

Muslims & Methodists

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Summer 2017

A Connexional grant 2016-17 enabled the Christian Muslim Forum to develop a structured relationship with the Methodist Church, focusing on Methodist-Muslim engagement in nine Districts and sharing resources and insights with the wider Connexion.

Without compromising the integrity of the two faiths, the project's aim for Methodists was to build confidence in God's presence, to enable people from both traditions to grow and learn as Christians and as Muslims and to be good neighbours to each other.

underlying complexity behind the different views expressed

The Muslims and Methodists project coincided with a period of change at CMF. In response to a fast-moving context, CMF sharpened its focus and widened its engagement. This included the establishment of a new and diverse group of Christians and Muslims willing to tackle controversial issues. The project enabled the group to include a senior Methodist leader. Members are committed to understanding the lived experience and underlying complexity behind the different views expressed and to interpret these back to their own communities.

The project was designed to build on the good work already taking place between Muslims and Methodists, to make a positive impact locally and across the Connexion, to be linked up and celebrated, and to form a solid base for more sustained and mainstreamed work in future years. For this reason, the project worked through the network of Districts in order for it to be embedded organisationally.

Although British Christians and Muslims have much in common, there are several asymmetries. Christians (59%) are more numerous than Muslims (4.7%); together they make up 64% of the population in England and Wales. The Muslim population is much younger (nearly half are under 25 years old) than the Christian population (22% are over 65 years old). Muslims are more likely (92%) to be from an ethnic minority, Christians less so (10%). Socio-economically, 46% of Muslims live in the 10% most deprived local authority districts in England.

*access to decision-makers,
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There are large disparities between levels of financial, organisational and social capital between Christians and Muslims. Muslim institutions are less securely established than Christian institutions, which have been built up over centuries. Islamic scholarship is not as readily available in the UK as Christian scholarship. Access to decision-makers, government and mainstream media is less easy for Muslims. Newer Christian denominations, including black-led congregations, face similar challenges. The historic churches have a recognised place in society and the Church of England has its own well-established mechanisms for interacting with government. Negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims in the press are more frequent than similar reporting of Christianity and Christians. Levels of hate crime against Muslims are significantly higher and is on the increase.

Whilst there is much goodwill and important Christian-Muslim work going on, the national and international context within which it takes place has deteriorated significantly over recent years.

Joint working on social justice and peace-building, concerns about religious freedom, terrorism, the religious duty towards stranger and neighbour, scholarly exchange and the willingness to be friends across faith boundaries are shared areas of interest which bring Christians and Muslims together. There are also reasons for engaging, or for being hesitant to engage, which differ between the two faiths. Some Christians want to understand why British Muslims have travelled to the Middle East to join ISIS. The persecution of Christians in Muslim-majority countries continues to be a topic of concern. Muslims often have pressing concerns around security, Islamophobia, the far right and discrimination. Relations with the media and other parts of the establishment are not always easy and Muslims can benefit from the support of Christians, who are often listened to more attentively. Both Christians and Muslims would like to see a more developed theology, from within both traditions, of inter faith engagement.

Methodist history has much to teach all British communities about social justice, working class and marginalised communities, hope and the capacity of groups to support each other and to challenge injustice here and overseas. The experience of non-conformity and dissent, the practical hands-on approach to social action and the importance given to organisational accountability provide British Muslims with a nuanced encounter which is differentiated from a one-size-fits-all understanding of British Christianity.

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LANCASHIRE

Lancashire has several urban and District-wide groups which bring together people from different religious traditions, but there is little that brings leaders together from Islamic and Methodist places of worship. A development day was arranged by the District's Inter Faith Dialogue Officer at Wesley Hall in Blackburn, bringing ministers and senior Islamic leaders together to learn about tackling extremism, what Muslims believe, the theology of working with other faiths, Faith Friends in East Lancashire schools, social media and multifaith speed dating, ending with a pechakucha-style sharing of the value of the day. The keynote speaker was the Rev Dr Inderjit Bhogal, a past President of the Methodist Conference and well known figure.

Within one day, Muslim and Methodist leaders who had never met before had established the beginning of a friendship and had become more curious about each other's traditions. One workshop looked at the Muslim Jesus and the Christian Jesus and feedback suggested that participants learned as much about their own tradition as they did about their neighbours' faith.

There was a particular interest in the doctrine of prevenient grace and in John Wesley's sermon *A Caution Against Bigotry*, with both Methodist and Muslim participants wanting to follow up on this and learn more. They relished the opportunity to look at the theological impact and a finer understanding of historical context which is relevant today.

