **CONTENTS** (continued)

<b>30 years of the Hindu Community's Association with the WIFG</b>	<i>T.R. Bhardwaj</i>	30-31
<b>Reflections from the Jewish Community</b>	<i>Martin Gomberg</i>	32
<b>The next 30 years</b>	<i>Vasdev Singh Bhamrah</i>	33-34
<b>Contribution to Faith Dialogue and Harmony</b>	<i>June Cook</i>	35
<b>Don't Become Irrelevant – Pray!</b>	<i>Tim Fyffe</i>	36-37
<b>What if?</b>	<i>David Cooper</i>	38
<b>Peace is the Only Way Forward</b>	<i>Michael Todd</i>	39
<b>Message from the New Cross Hospital's Chaplain</b>	<i>Stuart Pretty</i>	40
<b>Inspiration for a Best Seller</b>	<i>Campbell Miller</i>	41
<b>The 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our City's WIFG</b>	<i>Edward Pringle</i>	42-43
<b>Inter-Faith Symbole of Working Together</b>	<i>Joginder Singh Bhambra</i>	44-45
<b>Honorary Office Bearers – WIFG 1974-2006</b>		46-47
<b>Volunteers, Paid Staff and Patrons</b>		47



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to all the contributors whose willingness to put their thoughts and reflections together has made the production of this celebratory booklet possible. Their readiness to meet very tight deadlines has been of enormous help.

In order to stay focused, reviewing our work and re-aligning our priorities in response to changing need is imperative. I hope the articles in this booklet will serve this purpose and give us a lot of pointers with regard to our vision for the future.

The contributors to this book are some of the people we are privileged to have in Wolverhampton with a passion for inter-faith dialogue and community cohesion. Without their continuing commitment, this booklet would not have been possible.

We all look forward to the next thirty years with renewed vigour to enable us to play our part in facilitating understanding between different faith communities and contributing to community cohesion in Wolverhampton and beyond.

Special thanks go to Awards for All for funding the publication of this booklet.

Many people have provided timely help to make the production of this booklet possible and I am deeply grateful for their invaluable input. My thanks go to Barbara Easton, Erik Pearse, Prem Lal, Vasdev Singh Bhamrah and Devinder Kalhan.

Sehdev Bismal MBE  
Editor



## WOLVERHAMPTON INTER FAITH GROUP

The Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2004. When the Group was set up in 1974 to encourage understanding between different religions and faiths in the City, it was one of the first such groups in the country. It offered a common ground for different individuals and community groups to come together through meetings and visiting one another's places of worship in order to learn about their neighbours and people who had come from different traditions and backgrounds.

Thirty years ago, a local Methodist minister Reverend Neville Platten persuaded a small number of like-minded people from different religious backgrounds to meet each other and share information about their individual faiths. Their objective was to encourage respect for diversity of beliefs and to appreciate the legitimacy and distinctiveness of each religion. Since then the Group has grown enormously and today it has over 200 members and more than 45 voluntary organisations affiliated to it.

The members of the Group believe that since all the major faiths have teachings encouraging their followers to find ways of living in peace with others, it is good to talk to people from other traditions. One of the positive outcomes of such a dialogue is the discovery of common ground in shared values and expectations. In order to make bonds of friendship based on knowledge and understanding, it is equally important to discuss genuine areas of disagreements.

Since 1974, the focus of the Group has undergone a radical change although there is still emphasis on personal encounters and friendships. The activities of the Group now take seriously the challenges of diversity and inclusion which sometimes means standing against discrimination and social injustice.

Bringing communities together is done through annual events such as Prayers for Peace at St Peter's Collegiate Church, visits to different places of worship and hosting discussions on issues impacting on the local communities. We have enabled people to pray together and discuss their concerns at times of global crises. For example after 11 September 2001, there were a number of local and

national incidents of anti-Muslim abuse. A number of high-profile events were organised to promote awareness, tolerance and respect between all communities. We worked in partnership with all faith organisations in Wolverhampton, the City Council, the Police and the University.

A huge amount of work is done to introduce schools to the enriching diversity of faiths in the City. Thousands of school children in Wolverhampton and the surrounding areas have visited different places of worship with help and advice from the Inter-faith office.

The Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group is a charity and all its work is undertaken by volunteers who have a commitment to making Wolverhampton a place where people can enjoy good community relations as has been the case for many years. The Group feels that its work is far from over. Although over the past 30 years the British society is grown tolerant of other cultures and faiths, the next task is to help it become actively tolerant and to encourage an appreciation of diversity and plurality of views in the challenging times ahead.

**Sehdev Bismal MBE**

## Future Directions for Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group

### 1. Action

Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group was born as an active response to a crisis. The first generation were pioneers who established relationships between communities that did not know each other, and built bridges of understanding. All our current programmes and activities flow from that original vision and impulse of the pioneers.

The next generation needs to identify where the action lies now. Vigilance over the dangers of racism and the activities of bodies like the BNP must remain a high priority. Keeping our ear to the ground to detect threats to social cohesion is another. Extending our boundaries to embrace and welcome asylum seekers and other newcomers and enabling them to find a spiritual home according to their own faith will be a third.

Practical action relating to economic and social regeneration is now undertaken by the Wolverhampton Faith Network rather than the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group. This is to enable participation by worshipping communities which do not wish to take part in inter-faith dialogue. There is overlap of membership, and a close working relationship, between the two organisations.

There remains the need for pioneers who will identify and initiate new action where this is needed. It is an important and enduring part of the agenda of the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group to spot these needs as they arise and to respond.

### 2. Thought

From the beginning the Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group has promoted a better understanding between the faith communities of each other's beliefs, festivals and customs. The training which is offered to schools and those working in public services is an important dimension of this. Practical co-operation between faith communities which refuses to engage in the understanding or discussion of differences is unlikely to succeed.

I believe that in future this dimension of understanding needs to be deepened and extended by Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group. There are opportunities for working closely with Wolverhampton University in this area. The University Chaplaincy is evolving into a Faiths Team, and there is a challenge to the University itself here to use its location in one of Britain's most multi-cultural cities to become a centre of excellence in inter-faith dialogue and practice.

There are deeply held and controversial issues which need thoughtful debate at a level of impartiality, openness and professionalism which a University provides. I write this at Easter Weekend 2005, when Christians focus their thinking and prayers on reconciliation and forgiveness. All faiths teach that God is merciful, and reconciliation and tolerance feature highly among our common values. But we still surprise one another with the different ways in which we understand forgiveness: how central is it to our religious vision? How difficult and costly is it? How do we apply it in situations of conflict like the Middle East or Northern Ireland? And are there situations to which forgiveness is an inappropriate response? That is one example of a subject which requires in depth study and discussion. It is not an abstract issue for an academic ivory tower, but one which has practical repercussions on the ground.

Another is the nature of toleration in relation to censorship. Recent months have seen several instances of controversy suddenly flaring up over a play or a TV programme which have sparked off protest from faith communities as being offensive. How do our faith communities cope with criticism and satire? Where does criticism end and insult begin? How do we combine reverence and respect, and a sense of the holy, with a freedom of expression, the freedom to disbelieve as well as to believe, and the need to subject claims to authority to criticism?

These are just two examples of hot issues which need cool heads. I believe that Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group and Wolverhampton University should collaborate together in creating programmes of public education and debate at a level of academic seriousness combined with widespread participation.

### 3. Youth

The passing of Ivy Guttridge, and our immense gratitude for her inspiring us. In

leadership, highlights the need for leaders of a new generation to come forward. Handing on our faith traditions to the next generation is a major challenge to all of us. In this area of inter-faith co-operation it is perhaps even more important and we need to discover what are the convictions and needs of the present generation of young adults. Their insights and concerns are vital in both areas of action and thought described above.

Is it possible for the faith communities involved in Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group to work closely over the next two years with Wolverhampton University to draw young people into shaping a programme for the future? I believe we need to think this through in a very open way. There may be a need to establish a semi-independent young peoples' forum rather than inviting one or two younger members to serve on the existing Inter-Faith Group, where they will quickly feel isolated.

I have no doubt whatever that there is as much need as ever for an active Inter-Faith Group in the multi-cultural cities of the future. The world is becoming more complex, not less. That is why it is vital to engage a new generation in the identification of issues, the exploration of beliefs and attitudes, and the initiation of action.

