

Inter Faith

Dianna Wolfson's address on to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 22 May 2007

Moderator, I would like to thank the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for the tremendous honour bestowed on me by this invitation to address you today on Inter faith. While this honour is one for me as an individual today, the credit is due mainly to those who set up the Scottish Inter faith Council and to my colleagues of the different faith groups who work tirelessly in the interests of the faith communities of Scotland. I pay tribute too, to the many inter faith groups, faith communities and individuals who strive to develop links of friendship between people of different faiths.

I speak not as an academic, nor as a philosopher. I stand before you today, an orthodox Jew, proud of my own religious heritage. However, I could not be true to my own religious principles if I could not reach out in friendship to those of other faiths and cultures. My own inter faith experience was deeply embedded in my upbringing. I grew up in a mining village in West Lothian where half the village was Protestant and the other half Catholic. My father, Dr Sherry, was the village doctor and our family was Jewish. Family friends included the local minister and the local priest. We were very friendly with Rev George Lyons, a Church of Scotland minister and his family. My father's favourite saying was 'We're all Jock Thamsom's bairns,' and this statement underpinned his philosophy of life - a philosophy that he passed on to his family.

My serious inter faith journey began in the late 1970s when I represented the Jewish Community at the Glasgow Sharing of Faiths. It was there that I had the privilege of meeting the late Stella Reekie, a deaconess of the Church of Scotland, who opened up her home to people of other faiths in what was to become known as the International Flat. It was there that the inter faith encounter took root in Glasgow. People of the main religious faiths in Glasgow formed friendships which still continue to this day. We drew up programmes of meetings and discussed a range of topics relevant to our diverse traditions. Topics included the Environment (long before it was top of the political agenda), Attitude to women, Charity and Education. We arranged an annual Sharing of Faiths Exhibition, which was the highlight of the year and which was visited by many young people.

One project that we undertook made a lasting impression on me. We were approached by the Museum service for help in the preparation of a travelling exhibition on inter faith. The outside panels were to depict the various places of worship, together with information about prayer. These panels showed how different we all were in our approach to worship. The inside panels were to show the values that we all shared, supported by texts from our holy writings. For me this was mind blowing. On the outside we are all different, we have different theologies, we have different belief systems, customs and rituals. On the inside we all share the same values – our holy texts bear testimony to this: charity, loving kindness, caring for the weak and vulnerable in society, peace are but a few examples.

Let me share with you an incident that reinforced this for me. When I was Head teacher at Calderwood Lodge Jewish Primary School I was invited to speak to children in a school in

Cumbernauld. I spoke about the Jewish festivals that my pupils celebrated and explained some of our rituals. One little boy waved his hand frantically to get my attention. When I asked him what his question was he said, 'Do your children give charity to the Third World?'

I reassured him that they did and told him about a recent collection we had made for a specific appeal. My friends, the child visibly heaved a sigh of relief. If I could have put a speech bubble for his thoughts I am sure they would have been, 'I don't care what stuff they do for their religion, as long as they care about poor people, they are alright in my book.' A young child can see clearly what truly matters.

This story teaches an important lesson for the Religious Education curriculum. If we are to ensure respect for people of other world religions, then it is crucial that their values are taught alongside all the other aspects of their faith. I worry that all too often the ritual and colourful aspects of the other world religions is what is transmitted to pupils to the detriment of the values taught by the respective faiths.

One of the fears often expressed is that the inter faith encounter will water down the beliefs of the individual faiths into some kind of universal credo. The opposite is true. Inter faith is not to religion what Esperanto was intended to be for language. Those of us who are involved in inter faith work can testify to the strengthening of our own religious identity. When involved in inter faith dialogue it is helpful towards understanding the other to have not only the concept of a religion oneself, but the experience of one. In fact there is a powerful drive in each one of us to be a strong advocate and good role model for our own faith group.

What then does the Inter faith Council do? I will highlight one or two areas of work – you will need to read our Annual report for a more comprehensive account of our activities. It is no co-incidence that we were set up around the same time as the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The inter faith agenda had to be part of the new face of Scotland, to ensure that all the citizens were able to play a full part. Our mission is 'to contribute to a just and inclusive Scotland in which members of faith communities will know about and respect each other's faith and be willing to engage together for the common good of Scotland, respecting and rejoicing in religious and cultural difference.' We felt very much encouraged by the Scottish Executive by their One Scotland many Cultures campaign, which became, One Scotland. From the outset the Scottish Executive gave support for our work, with an annual meeting with the first minister a regular feature of our calendar. They also provided us with funding for our core work and for some of our projects, which has ensured our viability over the last few years.

I put our work with young people at the top of our agenda. Young people often show the way. This is true of the Youth committee of Inter faith Council. They decided to undertake a project on the Environment. With the help of Global Xchange students they researched and produced a booklet called Our Sacred Earth. I commend this publication to your congregations. It informs the reader of many practical ways to look after the environment. On every page there is a quote from the holy writings of one of the main faiths. It is quite

clear that the teachings of all the faith groups proclaim the importance of looking after the planet earth. It is our holy duty.