Conversations on radicalisation and terrorism revealed a worry that the recent Brexit vote had led to an increase in confidence to express racist views which could undermine interfaith relations and feed the far right.

Participants left with an increased awareness of cross-faith links in the District, greater confidence in talking about differences and similarities and having made contact with faith leaders in Lancashire whom they may not otherwise have met.

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SHEFFIELD

There is a wide variety of inter faith work in Sheffield District, ranging from practical support for refugees to story-based encounters and discussion groups involving people from religious and non-religious traditions. Finding ways to link Methodist churches with Islamic centres in ways which do not feel awkward or artificial was one of the ideas to emerge from initial discussions. Within the District, Rotherham has particular challenges, with good work taking place but community life in the town often fractured rather than cohesive.

CMF visited Sheffield and Rotherham and supported a Methodist minister who wanted to enable some reconciliation between people of faith in the local area. In reaching out to the leadership of the nearby Islamic centre, a link was established and, in time, a Macmillan's coffee morning was held at the mosque, with members of the Methodist congregation participating alongside their Muslim hosts.

Youth initiatives in Sheffield and a human library, where people can hear about the lives of people from different backgrounds, are also planned.

WEST YORKSHIRE

Touchstone is a flagship Methodist centre in Bradford, a listening community which makes safe places of hospitality for radically different people to listen to each other.

The Muslims and Methodists project contributed to the Light in Communities Network run by Touchstone with Muslim, Christian and Hindu women, and held at Bradford Community Radio. In response to news reports of faith bringing darkness, the sessions demonstrated that faith is a light to guide religious women and that they, in turn, can be a light in the community. The network is encouraging leadership by women on interfaith issues through creative engagement and community activism. A Muslim and a Christian from CMF joined two of the six sessions and shared their reflections.

The conversations took place over candle-making and glass painting. The women paid attention to the crafts and to each other's stories. Their conversations on women's leadership highlighted the importance firstly of knowing themselves, in order to elevate the status of the women around them. They discussed their intention

to build a unified movement of female empowerment as a result of the network.

a listening community which makes safe places of hospitality

Whilst grass roots inter faith work with women is often patronised by faith leaders as ‘nice but insignificant’ and not requiring much sophistication or skills, the Touchstone approach offers a very different reading. Touchstone sees working with grassroots women’s groups as crucial; it underpins everything they do. Women are empowered and become leaders and light bearers. Touchstone brings people into relationship across the divisions. The Methodist Rev Dr John Vincent has written about a theology of ‘communal practice and experience, of *Koinonia*, of having things (at least feelings) in common, of being One Body’. It is recognising ‘the inherent value of each and every person, whoever they might be’. The *Koinonia* approach begins by seeing the need for people to connect with each other rather than accepting segregation of communities by faith.

Participants in the Light in Communities Network are encouraged to develop their relationships with each other and with Touchstone by volunteering at the centre.

NORTHAMPTON

The Director of Mission for Northampton District joined CMF at its national meeting in Leicester and talked to one of the Christian-Muslim learning groups about the Methodist approach, citing Wesley’s sermon *Catholic Spirit*. Wesley talks about the conversation in the Bible story between Jehonadab and Jehu. Jehu affirms that he is ‘in accord’ with Jehonadab, who says ‘Give me thine hand’ and pulls him up into the chariot. Differences of opinions should not stand in the way of brotherly affection and Wesley goes on to say, ‘Though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike?’.

The history and non-established status of the Methodist Church led to a discussion on the freedom to speak out and about the down to earth approach of Methodists working for social justice.

BRISTOL

CMF was a guest at Bristol District Policy Committee meeting, talked about current issues in Christian-Muslim relations and gained an insight into the decision-making processes of the Methodist Church. Bristol is a large District with rural, industrial, suburban, urban and coastal areas and includes wealthy communities as well as those which are struggling on low incomes. Muslim-Methodist involvement has included solidarity action after an attack on one of the mosques in Bristol, chaplaincy work at the University of the West of England, friendships between neighbouring places of worship and a widely publicised [statement](#) by Methodists, Muslims and other faith leaders in the Barton and Tredworth area of Gloucester after the attacks in Manchester and London.

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Agreeing a statement which pulls together the underlying theology and purpose of inter faith work in the District was suggested; a concise form of words that could easily be presented on websites and online platforms. The work of the Methodist Church is summarised in 'Our Calling', which includes, 'to be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice'. A form of words for the District was not agreed within the project time, but the Methodist Conference in June 2017 issued a statement, "In the light of recent terrorist attacks, the Conference urges churches and circuits to foster and build relationships with people of all faiths, especially at this time with the Islamic community so that we might work together to create more open, tolerant and inclusive communities across Britain."