**The Rt Revd Michael Bourke The Bishop of Wolverhampton  
President of Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Group**

## COMMUNITY COHESION IN THE CITY

The Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group has, in partnership with other agencies and organisations, made a significant contribution to the community cohesion agenda in the City. The Group's drive to bring different faith communities together through personal encounters, active listening and celebration of differences has been immensely beneficial for the nurturing and supporting of positive community relations in our society.

The City Council has enjoyed working with the Inter Faith Group on several joint projects. For example, the production of the Directory of Places of Worship has added to our knowledge of the rich diversity of faith traditions and different places of worship that we are privileged to have enriching our daily life. The active collaborative events the Council organised in concert with the Inter Faith Group in the wake of the 9/11 attacks were found to be very useful in raising awareness of issues impacting on local communities.

We value the enormous work initiated by the Inter Faith Group that has been going on for the benefit of all communities in Wolverhampton. All of this work is undertaken by volunteers who are committed to bridging the gap between communities. They do their work because they are committed to sustaining peace and understanding in their City. Their work, although largely unsung, is an important part of our collective drive to make Wolverhampton a beacon of equality and harmony.

The Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group has served the City very well for the last 30 years. I sincerely hope it will continue its good work in the next 30 years too. It will need to redefine its priorities, review its current activities and enter into coalition with other agencies and organisations to optimise benefit for everyone. The City Council is committed to working with the Inter Faith Group and other like-minded bodies to ensure community cohesion is further strengthened for the benefit of all citizens.

**Derrick Anderson CBE  
Chief Executive  
Wolverhampton City Council**

## **Wolverhampton Inter Faith**

(This article is written from my Christian perspective but I hope readers will transpose it into their own faith).

Muslims tell the story of a man travelling alone through the desert who saw someone coming towards him in the distance. In terror he said; 'It is my enemy'. The man drew nearer and as the dust cleared the traveller thought more hopefully; 'It is a stranger'. Then he recognised the other man and said; 'It is my friend!' They ran towards one another and embraced.

For many Christians, and members of other faiths, however, the one poses a threat to the other. They have never met but, nevertheless, they have feelings of antipathy and suspicion towards the religion they do not know.

This phobia is a major reason why we cannot look fearlessly across the desert. It is encouraged and provoked by Muslim memories of Christian cruelty after, for example, the suppression of the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857, or stories of the terrible events of Partition in 1947 India and Pakistan. There may even be memories that date back to the Crusades. History need not be recent to be effective!

There is considerable scope for misunderstanding if we are willing to remain ignorant. Here it might be pointed out that ignorance is not a satisfactory answer for imam, granthi, rabbi or priest, or parent, to make because the requirement of the Education Act, that determines what our children learn in school, affirms that they should have a knowledge of the six main religions found in Britain today - Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Sikhism. Well taught pupils cannot be fobbed off with the untruths that some of us may have been brought up with, such as the view that Muhammad had epilepsy, and derived his message from Jewish or Christian teachers, or the belief that Judaism is a religion of law and Christianity one of love, (what was the lawyer quoting in Luke 10:27?)!

Hopefully, the terrifying enemy may turn out to be a stranger, at worst, but maybe he can turn out to be a friend. Some years ago the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, wrote to the Bishop of Hereford, who had oversight of clergy training suggesting that all Anglican ordinands should study a religion in addition to Christianity. Whether that hope has ever been implemented totally I do not know. Three years ago when I served on the other faiths consultation of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland there were indications that it was a dead letter. A pity. At best it

would have broadened horizons. Many men and women, especially in the teaching profession, who have met members of other faith, and learned about their religious universe, have found their own beliefs strengthened, though challenged in some respects, mainly through discovering a shared humanity and common social concerns. The late Professor Ninian Smart affirmed that those who know only their own religion know no religion!

There is at least one further reason why we should be concerned about establishing good relations with people of other faith. Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism came to the town of Multan with his close companion, the Muslim, Mardana. At the gate they were met by citizens one of whom was holding a bowl filled to the brim with milk. It was a statement that the city had no need for additional religious teachers. (Notoriously, they can be parasites!) Guru Nanak took a jasmine flower and carefully placed it on the milk, signifying that his presence would be no burden but would only add 'fragrance' to the life of Multan.

In Britain we often bemoan the nation's lack of faith and spirituality, yet there are some four million or more Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs who call upon the name of the Lord today and everyday. Often they are our neighbours; potentially they are our friends in faith. It seems criminal and almost blasphemous to regard these fellow citizens as enemies, or even strangers and to side line them. I am not suggesting that we should unite in a crusade against secularism. I have grave concerns about state religion and established churches, and empowered religion, and I have often found the most supportive employers to be secularists who have not favoured religion or been hostile to it but have been fair.

**Dr Owen Cole**

**Dr Owen Cole was head of Religious Studies at what is now University College, Chichester and is a life member of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group.**

**His latest of many books is Spirituality in Focus, Heinemann Press.**

## **PRAYER, JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION**

Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group has been a wonderful example of how human beings of any religious, political or cultural experience can advance the most fundamental challenge known to man or woman that of living our lives in such a way that love and friendship and tolerance towards each other in the day-to-day bustle of life is a shared community goal that cannot be ignored or denied.

I bear witness to the tremendous role played by Wolverhampton Inter Faith in the creation and development of Wolverhampton's Fair Trade partnership, which seeks to bring recognition and understanding of the crucial need to alleviate poverty in the many poor countries of the world, by allowing the people of these countries to trade fairly with countries such as Britain, in order to lift them out of poverty and injustice. This is a majestic challenge which has been readily adopted in Wolverhampton by our Inter Faith movement.

The Annual Inter Faith ecumenical service is another living testimony to the power of prayer and reconciliation in bringing together the diversity of faiths in Wolverhampton to rejoice in the shared values of every faith which offers the certain truth and hope of ultimate triumph over prejudice and division.

Congratulations and best wishes for your continuing work

**Lord Turner of Bilston**  
**Patron,**  
**Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group**

## **A MESSAGE FROM THE MAYOR OF WOLVERHAMPTON**

The Mayoress and I are delighted to send our congratulations on the thirtieth anniversary of Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group.

Our City can take pride and comfort that as a diverse and harmonious community, we have managed to avoid some of the unrest which has beset other parts of the country in recent years. I firmly believe that this is in no small measure due to the understanding, tolerance and decency which Inter Faith has fostered and promoted throughout the faith communities of Wolverhampton to the benefit of us all.

We can celebrate our diversity as a multi-cultural and multi-faith City thanks to the work of Inter Faith.

I know that my predecessors as Mayors have enjoyed the help and support of Inter Faith on many occasions and I look forward to continuing this long and happy tradition in my year of Office.

**Councillor Phil Bateman MBE**  
**Mayor of Wolverhampton**



## **A MESSAGE FROM THE CITY POLICE**

The police in Wolverhampton would like to congratulate the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group on its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. We value our relationship with the Inter Faith Group and derive real satisfaction and benefit from working with you throughout the year on a variety of community and policing issues.

The police in Wolverhampton exist to reduce crime and disorder and make people in all our diverse communities feel safer. We have had significant success in delivering this over recent years and in part that is due to the excellent relationships that we enjoy with a full range of communities that we serve.

As we move even further forward to embrace neighbourhood policing in Wolverhampton, our working relationships with communities will be more important than ever before. We are confident that the Inter Faith Group will be willing and able to play a full part. It is work which we look forward to undertaking with you.

Once again, many congratulations from both of us and from all our officers and staff on this excellent achievement of 30 years anniversary.

**Gareth Cann**  
**Chief Superintendent**  
**OCU Commander**  
**G1 Wolverhampton West**

**Andrew Armstrong**  
**Chief Superintendent**  
**OCU Commander**  
**G1 Wolverhampton East**

## **Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group in a Changing World**

If you flash back and look at Wolverhampton in the late 60's and early 70's and compare that image of the City of Wolverhampton today, I am sure you would be as impressed as I am with the remarkable and radical change that has taken place.

In those days Wolverhampton was a suspicious, fearful, intolerant and inward-looking town where there was little respect for diversity be it of faith, language, culture or ethnicity. The "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968 was, if not solely, to a large extent responsible for this unhealthy attitude that existed at the time in the minds of many Wulfrunians.

