Acting in God's Love

Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World

churches together
IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND©

A Practical Theological Resource using the document Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World, prepared by Bonnie Evans-Hills, Barbara Glasson and members of the Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group within Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

ACTING IN GOD'S LOVE

Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World

A practical theological resource using the WCC's *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct* guidelines and rooting them in earthed case studies from the UK

A practical, theological resource, rooted in the UK and Irish context, and using the document "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct" produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA): https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/christian-identity-in-pluralistic-societies/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world.

- Gain a practical understanding towards application of the guidelines;
- Provide a wider perspective of the UK context;
- Develop deeper theological reflection on interfaith engagement.

Engagement between faith communities is the stuff of everyday life, whether through interacting with our neighbours, work colleagues, travel, social media or the news, and only tends to gain greater attention when considered a source of conflict. Conflict between communities is more often a result of political or socio-economic disadvantage of any one or several groupings, be it faith, cultural, racial, gender, sexuality, disability, caste or class. When conflict happens, faith is at times not only called to blame as the harbinger of extreme ideologies, but people of faith are expected to pick up the pieces, to act as peacemakers, and to bring about change.

The stories included in this study guide are taken from real situations. They are the lived experience of those living and working, ministering on the ground in UK communities. There are stories that uplift, and stories of pain – but they are all stories of the life we share together. Each section has a series of stories that reflect that particular guide for conduct, but which could speak equally as well to other sections.

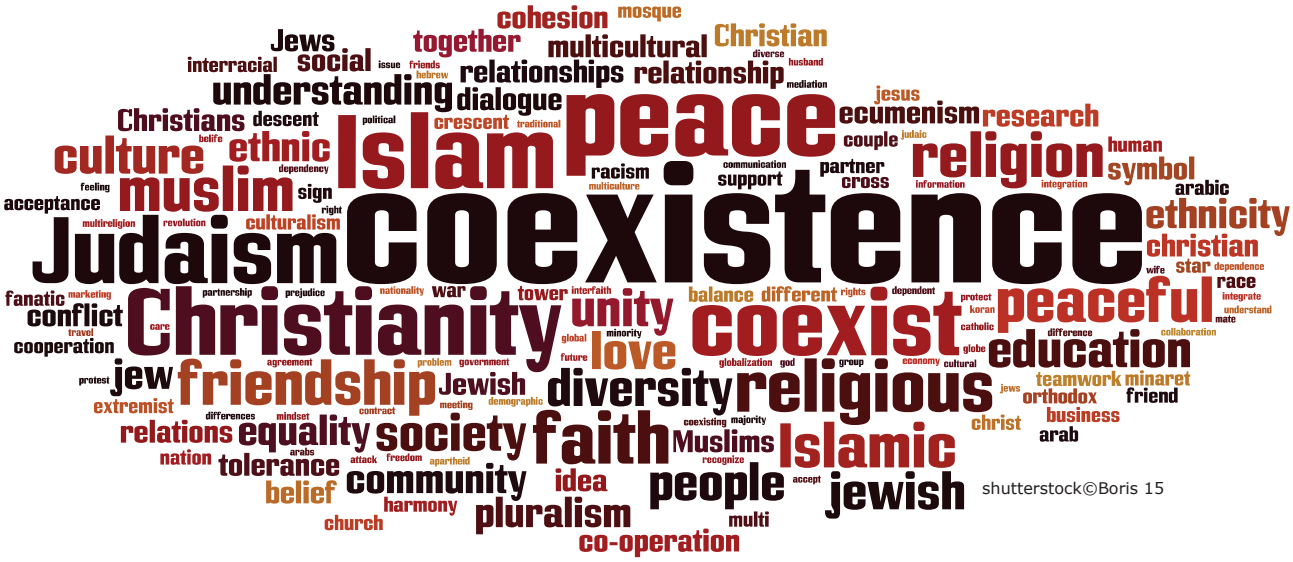
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you work your way through the stories and sections, these questions might be a helpful way of reflecting on each, or used in study groups for discussion:

1. Did this story challenge any stereotypes you may have held?
2. What did you find insightful or helpful in this story?
3. Would you have handled this situation any differently?
4. What about this story challenged your relationship with your neighbours? With God?
5. What about this story encourages a deeper relationship with your neighbours? With God?
6. Does this story bring to mind a particular passage of scripture or story from the Bible?
7. How does this story illustrate the Christian principle under which it is listed?
8. What action does this story prompt you to take?
9. What are your own stories?

PRINCIPLES - CASE STUDIES

Using the principles for Christian behaviour and life outlined in the WCC guidelines, case studies have been provided to explore these principles further using real life scenarios.



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1.Acting in God's love

Christians believe that God is the source of all love and, accordingly, in their witness they are called to live lives of love and to love their neighbour as themselves. Matthew 22:22-34-40 and John 14:15

These case studies are about times when Christians have walked alongside others or others have walked alongside Christians in the hope of building community and deeper relationships of love and respect.

***Case Study*: Walking alongside** - When a small Muslim community on a council estate was subject to protest from the EDL over possible use of a former scout hut as a place of prayer as well as community centre, local Christians were involved alongside other community workers, such as the city race equality centre, in helping to build community relations. They stood alongside them during EDL protests, one of which involved the presence of Nick Griffin, lending moral support through their presence as well as writing letters to the police, city council and press. They walked alongside them as the Muslim community distributed food at Eid, and lent support in setting up a food bank. Love for neighbour in action enabled a marginalised worshipping community to feel that they were a welcome partner in the estate, and in the wider city.

***Case Study*: Receiving Grace** - At a church in London, an elderly Jewish man attended the services on a fairly regularly basis. When the Old Testament reading was announced he always stood for the duration of the reading. One day the minister spoke to him and discovered that the reason he did this was because during World War II he had been recused from Holocaust via Kinder Transport and cared for in a Christian family. For him, attending acts of Christian worship, and participating as far as he could, was an expression of his abiding gratitude for what Christians had done for him.

***Case Study*: St Alban, the first martyr in Britain,** gave his life that an asylum seeker could find sanctuary:

'A man called Alban, believed to have been a Romano-British citizen of the Roman town of Verulamium around the end of the 3rd century, gave shelter to an itinerant Christian priest, later called Amphibalus.

Impressed by what he heard, Alban was converted to Christianity by him.

