



**Minutes of the East of England Faiths Council meeting held on
Wednesday 21 September 2011
St John's Innovation Centre, Cambridge**

Chairs: Mirza Baig (MB) and Richard Inwood (RI)

1 Welcome and silent reflection

MB welcomed everybody to the meeting. Jim Platts (Society of Friends) asked those present to hold hands and share a moment of silence.

2 The Jewish perspective on inter-faith dialogue

MB introduced Dr Ed Kessler (EK), MBE, Director of The Woolf Institute, Cambridge and a leading thinker in interfaith relations, primarily contemporary Judaism, Jewish-Christian and more recently Jewish-Muslim Relations. The text of EK's presentation is available on request from EEFC. MB thanked Dr Kessler for his lively and thought provoking presentation, one of the best given at an EEFC meeting, and invited questions and discussion.

Reynold Rosenberg asked whether Jews may be at a disadvantage in inter-faith dialogue because they are not evangelical. EK feels that there are particularities of faith that religions cling to; dialogue means being open to change and can help one to understand oneself better but one shouldn't enter into dialogue with the purpose of conversion.

Dina Mandalia commented that her understanding of her own Hinduism has changed as a result of her inter-faith engagement. EK feels that although there is some Jewish-Hindu engagement there is more to be done in this area.

Janet Scott pointed out that although many things are unfamiliar, learning about the other also tells us something about our own tradition. EK agreed that we can learn as well as bring, when we try to understand how the other person thinks.

Iqbal Warsi said that Islam does not see itself as a separate religion, both Judaism and Christianity are part of the Koran. EK responded that this is not necessarily how a Jew or a Christian would understand the revelation and there is a need to acknowledge the differences and tensions.

Valerie Skottowe said that she had recently heard a talk about Roman Catholic-Muslim dialogue by a Roman Catholic priest from the Vatican in which he said that it is necessary to make communities understand the importance of dialogue. EK replied that in most places we can encounter people who are different, so we need to ask whether we reject them because they don't belong or whether we include them and engage with them – do we go to our ghettos or engage with the world?

At this point MB handed over to RI.

3 Meet your neighbour

RI explained that for this session each table included a facilitator, and people would be asked to talk about the format of the quarterly meetings, subjects they would like to hear more about and how EEFC could offer further benefits. These comments would be noted and discussed at the next Board meeting.

4 Report on Faiths Council projects and matters

Annual Report

JK advised those who had not been at the AGM that Annual Reports were available at the reception desk, or could be emailed, or downloaded from the EEFC website (<http://www.eefcfaithscouncil.org.uk/reports.php>).

The last year has been one of change for EEFC but as JK had described in the AGM, it was continuing on track to fulfil its remit.

Local Authorities

EEFC was continuing to work with the six Local Authorities as JK had outlined at the last meeting, and she was pleased to say that Bedford Borough was now also supporting EEFC.

EEFC would be working with the East of England Local Government Association to survey Councillors and engage them further in outreach work to faith groups.

Survey of Local Inter Faith Organisations

JK warmly thanked all who took part in this survey. The final report is now available and will be sent to all participants and placed on the FaithNetEast website as a downloadable pdf on the publications page (<http://www.faithneteast.org.uk/publ.htm>).

The survey had been very helpful in directing EEFC work and indicated the need for:

- Making more time for networking
- Looking at how public transport can be used more for meetings
- Making representations to government for a modest pot of money dedicated to local inter faith
- Reminding people of IT help available and how to access it.

Meeting with government

The survey showed the importance of relatively small amounts of funding; that funding for local IF work has overall reduced; and that help is needed on locating and applying to funds. JK had met with an officer from the Department for Communities and Local Government and discussed the findings with him. The Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, has stated that he remains committed to working with faith groups. There may be some small grants made available, and EEFC will advise of anything it learns. There is also likely to be a new initiative from the Department promoting the value of faith volunteering.

Events

The Big Questions conference took place in Chelmsford on 27 June, with the support of Essex County Council, and proved very popular. EEFC will hold another similar event in Stevenage on 26 January 2012 with the support of Hertfordshire County Council. This will focus on changes in government policy that will affect faith groups such as Localism and Open Public Services, and also on how elected members (Councillors) can be supported to help faith groups get involved locally.

Guidance for faith groups engaging with government

This document is being drafted by Simon Banks from Essex County Council and will be available by January. Simon was present at the meeting and JK thanked him for this, and for all his support of EEFC.

Inter Faith Week (20 to 26 November)

There will be a regional event on Monday 21 November from 3pm to 6pm in County Hall, Hertford. The event will be designed primarily for local inter faith groups to meet and network, as this was what they had indicated they would most value. Those groups who had responded to JK's email asking for guidance on how they would like the event to be organised, had said that they preferred it to be structured, so there would be themed round-table discussions. JK asked people to send her a note of themes they would like included.

EEFC will have a dedicated IFW website page as in previous years and JK asked that people send their information to EEFC, and also reminded people that EEFC could help with publicity and media training. (<http://www.eefaithscouncil.org.uk/interfaith2011.php>)

Local Inter Faith Awards

With the reduction in EEFC capacity it would not be possible to organise the judging process used last year. However, EEFC had asked the two sponsoring banks (Triodos and Unity) if they could again provide some funding. If this is possible then the Awards could be made again, but with displays being judged on the day.

Follow us on Twitter (@eefaithscouncil)

EEFC is now offering updates by Twitter, and people can link in as 'followers' on the home page of the EEFC website. We would welcome people sending us material to get us started.

JK then handed over to Patricia Wyman of the Multi Faith Chaplaincy at Cambridge Regional College, who gave the meeting some information about National Quaker Week, beginning on 1 October.

Kevin Hand then told the meeting about the celebrations being held by the Faith Woodlands Project on 16 October.

5 Dates of future meetings

Thursday 15 December 2011

Thursday 22 March 2012

Tuesday 12 June 2012

Thursday 27 September 2012

Thursday 13 December 2012

Priscilla Barlow
3 October 2011