Today the City of Wolverhampton is a vibrant and relaxed multi-cultural, multi-faith and multi-lingual city where over 45 languages are spoken and many religious communities practise their faith freely and happily in their own premises and feel welcome, important and valued. Wolverhampton now is a city where diversity is celebrated with pride and everyone, irrespective of colour, creed or ethnicity is made to feel a sense of belonging and a contribution to the harmonious life and culture of the City, a city in which some many big gatherings occur annually and/or occasionally all with cosmopolitan attendance such as the July City Show, the Sikh Vaisakhi celebration, the Schools' Multi Faith Celebration, the Inter Faith Wolverhampton Alive event and so on, just to name a few. Wolverhampton now has become a City of Unity in Diversity a City in which peaceful co-existence flourishes and enriches our lives.

The Right Revd. Barry Rogerson, the first Bishop of Wolverhampton and the President of the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group said in the October 1980 issue of the Lichfield Diocesan Magazine, "We need to build bridges between two communities which are separated by language and custom. Much of the tension in our urban communities is caused by a lack of understanding and the fear that accompanies it. To understand another person you have to try and enter into his world and to do that means taking a risk. You risk your own understanding being changed."

I am delighted to say that the people of Wolverhampton, in vast numbers over the past 30 odd years, have responded to that call and taken that "risk", and built "bridges" and created the new Wolverhampton which is now an envy of the rest of the country. The vibrant multi-faith, multi-lingual and multi-cultural City of Wolverhampton did not just happen overnight by the waving of a magic wand by somebody. It is the result of a collective and concerted effort of many individuals and organisations, particularly the

WIFG over many years

I have to say that the "Rivers of Blood" speech perhaps has indirectly contributed to the creation of the peace and tranquillity the City enjoys today. The "Rivers of blood" speech prompted a number of clergymen and ministers and some people of other faiths to create the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group in 1974 which has continued persistently, for Wolverhampton to take the result we are all reaping from this multi-faith City of Diversity.

WIFG over many years

I am proud to have been Vice President and also a contribution to the creation of Harmony where people have prayed for a just, fair and also taken the obligations of its creation. The WIFG has active participation. May WIFG in addition to its service to the City, has inspired many organisations for building bridges for that to happen the WIFG

I have to say that the "Rivers of Blood" speech perhaps has indirectly contributed to the creation of the peace and tranquillity the City enjoys today. The "Rivers of blood" speech prompted a number of clergymen and ministers and some people of other faiths to create the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group in 1974 which has continued persistently, fearlessly, unselfishly to persuade the people of Wolverhampton to take the "risk" and build "bridges" over the past 30 years. As a result we are all reaping the benefit of a vibrant harmonious peaceful multi-cultural, multi-faith City of Diversity where everyone is made to feel a Wulfrunian.

I am proud to have been associated with the WIFG as its first Chairman and now Vice President and also privileged and humble that I have been able to make a small contribution to the creation of our wonderful City of Diversity of Peace and Harmony where people have Sunday after Sunday, and Friday after Friday not just prayed for a just, fair and equal society for everyone to live in peace in it but have also taken the obligations implied in the prayer seriously and taken an active part in its creation. The WIFG has played a leading and inspirational role in enabling that active participation. May I take this opportunity to mention one other thing? The WIFG in addition to its substantial fight for justice, fairness, peace and harmony in the City, has inspired many other towns and cities to establish interfaith organisations for building bridges. This work needs to be continued in the future but for that to happen the WIFG needs financial support.

As we all know building bridges for harmony and understanding is like riding a bicycle which will stop if the rider stops pedalling. We cannot yet stop pedalling particularly in the light of uncertainties that exist in the world today and the recent atrocities committed in London on 7 July. The WIFG's work must be supported by all Wulfrunians as none of us can afford to lose out unity in diversity. On Thursday 14 July the Right Worshipful the Mayor of Wolverhampton Councillor Phil Bateman called upon Wulfrunians to "stand firm and retain our dignity, our excellent race relations and show solidarity for our lifestyle and the cultural diversity that is welding Wolverhampton into the caring city it is." It is the same call that the WIFG has been making over the last 30 years. Can we afford to ignore this call?

**HARUN RASHID**  
Vice President

page 16

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Vice President

page 16

## CHALLENGE AT THE HEART OF ASPIRATIONS

There can be no doubt of the enormous contribution to Wolverhampton made by the Inter Faith Group. The City of Wolverhampton rightly celebrates and is proud of its rich, diverse mix of communities. The Inter Faith Group has played a fundamental role in bringing those different communities together, allowing us all to share our similarities and celebrate our differences.

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Since coming back to Wolverhampton, my home town, as Principal of City of Wolverhampton College, I have noticed the similarities between the vision, values and aspirations of the college and those of the Inter Faith Group. Some of the things we have in common are:

we both seek ways to celebrate diversity and regard differences as positive

we both serve and work with all of the different communities across the City our common purpose is to see a better Wolverhampton.

In the college we are a rich, vibrant mix of different ages, cultures and backgrounds. We aspire to follow the example of the Inter Faith Group and celebrate the differences and learn from the diversity of our students. We challenge our students not only to improve and achieve for their own benefit, but also to be role models in their communities and reflect those key values of respect for others, harmony and openness. I hope the college and our students can continue to represent Wolverhampton at its best and strive to follow the example set by the Inter Faith Group.

Perhaps we can follow the example of Martin Luther King Jr who said "the good neighbour looks beyond the external accidents and discerns those inner qualities that make all men human and, therefore, brothers." This challenge is at the heart of the aspirations of the college, the Inter Faith Group and our City.

**IAN S MILLARD**  
Principal and Chief Executive

page 17

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Principal and Chief Executive

page 17

## INTER FAITH WORK 'IN PROGRESS'

Wolverhampton Inter-faith Group is the bedrock upon which good community relations have been painstakingly built in our city. Without it, we would all be the poorer, both socially and spiritually.

It is an invaluable forum for the free exchange of ideas and information, from which mutual understanding and tolerance have grown. Such is the impact of WIFG, that our city would now be unthinkable without it.

As the MP for Wolverhampton South West, I learned first hand the help which WIFG offers. In the wake of disturbances in northern towns and cities in the summer of 2001, I talked to MPs from other parts of the country. I discovered that, in too many multi-faith areas of the UK, sadly the faith leaders did not even know each other's names, and certainly did not have a shared history of working together.

Conversely, in Wolverhampton our faith and community leaders have confidence in each other, precisely because they do have a shared history of working together. After the "9/11" outrage, it was to WIFG that I first turned, when wanting to organise a meeting of leaders, to resist those who would divide us against each other. At short notice, an impressive group of representatives was gathered. We came together as a community, and there were relatively few incidents in Wolverhampton.

Nevertheless, I do wonder if a challenge for the future is for WIFG to do even more to include representatives of those faiths with smaller numbers of adherents in Wolverhampton to broaden the spectrum.

That said, I remain a strong supporter of the successful work done by those who have been involved in WIFG over the years. It is worth bearing in mind two things. Firstly, almost all of that work is entirely voluntary, and I salute and thank those who have given so generously and freely of their time and energy in the noble cause of community cohesion. Secondly, good community relations are always a "work in progress"; it's like riding a bicycle: if you stop work, everything comes to a halt and you fall off!

Here's to the next 30 years.

**Rob Marris**  
**MP Wolverhampton South-West**

page 18

## INTER FAITH AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

I would like to congratulate the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group on its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. I believe the community in Wolverhampton is tremendously enriched by its diversity and its multi faith character.

As someone still quite new to the city I have been struck by the depth of friendship between different faiths. I have had the honour of visiting many churches, temples and mosques. Everywhere I have found a deep commitment to common understanding and to working together for the benefit of the whole city.

This commitment has not come about by accident but is down to the efforts of a great many people including the Inter Faith Group to promote mutual understanding and respect.

In a city with many people and nationalities from all over the world it is vital that this work continues, for only with dialogue and understanding can the mutual respect which is so essential to community relations grow.

I believe the city can look forward with confidence and optimism. We already enjoy excellent inter faith relations in Wolverhampton. What we must all ensure is that these are maintained for the future. As one of the City's three MPs I certainly look forward to playing my part in fostering the best possible inter faith and community relations in the times to come.

