

Inter Faith Week

15th - 21st November 2009

Information and Guidance for the Church of England

Faith and your community National Inter Faith Week

It has been long recognised that where there are communities of faith they have the potential to add value to the life of that community. It is also recognised that when faith communities work together for the greater good, while holding their distinctiveness, then the chances of human flourishing are raised. The following article comes to us from Canon Guy Wilkinson National Inter Religious Affairs Adviser & Secretary for Inter Religious Affairs to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

An Inter Faith Week will take place from 15th to 21st November across England. It will include and highlight activities organised by Churches and other Faith communities around the country designed to:

- strengthen inter Faith relations at all levels;
- encourage local Faith groups and communities to reach out to each other and build stronger bonds of understanding and cooperation;
- increase awareness of the different and distinct Faith communities in the UK, with a particular focus on the contribution which their members make to their neighbourhoods and to wider society;
- gain positive profile for inter Faith initiatives, locally, regionally and nationally as well as for the overall work of building good inter Faith relations;
- increase understanding between people of religious and non-religious beliefs;
- encourage the development of new partnerships within local communities and by Faith communities with statutory and third sector partners.

. There is a useful website by the Inter Faith Network at <http://www.interfaithweek.org/index.htm> which provides further information and resources.

The following gives good advice and guidance for any organisation within the diocese considering taking part or highlighting Inter Faith week .

**The Church of England welcomes Inter Faith Week.
We encourage our parishes, schools, chaplaincies, deaneries and dioceses
to take advantage of the opportunity it offers for building on our presence and
engagement programme**

The Aims of the Inter Faith Week

The Church of England, through our parishes, schools, chaplaincies and dioceses has a significant investment in each of these aims and the Inter Faith Week provides an opportunity to highlight our ministry and its rootedness in the gospel to the world around us.

Promoting good inter Faith relations

We have contributed very significantly to building good inter Faith relations at all levels, bilaterally and multi laterally over a long period. We should be glad to have a further opportunity to showcase the fruits of this and to be open to further developments. Inter Faith Week provides an opportunity to show Christianity at work in its daily ministry of reconciliation of human beings to God and to each other

Highlighting the contribution of Faiths to building community

Involvement in the whole life of the community, in parishes, schools, hospitals, workplaces and leisure, is part of the Church of England's core mission. Our contribution continues to be a substantial part of the cement that holds in place the values and the care –fullness of our society.

Inter Faith Week provides an opportunity to show the contribution made by Christian pastoral ministry

Increasing understanding between Faiths and wider society

Faith, including Christian faith, is often misunderstood in our society and misrepresented in the media, sometimes as a result of the misleading impressions given by the small but noisy anti-religious groups.

A few issues to be aware of

Inter Faith Week provides an opportunity for Christians to increase wider awareness and understanding of Christianity and the ways in which we work alongside people of other religions for the common good.

▪ **New Religious Movements and alternative spiritualities**

The Church of England relates to individuals within 'new religious movements and alternative spiritualities', including the Pagan movement, Christian-derived movements such as the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Unification Church and their equivalents in relation to other religions, in different ways but not through formal partnerships or arrangements. It will be important to make careful enquiries about participants in events and activities before accepting invitations.

For clarity, the Church of England's policy is to relate to the eight other 'Faiths' (Bahai, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism) which are in membership at the national level of the Inter Faith Network in a variety of formal and informal ways

Canon Guy Wilkinson is the Church of England's National Adviser on Faiths (Guy.wilkinson@c-of-e.org.uk) and Dr Anne Richards is the Church of England's Adviser on New Religious Movements (Anne.richards@c-of-e.org.uk) and both are available to offer advice as is the Inter Faith Network for the UK.

- **Secular and non-religious organisations**

The ministry of the Church of England is of course to all people, including those of no religious belief, but the Week is primarily intended to highlight the contribution of religious communities to society and their mutual inter relationships. Although there is pressure from secularist and humanist organisations to be included formally, the Church of England continues to consider these as having a different approach to issues of faith and religious belief. In consequence it will be best to maintain a distinction in the ways in which we relate in the Week to other Faith communities on the one hand and to secularist and humanist organisations on the other.

- **Christian distinctiveness**

As Christians we welcome and work for good and constructive relations with people of other Faiths. We seek to do so in ways that are faithful to the distinctive understandings and claims of Christianity. Positive inter Faith relations do not require anyone to give up any aspect of their particular Faith; nor is inter Faith dialogue about merging religious perspectives to find middle ground as a 'compromise' between them.

