



Stronger Together

Herts Inter Faith conference

'Stronger Together'
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conference



3 March 2020

Summary Report based on
Rabbi Jeff Berger's Notes

About the conference:

Welcome to 'Stronger Together' - Herts Inter Faith conference. This conference was a joint initiative between Herts Inter Faith Forum and Hertfordshire County Council.

Hertfordshire has a rich and diverse set of faith communities with two thirds of the population stating a religion. According to the 2011 census, 58% of Hertfordshire's residents describe themselves as Christian, 2.75 % as Muslim, 2 % as Jewish, 2% as Hindu, 0.5% as Buddhist and 0.45% as Sikh and with 26% stating they do not follow any religion.

This conference was an opportunity to hear from a spectrum of views and to gain a further understanding of how communities can work together to meet some of our challenges we face in Hertfordshire.

The Herts Inter Faith Forum brings together inter faith groups across Hertfordshire. The Forum seeks to share and promote best practice and works with all communities to encourage better community cohesion.

Hertfordshire County Council is committed to achieving equality of opportunity and we value and recognise the significant contribution made by all communities.

Conference chairs:

Conference chair

Reynold Rosenberg, Herts Inter Faith Forum

Session chairs

AM – Jehangir Sarosh OBE, Religions for Peace

PM – Anuradha Sharma, Herts Inter Faith Forum

Faith panel includes:

Rt Revd Richard Atkinson OBE,

The Bishop of Bedford – Diocese of St Albans

Rabbi Alan Garber, Shenley United Jewish Community

Imam Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, Visiting Imam to the University of Leicester and De Montfort University

Conference overview

10:00 Conference registration

10:30 Conference begins

12:40 Vegetarian buffet lunch

15:45 Networking break – tea/coffee

16:00 Conference closes

Conference organisers contact email:

equalities@hertfordshire.gov.uk

More than 105 delegates from faith communities around Hertfordshire participated in this day-long conference held at the Welwyn Garden City Focolare Centre for Unity.

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The morning was opened by Reynold Rosenberg, Chair of the Hertfordshire Inter Faith Forum who welcomed the participants and set the objectives for the day.

The Lord Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, Robert Voss CBE spoke about the rich diversity of our County, its opportunities and its challenge: Geographic, demographic, environmental, educational and religious diversity with issues of an increasing population and greater life-expectancy, along with demand for more housing. In higher education, many students from newly arrived immigrant communities are the first generation in their families to go to University.

There is great affluence, yet abject poverty in some districts. There are more than 4000 charities in the County staffed by 150,000–200,000 volunteers (well-above the national average), as well as several corporate headquarters. There are at least 25 faiths represented in Hertfordshire, with a wonderful tapestry of religions. He emphasized that interfaith builds social cohesion.

The Lord Lieutenant shared his hopes for the day – that we might recognise in a world more complex than ever before, a need to accept and respect each other – regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, political views and more – in order to create a safe, positive, nurturing atmosphere that allows us all to embrace and celebrate our individuality.



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The first session of speakers was chaired by Mr. Jehangir Sarosh OBE.

Rt Rev Richard Atkinson OBE has had a long history of promoting social justice and engaging in interfaith in Leicester. He spoke of caring for our world and the environment in six ways; 1) having a passion for Creation, 2) taking practical action, 3) making a commitment to work together, 4) being concerned about the future, 5) having a vision of transformation, and 6) taking a global interest.

His personal commitment includes; loving his neighbours, seeing Christ in each person, working for the common good, and upholding justice & righteousness. He sees Faith as a gift to the world, believes we must all make opportunities to build bridges, practice love, service and sacrifice, empower at the local level, want to make a difference, and be capable of receiving as well as giving.

For Rev Atkinson, this manifests in 5 ways; Witnessing, Standing, Serving, Resisting and Transforming. He cited numerous examples of interfaith practise, including the annual Luton Peace Walk ongoing for 20 years, visiting the religious places of others after terror attacks abroad, working with Near Neighbours and Faiths against Child Sexual Exploitation.