**Pat McFadden MP**  
**Wolverhampton South East**

page 19

## **Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Building Peace and Understanding**

In a country like Britain one can have encounters with people of so many different faiths, cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. At times, this could pose a threat for people of one faith to interact with people of other faiths. We are all products of our social upbringing and subconsciously acquire some prejudices and misconceptions about people who are different from us. This is where interfaith dialogue comes in; it could play a major role in breaking down barriers by building bridges between people of different faith traditions.

Wolverhampton Interfaith Group (WIFG) has been actively engaged for the past 30 years to encourage interfaith discourse amongst people of different faiths, through various activities such as seminars, conferences, exhibitions, pilgrimages and through exchange of literature. By doing this, WIFG has made an enormous contribution in promoting peace and understanding in the City.

Interfaith dialogue carries a set of values, which allows communication and discussions between people of different faiths to take place in a manner where one listens attentively to a person of a different faith without challenging or negating the fundamental principles of their tradition. In dialogue, each person listens to the other with respect to enhance one's understanding about other faiths and the ways of practising. I have found this a highly enriching and humbling experience.

There is no debate and argument but active listening with ample opportunities to ask questions and seek clarifications. This helps to broaden one's horizons and adds to their knowledge in abundance.

The benefits of interfaith dialogue can be achieved when one is open to new learning and is prepared to take risks in a rather safe environment for the benefit of all. However, there is a need to recognise that differences do exist, but the aim is not to correct other people, but to hear and listen to the other side. Each and every religion and faith has so much to offer in terms of promoting peace and harmony amongst people of different faiths. Interfaith dialogue helps bring people together and breaks down stereotypes that we have about people of other faiths.

The Faith Footprints walks that have taken place in 2005 have been a testimony to the interfaith dialogue bringing substantial number of people, young and old, men and women, from different faith communities visiting the each other's places of worship. This, in less than 3 hours, each Footprint pilgrimage was so moving and powerful; it provided people with a wealth of knowledge, imparted by committed practitioners and eagerly received by participants.

In essence, interfaith dialogue is about working together, creating unity, harmony and understanding between people of different faiths for the benefit of us all to create a better world a global family where differences are viewed and appreciated with mutual respect.

**Devinder Kalhan**  
**Chairman**  
**Wolverhampton Interfaith Group**

## **The View from the Millennium City Building**

In 2002 the Religious Studies department moved from the Dudley campus of the University to the city campus in Wolverhampton city centre. We now inform prospective students at Open Days that Wolverhampton is one of the best locations to study religion, and given the rich religious history of the city and well established patterns for educational visits and inter faith debate, this is no idle boast. We really are sited in the midst of one of the most active inter faith environments in the country.

Concepts of dialogue are well established in the city and there is a strong ethos of both learning about each other and learning from each other, with adults in the city showing youth how to behave respectfully towards people belonging to other faith groups. The inter-linking of key individuals from a range of faith groups in city wide educational and social groups has developed a strong collaborative ethos within the city. Thus, members of faith communities are able to work together to inform local public service agencies about religious issues.

Our work at the university has been enhanced by Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group publications. Firstly, through the *Directory of Place of Worship in the City of Wolverhampton* we are able to make contact with the full range of religious communities in the city. Secondly, the *Faith Lives* publication provides valuable insider perspectives from all the faiths in the city, presenting the beliefs and practices of smaller religious communities that are often lost due to the focus on the major world religions. Lastly, the *Living Faith Photo Exhibition* has been a stimulus to us to consider ways that our own studies on religious communities could be shared with the wider community.

The Council's *One City many cultures* initiative, supported by the Inter Faith Group, shows the recognition of religious and cultural issues within the city, with religion regarded as a positive form of 'social capital'. Amongst Keast's challenges for RE was a consideration of "what roles will religion(s) perform in our communities and in society in the future, and what perceptions will people have of them?"

Understanding religion in the community is an important task for education and as Keast pointed out Religious Education should not be isolated from such developments. The involvement of many individuals from the inter faith group on the local Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) ensures that all groups with expertise in the area of religious knowledge and education are brought together to produce a local agreed syllabus of the highest standard.

We are grateful to Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group for encouraging us to develop our work with religious communities in the city. The university based website *Religions in Wolverhampton* now contains many of the above publications to enhance the study of students and also to share the vast religious wealth of the city. Together we can continue this work of collating information about religious communities today and celebrating the rich and diverse history of religions in our city.

**Deirdre Burke**



## TIME FOR REFLECTION

For thirty years, the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group has been serving the City by promoting personal encounters and discourse between different faith communities. Although there is always the temptation there to claim a lot of credit for the current positive relations between communities, it is nevertheless a fact that the activities of the Group have made a contribution, sometimes significant, to community cohesion. However, for the Inter Faith Group to remain an active contributor to peace and understanding, it is crucial for it to pause, evaluate and review what needs to be done in the future. Without this, the danger is that it may be inclined either to fossilize its activities irrespective of changing times or merely to rest on its past laurels.

The principles underpinning the Inter Faith Group and the driver behind its practice has been the paramount need to make bonds of friendship based on knowledge and understanding and celebrating the differences between different faiths. We take cognisance of the truth that there are differences between different faith and cultural traditions and since we realise that having a homogenised religious world is neither a realistic nor a desirable aspiration, we wish to learn from others in a non-judgmental and supportive way. There is an obvious need for organisations such as the Inter Faith Group at a time when there is so much intolerance throughout the world. We support and nourish our own faith while giving the same opportunity to those who choose a different spiritual path. Despite our difference, we know there are areas in which we can work together recognising our common humanity.

Interfaith dialogue has served the City at several critical points in recent times. Its value became evident when Wolverhampton was trying to avoid the ugly rioting that happened in some northern town and cities. Similarly the events immediately following 9/11 in America saw a good deal of healing work initiated through interfaith dialogue. Communities have been brought together through Wolverhampton Alive and a whole raft of similar events.

However, there are steps that the Inter Faith Group needs to consider to retain its significance and place in the City. It needs to find the will and space to offer more activities in response to the needs as identified and articulated by the City's communities. In order to do that, it needs to broaden its membership and to

diversify its links with the local population. That would require a lot of legwork on the part of its board members. Although it will entail a fair amount of new hard work, the outcome will be of enormous benefit to the City.

The lack of involvement of young people in the activities of the Inter Faith Group is something that needs to be addressed. Much of the time that is spent on bureaucratic discussions should be spent on reaching out to young people through a range of well-thought out initiatives. All the activities of the Group should be planned on an annual basis and rigorously reviewed to evaluate their impact.

The third priority has to be more partnership with other agencies. We cannot afford to continue to work in splendid isolation. We do not have the wherewithal to achieve everything on our own without the active support of other stakeholders. Partnership has to be the key to our aspiration to be effective. A bit more of joined up thinking is needed to form alliances with other agencies and organisations and not try to reinvent the wheel when planning activities.

The Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group has served the City at some critical points in its recent history. It has worked tirelessly to dispel ignorance, sometimes with reasonable success. We cannot however remain static. We have to take on board the demands of changed times and respond to new challenges. This is essential to ensure we are relevant to community cohesion in the times ahead.

**Sehdev Bismal MBE**

## **PIONEERS IN INTER FAITH WORK**

It is a great pleasure to be able to send congratulations to the Wolverhampton Inter faith Group as it celebrates its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. It was one of the first local inter faith organisations to be established in this country. Its role has not been of just local significance. It has been of national importance because it provided a model for others to follow elsewhere and has been a source of invaluable advice and encouragement to many people across the country as they have set about building inter faith links where they live. The influence of the group has been felt overseas as well.

We all owe a particular debt of gratitude to those trail blazing pioneers who saw the need to build good relations between different faith communities in our increasingly religiously diverse society. But we need to recall too all those who have sustained the work of the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group over the later years of its life to ensure that it continues to be a valuable instrument for promoting inter faith understanding and cooperation.

There have been substantial changes in the inter faith scene since 1975. Back in the mid 1970s there were local inter faith organisations in only two or three places. There are now nearly 200 spread out across the UK reflecting the greater awareness of the importance of inter faith work. Today it is surprising to find a city or town that does not have an inter faith organisation rather than one that does!

The Wolverhampton Inter faith Group gave valuable support to the establishment of the Inter Faith Network for the UK. Ivy Guttridge, whose work was celebrated at a memorial service earlier this year, was involved in the initial planning meetings which led up to the formation of the network in the spring of 1987 and then became a member of its Executive Committee and served as one of its Vice-Chairs between 1992 and 1998. She was able to share the wisdom and experience which the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group had gained in exploring how best to tackle the vital work of promoting good inter faith relations at local level.

