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FAITH MATTERS

Cohesive Communities Programme, Working Towards Bridging Divides Between Sikh and Muslim Communities

Confronting Regional Barriers and Divisions Between Sikh and Muslim Communities Through Structured Residential Programmes at Corrymeela



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Growing Divide and the Need to Acknowledge Triggers that are Dividing Both Sikhs and Muslims

About six months ago, Faith Matters put together the framework of a project to try to address the growing gulf between Sikhs and Muslims in certain localised areas of England. We knew that there had been historical flashpoints and tensions and we were aware of a deep rooted set of dynamics that were corroding relationships. Our own learning journey through this process has been steep and with it a need to understand the key triggers that are dividing both Sikhs and Muslims and the anger that is brewing within a younger male Sikh section of the community. Core to trying to bridge divides is the need for issues raised by the Sikh community to be acknowledged and vice versa, though this seems more so from the Sikhs to Muslims. We also acknowledge that within Corrymeela, that there were different personal aims that individuals wanted to achieve and some of these were different to the aims of this project. Whilst we could not attempt to meet all of these within this project, we believe that because this was the first project of its kind in the UK between Sikhs and Muslims, a lot of issues came out in the process. Some of these opinions were polarized; some were based on a sense of collectivism whilst others were more receptive, thoughtful and inclusive. This report therefore lists some of the findings that came out from facilitated group and person to person interactions. We have also corresponded with participants and have informed them that comments that were seen as inflammatory and which could lead to further barriers to interaction in the future, would be left out. As the name suggests, the Cohesive Communities project was a chance for key issues to be aired and a start to the interaction process between both faiths. It was not meant as a basis to provide legitimisation for either community to use the report or findings against the other and we firmly adhere to this principal.

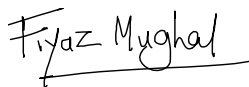
Today, we can honestly say that the dynamics are becoming polarised as each community starts to mentally map the corresponding faith group as the 'other.' The primers and triggers that facilitate space for this divergent thinking include on Sikh side, the view that resources are going to Muslims be it funding or others and that there are programmes of alleged forced conversions of women. Furthermore, some Sikhs feel that Muslim leaders do not speak out when there are attacks on Sikhs who are considered to be Muslims and there are those voices which suggest that Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians are targeted by Muslims. Conversely, Muslims are starting to voice concerns that a handful of Sikhs are starting to work with the BNP and this is made more relevant when the language used against them sounds like statements from British National Party literature. There are also those within Muslim communities who have no idea of some of the issues outlined and who blindly think that there is a commonality based on race, a minority faith and links to the sub-continent. There are others who believe that pictorial depictions of Muslims killing Sikh believers within Sikh Gurdwaras do nothing for cohesion and feeds radicalism within the Sikh community from a young age. Then there are those culprits of the night, the shape shifters who feed the fears about Islam and Muslims and who talk about a Muslim take over and the struggle to push back unbelievers. Their texts on Kaffirism and non-believers further exacerbate fears and their names are Al-Muhajiroun and Hizb-ut-Tahrir. On the Sikh side, there are also those small numbers of groups who take a radical polarised view of Muslims and to other faiths and these have come out of a gang culture that was based on the perceived control of local areas. In this concoction, it is not hard to see that both communities are on divergent tracks and that potential problems are being stored up. Indeed, the questions that participants' from both communities put to each other at the end of this report, show inter-community fissures and why we felt that facilitation was much needed in this project. These questions came out from a flip chart session where each member was told to list their views and thoughts and which led to some wide ranging and deeply troubling thoughts being listed. The questions put to each faith by the corresponding faith group have not been changed, though they thankfully took a more constructive and less inflammatory approach.

In light of the above, we are of the opinion that more programmes are needed to get Sikhs and Muslims to deal with these and ongoing issues. Whilst the approach taken by Corrymeela was based on their experience of conflict resolution (i.e.) looking at commonalities before moving onto areas of contention, this was something that some Sikh participants queried. Their perceptions were that they had come to try to raise issues of contention and get them resolved. We believe that the approach of Corrymeela was justified since conflict resolution always looks at issues of agreement or similarity before moving onto

contentious issues. However, this pilot will be adapted in the future to look at the key issues and relevant methods of overcoming the barriers which has been mentioned by a few participants. We acknowledge this and if a model is to be developed which can be replicated throughout the UK, then it needs to include actual tangible methods of overcoming the areas causing conflict. However, this project has achieved three fundamental and key objectives that will need to be built upon. Firstly, it has flagged up the internalised thought patterns of what may be circulating within each faith community. It has also flagged up and summarised in a set of 10 questions, the contentious dialogues through which each of the two faith communities are taking towards each other and finally and more importantly, this work has provided us with the basis on which to make some key proposals that are listed here. It is our firm opinion that these will make a substantial difference through national work programmes and public messages that show that the issues affecting both faiths are being taken seriously.

Whilst the issues are currently localised to a few regions across the UK, it is also clear that the use of the Internet and chat rooms are pushing localised issues within the wider national domain. If this continues and the no action is taken through further investment in the proposals made within this report, then it is our opinion that localised tensions may well 'link up' and create national tensions that will deeply affect community cohesion and interfaith relations between Sikhs and Muslims in the future. We are also mindful that if this takes place, there will be those groups like the British National Party, as well as other anti-Muslim or anti-Sikh groups who will attempt to manipulate the tensions. This is a real and credible threat given the past history of the British National Party and its recent campaigning against Muslim communities, for example during the local elections of the 5th of May 2006.