'When a period of persecution, ordered by the Emperor, brought soldiers in search of the priest, Alban exchanged clothes with him allowing him to escape and it was Alban who was arrested in his place.

'Standing trial and asked to prove his loyalty by making offerings to the Roman gods, Alban bravely declared his faith in "the true and living God who created all things". This statement condemned Alban to death. He was led out of the city, across the river and up a hillside where he was beheaded.' (from the website of St Albans Cathedral https://www.stalbanscathedral.org/history/story-of-st-alban)

***Case Study*: Sharing space with those who have none** - When the Somali Bravanese Al-Rahma community centre in Muswell was burned down in an arson attack, the Muswell Hill Synagogue offered space in the synagogue for them to pray and to use for their children's after school activities during the week. Their gracious provision was recognised in an award for Community Cohesion from the Islamic Society of Britain. 'Rabbi Mason said: "We are a community that puts much effort into inter-faith relations and I am very proud of the connection we have built up with the local Bravanese community."' https://www.thejc.com/community/community-news/muslims-say-thank-you-to-muswell-hill-shul-1.61035?highlight=muswell%7Ehill%7Esynagogue%7Earson

An act which was meant to destroy the Somali Muslim community in Muswell Hill, ended in strengthening ties as all of the faith communities in the area rallied around them to provide support in the wake of the attack. This gesture from the synagogue and provision of space challenged many of the stereotypes of an unbreachable conflict between Muslims and Jews.

2. Imitating Jesus Christ

In all aspects of life, and especially in their witness, Christians are called to follow the example and teachings of Jesus Christ, sharing his love, giving glory and honour to God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:21-23).

Our global community is full of examples of people of faith giving their lives that others might live and flourish. There are the brothers of Tibherine, so movingly depicted in the film, 'Of Gods and Men' (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1588337/), and of other religious living in Algeria during that same time and documented in the book 'Christian Martyrs for a Muslim People' by Martin McGee OSB (http://www.paulistpress.com/Products/4539-3/christian-martyrs-for-a-muslim-people.aspx). The sacrifices made by our neighbours in faith, those Muslims who stood lined up outside churches in Egypt and Pakistan in order to protect Christian worship from possible threats of violence, must also be acknowledged. Sometimes we discover those of another faith taking on the sacrifices of Christ for our sake, sharing their bread, sharing their love, and coming to our defence.

How far are we able to be the face of Christ to those we meet? And are we able to see the face of Christ in the other?

***Case Study*: Conversation at Islamabad airport** - I had an interfaith conversation by mistake on a journey back from Pakistan. I wasn't really wanting to engage with my fellow passenger as I was anxious to get home, however, he was very kind to me and so we exchanged some pleasantries. It turned out that he was a taxi driver from Dewsbury and he was keen to know why I had been visiting Pakistan as I was the only white person on the flight.

I didn't want to say that I was a Christian minister in case my companion assumed that I had been to Pakistan on some kind of mission of conversion but the conversation unfolded in such a way that it was impossible not to disclose my faith. Having done so, my fellow passenger spent the next 40 minutes of our time together explaining to me that in his opinion Christians were misguided, that we had invented three Gods, that we changed the Bible to suit our own ends and that Islam was a preferred way to know Jesus.

I began to become irritated with the one way flow of the discourse so I interrupted with the challenge that he needed to summarise Islam in 3 minutes and he returned the challenge for me and Christianity. The next few minutes were spent, not by me listening to him, but me racking my brains to think of how I could summarise my faith.

I said that I believed in a living God who was still involved in the world through Jesus.

That I was glad that we continued to find different readings of our religious text and that made it more precious for me as it was always offering surprises.

And that Christianity was the only faith that told its followers to love our enemies and pray for those that persecute us.

It was an uncomfortable conversation in which neither of us really listened to the other and I suspect both of us were rather frustrated, but it did make me think how I could give account of my faith succinctly without resorting to the sort of short-hand jargon that I don't believe in either.

***Case Study*: What language are we speaking?** I was privileged to take part in a dialogue between monks at Ampleforth Abbey (I am Anglican, a woman, and was a lay adviser at the time), and Shia Muslim scholars from Qum in Iran – two days after the events of 7/7. We met first in London, at a Jesuit college, and then travelled up to Yorkshire to the abbey. There was such good will on the part of everyone, to find common ground and come to a common mind. At one point one of the scholars from Iran turned to us and, with such passion in his eyes, explained to us how much he loves Jesus, that Jesus is a respected and much-loved prophet in Islam. His heart was full. And when he had finished, a lovely monk, Brother Boniface, turned to him with a heart equally as full, and explained that for him, for Christians, this just wasn't enough; that Jesus is more than a beloved prophet; that Jesus is the Love of God incarnate in human form come to love and save us all.

The Iranian scholar was downhearted – concerned that while he had intended to reach out in love, his words had actually insulted, but Brother Boniface and others reassured him he had not and his words were received in the spirit in which they were meant.

The whole dialogue over several days took place in a spirit of sincerely wanting to come to a commonality and not quite getting there – until the final day. The theme for that day was spirituality, and suddenly we were speaking the same language. Our love of God, and the command that we love one another, was something we all shared. It sounds rather corny, but love brought us together.

***Case Study*: Sharing love of God** 'Since becoming a Hindu, I have come to understand my Christian roots better. I would even say that I have become a better Christian.' So said a western convert to the Vaishnava tradition of Hinduism. He continued to speak enthusiastically about the spirituality of Hinduism, most particularly the emphasis on loving devotion to God within his own spiritual practice, which included dancing and chanting their love. His Christian audience were captivated. One Christian present said, 'You have made me see that Christians can be reluctant to express their love of God openly. We sing hymns but we don't express our love of God in the way that you do, with your body, your emotions and your mind. Your words are a real challenge to me.'

3. Christian virtues

Christians are called to conduct themselves with integrity, charity, compassion and humility, and to overcome all arrogance, condescension and disparagement (cf. Galatians 5:22).

***Case Study*: A rural devotion** In a tiny rural village there is a corner shop which serves the locals faithfully, getting anything in that people ask for and ensuring produce is delivered to the housebound. The owners of the shop are Hindu, and every Sunday one of them makes an act of Hindu devotion by visiting the church before the early service. He brings milk for the congregation's coffee, an offering for the collection plate, and a breakfast bar for the person leading the service. He prostrates before the altar and receives a blessing from the priest. It is as much an act of Christian charity to joyfully accept this humble devotion as it is to give devotion ourselves.