Central and local government and many public bodies now display a much greater recognition of the valuable contribution which inter faith work can make to community cohesion within our society. The investment in building up good

relations between our faith communities and their leaders at both national and local level shows its worth when we face the kind of strains placed on our society's common bonds at times like the recent bombing atrocities in London. The way in which faith communities came together to display their solidarity, was testament to the work of those who saw the importance of this at a much earlier stage and began the work of forming constructive relationships.

The Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group can take pride not only in what it has achieved for Wolverhampton, but far beyond the boundaries of the city.

**Brian Pearce**  
**Director**  
**IFNET UK**

## MY JOURNEY WITH INTERFAITH

My interfaith journey started in my childhood. Back in India we were brought up to live in a multi-faith, multicultural society. However, the real test is when you move to a different country to continue to believe and respect others' beliefs and values.

I was seconded to work on a project called the Multi Ethnic Living in Wolverhampton and I came across the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group in 1996. I was very impressed with their work on promoting mutual understanding and creating peace and harmony. The hospitality I received made me feel really valued and gave me confidence to contribute to the activities of the Group and learn at the same time. Since then I have been an active member of the Group.

The work started by our Christian friends, who had the vision to live and let live and to know their newly arrived neighbours has been growing day by day for last 30yrs. During these three decades, the world has move on, hopefully for the better and it is evident that everyone want peace. It is a different matter that not everyone has the same vision for the means to achieve peace. This is what makes it crucially important that interfaith dialogue is nurtured. Our youth are our future; we have to present them with good role models, guidance and peaceful ways to live in this very challenging modern world.

Every time, when a disaster happens, it raises many questions and unravels the hidden ignorance prevalent in the world. It shows up whether it's Sept11th, Tsunami or London bombing. Why?

Guru Nanak says, if you are Sikh, be a true Sikh; If you are a Muslim be a true Muslim. If you are a Hindu, be a true Hindu, and so on. Truthful living is the basic requirement of harmony and peace.

My experience with Interfaith work has given me the opportunity to learn about other faiths and treat others with respect and look deeper into my own faith, Sikhi and developed a strong commitment to serve the creations of God.

I believe that Group needs to change with time and we are looking forward to our new name *Wolverhampton Inter Faith Council* in the light of new vision. It has a strong foundation to keep going for the next century

**Kamaljit Kaur**  
Board Member

page 28

## COMMONALITIES ACROSS FAITHS

I have been a member of the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group for the last ten years and before that, my father Mr Bawa was a founder member of the Group. Not only have I engaged in its work but also encouraged my whole family as well as the local neighbourhood to support this voluntary group in its aim to promote peace and remove prejudices and discrimination.

Wolverhampton over the years has developed into a city and in doing so it has also attracted a diverse multi-cultural community. In the current world political climate it is more and more evident as to why such a group was set up and of its central importance. The Group provides a forum for community members from different backgrounds to engage and communicate with each other about local and national issues. It is not solely about religion but also about diversity at all levels.

I am a Senior Probation Officer working in a major government department. My work involves working closely with offenders from various backgrounds who have found themselves caught up in the criminal justice system. By engaging with the Inter Faith Group I have been able to take ideas from the Group and apply them to my professional working environment and vice versa. An excellent example would be the publication **Faith Lives**. This book is currently being used by the West Midlands Probation Service introduced by me to train and educate Probation staff about diversity among work colleagues, clients and other outside agency users to enhance and develop better understanding and communication between people. Since my involvement I feel that I have learnt that one should deploy the commonalities between the faiths and not the differences to bring us together to have a deeper understanding of each other.

Each one of us is unique because of our different upbringing, faith/belief and experiences that have shaped our thinking and understanding. Being able to understand any one of these factors to some extent can only enhance our own understanding of who we are and what we want to be and our understanding of others. In other words, relationships can be developed and enhanced through the removal of ignorance. However, in order to do this one needs to be receptive to new ideas, willing to compromise and communicate one's own views as well as listen. If one ignores this, then one can only be described as being ignorant and ignorance only breed confusion, misunderstanding and hatred.

**Parveen Brigue**

page 29

## **Thirty Years of the Hindu Community's Association with the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group**

It gives me an immense pleasure reflecting on the past, enjoying the present and looking forward to the future development of Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group (WIFG), which was established more than thirty years ago.

The organisation was born out of a need to address the disproportionate high level of fear and insecurity among Asian communities brought about by the so-called "Rivers of Blood" speech of Enoch Powell in Birmingham. The emergence of an Inter Faith Group in Wolverhampton encouraged the Hindu Community and other faith groups in the city to join in a partnership, based on equality, in order to eliminate fear, racial discrimination and subsequently promote equal opportunity for all.

### **The Hindu Community's Benefits from the link with WIFG**

The Hindu community in Wolverhampton has benefited immensely from the Inter faith Group. An outstanding example was the full support it had for the building of the Shree Krishan Mandir on the Penn Road when a lot of people saw it as an ambitious project.

When a public enquiry was set up to assess the feasibility of the project, WIFG was at the forefront of those who supported the building of the temple at its present location.

The chairperson and an independent arbitress for the enquiry commission, Mrs Margaret Langley, was impressed by the opinion of the Christian members of WIFG, that every community has a right to build its own place of worship at any chosen location. The Hindu community is indebted to WIFG for its continuous and unfaltering support.

### **Achievements of WIFG through Dialogue**

WIFG has managed to build bridges and resolve conflicts in the city through dialogue. A typical example was the case in the All Saints area some years ago, when the then Head of Grove Primary School tried to exclude a Sikh boy with a turban from the school. It was through the leadership of WIFG and the cooperation of parents and the school authorities that the situation ended amicably, and possible riots and disturbances in the area were subsequently averted. Over the years, WIFG has succeeded in using dialogue to resolve several other issues of cultural sensitivity and racial misunderstanding in the

city. WIFG has been playing a leading role in relieving sufferings in the city and beyond, as was demonstrated in the recent Tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia.

### **Further Developments Needed to Consolidate the work of WIFG**

A greater involvement of all the communities in the city is of vital importance in creating adequate financial support for WIFG. At the moment, most of our funding has been from Christian sources. More effort is needed to gain financial support from Asian communities and other sources such as Wolverhampton city Council, NRF small grants, Community Chest and many others.

At this point we need more involvement from the younger generation, who are the future leaders; their strength, power and enthusiasm could be of immense help. Nevertheless we do need people of all ages, from all communities, who have the time commitment and enthusiasm to work with us. As soon as we get this right our organisation will blossom and flourish just like a lotus flower. We should renew our determination and ask the Lord to help us accomplish all our goals.

This is the time to explore the possibility of acquiring our own quarters in order to enhance our effectiveness in the enormous task of bringing together the different faiths in the city of Wolverhampton. Let us blow away the blues and get into a positive mood, look to the future rather than worrying about what might have been.

Let us refresh our outlook in order to combat our social and demographic future needs.

**T. R. Bhardwaj**

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

A Jewish woman, who served in the WRAF near Wolverhampton, in the 1940's, remembers attending services at the Wolverhampton Synagogue. In those days Wolverhampton had a sizeable Jewish community. Over the years the community diminished until the few families left were not enough to sustain that synagogue.

But the size of the Jewish community does not matter for Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group. The Group is welcoming for all and provides opportunity for dialogue.

Over the years the annual Prayers for Peace has been a significant event. It is a rare opportunity for us all to share together bits of our traditions. Breaking down barriers between us by discovering and rediscovering our similarities and differences is an ongoing joy.

Sometimes there are times of difficulty, when events from the world or local stage present challenges. The existence of the Inter Faith Group means that there is already a friendly group who can be relied upon to provide help and support to one another and develop a plan of action when needed.

Most significant is the investment into the future that the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group has already made in the field of education. The Group gives very practical help by providing resources for Wolverhampton schools. Making sure that today's children - tomorrow's adults - receive good information about a range of religious traditions all helps build on the foundations of understanding that were started 30 years ago.

It is no surprise to find that many of the same faces from the Inter Faith Group also contribute their time to the Wolverhampton Local Education Authority Standing Advisory Committee for Religious Education (SACRE). The SACRE is responsible for setting the syllabus for what will be taught in Wolverhampton schools.