Deep rooted fears need to be respected through sensitive language and acknowledgments. It has been a very tough and difficult process to date though this is part and parcel of dealing with two communities who have complex sets of interactions. We are determined that such issues listed above are acknowledged and then actioned so that further corrosions around community relations do not take place in the future. This is the basic respect that can be given to both communities. It is also why we will be calling for statutory sources and those with resources to set up national Muslim and Sikh commissioners who can work within local areas and act as a bridge between statutory authorities and communities from both faiths. We will also be calling for a national Muslim and Sikh media group which will work together when there are issues of tension or incidents involving Muslims and Sikhs. We will also be pressing for Government sources to get local authorities to set aside local community chests for Muslim and Sikh led community organisations to apply for funding for joint partnership working projects, where there are large populations of Sikhs and Muslims in relevant cities. Finally, we sincerely believe that with the lobbying work that we are undertaking, that an independent report will be commissioned through an academic institution around suggestions of forced conversions that have been raised by Sikhs. Changing religion and converting is the basic right of any one of us if we chose. Forcing vulnerable people to do so is not on and is condemned by all faiths. With that in mind, it is time to find out and deal with this issue once and for all and we are proud to have worked with Sikhs and Muslims over the last 6 months. Easy it has not been, but we have valued every minute of it and hope that we can have the pleasure to work with both communities in the future.



Fiyaz Mughal
Director – Faith Matters



FAITH MATTERS

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1 INTRODUCTION

This briefing document outlines the unique experiences, collective reflection and emerging concerns of the participants who took part in a four day residential workshop at the Corrymeela Community Centre from 4-7 July 2008. The event provided a unique opportunity to participate in a structured conflict resolution programme which was organised by Faith Matters, a not for profit community interest company that undertakes activities to facilitate work between faith communities in order to reduce conflict within local areas. This workshop was essentially a part of Faith Matters' 'Cohesive Communities Programme' (CCP) which was funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The CCP was set up with an aim **to facilitate a platform through which much needed discussion and dialogue could take place between key British Muslim and Sikh communities representing their organisational heads, students, and religious leaders and up coming politicians.**

Faith Matters facilitated the visit of twenty four participants from England to Corrymeela on the North coast of Ireland. About thirty participants were invited, though six Sikhs dropped out in the last three days due to personal and work related issues. The entire event was managed by facilitators at the Corrymeela Community Centre, as well as through the support by Faith Matters staff and volunteers.

The Corrymeela Community Centre was specifically chosen as a setting for this event given that the Centre had successfully delivered and hosted programmes for conflict resolution over the past 40 years in Northern Ireland; thereby offering 'safe spaces' for people from diverse backgrounds to share experiences, hopes and fears. The Centre

over years has earned a reputation of delivering its session successfully even at the heights of sectarian violence in the late 1970's and 1980's. The ethos of Corrymeela was to look at areas of agreement or similarity before looking at areas of conflict which is the main basis on which most conflict resolution programmes work. They also pressed heavily on the need to listen to and empathise with the thoughts and feelings of 'the other', yet they also used facilitation methods which helped to extract the core areas of difference between the two faith group participants. Without understanding the core issues, future programmes cannot be tailored to deal with in a constructive and positive manner.

The Corrymeela Centre therefore promotes activities of reconciliation and peace building through the healing of social, religious and political divides amongst various communities throughout the world. These faith events are conducted at the Ballycastle Centre in Northern Ireland and Corrymeela welcomes participants from all faith backgrounds to openly discuss their views and opinions without fear of violence and embarrassment or potential 'comeback'.

1.1 Background of the Participants

The participants for this event represented students, academics, organisational leaders, and people working in the field of cohesion and Sikh/Muslim relations. These individuals brought with them life experiences which they shared and discussed. The Muslim participants hailed mainly from five geographical areas within UK i.e. London (Southall, Slough and Hillingdon), Derby, Coventry, Birmingham and Wolverhampton. The group consisted of individuals who were:

- Interested in relations between Sikhs and Muslims,
- Those who knew little of areas causing conflict,
- Those who had set up local programmes around Sikh/Muslim joint working and
- Those who genuinely wanted to see how both faiths could move forward together on issues.

The participants represented both men and women of varying age groups and each had different expectations and outcomes from the programme. The Muslim participants were less well known to each other than the Sikh participants and networked with each other during their stay. They were not community or religious leaders and were not to be held 'accountable' for social issues within or affecting their own community.

It was acknowledged that the individuals from the Sikh community were well networked and were known to one another. The vast and overwhelming majority (over three fourths of them) came from London. In total, there were 9 Sikh attendees and 6 did not attend due to work related or personal issues. Once again, these were attendees with an interest in the subject, activists, an individual who had stood for a mainstream political party in the UK and a youth worker. As stated before, there were no religious leaders or people regarded as community leaders and were not to be 'held accountable' for social issues within or affecting the Sikh communities.

The series of workshops tailored for this programme were based on relational models, meaning that individuals used stories and thoughts about their life experiences, as well as their fears and hopes for communities. The group shared their aspirations amongst each other and within close relationships that they developed with their respective faith counterparts. These aspirations broadly ranged from:

- An opportunity to recognise diversity and raise individual opinions however difficult that might be,
- Having the ability to initiate discussion and learn from a constructive dialogue,
- Sharing and reflecting on cross community experiences,
- Evaluating both faith communities on the grounds of religious beliefs,
- Understanding the commonalities which linked both faith communities and which could be build upon for cohesion within local areas
- Looking at what could be done in the future to redress areas of difference.