***Case Study*: where can we pray?** One of my parishioners, who doesn't come to church but is supportive of my ministry, was telling me about a former employee of his who trained for ordination in the Church of England. When this parishioner went to his ordination he noticed a Muslim guest trying to pray unobtrusively behind a pillar of the cathedral. But the steward approached to tell him he couldn't do that. This had happened over twenty years previously, but it obviously made an impact on my parishioner. While it is canon law that a public service of any faith other than Trinitarian Christian cannot be held in a Church of England church, how can there be any objection to anyone using a church for prayer?

***Case Study*: Appropriating the spirit** The room in London was packed with Christians and Buddhists, most of whom were of Sri Lankan origin. The topic was Buddhist-Christian relations. At one point, one of the Christians present said something like this, 'The Buddha was such a good teacher and had so many wise insights that he must have been in contact with God'. The moment he said this, there was an almost tangible frisson of tension among the Buddhists in the room. After a moment of absolute silence, a Buddhist got up and tried to respond. 'Buddhism is a non-theistic religion', she explained. 'The Buddha was an enlightened being and our texts say that he was a teacher of gods and humans. Your words seem to make Buddhism inferior to Christianity.'

The Christian speaker was trying to create a dialogue with Buddhists. Yet, her words were seen as an almost imperialist refusal to recognise the distinctive nature of Buddhism, in a context where some of the Buddhists present had experienced British imperialism, or the legacy of it, in Sri Lanka.

4. Acts of service and justice

Christians are called to act justly and to love tenderly (cf. Micah 6:8). They are further called to serve others and in so doing to recognise Christ in the least of their sisters and brothers (cf. Matthew 25:45).

Acts of service, such as providing education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel. The exploitation of situations of poverty and need has no place in Christian outreach.

Christians should denounce and refrain from offering all forms of allurements including financial incentives and rewards, in their acts of service.

***Case Study*: Providing refuge** Voices in Exile is a Christian-based charity set up in Brighton to work with those seeking asylum who have fallen through the cracks of the immigration system. They provide assistance to those who have no recourse to public funds and would otherwise struggle to feed, clothe, or house themselves or their families. While Christian-based, people of all faiths and none, work together, dedicated to supporting those who have become destitute due to displacement and persecution. http://brightonvoicesinexile.co.uk/

***Case Study*: Making space** While on a visit to the central Bahai centre in London, a parish priest was told by one of their workers that he was going to be married in a cathedral. His fiancé was Christian, and the cathedral staff were doing the Christian marriage service in the cathedral, and allowing a Bahai service to follow, albeit in the deanery.

***Case Study*: Support in times of sorrow and distress** Following the events of 7/7, there was another bombing attempt two weeks later on 21/7 which some young Muslim lads from our area were involved in. It shocked their mosque community to the core, concerned that their brightest and best had become radicalised and questioning what they could have done to prevent it. They had not engaged in dialogue prior to this, although attempts had been made. They quite courageously invited an established group of faith leaders alongside the bishop to hold one of their regular receptions at the mosque. All went well, although they were visibly nervous. At one point the interfaith adviser turned to them and told them: 'We want you to know we realise how difficult recent events have been for you with some of your young people being involved in intended acts of violence. We see your pain, and want you to know we are praying for you and for the young men who have been arrested. We are here for you, you can call on us any time.' The bishop and other leaders confirmed this. It was a turning point in the conversation, of what had been until that point the proverbial elephant in the room.

What does this mean for us today, ten years later? Is it possible to visit and support a family where members have gone to Syria to join ISIS?

5. Discernment in ministries of healing

As an integral part of their witness to the gospel, Christians exercise ministries of healing. They are called to exercise discernment as they carry out these ministries, fully respecting human dignity and ensuring that the vulnerability of people and their need for healing are not exploited.

***Case Study*: When, if, or how to intervene in domestic violence, Kahrmel Wellness** When a vigil was held in Leicester cathedral for the young woman raped and killed on a bus in India, many women working on the ground with those suffering from domestic violence, honour-based abuse and forced marriage turned up. Following that a directory of women of faith organisations was put together in order to provide recognition of the work

they are doing. This was launched with the help of the Christian Muslim Forum https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3RccMI5zP0k

One of the organisations providing help for faith communities and leaders dealing with such issues is Kahrmel Wellness. They organise regional conferences, working with local people and gathering local stories: http://kahrmelwellness.com/

***Case Study*: Bless the home** I was once asked to do a house blessing for a Sikh family. They were seeing 'ghosts' in windows and had a general feeling of unease about their home. Alongside another priest I went along to hear their story and to bless the house. They really wanted a Christian priest to do this, and the teenage daughter – the main member of the family who was experiencing these sightings – continued to visit me for spiritual guidance for some time after.

***Case Study*: Prayers for the sick** When the wife of one of her parishioners, a Hindu, fell ill with a brain haemorrhage, a hospital chaplain walked alongside the husband, listening to his concern, praying with him and for him and his wife. At no point did she insist that healing would only come if he and his wife became Christian. She embodied the unconditional love of Christ for all through her care of them. At one point the wife had a vision of Hanuman, a Hindu incarnation of God, holding out his hand to her. From that point her faith in God strengthened and she took up twice daily prayers and the vegetarian diet practiced by devout Hindus. At no point did the chaplain disrespect their Hindu faith, but her devotion to them has meant they participate in the community life of their parish church.

***Case Study*: 'The Gay issue'** A dynamic founder of a Muslim organisation working with young adults, and high school and university students, was telling a group of us about her search for a professional Muslim counsellor who could provide pastoral support for those struggling with their sexuality, family, and faith communities. She tried to make it clear that they needed someone who would be sympathetic rather than judgemental, and be able to work through issues with their clients in a professional manner. She had one psychologist volunteer, and in interview came across as caring, professional and sympathetic. But when she sent the first client to him, the client complained to her that he had told him that he should seek an exorcism as his homosexuality was due to demon possession. She was full of frustration in that she works with young people on the brink of suicide due to cultural, religious, and family pressure.

6. Rejection of violence

Christians are called to reject all forms of violence, even psychological or social, including the abuse of power in their witness. They also reject violence, unjust discrimination or repression by any religious or secular authority, including the violation or destruction of places of worship, sacred symbols or texts.