The way that the youngsters of today show knowledge and interest in all faith traditions, more so than in previous generations, and less weighed down by stereotype, is all testament to the influence of the work of the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group. For the Jewish community, this positive shift across the generations is greatly appreciated. We look forward to this continuing as the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group develops into the future.

**Martin Gomberg**

page 32

## The Next Thirty Years

I have been a founder member of the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group (WIFG) since its birth more than 30 years ago. I have served the Group in a number of roles to the best of my ability and devotions. I sincerely believe it is doing an excellent service to the varying faiths and communities in Wolverhampton and the surrounding areas. The City needs such an organisation like the Interfaith Group to maintain peace, harmony and better understanding between different faith communities. Without a dialogue, it is very easy for misunderstandings to arise, prejudices to flourish and the community relations to break down. The Group has contributed immensely to the positive relations that exist between communities across the City.

As termed in the African Culture, 'HARAMBEE' which means to move forward together, we cannot remain static and continue carrying out the same actions, as we have done in the past 30 years. Times have changed and we also need to change as well.

First, we must involve local communities more and more in the work that the Inter Faith Group is promoting. If some groups have not yet come to us then it is our firm duty to go to them. We must look into why they are not fully involved. We must take their opinions into account when making important decisions. If communities don't get actively involved, then we simply cannot make any real progress. There should also be a thrust to increase our individual and group affiliation with WIFG membership.

Secondly, we should plan more activities in collaboration with local communities. Indeed on an annual basis we need to review our work and future initiatives. The management board meetings should be about the events we are planning to organise or evaluating what we have already done so far.

Thirdly, the Inter Faith office should be open five-days-a-week, to members of all local communities. People will inevitably get frustrated if they find the door to the office is often closed. We exist for the local faith communities. The office building should be a centre of activity with people dropping in to discuss issues.

page 33



seek advice or to exchange ideas.

Fourthly, we should strongly aim to have our own Inter Faith building. There should be a permanent base for the Group to work from, rather than working in a rented building. We have already set up a building fund to raise money so that we can purchase our own office space. This will enable us to create a faith library, designated meeting areas and a permanent exhibition centre. All members of the WIFG and other affiliated groups should contribute to this fund, as it is an essential priority.

I wish the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group every success in the future. I am sure it will keep on doing its excellent work for the next 30 years. We all need to work together in raising the profile of the City of Wolverhampton.

May almighty God bless all faith communities to unite under the umbrella of WIFG and aid us in working towards our common purpose in creating love and peace.

**Vasdev Singh Bhamrah**  
**Patron (WIFG)**

## **CONTRIBUTION TO FAITH DIALOGUE AND HARMONY**

I first came to live and work in Wolverhampton in 1978, as a newly qualified teacher, trained in world faiths and cultures but with limited actual practical experiences beyond a shire County upbringing and my own faith journey.

My school in Wednesfield provided happy times and valuable lessons for me both in learning more about and from world faiths and cultures, and also in a community working together beyond any issues of race, culture or faith for the benefit of all pupils.

Since the late 1980's working for the Lichfield diocese, I have been privileged to be involved with many Wolverhampton schools' staff, pupils and communities. Church schools have a Christian foundation and identity yet are rooted firmly in their own individual environment and community. The Diocese supports and promotes each of its Church Schools working together with all its stakeholders to provide the best quality all-round education.

I have also been involved over many years with Wolverhampton SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education), including 9 years as Chair. Members are from all faiths and none, and have always worked co-operatively and productively respecting and valuing each others faiths, perspectives and contributions at meetings.

Nowhere can this spirit be more clearly evidenced than in the development over the years of no less than 3 RE Agreed Syllabus documents; the basis for RE teaching Wolverhampton schools, where each time the document has been 'agreed' on schedule and in harmony amongst all the constituent groups and individuals.

Individual schools, the Diocese and SACRE all have cause to thank the work of the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group over the years. Their involvement in specific projects and their overall contribution to inter faith dialogue and harmony is immeasurable.

Wolverhampton is a pioneer in this field where they have led, others have later followed.

**June Cook**

## DON'T BECOME IRRELEVANT - PRAY!

***"They're probably the best thing in Wolverhampton.  
Don't let them get as irrelevant as the Church of England."***

Comment by John Hammersley, in 1983, when I told him I was going to get involved with the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group.

**GOD/Truth speaks > Leader listens > Committed Band Follows > Lively movement grows > Members take initiative > Supportive Structure built > Body of Teaching recorded > World takes note > World is changed/transformed.**

Time passes >>>> >>>> "How do we *Keep Going?*" > Maintain *Structure* > Teach in (dogma) *unchangeable* > Members pass responsibility to *Leaders* > Inspiration *disappears* > World Rejects Us as *Irrelevant*.

**It's happened to every religious movement. What do we do to stop it happening to WIFG? Or rather, what do we do when it begins to happen? for happen it will!**

**PRAY OBEY.** Every faith started with prayer hearing the *word from GOD (or truth)* which triggered off the *inward journey* of the founder, whether individual or community. Prayer is first about *hearing*, and then about our *response* in inner journey and outward obedience.

GOD's word comes on us most vividly at crisis moments: Sikh Turbans in schools; assassination of Indira & Rajiv Gandhi; Ayodhya Mosque/West Bromwich Temple; Satanic Verses; Gulf War 1 & 2; Bosnia needs; 9/11. WIFG made a **relevant response** from the hidden treasure-chest of its heart. The Word has come to us also in ongoing socio-political involvement: Education, Police, Health Care, Multi-Cultural training, Community Celebration. **Relevant** response again.

We've been able to make these **responses, relevant to the world**, because:-

- We are a group who trust each other, and can therefore call others to trust
- We had done the "leg-work" patiently over years growing in trust and love
- We are rooted in a truth bigger than us that enables us to stick our necks out

The loving trust, leg-work, and bigger truth sprang not from uncertainty, but from a security in our own faith that emboldened us to listen to others, even when what they

would seemed strange and even threatening. It sprang from prayer the *inner journey* in response to *the word from GOD/truth*. Ivy's inter-faith exploring sprang from a very simple Methodist Christian prayer life. Inderjit's passionate theological assertion of New Testament support for inter-faith work, was rooted in his personal experience that "I could not have become a Christian if I had had to stop being a Sikh"; while his often uncomfortable assertion of justice issues (remember his leadership in the march following the killing of a black man under arrest) went alongside his weekly Holy Communion service in the Inter-Faith Centre. Of others who have passed on into greater life I recall Sabir Hussein's Christmas greeting from his devout Islamic faith, and Ranjit rebuking Christian worship for "talking too much". I note, love and respect similar devotion in current members who are moved by their inner life to effective outward action.

GOD's gift to the world is *people*, real people, on a spiritual journey. **US!**

Surely it's in **prayer**, more than in discussion, that we are brought closer to one another. If we are all nearer to GOD/truth, we must then be nearer to one another. I have used (or is it misused?) words from all the main faith traditions as part of my morning prayer for fifteen years now, and find them helpful. **But I still pray as a Christian.** I am hospitably welcomed by the UKIM mosque most Sunday evenings at one of the prayer times, though I'm fully aware that I do not pray as one of them.

I quite often attend worship at the Ramgarhia Sabha after my St Andrew's service, but I know I'm not one of them. Yet it seems to be a part of my inner journey to walk alongside those who are on a different path. I wonder if we all need to do that more?

One more point. I miss very much the weekly 15 minute "prayer for peace" which we used to have at the WIFG office. For me it stood for the fact that we are not first and foremost a "campaigning group", but a living body of people who wait upon GOD/Truth, and TRY to work out our inner journey in **RELEVANT FAITH-INSPIRED ACTION FOR GOD/TRUTH/LOVE.**

**Revd. Tim Fyffe**

## WHAT IF?

Picture a Wolverhampton without the WIFG ever having existed. What would it be like today, if a group of people from different faiths didn't seek to become friends and commit themselves to building a society based on respect and understanding, instead of the fear of the unknown and ignorance? What would Wolverhampton be like if the WIFG had never come into being? Quite simply, Wolverhampton would be very different indeed to what we have today.

I think the City of Wolverhampton's living legacy is enriched deeply because the vision and commitment of a small group of enthusiasts over a period of over 30 years have helped the WIFG develop into what we have today.