2 SESSIONS, GROUP ACTIVITIES AND RESPONSES

The entire workshop was conducted through a series of participatory sessions and group activities which helped the participants to deal with various cross-community and interfaith issues and tensions. These sessions encouraged the participants to list down what they considered as important perceptions, issues and concerns with regards to their communities. Most of the issues revolved around the following topics:

- Pre and post 9/11 scenarios and the impacts on both communities,
- Interfaith marriages and the issue of alleged forced conversions,
- The role of gender and generational gaps within their respective communities,
- Perceptions and philosophies governing Islam and Sikhism,

- Politics linked to religious elements,
- Exploring and unwrapping terms like racism , social separatism and Kaffarism and,
- Reasoning why certain ethnic groups and communities are perceived to be disliked, monitored or made accountable for the actions of a 'few' within minority groups

The next session explored the roles and perspectives around gender within the faith communities. Each gender work group was asked to address and reflect their views around three key questions as listed below.

1. What contribution have Sikhs and Muslims made to the societal developments in the UK?
2. What hopes and hurts have they experienced?
3. What achievements of their community make them feel proud?

Participants reflected their thoughts and feelings by creating a collage of magazine pictures and articles on the map of the United Kingdom and can be seen within the relevant sections of this report.

2.1 Responses from Muslim Men

These participants took pride in their traditions and values. The group built a historical perspective of the emergence of Islam and its contribution to Europe during the Dark Ages especially in mathematics, science and the humanities. This came across strongly in the collage. History was therefore listed as being important in framing views and thoughts about Muslims in Europe.

This work group stressed that the wounds of the past cannot be forgotten though their communities can learn from them. They also pasted the cutting which headlined that, 'Muslims feel like (the) 'Jews of Europe''. This strength of feeling was very evident as



the group talked through the collage.

They also stated that Muslims were and are the peacemakers and that Muslim women are feeling the brunt of too critical and unrepresentative newspaper headlines and dialogues that are sometimes couched as such and are used to berate Muslim women from wearing the Hijab or expressing their faith. Other concerns were related to racism and issues of modern life affecting young people i.e. drugs and unemployment.

The work group also highlighted issues of rising levels of Islamophobia where attacks on Muslim communities were described and the continuing sore of civil rights abuses in Kashmir. They also stressed that Muslim communities are under intense scrutiny and judged by international events and not by their domestic achievements. The group explained that as the followers of Islam they are a part of a diverse community within a democratic set of systems in the UK and that they must not be treated as second class citizens. They stated that such differences are fed by myths, stereotypes and perceptions around Islam which essentially negate the real benefits that UK has gained through Islam and other diverse communities.

Participants also expressed that Muslims have been in Europe for over 1,000 years. Many hundreds of thousands who died in the fields and sands of France, Italy and North Africa in the Great Wars for this country were Muslims, something that was re-iterated by Sikh men in their responses. Finally, they also pointed to the genocide of Muslims in places like Bosnia where some of the worst atrocities since the Second World War were committed simply on the basis of religious difference, hatred and bigotry.

2.2 Responses from Muslim Women

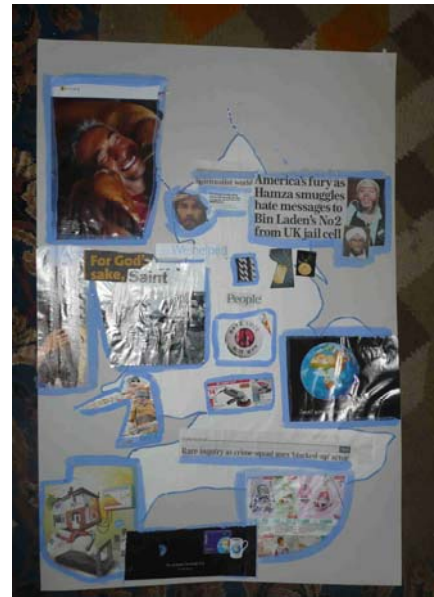


The Muslim women's workgroup stressed the core principles of Islam which are based on family life, faith, humanity, work, modesty and monetary help to the poor and needy. They also stated that God is at the very core of their lives and women from diverse cultural backgrounds are united by Islam and the fundamental belief in God and his compassion. They also highlighted the various inventions and discoveries that provided Europe with innovation in the Dark Ages and the Renaissance through Islam in Spain, Portugal, Eastern Europe and other countries. These inventions ranged from coffee, medicine, engineering, surgical tools

through to agriculture and environmental protection schemes. Muslim women were concerned that media views them wearing the Hijab as a mode of oppression and not as a personal choice made by them. Additionally, they stated that in Islam, women are given the right to property and income for their own use along with the freedom to play a role in democratic processes and the development of the civil society.

2.3 Responses from Sikh Men

The Sikh men perceived themselves to be hardworking, honest, open-minded and engaging. They want to be known for their hospitality and family oriented attitudes. They portrayed strong moral values in their collage. Their community has contributed towards sports like cricket and they had served 'Queen and the Country' in the First and Second World Wars where 83,000 Sikh men died and thousands more were wounded. They also took pride in commemorating those that had passed away in honour of their military and civil duties during such times. The workgroup stressed that Sikhism draws its strength from its philosophy of protecting the weak, being kind and humane to others as well as being sensitive to the environment.



The group reminded participants that Sikhism is based on the belief of 'One God' and encourages adherents to follow a spiritual path. The group expressed their desire to build upon a 'global vision' and a 'big idea' for peaceful co-existence between faith communities. Other younger participants also expressed their desire to see a return to more spiritual values and to break away from the bondage of those elements of society which promote the illusion of happiness through power and wealth.