The Church of England has made it clear that anyone with a role in their churches may not be members of racist organisations such as the BNP, EDL or Britain First. From UK Parliamentary notes:

'The rationale behind the change is that the clergy of the Church of England are required by canon law (in the form of Canon C 26.2) "at all times [to] be diligent to frame and fashion their lives according to the doctrine of Christ, and to make [themselves] wholesome examples and patterns to the flock of Christ". One aspect of that is that clergy are expected to act in accordance with the Church's teaching on racial equality. There are some political parties or organisations whose aims or policies are so repugnant to the Church's teaching on racial equality that the Church would be brought into disrepute if its clergy were actively associated with them, and the ministry of those clergy severely compromised: the public would have no confidence in bishops, priests or deacons who were members of, or actively supported, such organisations.' http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201213/jtselect/jtecc/132/13211.htm

This was first brought as a private member's motion to General Synod in 2009:

https://www.churchofengland.org/media/38965/gsmisc903b.pdf

And explored theologically further in 2011 by a House of Bishops' publication 'Affirming our Common Humanity', available on line.

Each of our churches have equalities and anti-racism policies which endeavour to adhere to UK law as well as God's. It must be acknowledged that to date exceptions in law have been provided for theological doctrine and conscience which remain in conflict with some of these equalities laws, particularly surrounding sexuality and gender. There is still much work to be done in this area around these issues, and careful examination of case studies may provide inspiration in the scripture of life as well as written scripture and its interpretation.

> ***Case Study*: Exorcism at London arms fair** Keith Hebden and Chris Howson, alongside others, performed an exorcism at the International Arms Fair in London in 2013. It was an act of protest: 'to exorcise the demons of militarism and violence, to call an end to the evil horrors of the arms trade and to cast out the spirit of warfare and barbarism from this place. We remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the continuing global arms race, the failure of the nuclear powers to observe their obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty,

the polluted earth, the world governed by fear instead of justice, the futility of deterrence, the waste of public money, the horrors witnessed by Syria, Iraq, Rwanda, Palestine, Egypt, Democratic Republic of Congo. We call for peace instead of war!' Read more here: http://www.onreligion.co.uk/taking-up-arms-an-exorcism-at-the-arms-fair/

***Case Study*: Facing the risk** In the whole post-EU referendum atmosphere I heard many stories of migrants from all over the world being subjected to hatred and abuse. Sometimes the people around them came to their defence, and sometimes they didn't. During a vigil to support the victims of violence in Kashmir, I was asked as a Christian leader to not only attend but to voice support, which I was glad to do. But afterward a man that none of us knew came up and started aggressively demanding that I ensure politicians, the Church, and the UK government addressed the whole of the issue. I've faced this sort of thing before, but this time it felt as if the guy was purposefully stirring up trouble - wanting to drive enmity between me and the Muslim friends I was with. But my friends defended me, told him to stop attacking me, and when I needed to leave, my Muslim friend, who wears a full hijab, escorted me to the taxi I needed to get home. In an atmosphere where Muslim women are visibly subject to attack, there she was ensuring my safety.

***Case Study*: Harassment, religious or gender (1)?** There was a presentation in our local university on the subject of harassment, its legal definition and types of harassment that were found locally. A number of presentations by men, academics, faith leaders and police were provided. I knew that following events in Woolwich that it was predominantly women who suffered from Islamophobic abuse – and that most of the time their cases, although nevertheless serious and frightening, were termed to be 'low-level'. So I asked about a local case I had heard of. A young woman had been approached by three lads on a street corner in broad daylight and her headscarf ripped off while subject to taunts and abuse. When it had happened I spoke to my teenage daughter about it, how she felt about the incident and whether it was something she felt was common. She replied that if those lads hadn't come upon her, but upon someone else, they would still have picked on whoever it was. They were out for trouble, and if it hadn't been a headscarf it would have been something else.

So I asked the police during the presentation whether this incident would have been considered 'faith-based' or gender? I looked around the audience and said that each and every women sat there will have had some incident of abuse, which could be termed criminal harassment, in the last few weeks or months – but that it never gets reported because, to be frank, we don't believe it will be taken seriously. At this point the women in the audience clapped in agreement. The police assured it would be taken seriously – but I suspect in reality it would not. All the media hype over the hijab is part of a cultural sense of entitlement

to comment on what women wear. This is something that needs tackling not only with regard to hijab, but to all women – to not be judged by what we wear.

(For a full, legal definition of 'harassment' please follow this link: http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/s_to_u/stalking_and_harassment/#a02a)

***Case Study*: Harassment, religious or gender (2)?** The main University campus in my city runs alongside a very busy road that in-turn connects to the ring road. As a result it is a cut through to other parts of town and in term time has a large number of students moving up and down the pavement from one part of the campus to another.

It is customary for young men with fast cars to race up and down the street and also to wind down their windows and shout names at young women who are dressed in Western clothes. This is particularly noticeable towards women of Pakistani heritage, many of whom have been raised in the city.

This trend has led to a number of these women beginning to cover up, to wear long skirts and the hijab in order for them to look more modest and resist harassment. This is often seen as a 'backward step' and interpreted as young women of Pakistani heritage becoming more conservative or succumbing to the pressures of harassment, but some say that it gives them back the power and resists them being seen as objects to which a load of assumptions apply.

***Case Study*: Harassment, religious, or gender (3)?** While acting as an observer for my bishop and with the local police at a protest on a housing estate – the local EDL was protesting the establishment of a Muslim community centre on the estate – one young man was trying to heighten tension. He went around telling everyone how 'those Muslims were driving around stopping *our girls* and calling them slags.' I challenged the other men standing there and said, 'Look, you lads do this all the time, don't you?' They hung their heads in shame, admitting that they did. It deflated whatever tension the young lad sought to heighten. What made my blood run cold was the phrase 'our girls' – it implied ownership, implied objectification of human beings, it implied that women were 'guardians of the men's honour'. What the media try to portray as having to do with certain communities, is true of all communities. There is a gender issue in the whole of our society.

7. Freedom of religion and belief

Religious freedom including the right to publicly profess, practice, propagate and change one's religion flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26). Thus, all human beings have equal rights and responsibilities. Where any religion is used as instrumental for political ends, or where religious persecution occurs, Christians are called to engage in a prophetic witness denouncing such actions.