Those who subscribe to the values and ethos of the group - those who say "yes" to what the group stands for and seeks to accomplish - number many hundreds of people, or even thousands! Despite this, like many voluntary charitable organisations, it invariably falls to a very small number of people to carry the vision though. It always has and probably will always be so! It is therefore truly remarkable that the WIFG's list of people who use the gifts and talents of the group include schools and LEA's, universities, local governments and national parliament - individuals and corporations alike: all utilising the knowledge and resources that the WIFG has generated.

The best thing that the WIFG has to offer has and always will be the people of faith in Wolverhampton. Books and artefacts about faith date and age are set in particular times and contexts. But people of a living and active faith have something new to say each day and this keeps the life-blood of society fresh and invigorated.

This is the enduring challenge that has faced the WIFG since its inception: to encourage, teach and challenge the world to hear the authentic and vital voice of the faithful person. It is a precious voice and needs to be heard. May this challenge always lie at the heart of WIFG's activities now and in the years to come.

**The Revd David Cooper**  
**WIFG 1998-2004**

## PEACE IS THE ONLY WAY FORWARD

I am a believing Christian, and as such, believe that all people should have an equal chance to fulfil themselves, and have a reasonable standard of living. I became involved in inter-racial work in Wolverhampton through the Young Men's Christian Association, of which I was the full-time organiser for some fifteen years. We ran a town-centre club, which was available all day and evenings, every day of the week [except Sunday mornings]. This pattern enabled us to help those who were out of work and marginalised by society. During this time the young West-Indian community was being discriminated against and became the predominant membership group. The authorities used many ploys to try to close the facilities, eventually removing the grant-aid that paid my salary. The Wolverhampton Council for Community Relations stepped in and we were able to continue.

Through WCCR I became involved in wider schemes to benefit all minority groups. Now I am retired I have become involved with the Inter Faith movement as a Board member. I have seen the lessening of tensions between different groups, as the general public become more aware of the bonuses to be gained by co-operation. All religions preach peace, and I see WIFG as one of the participants in that process of peace. Through them, I have become involved in a movement to promote a Ministry of Peace within the Government, and a Commission for Peace as its outside working group. This is to act as an equivalent peace bias to the military lobby and to promote peaceful ways of resolving differences both within our local society, nationally and internationally. WIFG is already involved in this, and has been for some thirty years, our only way forward is a peaceful one, where we value each other and our beliefs.

**Michael Todd**  
**WIFG**  
**Board Member**

## MESSAGE FROM THE NEW CROSS HOSPITAL'S CHAPLAIN

I would like to say a few words about the importance of the multi-faith involvement over the years with the life and work of our local hospitals. I have only been in post as Chaplain here for the Royal Wolverhampton Hospitals NHS Trust for the last two years, but am aware that there have been a number of very active people within the community and at the Hospital who have concerned themselves with helping to ensure that the spiritual and pastoral needs have been met of the patients staff and visitors here in Wolverhampton. It is important that the spiritual needs of all are met within the hospital community and that people are able to practise their faith whilst in hospital. We have very much welcomed the involvement of a number of named and nominated faith representatives from the local Sikh, Hindu and Muslim communities who have been able to respond in emergencies and also deal with general faith related referrals and enquires.

We are attempting to build and develop the work here at New Cross Hospital and the Eye Infirmary with our colleagues from the various faith communities. I would like to thank the individuals who have actively and tirelessly been involved with the life and work of the hospital community here in Wolverhampton and look forward to continuing to work alongside them in the future.'

**Revd. Stuart Pretty**

## INSPIRATION FOR A BEST SELLER

It was when I was Head of Religious Education at the Municipal Grammar School, which later became Colton Hills School, that the Inter Faith Group organised, in 1976, the successful exhibition of black and white photographs of people at worship in the various faith communities in the town. The photographs were mainly taken by Nick Hedges and one of his students. My colleague, Mrs Celia Collinson, and I were so impressed with the photographs that we felt they could have a significant role in promoting multi-faith RE in the classroom.

We thought initially of a teaching pack with suggested activities but our idea developed from there and was taken up by the educational publisher, Edward Arnold (later to become Hodder Headline). The result was the eventual publication of a secondary school text book - "Believers- Worship in a multi-faith community". It consisted of photographs from the exhibition, together with explanations and suggested tasks for pupils to work on and focussed on Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The book was so successful that we were asked to do another on Ceremonies of Birth, Marriage, Commitment and Death, entitled "Milestones"; this led on to two others, on Festivals and Pilgrimages. While these later books did not depend on the Wolverhampton photographs, the whole project was inspired by our membership of the Inter Faith group, and much of our research for the text in all four books involved talking with members of the group and visiting many of the various faith communities.

In total about 114, 000 copies of these books were sold and we know that they found their way into schools all over the country and some even to some schools abroad. We like to think that in this way, the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group has spread its influence far beyond the local area, and hopefully, has played some part in stimulating thought in young people about the significance of faith, and since we believe prejudice breeds on ignorance, has helped in some way to combat racial prejudice.

Celia and I will always be grateful for the help and encouragement we were given all these years ago, especially by the late Ivy Gutridge and that we were able to play some part in furthering the aims and the influence of the Inter Faith Group.

**Campbell Miller**

## **The 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our City of Wolverhampton's Inter Faith Group.**

I see it is Thursday July 7<sup>th</sup>, as I begin to write these remembrances of the Inter Faith Group and of being on its committee for 4 years. A happening that caused me real astonishment! There I was sitting quietly at the AGM in the year 2000 and there was a sudden silence, a blank response lasting for a minute, I suppose following a request by the chair for more names to be suggested for the committee. And I sitting quietly (with my hearing aid switched on) suddenly heard an old acquaintance, one who had survived being a patient, shout out my name as a possible candidate for the committee!

I found myself nodding in agreement it being generally better to say yes rather than no if you are dead! And so it was to be!

This morning the headlines in the Independent, under world news, carry the headings "India convulsed by sectarian violence as Muslim hardliners attacked an airport, after a Hindu attack on a disputed temple". And then on the next page "Teachers in southern Thailand, mostly Buddhists, are to be armed by the government with revolvers because local religious differences may lead to their being attacked!"

So what would Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group be able to offer?

The answer was to give me real pleasure as I found a remarkable mix of representatives of the world's religions sitting together in the Princess Street offices. Without any apparent difficulty. I was made welcome as a newcomer in a gathering of obviously friendly enough Wulfrunians of very varying faiths, who managed to talk the same language in spite of our so different backgrounds. And when there were differences of opinion, which did of course occur, the media would have been sorry to have to record that it was entirely amicable; to me anyway. But then we were so fortunate to have such an excellent chairman in Sehdev Bismal, with competent officers to assist him. The whole set-up seemed to have gradually, over the years, come to a degree of maturity. With a paid secretary to make the Group one that could now cope with an office open all day, it was so much more in business than I had ever realised.

And the great support of the Bishop of Wolverhampton as President, which gave us such significant support on high... With Jim McManus for so many jobs successfully tackled as well as being the secretary, Vasdev and Tim Fyffe always around with untold hours of help and an efficient treasurer in Erik Pearse. So why shouldn't it be in business?

Only as a result of years of really hard work I gradually come to realise, and with many anxieties over such fundamentals as funding. Once again the problem not that you may well expect to be to attract money for new schemes, but to pay for daily expenses...!

But little did any of us expect what was to happen half an hour after I started to write, that this Thursday was to be the day of the appalling attacks on London! It's our turn this time!

I'm reading a new book by Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, "The Dignity of Difference" inspired by seven leaders of world religions meeting at the ruins of the world Trade Centre and doing so together as a gesture of solidarity with that damaged city.

Now London shows us how far we have to go... but our Inter Faith group does, surely show us that it may be possible. It is all of, but only, 30 years since Ken and Ivy Guttridge started the idea that we should begin to try and get to know our neighbours, who were bringing totally new religions, ideas and words to the town

When I first came to this then smoky Midland town, which I learnt made any and everything that could be made from metal, the idea that there were any other religions save varieties of Christians and Jews just didn't exist! And the Christian varieties were unknown to each other! You could look them up in an encyclopaedia!

We had altered since Lady Wulfruna founded St. Peter's in 99 / AD, but not perhaps all that much!

We are not the same as each other, we shall never be, but we are much nearer to realising that we can see the image of God in one another thanks to those initial 30 years of hard inter faith work, in spite of all the many, many problems the world really has to face... problems which will demand all our faiths to stand by each other in an increasingly secular and still violent world.