The group also believed that 9/11 had some very strong adverse impacts on the Sikh community which led to global misunderstandings around Sikhism and actual physical attacks on Sikhs who were perceived to be Muslims and/or 'the other'. Finally their group slogan was 'Make Love Not War' and related this slogan to the preaching and work of the saints and soldiers of Sikhism.

2.4 Responses from Sikh Women

The Sikh women stated that equality between men and women are some of their religion's highest strengths. The group stressed that their religion was founded on the basis of protecting and defending the weak and the needy not just for their community, but others as well. As followers of Sikhism, the women's group regarded themselves as open minded and they believed in the 'oneness' of God. The workgroup felt proud of their Sikh identity and that their religion represents peace, justice and equality. The group also expressed that they would like to see more Sikh women role models getting promoted i.e. those who have emerged within the media, law and medical professions. They also would like to campaign around honour killings and bring about the empowerment of Sikh women's organisations dedicated to the cause of justice, environment and community development. The common themes in all of these four group presentations were selflessness, social justice and having a faith inspired respect for humanity and the environment.



3. CAFE CONVERSATIONS

Group activities also included Café Conversations which encouraged open and frank discussion on various themes. Such themes and the relevant responses are summarised below:

3.1 How Has 9/11 and 7/7 Affected My Daily Life?

Participants from both the faiths expressed that they both equally suffered from the impacts of 9/11 and 7/7 which created a climate of vulnerability, fear, actual physical assaults, abuse, mistaken identities, anger and frustration. Muslims in particular, have been blamed and individuals asked to answer for the actions of extremist groups. Similarly there have also been numerous incidences and accounts of attacks on Sikh faith members. These events have generated negative stereotypes in the mindsets of other faith groups who look at them with an eye of suspicion. Some participants also stated that such events had a direct bearing on their economic situation and their

freedom of expression. These individuals experienced such prejudices particularly through immigration law and by the anti-social behaviour of their next door neighbours, as well as by individuals within their workspaces.

Despite such treatment, some of the participants dealt with adversity in a positive way. They initiated awareness building campaigns on 'who they are' and 'what their religious values stand for' by conducting open days within their respective faith institutions for all local non-Muslims or non-Sikhs. The group also highlighted the role of the media in covering events like 9/11 and 7/7 which created a negative image about their communities. The groups see such negative publicity as an obstacle towards maintaining cohesion and even possibly a generator towards the feelings of isolation and anger within both groups. Such feelings can deter the development of conducive interfaith projects or any safe common local spaces.

Interestingly, one of the Sikh respondents in the Café conversations stated that Sikhs have been repeatedly called 'Bin Laden' since 9/11 and that turbaned Sikhs were directly in the firing line of racist bigots due to the turban and its negative association in the minds of some people with the Taliban. Also, this has led to actual murders of Balbit Singh Sodhi in Mesa, Arizona who was shot and killed post 9/11 at a gas station.

3.2 How to Empower Sikh and Muslim Communities?

The discussion group explored ways in which Sikh and Muslim communities can support one another within their work towards community cohesion. The participants collectively questioned themselves and re-examining their own 'cultural baggage', mindsets and differences whilst also commenting on each other's faith and religious practices. Muslim participants stated that Islam places a duty on Muslims in non-Muslim countries to work within the bounds of the laws of that country.

One of the most important themes that emerged from this topic was the inclusion of women of both faiths in various decision making processes and that they needed more encouragement, equal access to resources and opportunities, education as well as recognition of their achievements. Some other suggestions were to:

- Build an ongoing feedback and reporting mechanism which informs both the faith groups on latest events and social gatherings whether it be for interfaith, women's leadership opportunities or conflict resolution work.
- Concentrate on common values preached in both the religions.

- Eliminate incidences of intra faith differences by building trust, engaging in dialogues and voicing out concerns.
- Further work on this was stressed consistently, showing that there were concerns and few existing dialogue points.
- Explore ways in which local cultures and practices can help overcome gender discrimination.
- Institutionalise teaching and interactive training (faith master classes) on peace building by involving community elders, local religious leaders and heads of Mosques and Gurdwaras.
- Examine theological practices, through scriptural reasoning processes for example.
- Create a performance indicator to measure actions which encourage mutual understanding, co- existence and inclusion. (This currently exists for local authorities, though measures to test whether these are being met are blunt and are not specific for certain communities. This may be an area that Government agencies like the Department for Communities and Local Government would like to look at in the future).
- Reshape the next generation to see themselves as people of a 'joint community' and avoid interpreting information based on distorted media sources. This can possibly be attained by offering safe and secured environments so that people can interact, understand and appreciate each other's diverse backgrounds. These safe spaces can also be places where hard and difficult questions can sometimes be asked and where there would be access to facilitators.
- Question the reasons behind the attitudes of those young people who consider other cultures and faiths as inferior.
- Organise and hold interactive events which will mean more interactive opportunities for young people through sports, camping and common national celebrations.
- Challenge cultural stereotypes, religious dogmas and racist attitudes of what we think about 'others'.
- Secure more government and local funding to initiate community work led by young women. (In particular, we believe that this is exceptionally important and that future work programmes between Muslim and Sikh women are facilitated and resourced. We also found that within Corrymeela, the voices of the female participants were sometimes drowned out and that the issues promoted were mainly from males in the group. Space must therefore be created for women to express their thoughts and feelings and Faith Matters will support this where appropriate and possible.)