***Case Study*: Standing together** During the summer of 2015, and just as demonstrations from Britain First were intensifying, a neo-Nazi group sought to hold what would have been a second protest in the Golders Green area of London against what they were calling 'the Jewification of Britain'. This would have been held on the Jewish Sabbath at the heart of an area which had a 40% concentration of Jews. Protests were heard not only from the Board of Deputies and the Community Security Trust, an organisation which advises the Jewish community on security, but also from Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and other community leaders. *Hope not Hate* and the *London Jewish Forum* worked with the community in organising Golders Green Together events to encourage solidarity. Eventually the demonstration was allowed to go ahead, but in another part of London. It was contained within a strict area and limited to one hour. There was a concern that freedom of speech not be curtailed, but also that hate speech not be allowed to verbally terrorise a whole community. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jun/30/london-neo-nazi-rally-moved-from-golders-green

***Case Study*: Overcoming Fear – A religious sister and the invitation to Muslim neighbours** - There are a number of religious communities in Bradford and a number of the Sisters from a local order are volunteers at our project. These women come from various parts of the globe and we felt blessed that a new volunteer came who was from Pakistan. We were particularly pleased that she could read and write Urdu and so help us with communicating with our neighbours.

We decided to hold a shared Christmas and Eid party and we asked the Sister if she would write the invitation in Urdu script and to help to deliver them to the women that live in our road. We thought that a personal invitation would be more welcoming than just a note through the door.

What we had not taken into account was that the Sister's village in Pakistan had been set alight some months before and a number of her relatives lived in fear of their lives because of 'the Muslims'. Despite her fear she did manage to have conversations with a number of Muslim women and invite them to the party. It was a learning experience for all of us, but maybe particularly for the nun who met Muslims as human beings in a new way.

***Case Study*: Bradford - Gaza and Palestinian flag** - During Ramadan in 2014 there were a number of attacks on Gaza in which a number of Palestinian children were killed and injured. It was a particularly hot month and tensions were running high. There was a rally in support of Gaza held in Bradford City Square. There were speeches by various members of the community from different faiths, including a speaker from the Cathedral staff. At sundown there was the call to prayer and mats were laid out for the Muslim men and women to pray in separate parts of the concourse. The Christians were left standing in the middle so we made a spontaneous decision to pray too. The press were present and took pictures of the event. The Town Hall that overlooked the square was flying the Palestinian flag and this was noted in the subsequent news coverage. We were not sure whether, as Christians, our presence was unhelpfully partisan or whether our solidarity with our Muslim neighbours was ultimately beneficial. As far as I am aware there were no members of other faiths in the gathering.

***Case Study*: Transcending the self** - 'I have come to the conclusion that the experience of what Christians call union with God must be the same as what Buddhists call the experience of *nibbana*. It can be no other. In both, the self is noughted.' So spoke a western Buddhist nun at a meeting of a society dedicated to exploring the touching points between mystical experience in the world's religions. She had been born a Jew and had converted to Buddhism in later life. Her view was the fruit of practising Buddhist meditation for decades, and of dialogue with Christians committed to prayer and meditation. She also knew of the Christian mystical tradition.

Her words pointed to a growing realization among some Buddhists and Christians that the differences between the two religions are minimized at the level of contemplative spiritual practice. Both religions speak of the dangers of clinging to the Self or the 'I'. In Buddhist and Christian meditation, the Self is transcended. Christians picture this as union with God; Buddhists speak of the arising of absolute compassion and wisdom. This Buddhist nun was convinced the actual experience was identical.

8. Mutual respect and solidarity

Christians are called to commit themselves to work with all people in mutual respect, promoting together justice, peace and the common good. Interreligious cooperation is an essential dimension of such commitment.

***Case Study*: Community comes together**_– A young Afro-Caribbean man was stabbed on a back street in Leicester. He was a community volunteer, working with children and teaching them sport across the city. Within a few short hours, that same evening a Muslim woman and her teenage children were trapped in their house as it burned and all were killed. The husband and father worked in Ireland while they were in the UK for religious studies. It turned out theirs was a case of mistaken identity – their home set on fire in revenge for the first murder. Each victim was a tragic loss to the city and all were held in affection.

The local church held a public vigil for anyone to attend. There were as many Muslims in attendance as there were Christian. While separate provision was made for Muslim women to sit apart if they so chose – each indicated they would sit among the rest of those attending. They would not sit apart – including those who are more strict in their observance, or who wore the full *niqaab*. Discussion was had as to whether to have candles to light – but as it was important for the Afro-Caribbean community of which the church was the centre, it was decided candles would be available to light as a part of the vigil service. To everyone's delighted surprise, most of the Muslims attending also lit candles. It was a poignant part of the service and an indication of real love for neighbour.

***Case Study*: Love your neighbour** - Following the referendum on whether or not the UK should leave the European Union, Brexit, the organisations *Hope not Hate* and *Tell MAMA*, as well as police, recorded an increase in hate crime. In rural areas, people from the continent who had lived in the UK for decades were suddenly subjected to verbal abuse and attack, as well as anyone of a racial or cultural appearance perceived as being 'different' from what was considered 'British.' In the wake of this, the Diocese of Birmingham, working with partners from faith communities and local authorities, initiated a campaign, #LoveYourNeighbour, encouraging individuals and communities to simple expressions of generosity. https://www.loveyourneighbour.org.

***Case Study*: Respect for what is different** - Not all case studies will be positive. One Muslim recounted his time at a university chaplaincy, where a group of Christian students picked up and moved a prayer rug in a parody of picking up a dirty rag and turning up her nose. This sent a very ugly message to the Muslim in question, who to his credit remains committed to building relations between faith communities in his town.

9. Respect for all people

Christians recognize that the gospel both challenges and enriches cultures. Even when the gospel challenges certain aspects of cultures, Christians are called to respect all people. Christians are also called to discern elements in their own cultures that are challenged by the gospel.

***Case Study*: Solidarity?** During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the summer of 2006, local protest groups, such as Socialist Workers Party and others, held a huge demonstration of around 500 in the predominantly Jewish part of the city. The protest was surrounded by equal numbers or more of police, with vans and all sorts. The protesters carried signs that were calling the Israelis Nazis, with large swastikas on their banners. I decided I could only act as observer and not join in the protest. It felt as if the Jewish community were being targeted in a very ugly manner – and that the use of the swastika would have not only caused offense but abject terror in some cases. I had listened previously to one of the local rabbis telling me they no longer felt safe in the UK and Europe – and that most Jews were emigrating to the US or Israel as a result.