Rev Atkinson asked the audience to consider the challenges ahead. How do we include those who've opted out of faith practice? Where do we find the financial resources to fund our activities? How can we disagree better? He believes that all of these issues can be addressed by building year-on-year from what we already have.



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Rabbi Alan Garber has worked for 13 years as a communal rabbi, including as chaplain in Leeds University, as a congregational rabbi in Australia, and now as rabbi of Shenley United Synagogue.

In his experience, interfaith interactions strengthen the faith of participants by increasing their religious literacy.

The Rabbi focussed on 3 subjects.

1) The Jewish idea of Interfaith. The core of monotheism is the focus on Unity – that we all come from One Source and we all are created in the Divine Image.

He said we must understand that 'Change starts from within'. Having asked his young daughter to reassemble a map of the world, he was astonished that she finished so quickly. She explained that on the opposite side was a photo of a person and by reassembling the image she was able to easily complete her task. Lesson: when we put the Person together, the World comes together.

2) The spread of corona virus and avoiding hand shaking. The Rabbi quoted a colleague in Miami who expressed how much we miss something when it is taken away. Describing God as 'our Father in Heaven', he suggested it is hard for a parent to watch children fighting with each other. Emphasizing that small acts can have a big impact, he referred to Edward Lorenz's 1963 Butterfly Effect. Lesson: Along with Unity comes Responsibility for looking after each other.

3) With regard to the Cherubim of the Holy Ark, explained the Scriptural verse that the Divine Presence appeared when the Cherubim were facing each other. Lesson: Through Engagement, we can find the Divine in each of us.



Several activities can make us Stronger, including:

- internalising a mind-set of unity,
- standing up against hatred,
- training ourselves to do daily acts of kindness which we can review in our minds before going to bed.

Rabbi Garber concluded with examples of interfaith programmes he is involved in. These included; Remembrance Day & Holocaust Memorial Day ceremonies, Happy Hour with the local Bishop to address the topic of Happiness & Well Being and visiting local schools together. He believes that when we make the effort to get together, we can discover how much we have to learn from each other.

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Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra is a member of the Muslim Council of Britain and visiting Imam to the University of Leicester and De Montfort University. He spoke of the Muslim case for interfaith.

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Quoting from the Koran, Shaykh Mogra began by sharing a story of God assembling the Angels on High to discuss the creation of humans. Though they protested the anticipated violence and bloodshed between humans, eventually God made the Angels bow to them. The Shaykh said, as children of Adam, we've been given Nobility, Honour, Dignity and Respect. Each of us is precious. He quoted further passages from the Koran reflecting the common heritage we share and the task of humanity 'to encounter one another'.

Though some in his community interpret these verses narrowly to only include those of the Muslim faith, Shaykh Ibrahim proposed a wider, more inclusive interpretation. In a separate metaphor on Unity, he suggested that it was easy to break a single stick but harder when they were bundled together.

A second stream of his talk involved inviting cooperation. Again, Shaykh Mogra quoted from scripture the need for us to assist each other in righteousness, defining that one can't be righteous unless we 'want for others what we want for ourselves'.

Sharing some successful interfaith experiences, he described mutual cooperation in lobbying and engaging with government over the introduction of 'body scanners' at airports and regarding burial practices. He cited exceptional cases of hospitality offered by the Jewish community following the arson of the Somali Bravanese Centre in London and efforts by Muslims in Bradford to save an ailing synagogue.



In his conclusion the Shaykh shared his experience that interfaith needn't require compromising our teachings, beliefs and jurisprudence but instead accommodating each other in our differences.

In a Q&A session the panellists addressed questions about mixed marriages, proselytizing and conversion, and mental health support for young people.

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Wendy Lidgate

How can interfaith co-operation assist learning in Schools?

The Whisper Interfaith School Project promotes volunteers from many faiths to visit classrooms in the County and introduces religious literacy through example and artefact.

Wendy presented information about the Whisper Project. Whisper provides school visitors drawn from multiple religions who tell children about their faith in support of the RE curriculum. It's great for the children to have a real encounter with an authentic person of faith! Visitors answer children's questions about their personal experience, and often give presentations about their faith, tell stories from their scriptures and explain artefacts and festivals. Whisper arranges school assemblies.