- Highlight the agenda of collective cooperation for finding common solutions to local problems.
- Have joint charity events on common causes e.g. natural calamities and fundraising events for the needy.
- Raise awareness in schools and community hot spots by conducting campaigns, focus groups, surveys and sharing experiences which represent healthy practices of social cohesion.
- Educate, mentor and advise key community members.
- Accept our diversity and differences and work together for common community goals like education and health.
- Challenge the existing prejudices and stigmas on a more intellectual level by holding debates and inviting representatives from other minority groups.
- Follow the teachings of influential and impartial community role models and faith leaders.
- Encourage and follow a non biased and transparent media and make documentaries which represent the voices of many faiths. 'Bring voices from the margins to the mainstream.'
- Learn and create knowledge by learning from each other's religion and respecting such differences.
- Create opportunities for interfaith events on a local and national level, particularly between Muslims and Sikhs.

3.3 What is Your Experience and Opinion of Interfaith Marriages?

Some of the participants held the view that the choice of a partner and the decision to marry is a personal one. Yet, both the parties must give some time for reflection on the likely impacts which can affect their marriage and their respective families. Experiences and incidences were shared on the negative and positive impacts of such marriages which ranged from 'successful marriages' to 'a complete break down between the respective families of the two partners' and subsequently to 'complete community isolation'. Therefore, there were positives and negatives, though there have been numerous incidences where the families of both partners have ceased communication and severed all ties with their children. Such incidences are observed to create two contrasting scenarios. It has strengthened the bond between partners where they have had to rely on each other emotionally or it has weakened the relationship due to the pressures caused by the dissociation from extended family members.

Responses to this issue were met with statements like – ‘generational gaps and skewed attitudes’, ‘the way they want to bring up their children in a particular way and faith is their own choice’, the ‘complexities may outweigh the benefits’ and ‘love can conquer any obstacle in the end’. Participants also stressed that one should not generalise or generate stereotypical images of failed interfaith marriages and there are many positives and negatives in all types of marriage, whether they meet or forget orthodox traditions.

On a more positive note some participants supported the idea of interfaith marriages as a way of strengthening ‘personal choice, opinion and options’ and which can ultimately unite communities. They also jokingly coined terms like '*Sikhuslim*' and '*Musik*' for such scenarios. The group also highlighted the need to advise children of interfaith marriages from an early age to respect and embrace both the religions that they inherited from their parents. Others stated that rising levels of interfaith marriages and racial mixing are becoming a natural occurrence and increasingly, it is becoming difficult to meet the ‘ideal’ partner from within each faith due to limited social circles, increased work pressures and less time to socialise. Consequentially, interfaith marriages will gain more acceptance in the future. Above all, participants agreed that partners of any interfaith relationship are individuals first and converting or staying with one’s religion is a highly personal choice. The group also agreed that forcing, setting a compulsory pre-condition or emotionally blackmailing a partner towards conversion is a shameful act and must be condemned in all circumstances.

Two Muslim participants stated that Islam respects the right of Christians and Jews to stay within their faith if they marry Muslims and Islam states clearly that Christians and Jews have the right to practice and indeed should be encouraged to practice their faith if they want to within an interfaith marriage. They also stated that this also means that Sikhs and Hindus within interfaith marriages should have the right to practice their faith if they want to. Neither should they be pressurised to change or give up their faith within such marriages and suggesting that Sikh women would change their faith because of an interfaith marriage, assumes that they did not have the ability to say no and this was somewhat derogatory to them. They also went onto say that they were puzzled as to why the issue of interfaith marriages was being raised within the context of Muslims wanting to convert non-Muslims as part of the ‘Dawah’ (inviting to faith) process. Dawah they stated was a process of inviting and explaining the faith though it did not mean forcibly or coercing people to Islam, just as preachers for Christianity or any other faith would not be expected to coerce or pressurise people to change to their faiths.

In their opinion, they suggested a small but growing trend for some Sikh groups to proselytise even though the other Sikh community members that they had met in other venues had suggested that proselytising was not a part of the faith.

A response from a Sikh participant provided the following statement post the Café Conversations: *“During the Café Conversations it was evident that conversion of a non-Muslim (or Sikh) to Islam was often celebrated, however the conversion of a Muslim to Sikhism was not discussed. Sikhism does not actively look for converts whereas from my understanding of Islam, the principle of Dawah is central to Islam and it is the duty of all Muslims to encourage non-Muslims to adopt the faith. When you have this knowledge you can then have a better understanding of issues around interfaith marriages and the challenges faced here.”*

3.4 How Have We Stood Up for the Victims?

There have been numerous historical accounts where Muslims and Sikhs have stood up for each other whether in India since the inception and creation Sikhism, or in the UK. Whilst we did not look at this element within the Cohesive Communities project, this may be something that can be undertaken in the future by other groups to build a platform on which both communities can come together. Such a foundation can allow facilitation work on creating out core differences at a local level.

Within Corrymeela, the participants shared their experiences gained at both local and national levels. They also noted that other minorities and not just Muslims and Sikhs often have to succumb to racial intolerance, intra racial prejudice and in some cases, incidences of genocide. Individuals felt that during these testing times all such faith groups must come together as one community to promote common shared values around the protection of civil and human rights.’

Some of the participants shared experiences of working within interfaith community projects and referred to the time that they listened to the harassed and assaulted Muslims post 9/11 in the UK. One participant talked about secularism in France which does not promote and support the individual’s right to wear turbans, religious clothing and Hijabs etc. The participant further elaborated about the efforts of raising these concerns on radio programmes where Muslims and Sikhs united together around the freedom to wear personal expressions of faith in line with religious requirements. Others referred to religious leaders like the Prophet (Muhammad’s) Companions who worked with other faith communities, Guru Teg Bahadur and the poem of Pastor Martin Niemoller, entitled ‘They Came First’ (See Appendix I).