The Inter faith Council gives the young people the opportunity to meet in neutral ground in friendship and dialogue. They go off on an annual retreat where they plan their annual conference with the help of our Education and Development Officer. I would like to see more young people across Scotland having the opportunity to have this type of encounter.

The religious leaders of Scotland meet twice a year. The meetings arose from an initiative from the Christian leaders of Scotland following 9/11. The Inter faith Council acts as secretariat to these meetings which are jointly chaired by the host leader and the convener of the Inter faith Council. This has been one of the privileges as my post of convener. It has given me the opportunity to see the good relations that exist between the religious leaders - and indeed with our Council. One issue that was discussed was whether St Andrew's day should be a public holiday. The religious leaders gave their support to this proposal. Although St Andrew's day is a Christian celebration, the First Minister at the time, Mr Jack McConnell assured the leaders that it would also be a day that would celebrate all faiths, a day that would recognise the cultural diversity of Scotland. It is most appropriate that St Andrew's day falls in the middle of Scottish Inter faith week, an event that SIFC launched in 2004.

Inter Faith week has exceeded all our expectations. It has taken on a life of its own. The Inter faith Council helps to promote it and to encourage faith groups to arrange activities. Events take place the length and breadth of Scotland, from Shetland to Dumfries. During inter faith week 2005 my own synagogue arranged a shared meal with the local Muslim community. The ladies of each community worked together at the synagogue to produce a meal that satisfied the dietary requirements of both faith groups. It was a tremendous success. It was gratifying to see the Rabbi and the Imam greet each other warmly – colleagues from the religious leaders meetings.

While there are many exciting initiatives taking place in Scotland involving inter faith, there are nevertheless challenges to the inter faith experience.

At the top of every list of concerns is a recurring theme: the Media. Faith groups feel that their portrayal by the media is almost always a negative one. At an event at the British library to coincide with the opening of its Exhibition *Sacred: Discover what we share*, Lord Melvyn Bragg chaired a discussion between Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith leaders. He condemned the media for refusing to report on religious dialogue, preferring to highlight rifts between communities.

Just over a year ago the Sikh community held a major event in Glasgow to welcome their revered religious leader Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh. The day was devoted to an inter faith programme which included the annual Inter faith networking seminar organised by the Inter faith Council. It was followed by a conference, 'Working for Humanity'. The last event of the day was a discussion by representatives of the major faiths on 'Sacred space'. The Elijah Inter faith Institute of Jerusalem organised this discussion. How wonderful it would have been to have had this event broadcast, or at the very least fully reported in the press.

A Sikh event with an important contribution from an Israeli inter faith organisation together with religious leaders from various traditions – that would have been a wonderful news item, particularly with the warmth and friendship demonstrated by the leaders for each other!

Another challenge faces faith groups whenever there is a crisis abroad or at home. Wars and terrorism abroad and events at home lead to wide generalisations and demonization of specific faith groups, usually those groups who are easily identified by their outward appearance.

Pronouncements by politicians, religious leaders and other prominent people can add to the difficulties that are experienced.

How can we mitigate the effects of some of the problems that occur? There is a two page leaflet produced by the UK Inter Faith Network called *Looking after One another: the safety and security of our faith communities*. It has three main messages:

- 1) Respond jointly – an attack on one is an attack on all. There have been joint statements by the Religious leaders of Scotland: at the time of the G8 summit and following the bombing in London on 7/7. While individual faith leaders may also wish to make their own statement, the unanimity of a message from all the leaders has a powerful impact.
- 2) Build on existing good inter community relations. This is at the core of our work.
- 3) Calm in times of tension.

The third section reminds us all of the importance of checking the accuracy of stories with trusted contacts in the communities to ensure that inaccurate rumours do not spread. The message of this leaflet is the justification for much of the work that the Inter faith Council undertakes. When we have contacts and friendships with people of other faiths we have a human face, we can relate to. If we are to build community cohesion in Scotland we all need to concentrate on building friendships with other faiths. We need to understand what causes pain, what actions lead to anti-religious behaviour in the form of verbal and physical abuse, written comments and partisan analysis of events by the media and others.

I have been very privileged to be part of the Inter Faith Council team. I am proud of the enormous contribution the Council has made to the inter faith agenda in Scotland through the tireless work of the professional members of staff. I am moved beyond words that my dear inter faith colleagues have come here today to support me. I hope that my short address today will inspire you all to become involved in inter faith events, especially at grass roots level, perhaps during Inter Faith week. The news that the Church of Scotland has appointed an inter faith officer is a most welcome development. I bless the work of this Assembly and hope that your deliberations will not only benefit the members of the church, but will reach out and enrich the whole of our society.