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Afternoon

The afternoon session was chaired by Mrs Anuradha Sharma who explained the break-out session format.

How Inter Faith dialogue enables better community cohesion. The High Sheriff of Hertfordshire, Sarah Beazley.

Sarah spoke of the Intrinsic Value of Every Human Being and the Importance of Developing Friendships as the basis for interfaith engagement and integration. Summarizing her year as High Sheriff, she observed that compared to the national average, faith appears to matter more in Hertfordshire.

While recognizing the enormous amount of dialogue that takes place across faiths in our County, many of us are still nervous about entering Houses of Worship of other faiths. Social action should strengthen our relationships across the faiths and enables us to more actively explore our differences.

One of the reasons for this conference was to have the opportunity to better share our County-wide successes. For example, faith institutions are the largest provider of youth activities in the country. We also do great work in alleviating social need.

However, geo-politics at times complicates our identities and loyalties, and that about crime, the police are unable to 'arrest their way out of the current problems' of drugs and violence. It is up to us as faith leaders who have broad influence to assist in the task of safety and crime prevention.

From a series of reports from 2015-2018, a path for creating greater social cohesion was described.

1. Leaders need to agree on a shared value system for public life.
2. It is necessary to improve religious literacy in schools and colleges to enable us to break away from unhelpful prejudices.
3. All that we do needs to reflect a pluralist viewpoint.
4. Going beyond dialogue, we should think globally but act locally, broaden our approach to engage in social action, and build trust between ourselves at the grass roots level.



Can we do more to engage with those who are not only like-minded but with those who profess no interest in organised religion? Setting the example of 'unity not uniformity' and being part of a 'salad bowl and not a melting pot', the audience were charged to go to the break-out groups and come up with some action plans.

Hertfordshire is a safe place with lots of interfaith, but we might strengthen our bounds through more social action. Interfaith engagement is a vehicle for building trust and breaking down social barriers, allowing us to find our shared fundamental values.

Workshops

Participants were invited to join two of four 45-minute sessions



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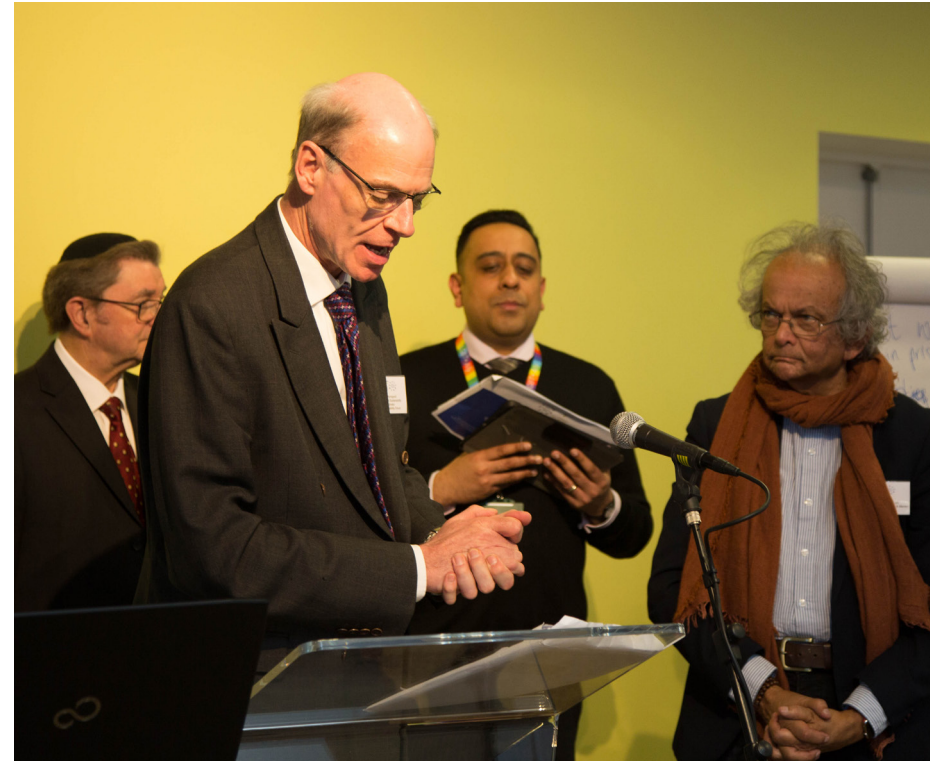