Participants also raised the fact that they worked for charity organisations or sent generous contributions to charities like Islamic Relief. In doing so, they supported many communities under an over arching desire to help the needy, the dispossessed and the poor and this is something which they believed extended beyond the boundaries of nationality, culture and religion. Other participants organised and championed joint campaigns with local Muslim, Sikh and Kurdish women's groups in relation to honour killing cases. Additionally, a few participants in Derby set up a forced marriages group to investigate and help people who were having problems with such matters. In doing so, they worked with Sikh and Hindu communities alike.

Others cited examples of working for wider international communities in Palestine, East Africa, Indonesia, Kashmir and undertaking peaceful civil society mass action, like attending the march against the Iraq War in 2003. Furthermore, others took on a wider socio-economic and human rights development agenda around the fair trade movement, campaigning against genocide and environmental dumping. Others have worked with Eastern European groups such as Polish communities in trying to get them to be part of local communities and in reducing the cases of xenophobia and racism and by propagating positive benefits of migration to wider communities.

Some suggestions that emerged from this discussion were to:

- Create a positive image in the media by creating insightful documentaries into faith groups like Muslims and Sikhs.
- Be supportive to the needs of the wider community. Muslim participants suggested that Islam teaches them to stand for the truth and to defend those communities who have been unfairly treated. Sikhs emphasised the teachings of the Gurus by the phrase '*Sarbat da Bhala*' meaning that through their prayers they wished goodwill to others and their prolonged well-being.
- Have more meaningful discussions based on open and honest channels of communication through digital media sources, online forums, internet chats and face to face meetings.
- Work with youth groups, women's organisations and other community based organisations with common shared objectives for working with people from all backgrounds and faith.

3.5 Do You Consider One Faith Inferior to the Other?

The participants came to the conclusion that individuals do not have the right to judge each other on the basis of their faith and that God is the supreme power. The group also expressed that human beings may take divergent routes to pray and practice religious beliefs but all such routes eventually meet up at the same point of reference where they can attain personal peace through self reflection.

Others stated that people have to recognise and appreciate the diversity of cultures and presented the example of the Baha'i faith which adopts an open faith policy and appreciates the teachings of all faiths equally. Others challenged the link between Sikhs and the British National Party and Sikh members stated that the action of one or a handful of Sikhs cannot provide a pretext for others in the wider community to accuse Sikhs of having an alliance with the British National Party. This message was also relevant to Muslims in the group who felt that the whole of Islam and global Muslim communities were being tainted by the actions of the few and by those intent on painting Islam as being external to Europe. Muslim participants made it clear that Islam has been within the UK for over a millennia and has been part of the development of this continent.

'Kaffirism' was raised by two of the Sikh participants as a term that was causing some distress since in their opinion it was a derogatory term and they asked for further explanations on this. In their opinion, it had been used against some Sikhs.

Muslim participants also felt the need to explain the connotations attached to the word 'Kaffir' which according to them has been hijacked by some media sources and politically motivated groups so as to make Muslims look devious with some underhanded agenda. A few participants also linked this example with Jews in Europe who over hundreds of years were accused of having an ulterior and underhanded agenda. This is now termed as Anti-Semitism and therefore accusing Muslims of having a similar agenda can easily equate to Anti-Semitism. They also added that the word 'Kaffir' in Arabic simply means 'Non-Muslim'.

4. THE RAPID FIRE ROUND

The next session involved a rapid question-response round posed as an interfaith dialogue. It must be stated that these questions came about due to statements and comments made early on within the facilitation process and on the first day of the programme. Participants were given the option of using flipcharts to lay out their hopes, aspirations, fears and thoughts and responses from a few of the Sikh participants on the flipcharts led to a heightened degree of tension between the two groups since initial comments were perceived by Muslim participants as being confrontational and stereotypical. Yet, every participant was allowed to list items on the flipchart and it was apparent that there were clear areas of difference between the two groups. To ensure that the process did not break down through disengagement, since this had a real potential to occur post the flipchart session, participants were asked to put together 5 core questions that they wanted to put across to the participants representing the corresponding faith. Not only would this focus down onto key areas, it would also mean that any inflammatory comments would be reconstructed through group work and that the issue could then constructively be dealt with by both faith groups. The following reconstructed responses emerged from the facilitation:

4.1 Questions Posed by Muslims to Sikh Members

1. What are the attitudes of Sikhs towards Muslims?

Answer: We have no issues with the Muslim faith. We feel harmed by intrusive behaviour; a) conversion activity; b) extreme groups like Al-Muhajiroun (e.g. hate propaganda) and c) the adverse impact on Sikhs of 9/11.

2. Given that some Gurdwaras display pictures of Sikhs being slain by other faith communities, how do you define extreme and moderate/ mainstream?

Answer: These are historical facts about persecution and sacrifices against tyranny. Examples include the fifth Guru accepting torture in a peaceful manner and the ninth Guru standing up against oppression.

3. What is your vision of the shared future of Muslim/ Sikh communities; especially amongst young people?

Answer: We believe in both communities working together, based on identifying and addressing specific problem issues, as well as developing accountability about the actions of members in both faith communities. We believe that working together is the only way to combat issues that affect both our communities, though joint projects means

that there has to be trust between communities and this involves transparency and a desire to make a change on all sides.

4. Do you think its right for Muslims to hold All Sikhs accountable for a Sikh candidate standing on behalf of the British National Party in local elections as it would appear some hold Muslim communities accountable for the views of those groups you find unacceptable?

Answer: The BNP Sikh supporter (not candidate) was a single isolated case which was condemned by Sikh groups and the Sikh community. We do not believe that by working with extremist groups, you can find social solutions that attempt to try to bridge divides.