***Case Study*: Coming to the Father** I was once asked to be on a panel in which faith leaders were to respond to the passage from the Gospel of John 14:6 – 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

On the panel were a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Rabbi, and myself. The Buddhist responded first, stating she had no issue with viewing Jesus as a teacher through whom enlightenment could be discovered. The Muslim also had no real issue, stating that Jesus is respected as a prophet in Islam, and that his message would have been considered the same message that Muhammad brought. But the rabbi stated that this passage from Christian scripture was one amongst several that has been used over the centuries as excuse for persecution of the Jewish people, and that eventually lead to the Holocaust. And then it was my turn.

I responded that each of these phrases refers to an aspect of our shared humanity: The Way, as the journey of life itself which we make together; The Truth, as infinite and perception of which is ever beyond the horizon, none of us able to claim as within our grasp; The Life as synonymous with the command to love God and neighbour, that these are an inseparable one, and that any interpretation of scripture which contradicts that love would be false and in need of re-examination.

***Case Study*: A shared story** Our local primary school always insists on performing a nativity play at Christmas and invites me as local rector of our church. The head of the school is Sikh, and the students are an equal mix of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and of no faith. But the head believes it an important part of their education that they take part in Christmas celebrations as a religious tradition. So children from all faith backgrounds enthusiastically participate in portraying the Nativity story each and every Christmas. Another local school, with a similar mix, uses our church for their Christmas concert.

10. Renouncing false witness

Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions.

***Case Study*: Christian Patrol** Britain First made a series of visits to our local town, where there is a significant Muslim community. The first time they came they brought Bibles they had obtained from our armed services and put them in one of the mosques, walking in without respect or removing their shoes, and telling the Muslims they needed to stop being paedophiles! The next several times they came, they carried large, white crosses through the streets, calling themselves the 'Christian Patrol' and claiming they were taking back the streets. Each time our local Christian ministers and leaders went into the area to observe alongside police, but also as a moral support for the Muslim community. One of my Muslim friends called us 'the Real Christian Patrol.'

***Case Study*: The Word 'Allah'** I was contributing to a day on interfaith engagement to a group of curates in our diocese, to which a number of them had volunteered to provide presentations on the paradigms of *inclusive, exclusive*, and *pluralist*. It was clear that the individual presenting on the exclusive position felt very strongly about holding to it, and he started advocating that when speaking with Muslims or Arabic-speakers we should never refer to God as 'Allah'. In his opinion, Allah is not the same god as the Christian God. There were a number of curates uncomfortable with his presentation and they questioned him strongly. I felt it important, as an 'expert' to not shame him in front of his peers, but I took him aside afterward and asked him how, if he were an Arab Christian, he would refer to God? I pointed out to him that Arabic Christian literature uses the word 'Allah', and that to imply there is a different god might be a form of polytheism. He clearly did not want to shift his position and told me it was Arab Christian converts who told him this. I replied that I had experienced the liturgy of Christianity in the Middle East, among Arabic-speakers, and Aramaic speakers, who have always used the word 'Allah.' I think it really shook him, and I was glad to a certain extent I had not brought this up publicly. But a part of me was sorry I hadn't, as it was a point that needed to be shared more widely among the curates. I think the word did get around though.

***Case Study*: Caste legislation** This is such a difficult topic. I was in a parish with about equal numbers of Muslims & Hindus, a significant Sikh community and of course the various churches in what is a suburban estate on the outskirts of a city. I went along to a day conference on caste legislation – basically adding caste to the legislation around which it is illegal to discriminate against people. Where I live, I witness how the issue of caste adversely affects people on a day to day basis, how they are treated in shops, on public transport and in employment; and cuts across religious traditions. It is something which affects not only Hindus, but Sikhs, Muslims and Christians alike. So this legislation is something I support. But I also receive regular e-mail updates from Hindu colleagues who view the legislation as racist in itself, targeting those of the Hindu tradition.

At the conference someone had brought along some leaflets about caste discrimination they share at their parish church. To be honest, although I support the legislation, I didn't feel these were something I could share in my parish. I felt it was something that would have depicted the Asian community as a whole as guilty of a rather ugly discrimination associated with horrific crimes in India against the Dalit. It is important that we are made aware of these issues, and that we support all who are at the receiving end of discrimination. But I did feel it was difficult to share without a rigorous discussion of the issues surrounding caste and how they came about, otherwise yes, it could be used as yet further ammunition for far right groups looking to target Asian communities. I believe the legislation must go forward, but there needs to be a sophisticated understanding of it on the part of our churches.

Christian relations with Hindus in the UK is especially problematic due to the colonial history in India and a perception by the Hindu community of the Church in India encouraging Hindus, particularly the Dalit community, to convert, especially through financial and social incentives. The church is perceived as colluding with colonial powers in the marginalising of Hindu tradition. Current political parties on the rise in India consider Islam and Christianity to have converted people in India for the purpose of gaining power, to the extent that some articulate an enforced 'return' to Hinduism. The correctness of this perception can be argued, but the reality is something that must be dealt with.

Heightening this tension is the current proposed legislation to include caste in diversity laws, in order to prevent any discrimination based on caste. Many churches now feel stuck with regard to wanting to encourage dialogue with those of the Hindu tradition on the one hand, but also support the cause of groups such as Dalit Solidarity and others both here and abroad. One of the best means of understanding something of the extent of feeling against this legislation by some Hindu groups in the UK can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5-XQdinqHo

A report, now ten years old, from Dalit Solidarity Network, can be obtained here: http://dsnuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/No-Escape-Report-Caste-in-the-UK.pdf and their website here: http://dsnuk.org/ outlines more recent issues on the subject.

11. Ensuring personal discernment

Christians are to acknowledge that changing one's religion is a decisive step that must be accompanied by sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom.

Oftentimes in the enthusiasm to share our faith and seeking to encourage others to become Christian we fail to recognise the cost this may entail. Sometimes when people leave one faith to join another it is the cause of pain to those closest to them, to their family members, partners, friends, work colleagues and community – be that of another faith or culture. It can lead to isolation not only for the convert but also for their extended family as they can be considered a traitor to their inherited identity. When we encourage others to join us, are we prepared to take responsibility for the resulting life changes this may bring?