The workshops were: 1) Environmental & Sustainable Development, 2) Challenging Prejudice & Extremism, 3) Health, Wellbeing & Fitness and 4) Exploring Opportunities for All

Workshop1: Environmental & Sustainable Development, delivered by David Thorogood (Herts Sustainability Forum) and Don DeSilva (Advisor, Religions for Peace UK)

Sustainable development concerns the wise use of our natural resources — this includes, issues, such as, food and consumption, poverty, the gap between the rich and poor, homelessness, inclusion, education, the use of utilities like gas, water and electricity, flooding and health and wellbeing.”

The workshop discussed how can faith communities encourage better awareness of issues related to sustainable development in Hertfordshire? The presenters considered that Faith and Sustainable development are two sides of the same coin. Sustainable development demands faith involvement commitment from faith communities will help solve problems of climate change.



Workshop 2: Challenging Prejudice & Extremism – delivered by Chief Inspector Chris Treadwell of the Hertfordshire Constabulary, Chris heads the Hate Crime department for the entire County. He also is in the department responsible for Crime Reduction.

Chris presented statistics on Hate Crime/ Hate Incidents in the County and policing efforts to identify precursors to Domestic Extremism. A seasoned member of the force, his most emphatic point was that there is a breakdown of trust between local communities and the police and that only 1 in 8 crimes are reported. Despite all their efforts, the police struggle to receive crime information from the public.

Reference was made to cooperative efforts by SAFE (Safety Advice for Everyone) & CST (Community Security Trust) to improve preparedness and prevention in faith communities and specifically for Houses of Worship and Community Centres.

During Q&A, questions focused on radicalization in prisons, the negative impact of grooming and how to mitigate media fear mongering.

Workshop 3: Health, Wellbeing & Fitness – delivered by Jim McManus, Director of Public Health, Hertfordshire County Council.

Jim presented a 25-minute scientifically evidenced approach to health, balance and wellbeing. Consisting of four pillars – Coping, Resilience, Mental/ Physical Balance and Making Sense, Jim explained that those with a religious faith seem to be able to cope with life challenges better than those without a faith. He praised faith communities for providing Balance, Connection and Care to their members, and cited examples where they have lead in providing early support services like hospitals, mental health centres, hospices and more. Jim contrasted the NHS approach of addressing specific illnesses rather than a broader approach that helps a patient get back to being ‘wholesome’.

Jim offered a diagram that addressed rebalancing needs of the Self, the Society, the Environment and the Spiritual. He challenged the audience by asking ‘what are you doing as a community leader to build health in your community?’

At the Q&A, issues raised included; COVID-19, the public budget gap for Mental Health Services, avoiding places with bad health practices and body-image worry among teenagers.

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Workshop 4: Exploring Opportunities for All. Delivered by Jeremy Simmons and Martin Smith (FaithAction)

Jeremy and Martin introduced their organisation FaithAction. FaithAction are a national network of faith-based and community organisations seeking to serve their communities through social action and by offering services such as health and social care, childcare, housing and welfare to work.

FaithAction empowers faith-based and community organisations, by:

- providing support, guidance and training, enabling them to carry out their own mission to the best of their ability;
- conducting research, highlighting the work of the faith-based and community organisations, and encouraging statutory bodies to work in partnership with them;
- disseminating key information, ensuring they have access to all the information, research, best practice, and funding opportunities they need;

- being their voice to Government, ensuring that the contributions and needs of faith-based and community organisations are properly considered when policy is made.

FaithAction are part of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance which exists to help make sure that the voices of people in communities are heard by the people who make policy on health and social care.