5. What solution would you propose to address the specific concerns you have raised?

Answer: Listen to and acknowledge our experiences and this can lead into a constructive and frank dialogue. Addressing the feelings and experiences that we have are essential to a solution centred approach. This will be an important starting point and we also will seek to do the same since there are hurts and strong feelings within Muslim communities that we feel and empathise with.

4.2 Questions Posed by Sikhs to Muslim Members

1. What is mainstream Muslim opinion about activities of groups like Al-Muhajiroun and Hizb-ut-Tahrir?

Answer: Muslims are against all criminality and as any other community we condemn all criminal activities and would encourage people to report criminal acts to the police so that perpetrators are dealt with according to the law. These so-called Muslim groups are unsupported, marginalized and banned from many Mosques around the country, however if the law permits, they should be allowed to voice their opinions. It is better not to ban voices since they become stronger 'underground' and at least if they have the chance to air their opinions, whether we like them or not, they can be challenged.

2. What are your opinions about social separatism in relation to Muslim communities? Additionally, what are your thoughts on Kaffirism?

Answer: The word Kaffir can be used positively and negatively and if used by some as an insult then in this context it is unIslamic. Social separatism is a function of exclusive ideologies and it is not something that Muslim communities actively subscribe to, though there are clear underpinning factors such as low income, poor housing and minimal

access to resources. So, separatism cannot completely be blamed on Muslim communities and there are complex factors that should not be minimized to just one community and not to one set of circumstances. The concept of Kaffirism is much misunderstood. Kaffir is a phrase that can be used by some elements of the community in a negative and derogatory manner e.g. some Muslims also call other Muslims Kaffirs and is not a mainstay of Muslim attitudes to Sikhism. There are also negative attitudes towards Muslims by some Sikh members due to historical reasons and this cannot be extrapolated to all Sikhs. That would be bizarre and dangerous.

3. How can both communities work together in a trusting way that will ensure that each will publicly reciprocate support for each other when one community is under attack in light of 9/11 and 7/7 and more recently when there are further failed potential terror attacks?

Answer: Many mainstream Muslim organizations have publically condemned and have made joint declarations against the 9/11 and 7/7/ acts. It is unIslamic to commit suicide and as you are aware many Muslims also lost their lives in these atrocities. We should not stereotype the whole community on the action of a few individuals and thereby destroy our inter-community cohesions. We need to have a shared vision and mutual trust (and not to dehumanize each other) and that vision needs to be made real through education about our faiths and cultures, through interfaith workshops etc. We need to acknowledge the past and not let it adversely influence the present. This is the key point. Looking back does not need to taint our view ahead.

4. It's about the word "Asian" in media. Does it have a place and would you support distinct Sikh ethnic monitoring?

Answer: Asian is used to denote point of origin and we support your efforts to be classified as Asians and/or Sikhs.

5. The Sikh community is particularly sensitive as are other communities to issues around grooming of women that came up over the last few years? We would be interested in your opinions on this?

Answer: We do feel the pain of your experiences and if evidence of these activities can be found then we would condemn the actions of these perpetrators. Sikh, Jewish, Hindu and Muslim communities must come together to condemn such activities and they have no part in a modern civilised society and within our local communities.

5 LESSONS LEARNT

“I will try to see things from other’s perspective. I’ve taken away new friends. Faith can be uniting rather than dividing”- Cohesive Communities Participant.

These sessions helped the participating communities’ to reflect upon a range of issues that came up within the CCP. Some of these issues were difficult and very emotional for participants and the following outcomes were realised:

- Both the communities do not hold a good understanding of each other’s faith in terms of both differences and similarities.
- There are misconceptions that need to be addressed through national and local work.
- The communities do not engage rigorously in constructive interfaith dialogue. Efforts taken up in this direction were not as open as they could be. Indeed, there is no work being undertaken on a national basis between Muslims and Sikhs.
- Most of the time the communities discuss cosmetic issues governing their backgrounds and faith. Instead, the communities can benefit from exploring wider cultural, political, economic and social issues which affect both Muslims and Sikhs. These need to be further explored with better targeting of members from both communities across the UK.
- The modes of engagement and discussions employed by these communities are not necessarily participatory and based on sharing experiences. This must be further promoted in social projects and if Faith Matters was to run such programmes in the future, we would consider the possibility of using other facilitation methods maybe based on methods that we have developed from ‘Eastern cultures and philosophies.’ The problem is that very few such facilitation methods are available in the UK and no such centre exists in the UK.
- Community members avoid voicing out their personal experiences, opinions and perceptions. This avoidance may mask deep rooted fears, thoughts and even experiences that may be seen in a negative light.

6. THE WAY FORWARD

The project received a positive feedback from a majority of participants which provided them with an opportunity to look at how each faith community is perceived within a wider context as well as the areas of contention and to share common experiences within the safe environment of Corrymeela.

Fears and perceptions were therefore discussed with facilitators at length and some participants were emotionally moved, whilst others were grateful to have had the chance to 'let off' things that were on their minds and which they had heard and experienced. The most important element in this workshop was the sharing of stories and personal experiences which had the greatest impact in one to one settings. However, it is also clear that there were some Sikh participants who felt that the "funds allocated to this initiative, would have been better used to enable a more comprehensive, engaged dialogue on the core issues of contention." We do not agree with this due, however, in line with the transparent ethos of the Organisation, we believe that this response should be listed and we have done so. The key points as to why the process did not solely focus on the areas of contention were because:

1. Any facilitation process is not static and is fluid. Faith Matters and Corrymeela staff members adapted the facilitation sessions on 2/3 occasions due to changing dynamics within and between the groups.
2. When core points of contention were raised mainly by the Sikh group at the start of the process, there was the very real possibility that the whole process would have broken down. Suggesting that, talking through areas of contention before building on some areas of commonality, does not take this into account.
3. We chose Corrymeela due to their long history of working with communities in conflict. We believe that their methods led to real and tangible results within a small project budget and one such tangible result included comments on film by Sikh and Muslim participants, praising the process and requesting for further such programmes. It is therefore disappointing to have received the above statement from a Sikh who is on film record as having praised the process. In effect, we believe that this shows the complexity of working within conflict resolution projects and especially when no other project has ever been piloted on a national basis to work with these two communities.