In India, there is legislation which provides for the historically disadvantaged indigenous people of India, those of 'scheduled caste' – but this is withdrawn from those who convert to Christianity, as it is believed because Christian doctrine does not recognise caste these converts are no longer subject to disadvantage. This has led to those converts from scheduled castes considering themselves unable to declare their new faith or from joining church communities. They remain 'secret' Christians. In such situations it is incumbent upon the Church to provide, while remaining a minority community itself. These same tensions persist among some of our immigrant communities within the UK, and it behoves the Christian community to be aware of such tensions when encouraging conversion.

***Case Study*: Christian-Jewish marriage – what about the children?** There is a wonderful Christian woman I know, whose husband is Jewish. They have both worked hard at ensuring their respective families were involved in their plans to marry and in the raising of their children. She attends her local church regularly, and shared with me the difficulty of the time her children reached an age first of all when they began to understand other children in their Sunday school were baptised, and they weren't; and second, when the others were starting to think about confirmation. My friend felt it was important that her children be exposed to both faith traditions and make up their own mind when the time came. Unfortunately her parish priest began to put pressure on her children that they not be allowed to participate in certain activities unless they were baptised. This was experienced as a lack understanding and respect for their choices as a family, which also resulted in her children feeling they were not welcome in church.

***Case Study*: An asylum claim in Liverpool** At one time I was the pastor of a Fresh Expression of Church which was inclusive or many who were not comfortable in more conventional settings. At one time a young Iranian man came to be with us, he was a Muslim and also gay. His asylum claim was due to his sexuality and fear of persecution, even death, in his home country.

We began to help him with filling out the forms for his hearing at the asylum court. He was gathering evidence of how dangerous it was to be part of the LGBT community in Iran. He also had to have proof of his sexuality, which in effect meant that he had to have evidence of having sex with a male partner.

After a few months of being in our church, he asked if he could be baptised. We were delighted that he felt safe enough in our community to make the request

but we were also worried that his reasons for asking for baptism were to help his asylum claim. We also knew that if he was not granted asylum in the UK and he had converted to Christianity, his life would be doubly hard in Iran.

It was a hard to work through the ramifications of his decision, particularly as his English was not fluent. It felt horrible to feel suspicious of someone who was making the wonderful request for baptism into a community in which he had found a home. After much prayerful reflection we did have a service of baptism, but afterwards we lost contact with the man so don't know the end of the story.

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***Case Study*: Ethics of evangelism** 'We believe that mission, in the sense of trying to convert people to another religion, is unethical. Why try to draw people away from their faith and their culture, when all religions speak of the same truths? The religions of the world are just different ways of reaching the top of the same mountain. All religions teach people to gain God consciousness. Christian efforts to convert Hindus should be stopped.'

This view was voiced by one of the Hindu members of a Hindu-Christian dialogue meeting. The Christians there were unsure how to respond. They wanted to assure their Hindu dialogue partners that they respected Hinduism and that they personally would not wish to convert Hindus to Christianity. Yet, they were aware that the churches to which they belonged were completely committed to evangelism and the theological principle that the 'gospel' should be preached to the whole world. This clash in perspectives eventually led to the breakdown of the dialogue. Only gradually was it re-established through the re-building of trust.

***Case Study*: Parks Day Tent** I was part of a parish which had a kind of plant in a rather isolated council estate. The estate was great, with all kinds of cultures represented – particularly three Somali community centres. The school

head was careful to establish a culture of respect between students, and the sense of being members of a single community. There was an annual Parks Day at which the whole estate came together in celebration, with bouncy castles and food and lots of performances by children, teenagers and adults. Our parish set up a tent with a kind of prayer corner with incense (something important in the Somali community) and a table for the children to colour a cartoon of our church's saint, with times of services on the other side. The children were used to seeing us as we made regular visits to the school.

One group of lovely Somali girls came in to colour, but an 'aunty' came along to try and shoo them out. The girls were having none of it and did their best to ignore her. It was clear she was upset the girls were with us. Our lay reader was rather shocked by her behaviour, so I took her for a walk. I asked what the reaction of much of our congregation might be if a mosque had set up a similar tent and a group of our young people went in and looked so comfortable. Might some of them not be a little upset? It was important that we be able to sympathise with the difficulty this will have presented for people of other traditions and cultures.

We were fortunate in that soon after we were visited by the imams from the three community centres and established some good contacts. In the end, some fear of the other was broken down that day, and a reality check on the challenge this presented for some.

12. Building interreligious relationships

Christians should continue to build relationships of respect and trust with people of different religions so as to facilitate deeper mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good.

***Case Study*: 'Women Weaving Wisdom'** We received a Government grant to 'enhance interreligious dialogue and understanding' but we knew that these objectives were often achieved by excluding women. We sensed that women would more naturally engage with a faith conversation if it was based around creativity and experience.

We gathered a small group of friends together and discussed how to enable such a creative engagement. First of all we thought about making prayer mats together but it was felt that some Muslim women might interpret this as Christians trying to do a Muslim thing. They suggested that we might explore the theme of 'wisdom' as it is a facet of all faiths and often represented by the feminine.

We selected some groups of women and girls to have a conversation around a number of questions: Where do you locate your own wisdom? What is the wisest piece of advice anybody ever gave you? Who are the wise women in your religious text? In the light of the conversation, women were invited to make a rug from the materials that we provided, plus anything of their own.

Altogether 20 groups participated and every rug was different! These are now being collated in an exhibition called *The Great Carpet of Wisdom* which is on tour. We are still encouraging other groups to join in, both in the UK and in Pakistan.

WHAT DO A BUDDHIST TEENAGER from Cornwall and a Muslim mum from Pakistan have in common? It's their creative participation in Touchstone's interfaith project, Weaving Women's Wisdom.

This was a really simple project that the women engaged with readily. Those who had little English were not disenfranchised as they were equally able to depict their ideas using thread, wool, and other materials. There were groups in schools and after school clubs and also in areas that would not consider themselves to be multicultural.

***Case Study*: Rock star Sheikh** Three years ago, when a famous religious sheikh came to the UK, I asked him in a public meeting about why women were not allowed in mosques in my city, when I had both visited and lived in Muslim countries where women were very much a part of mosque life. He was, I think, quite shocked by the question at first, but I later heard that during his tour he became quite an advocate of Muslim women's inclusion in the life of mosques across the UK.