- **Multi faith worship**

The Church of England has guidelines on the question of prayer and worship with people of other Faiths which can be found on the website at www.presenceandengagement.org.uk

- **Government policy and Christian teaching**

It is vital to remember that our ministry is rooted in the love of God and in the mission of God in Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit. Notwithstanding all that is said by government, central and local, about the relevance of Faiths for its social cohesion, security and other agendas, we need to hold on to a theological understanding of this as of all else. In thinking theologically about inter Faith relations, you may wish to read: "Generous Love – an Anglican theology of Inter Faith relations" and "an Anglican understanding of Mission and Evangelism". Both are to be found at www.presenceandengagement.org.uk

With a bit of forethought, planning and co-operation with others, the Inter Faith Week can be a valuable element in the way in which we witness to the world around us. There is no required pattern to be followed, nor particular permissions to be obtained. Imagination and goodwill will be the keys to a worthwhile involvement.

Some useful Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why is Government involved in this Week? Is this the Government promoting religion?

The Week was proposed by the Faith communities through the Inter Faith Network as part of a process of consultation leading to the publication last year by the Government of *Face to Face and Side by Side: A Framework for Consultation in a Multi Faith Society*.

It is an example of partnership working where the religions develop and lead on dimensions of work relating to their communities and the Government and the secular agencies with which it also works, bring expertise and involvement relating to public bodies.

2. Is any funding available for events in the Week?

Some public funds are being made available to enable a national launch event; allow Regional Faith Forums in England to encourage and publicise local activities in their Regions on their websites; to support Inter Faith Week projects developed by national inter Faith organisations, and to pay for written materials encouraging activity linked to the Week. Local projects will also be able to bid for funding from the Grassroots programme administered by the Community Development Foundation (<http://www.communityfoundation.org.uk/funds/grassrootsgrants/>), and it is hoped that many local inter Faith projects supported under the Faiths in Action programme will want to hold events during the Week.

3. Is the Week a one-off?

There are no plans to organise a similar week in future years, but if the Faith communities and inter Faith bodies wish to do so that will be a matter for them.

4. Is this going to give the impression of 'mixing up' religions or suggesting that they are all really the same?

No. The Week is being developed with the engagement of the Churches and other Faith communities and reflects recognition of the distinctness of each of the major religions. The Week is about giving individual Faith communities the opportunity to explain how they relate to wider society and to each other.

Participation in the Week makes no assumptions about the ways in which different Faith communities understand the basis for their inter Faith engagement. Each religious community will have their own bases for engagement and in the Church of England we are participating in the Week as Christians holding the distinctive understandings and claims of the Christian faith.

5. Are the major Faith communities supportive of the Week?

Yes. The nine Faith communities linked by the Inter Faith Network, including the Christian Churches, recently expressed warm support for the Week at a meeting of the IFN's Faith Communities' Forum.

6. Where do mission and evangelism fit in?

Just as they do in any other expression of Christian witness in society. The context of this Week creates the opportunity for a particular focus on expressing the hospitality of God

7. Will there be an official logo or 'approval' of events?

No. This is not a 'top down' week with a programme of centrally organised or endorsed events. It is a chance for people and groups all over the country to come up with their own innovative ideas. Events are not being 'badged' or 'approved'.

Some Ideas for Inter Faith Week

The Inter Faith Week website has some helpful illustrative suggestions for the kinds of events that might be organised locally during the Week. Many others can be imagined:

- A church and a gurdwara arrange an exchange visit for their congregations
- A restaurant features for a week special dishes linked to each of the Faiths in its area
- A school works with its local SACRE and local inter Faith group to host an 'inter Faith day' with opportunities to talk with local members of different Faiths about why good inter Faith relations are important
- A student union works with all the student religious groups in its university to put on a forum on 'What our Faiths say about the environment'
- A mosque hosts a Muslim-Christian dialogue event
- A Jewish charity holds a joint fundraising event with a charity with a different Faith base
- A local inter Faith group holds a joint event with a local Humanist group on "What do I believe and why?"
- A multi Faith chaplaincy in a college of further education works with students and staff to put on a special inter Faith week exhibition
- A 'dine at mine' event with people of different Faiths coming together for a meal is held

For further information and guidance please contact

Rev Canon Jean Kerr

01634 844508

Jean.kerr@rochester.anglican.org