Therefore, further work is much needed across the UK especially in cities and towns with predominant population of both Muslim and Sikh communities. There were tensions that bubbled up and which came to the surface in Corrymeela and the CCP is the first such project that has involved people from across the UK from both communities. It is also clear that a larger number of people could not be engaged with due to resourcing issues and this programme needs to be rolled out regularly on a national basis to ensure that key community leaders, students, faith leaders and upcoming local politicians from both communities get a chance to voice out and discuss the interactions and issues between both communities. Key elements of action points relevant for Central Government and Local Authorities are also listed in the conclusion by the Director of Faith Matters, Fiyaz Mughal.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The group identified a clear need to work together in a collaborative and strategic manner. They also raised the desire for further capacity building work to be undertaken and this was especially stressed by Sikh participants who felt that Sikh civil society organisations were not able to bid for and successfully obtain much needed funding and this was primarily due to the need for such capacity building work within the community. Interfaith dialogue was also regarded as a process that dealt with 'cosmetic issues' particularly when it came down to Sikh / Muslim interfaith dialogue which were not well structured and implemented across the UK. However, it was clear that such work had been undertaken in Slough, even though there were continuing issues and tensions. In other areas like Coventry and Wolverhampton work between Muslim and Sikh communities was being undertaken, though few examples were raised in Corrymeela and tensions between both groups meant that examples of positive work did not come to the forefront. Faith Matters will therefore look to work with the relevant local authorities to add value if and when required. It was clear from these sessions that:

- There are clear misconceptions between both communities and that more work has been to be undertaken to ensure that the feelings and experiences of both communities are acknowledged by each other,
- There are deep rooted feelings and various historical 'cross-over' points where both faiths have interacted with each other, sometimes, with not so positive outcomes.

- There is a strong degree of commonality between Muslims and Sikhs and both communities have been clearly affected by the impact of 9/11 and 7/7 and when there are potential terrorist plots or actual incidences.
- Muslim participants had on numerous occasions stated that they knew people who had been physically assaulted, women whose Hijabs had been pulled off whilst waiting for a bus and those who had undergone verbal abuse on the streets. It was also deeply disheartening to hear the experience of a Sikh couple who had the meteoric impact of 9/11 blast itself through their lives. The husband had been violently physically attacked and the wife was clearly still emotionally struggling with the unprovoked attack on her husband and who victims thought was a Muslim. The attack was so vicious that she described how she could not identify her husband when she saw him after the attack.
- Islam and Sikhism have many religious similarities and that there is a strong sense of social justice that motivates adherents to undertake volunteering activities. Both religions also stress the need for social justice and for protection of the poor and those 'who have no voice'.
- Further national work is needed and the Cohesive Communities project may be one strand of that national work. From what we have seen and experienced, it is essential that local authorities set aside local community chest grants which should be targeted towards getting joint cohesion work undertaken between Sikhs and Muslims locally. This is essential and members of such local authorities should advocate and push for such work through the relevant thematic group on the Local Strategic Partnership. Clear leadership by local authority members is needed here.
- A national Muslim/Sikh Forum of Commissioners should be set up with 5 Muslim and 5 Sikh Commissioners who should work on a regional basis. They will act as a bridge between Government, Local Authorities, Regional Development Authorities, other Statutory Sources and Grass Roots Sikh and Muslim Communities. They should meet on a quarterly basis and undertake duties throughout the year. Their work programme will and should be developed by the commissioners themselves and possibly the Department for Communities and Local Government.
- A national Sikh/Muslim press and public relations group can be set up so that when attacks take place against either community, this group can make relevant

public statements. Such joined up working can make a difference to perceptions between Sikhs and Muslims. This group may well be resourced by the Department for Communities and Local Government in terms of officer time.

- A report must be commissioned on one of the key areas of contention. This includes the supposed forced conversion of Sikh women. To date, very little tangible evidence has been provided to police forces on this matter, though this does not mean that the issue does not have relevance in terms of community impacts. It clearly does and therefore should be taken seriously. Faith Matters therefore proposes that an academic institution undertake the research and ensure that stakeholders from both faith communities are involved.
- The Department for Communities and Local Government may want to use the FIRST magazine which is distributed to all elected local authority members to highlight the need for community leadership on issues affecting both the communities. This should be raised and may be headed up with an article on relations between Sikhs and Muslims and areas which may lead to conflict.
- Current capacity building opportunities should be accessed by both groups, though it is clear that whilst groups should be encouraged to apply, there is no guarantee of success and voluntary action groups need to increase their contact lists to cover a wider number of faith communities.

In light of the above, we firmly hope that these recommendations and the report can add value to the continuing development of our nation and the work undertaken by faith communities in the fields of community cohesion and conflict resolution.

APPENDIX- I

First They Came, Pastor Martin Niemoller, 1976 version

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.

When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,
I remained silent;
I wasn't a Jew.

When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.

(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_they_came...)

This Report is a Product of

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