Now I was criticised quite heavily by others for having asked the question, but neither the sheikh nor those in his rather large entourage were phased by it.

Not long after the young woman was killed so horrifically in India, and within 24 hours our cathedral organised a prayer vigil to remember her. Numerous women of all different faiths and cultures turned up – the greater portion of them working for victims of domestic violence and honour-based abuse, largely unacknowledged either by local authorities or faith leader.

With a colleague, we put together a directory of women of faith organisations in our city for the purpose of boosting their profile and providing a means of mutual support. At the launch I mentioned that I had been told not to talk about women in places of worship, but that I would carry on talking about it nevertheless. My talk was followed by one of the people who had told me not to talk about it. The first thing he said was that he was wrong (I had not identified him!)

Three years on from the original meeting, my 'rock star sheikh' (I call him that out of affection because he is so popular he attracts crowds to huge venues) returned to the UK – and wanted to visit me in my parish and to meet some of my parishioners. And so he turned up for tea and cakes on a sunny Spring afternoon. One of my parishioners asked him about why he thought so many young women were joining ISIS. He replied that because they are not being given a space in the mosque communities in the UK, they are going where they think they will be given a place. He was holding the mosque communities (partly) to blame for young people abandoning their faith.

It was an astounding experience for my now very rural parish to be visited by such an entourage. But it was equally a unique experience for him to be able to visit a village church in the middle of the countryside.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

These stories for reflection are only the start of a wonderfully adventurous journey, for it is a journey into the deepest part of the hearts of all those whom we meet. Our relationship with God is the most important, most intimate relationship any of us embark upon. And when we speak of that relationship with others, we are reminded that for them that relationship is equally deep. We become heart-greeting-heart in a tender intimacy. This is a great privilege, and it behoves us to remember we are treading holy ground. We must remove our shoes and tread gently.

Our journey on this holy ground cannot be embarked upon in solitude. We can only journey accompanied by others, and in that journey we will meet those who seek to sow discord, or to prevent our companionship of the journey altogether.

Ours is the journey of peacemakers. In their joint book, *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu make a case for forgiveness, of it not being a quality of weakness but of strength. Tutu states that forgiveness is not easy, and challenges those who believe it is a sign of weakness to give it a try! Tutu outlines a process for forgiving in his book with his daughter Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, as fourfold: Telling the Story, Naming the Hurt, Granting Forgiveness, and Renewing or Releasing the Relationship.

While the means of war and conflict are increasingly sophisticated, with the ability to push a button in one part of the world and blow up a city in another, the processes of reconciliation and peace are that of human to human, face to face, listening to one another's life stories and perspectives. And this is where dialogue, and ethical conduct in that exchange, comes to the fore.

Our young people are facing greater and greater pressure with regard to decreasing access to employment, education, and building relationships that establish family and community. Disappointment and lack of hope lead to desolation and vulnerability to those who would seek to exploit them for their own gain, using and abusing them in the way of radicalisation towards far right or Islamist groups, or in trafficking and sexual exploitation. What do we do when the best of our young people, those who would seek to be heroes, or who want to make the world a better place, become attracted to groups like the EDL or Britain First, al-Muhajiroun, or ISIS? What processes can we develop that would enable them to feel supported, and provide the tools for building a future?

When a pig's head was left outside a community centre shared by Muslims for their daily prayers, local leaders did not want to draw attention to the incident, believing this would serve to feel the fuel of local tensions. Yet within 48 hours news of the event were reflected back from as far afield as Malaysia and Egypt. It is the classic story of the flutter of a butterfly's wings causing a tsunami elsewhere. What is the bigger picture that is affected by our local stories? What we do here in our neighbourhoods in the UK can affect others in Pakistan or Nigeria. Our behaviour matters. The love we offer to those around us, matters greatly. And how these stories are reported elsewhere, how we use and cooperate with media, also matters.

Ours is a world in which we are constantly bombarded with images and words, words selling products, words selling ideas, words sending messages – some of them positive and uplifting, and some seeking to influence through use of fear, or enticement to power, a better body, even sex. How do we as a society discern our path through all these messages and images? Can these mediums be used to share a different message, that of our common humanity?

These stories are intended as catalyst for deeper reflection and action within our current world, where cultures, languages, traditions, faiths, customs, joys and sorrows intermingle at a phenomenal rate; events broadcast instantly across the globe. In *The Book of Joy* the Dalai Lama states:

> We are same human beings… when we see one another we immediately know this is a human brother or sister.' He continues: 'If we stress secondary level of differences – my nations, my religion, my colour – then we notice the differences…When we relate to others from the place of compassion it goes to the first level, the human level, not the secondary level of difference. Then you can even have compassion for your enemy.[1]

This is not to imply that anyone different from us is an enemy. No. Rather it is to state that those we meet are to be loved as a fellow human being, and that even when we cannot, through conflict or pain, our shared humanity is a starting point.

1 Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu with Doublas Abrams, *The Book of Joy,* Penguin Random House UK, 2016; pp 126-27.

RECOMMENDATIONS – AVAILABLE RESOURCES

1. **Study**

   Courses are available at:

   The Awareness Foundation (http://www.awareness-foundation.co.uk/index.php/otherfaiths)

2. **Build relationships**

   St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace & Reconciliation (https://www.stethelburgas.org/events/training)

   'The Book of Forgiving' by Desmond & Mpho Tutu (http://www.amazon.co.uk/Book-Forgiving-Archbishop-Desmond-Tutu/dp/0007512872)

3. **Encourage**

   'Eating Curry for Heaven's Sake' by Barbara Glasson (http://www.kevinmayhew.com/eating-curry-for-heaven-s-sake.html#.VaA55flViko)

4. **Cooperate**

   The Near Neighbours Project (http://www.cuf.org.uk/how-we-help/near-neighbours)

5. **Call**

   Hope not Hate carries out research into cases of Islamophobia and racism, and engages government, local authorities, faith communities and police (http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/)

   Kahrmel Wellness works with faith communities to eradicate domestic and gender violence and abuse (http://kahrmelwellness.com/2015-national-training/)

6. **Pray**

   Kenneth Craggs' book of collected Christian and Muslim prayers: 'Common Prayer' (https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2535665.Common_Prayer)

   A good resource for understanding Hindu spirituality: 'Darsan' by Diana Eck (https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/91363.Darsan)

   'The Eternal Journey: Meditations on the Jewish Year' by Jonathan Wittenberg

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