LONDON

Although CMF travels around the country, London remains an important venue for events with national resonance. In the wake of the Casey Review, a CMF briefing on Integration and Opportunity was launched at Westminster Abbey at a lunch hosted by the Dean.

The Chair of London District attended and was interviewed on film. The Chair was also one of two keynote speakers at a CMF event for young Muslim and Christian women on gender equality to mark International Women's Day at the Southbank Centre, which was also captured on film. Following the fire at Grenfell Tower, the Notting Hill Methodist Church found itself on the frontline of support to local residents, working in cooperation with the Al Manaar Muslim Cultural Heritage Centre and other places of worship.

BOLTON AND ROCHDALE

As part of CMF's church-mosque twinning programme, two women, a Methodist minister and an Anglican priest, joined together to form a twinning friendship with sisters from one of the Rochdale mosques.

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This is what I think and I'm right
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BEDFORDSHIRE, HERTFORDSHIRE AND ESSEX

The Muslims and Methodists project visited a Methodist minister who is lead Chaplain at the University of Bedford. She also takes responsibility for inter faith activities in the District. The University is a multicultural and multifaith institution with a significant proportion of overseas students. The Chaplain works closely with the part time Muslim Chaplain. Plans to build on a series of community conversations in 2015 and to involve young Methodists from the east of the District were not realised within the course of the project. Training in dialogue itself was identified, to get beyond people saying, "This is what I think and I'm right." Within the university community, it was recognised that students from Muslim-majority countries who are under pressure to achieve well academically also have to deal with many of the day to day challenges that, as a minority, British Muslims face. Being part of a worldwide network, the Methodist Church has an understanding of these challenges and future work may ease the settling in of overseas students.

WOLVERHAMPTON AND SHREWSBURY

After a visit of CMF to the Chair of Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District, two possibilities emerged: support for a Christian-Muslim coffee morning for younger women and an idea for local schools. The latter was the idea which caught on and local Methodists, together with imams from a mosque in Netherton plan to put together a Faith Exploration Day: a half day of interactive activities based around Christianity and Islam, games and food, delivered by the Methodist leaders and imams. In the meantime, the District Chair has led a large gathering in Walsall of Muslim and Christian leaders interested in CMF's church-mosque twinning programme. Methodist ministers took part and one of them has formed a twinning relationship with the leader of a nearby Islamic Centre.

A SELECTION

WALES/CYMRU The Chair of Synod Cymru chairs [Trefnu Cymunedol Cymru/Together Creating Community](#) with Dr Farookh Jishi of the Wrexham Muslim Association as Vice-Chair, bringing diverse communities together to tackle social injustice. The Methodist church and mosque in Llandudno Junction have good relations.

BIRMINGHAM Methodists are working ecumenically and with Citizens UK. There have been joint celebrations in the Islamic and Christian calendar and close bonds formed between Islamic centres and Methodist churches. A blog was written by the District Chair on [Christian Identity in a Multi Faith City](#) and he also signed the Brimingham Faith Leaders' statement on USA travel ban from seven Muslim-majority countries.

The immediate and sustained support by Muslims from Lancashire when the floods hit has not been forgotten

CUMBRIA This rural District has suffered a succession of misfortunes, from foot and mouth disease and bovine TB to the death of twelve people by shooting and two episodes of severe flooding. The immediate and sustained support by Muslims from Lancashire (and through Muslim Aid) when the floods hit has not been forgotten, helping out in many places including the Methodist Chapel in Kendal and in Keswick. The strong friendships ecumenically and between church and Muslim leaders (five groups regularly share meals) have strengthened the wider community against attacks by the English Defence League in Whitehaven and Carlisle. Public shows of solidarity weaken the resolve of far right groups and deter further aggression.

CHANNEL ISLANDS Historically, Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Methodists have always had good relations with the local Jewish community. More recently, Muslims from the financial sector and medical profession have made Jersey their home and, after worshipping in a former Methodist chapel, they have purchased the building. The opening ceremony for the new Mosque included local civic and religious leaders. The Methodist Superintendent Minister spoke of the place becoming a

house of prayer again, of the good relations between the three Christian denominations and the Jewish and the Muslim communities and their mutual respect for each other over many years. As President of the Methodist Conference in 2015/16, the Rev Steve Wild visited the Mosque as he had done as a teenager when it was a Methodist youth centre.