**Edward Pringle**

## Inter Faith Symbol of Working Together

In the United Kingdom the first inter faith movement began in Wolverhampton in 1974. Since then it has aspired to become a socially and religiously active establishment promoting the need for understanding, unity and peace within communities. According to Interfaith Organisations in the UK (2005), this development is evident through the 185 different interfaith groups, councils and forums that presently exist.

My awareness of the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group (WIFG) began around 1974. In 1976, I became a general member of WIFG. Though it was during 1984 that I became the General Secretary of the Ramgarhia Sabha (Sikh Temple Newhampton Road East, Wolverhampton), consequently enabling me to represent them within the Inter Faith Group. Since 1993 I have proudly served as an Executive and Board Member of the WIFG.

Till now I have enriched myself with experience and wider knowledge which I obtained whilst visiting places of worship, schools, attending peace prayers, faith meetings and cultural programmes. Through this I have built many close friendships with people of all faiths and backgrounds, which I hold in high regard.

In my opinion the Inter Faith Group has played a vital role in building the bridges of friendship to create peace, harmony and prosperity between many faith communities. Its influence branches through many areas of society such as Religious Education, which is taught within schools and universities. Along with this, faith exhibitions, seminars and conferences are apparent which enable us to demonstrate and outline the roots and variations in our multicultural society. It has also raised the united voice against injustices, conflicts within and outside communities.

Another imperative is the involvement of youth within the Inter Faith group. I feel it is through the youth that new innovations and ideas can be brought into WIFG. Indeed it is not irrational to suggest we need to be revolutionary in our approach to attracting young people into the Inter faith Group network. Through

creating interest and reinforcing their spiritual incitement we will fulfil the dream of a world free from want, free from fear and free for the future generations to inherit a sound, healthy environment of non violence for the children of the world.

The key here is the need to work together as a interdependent community, as it is only through working together that we may achieve the common goal of mutual respect and closer understanding between all communities. We must educate children to respect and accept people of different faiths and cultures, so that they do not become offended by others who hold different values or customs. Also, it is essential parents provide children with first hand knowledge of other faiths whether at home or in social surroundings.

It is heartening to see that work carried out by the Inter Faith Group is receiving wider acknowledgement in the UK and abroad by setting up their own faith groups in their local town and city. This has already been a major achievement when working together with united power and confidence.

I would like to finish by saying peace can only be achieved by the transformation of human inner heart. For this reason all religions have to play an important role within society, as progress can only happen through the hard working people who live for the sake of others.

**Joginder Singh Bhambra**

# **HONORARY OFFICE BEARERS WOLVERHAMPTON INTER-FAITH GROUP 1974-2006**

page 46

Years	President	Vice-President	Chairman	Vice-Chairman	Secretary	Treasurer
1974 - 75	Rev Neville Platten				Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	
1975 - 76	Rev Neville Platten				Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	
1976 - 77	Rev Neville Platten				Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	
1977 - 78	Rev Neville Platten	Mr. Harun Rashid			Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
19778 - 79	Mr. Harun Rashid	Rev Ian Forster			Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
1979 - 80	Rt Rev Barry Rogerson		Mr. Harun Rashid	Rev Ian Forster	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
1980 - 81	Rt Rev Barry Rogerson		Rev Ian Forster	Mr. Ravi Khosla	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
1981 - 82	Rt Rev Barry Rogerson		Rev Ian Forster	Mr. Ravi Khosla	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
1982 - 83	Rt Rev Barry Rogerson		Mr. Ravi Khosla	Mr. Ranjit Singh	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
1983 - 84	Rt Rev Barry Rogerson		Mr. Ravi Khosla	Mr. Ranjit Singh	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
1984 - 85	Rt Rev Barry Rogerson		Mr. Ranjit Singh	Mr. Ian Cowie	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
1985 - 86	Rt Rev Chris Mayfield		Mr. Ranjit Singh	Mr. Ian Cowie	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge	Mr. Ian Cowie
1986 - 87	Rt Rev Chris Mayfield		Mr. Ian Cowie	Mr. Saber Hussein	Rev Tim Fyffe	Mr. Ian Cowie
1987 - 88	Rt Rev Chris Mayfield		Mr. Ian Cowie	Mr. T R Bhardwaj *	Rev Tim Fyffe	Mr. Ian Cowie
1988 - 89	Rt Rev Chris Mayfield		Mr. T R Bhardwaj	Mr. Kingsley Fernando	Rev Tim Fyffe	Mr. Ian Cowie
1989 - 90	Rt Rev Chris Mayfield		Mr. T R Bhardwaj	Rev Nigel Pounce	Rev Tim Fyffe	Mr. Ian Cowie
1990 - 91	Rt Rev Chris Mayfield		Rev Nigel Pounce	Mr. Vasdev S Bhamrah	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge *	Rev Jim McManus
1991 - 92	Rt Rev Chris Mayfield		Rev Nigel Pounce	Mr. Vasdev S Bhamrah	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge *	Rev Jim McManus
1992 - 93	Rt Rev Chris Mayfield		Mr. Vasdev S Bhamrah	Mr. Prem Lal	Mrs. Ivy Gutridge *	Rev Jim McManus
1993 - 94	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Vasdev S Bhamrah	Mr. Prem Lal	Mrs. Gutridge MBE *	Rev Jim McManus
1994 - 95	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Prem Lal	Mr. Shah Ali	Mr. Ravi Khosla *	Rev Jim McManus
1995 - 96	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Prem Lal	Mr. Shah Ali	Mr. Ravi Khosla	Mr. T S Dhillon
1996 - 97	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Shah Ali	Mr. Sehdev Bismal	Mr. Ravi Khosla	Mr. T S Dhillon
1997 - 98	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Shah Ali	Mr. Sehdev Bismal	Rev Jim McManus	Mr. Erik Pearse
1998 - 99	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Sehdev Bismal	Mr. Vasdev S Bhamrah	Rev Jim McManus	Mr. Erik Pearse
1999 - 2000	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Sehdev Bismal	Mr. Vasdev S Bhamrah	Rev Jim McManus	Mr. Erik Pearse
2000 - 2001	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Sehdev Bismal	Mr. Vasdev S Bhamrah	Rev Jim McManus	Mr. Erik Pearse

2001 - 2002	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Sehdev Bismal	Mrs. Kamraj Kaur	Rev Jim McManus	Mr. Erik Pearse
2002 - 2003	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Sehdev Bismal	Mrs. Kamraj Kaur	Rev Jim McManus	Mr. Erik Pearse
2003 - 2004	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Sehdev Bismal MBE	Mr. Devinder Kalhan	Rev Jim McManus	Mr. Erik Pearse
2004 - 2005	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Devinder Kalhan	Mr. Sehdev Bismal MBE	Rev Jim McManus	Mr. Erik Pearse
2005 - 2006	Rt Rev Michael Bourke	Mr. Harun Rashid	Mr. Devinder Kalhan	Mr. Sehdev Bismal MBE	Father Patrick Udoma	Mr. Erik Pearse

\*Acting

---- Position not set up

## **VOLUNTEERS**

Rev Neville Platten 1978 - 1980  
Community Co-ordinator

Mr. Harun Rashid 1993 - 1993  
Community Co-ordinator

**PAID STAFF**  
Rev Norman Briggs 1984 - 1987  
Community Co-ordinator

Mr. Peter Smith 1987 - 1989  
Community Co-ordinator

Mr. Peter Smith 1989 - 1991  
Community Co-ordinator

Mr. Peter Smith 1991 - 1993  
Community Co-ordinator

Mr. Peter Smith 1993 - 1995  
Community Co-ordinator

Mr. Peter Smith 1995 - 1997  
Community Co-ordinator

Mr. Peter Smith 1997 - 1999  
Community Co-ordinator

## **PATRONS**

Mrs. Ivy Gutridge MBE  
10 th Nov 1998 - 19th Jun 2004

Mr. Vasdev Singh Bhamrah  
6th Feb 2003 - Present

Lord Dennis Turner of Bilston  
14th April 2005 - Present

## **WOLVERHAMPTON INTER-FAITH GROUP**



## **HONORARY OFFICE BEARERS AND PAID OFFICIALS**

1974 - 2006

Established 1974

Registered Charity Number 513201 (1982)