There was a group discussion on the topic of “How can faith communities help reduce inequality? “

The workshop discussed how can faith communities harness what they are already doing to reduce inequalities.



Key actions from workshops

Life opportunities for all:

- Think “laterally” about how your existing activities may be harnessed to reduce inequality. E.g. services/events offered.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of your activities. If possible, consider external evaluation. FaithAction also provide training/guidance on evaluation if needed. Telling stories of how the things you do affect the lives of individuals provide a good platform for influencing policy.
- Hertfordshire County Council should consider adopting the Faith Covenant in partnership with faith groups, to encourage cross-sector partnership (<https://www.faithandsociety.org/covenant/>)

Health, Wellbeing and Faith:

- Faith group leaders should consider a workshop or course on health & wellbeing.
- How can faith communities support people to find balance in life?
- What can faith communities/leaders do to help people cope with the realities of everyday life?
- How can faith communities respond to the mental uncertainties of young people today?
- What activities can faith communities organise to promote connectedness?

Workshop on Environment and Sustainable Development in Hertfordshire

- Nominate a representative from Herts Interfaith Forum to join Herts Sustainability Forum
- We need to preach sustainability top tips from the “pulpit”! - Promote a “live simply” philosophy and circulate a list of key everyday actions for our individual members to help achieve a more sustainable lifestyle (including details of home energy grants available to vulnerable people).

- Working with young people is key. Encourage those who are governors of faith schools to ensure that sustainability and climate change is on the curriculum and to seek schools to achieve demonstrable practical actions to improve energy efficiency and thereby also save money
- Use both individual and collective voice as faith organisations to lobby government for more action on sustainability issues and in particular to build improvements to local public transport (especially the local bus network through “re-regulation”)
- Take action on plastic. Ensure that as faith groups we are using alternatives to disposable plastic plates, cups etc during community meals etc.
- Get out of the car! Encourage walking cycling to services and faith meetings. Why not join a lift-share scheme (e.g. Liftshare.org, operated by some District Councils in Hertfordshire)

Challenging Prejudice & Extremism

- Raising awareness of ways of reporting Hate Crime in Hertfordshire
- Partnership working with Faith Communities
- More consultation and engagement with faith communities and places of worship

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Post-Workshops

The meeting reconvened as a plenary following the workshops. Reynold Rosenberg and Faizal Hakim invited the four workshop leaders to each share 3 action points from their sessions

Raising Awareness of Resources - Helen Gray, Director for the Hertfordshire Community Foundation



Grants and funding resources are available by application to HCF. Helen shared some disturbing statistics on child poverty and unemployment in parts of the County and explained the types of micro grants on offer for charities and small community groups – from £1,000-£5,000 – available to organizations addressing social needs. Examples included; Zeo Church, Street Pastors, and Red Trust Bushey Food Bank.

There are also emergency disbursements from the Children's Fund of £300 per incident for families in crisis. These are available via referral from teachers, professionals and senior clergy. HCF offers courses in Training & Development for First Aid, Safeguarding, Fund Raising & Governance and more.

Interfaith and Inclusion – a Hertfordshire County Council perspective - Cllr Bob Deering, Deputy Executive Member, Hertfordshire County Council



The County Council's support for Interfaith was confirmed. The High Sheriff's reference to being part of a Salad Bowl was supported and Bob shared a story of empathy with the taxi drivers he met over the years. Bob's experience as a Lawyer in Dubai made him more aware of Islam, and after returning to the UK enabled him to respect people more and to enjoy our County's rich tapestry of diversity.

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Reynold Rosenberg thanked all the participants for a productive day. He thanked the Focolare Centre for being such wonderful hosts and he asked the question whether this should be repeated next year.

Faizal Hakim thanked by name the local Focolare team for their technical and logistic support. He summarised three themes from the day which were Inclusion, Belonging and Support. He expressed eagerness to develop an Equality & Diversity strategy at the County Council, leading to greater partnerships and community engagement.

The meeting finished at 3:45pm allowing 15 minutes for coffee and networking.





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