CHESTER AND STOKE-ON-TRENT The

District's Vision and Mission Statement includes, 'We will develop good relations and understanding with representatives of other world faiths without compromising the Christian gospel'

LINCOLNSHIRE The birthplace of the Wesleys, good relationships exist between Methodists and the Islamic Association of Lincoln. A Faiths Festival is held together, including an exhibition, and a Peace Walk through the city centre takes place. After the Manchester terror attack in May 2017, a vigil of solidarity was organised outside the temporary mosque in Lincoln. During the month of Ramadan, senior Methodists take part in sharing an iftar meal to break the fast at the mosque.

LIVERPOOL The District Chair co-chairs the Merseyside Council of Faiths which brings religious leaders together, responding to events when necessary (for example after the [Manchester](#) and Finsbury Park attacks), which acts as a catalyst for deeper friendships and as an encouragement for other organisations to stand together against division. Liverpool is home to the oldest mosque in England.

PLYMOUTH AND EXETER The District participates in [Devon Faith and Belief Forum](#) and has good relations with Exeter Mosque.

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The Muslims and Methodists project has enabled a growing list of Districts to be in touch with CMF on a regular basis, to receive news and resources and to be involved in local and national CMF activities. Methodist approaches to inter faith work have been included in CMF's programme and have enriched the engagement. Several District Chairs were contacted by CMF and joined 100 signatories to a Letter to the People of Manchester after the May 2017 terror attack.

The Rev David Musgrave, who supervised the project and who is Inter Faith Coordinator for London District, has welcomed the work done to identify common strands in Methodist and Muslim experience and to encourage greater working together. He joined the new CMF group looking at controversial issues from its first meeting in Manchester. This group has produced briefings on [Religious Supplementary Schools](#) and [Integration and Opportunity](#).

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John Wesley's life and preaching were introduced to Christian-Muslim discussions, along with concepts such as prevenient grace, which stimulated a fresh appreciation of Christian theology. The distinctive history of Methodism and the change experienced in the industrial heartlands of England also brought fresh insights into the complexity of British church history and community life.

Working through the District Chairs has been best achieved by meeting in person. As with ministers and organisational structures in many denominations, time is in short supply and hard choices need to be made. Opening up a space within which Methodists can more easily engage with their Muslim neighbours through providing personal introductions to local mosques, through resources such as [Ethical Witness Guidelines](#) (on sharing faith) and [Christmas Statement](#), being part of a wider network of Christians and Muslims engaged in this work (such as CMF's [church-mosque twinning programme](#)), hearing how others have negotiated the hurdles and having reliable sources of scholarship and practical information – these have all encouraged the first steps towards engagement, or towards more challenging work, without compromising the integrity of either the Methodist or the Muslim involved.

Districts have been added to the distribution list of CMF's newsletter, which carries regular news of Muslim-Methodist engagement. This is proving more useful than a bespoke [blog](#). Being flexible on communication methods – email, landline, text, WhatsApp and e-news – seems to work best.

Establishing relationships of trust takes time and face-to-face meetings are an important part of this. The Christian Muslim Forum plans to bring together Methodists and Muslims who are currently involved - and those who are interested in being part of the network - to share stories and practical experiences, to draw on scholarship and current theological expertise to think deeply about the religious reasons for doing this work, to draw on aspects of history and culture, and to approach some of the difficult topics within a framework of respect and trust.

The Christian Muslim Forum is grateful to the Connexion for supporting this work and to the CMF team which has been engaged in different ways in Methodist-Muslim relations across the country.

ABOUT THE METHODIST CHURCH

The [Methodist Church](#) is one of the largest Christian churches serving Great Britain, with nearly 209,000 members and regular contact with 512,000 people. It has 5,023 churches in Great Britain, and also maintains links with other Methodist churches with a worldwide total membership of over 80 million. Its activities, both alone and with ecumenical and secular partners, are based on four aims known as Our Calling:

- To increase awareness of God's presence and to celebrate God's love
- To help people to grow and learn as Christians through mutual support and care
- To be a good neighbour to people in need and to challenge injustice
- To make more followers of Jesus Christ.

ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN MUSLIM FORUM

The [Christian Muslim Forum](#) is the leading bi-lateral organisation for relationships between Christians and Muslims. It was established in 2006 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, bringing together Muslims and Christians from a variety of denominations and traditions. There is an extensive network across the country which includes senior religious leaders, scholars, specialists and practitioners. The Forum aims to be able to disagree as well as agree with one another publicly, while being willing to articulate the reasons for agreement or disagreement.

For more information about the Muslims and Methodists project, contact Catriona Robertson at catriona@christianmuslimforum.org