

# Christians and Muslims in England: The Christian Muslim Forum

Julian Bond<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

As Christians and Muslims, we understand ourselves to be communities called by God to serve his purposes of mercy and justice in the world. While our beliefs, practices and values have much in common, there are also striking differences between our two faiths. Both religions speak of the absolute priority of God's truth, but their truth claims are irreconcilable at some key points. The universality of both mandates them to invite all people to membership, yet this in turn can lead to competition or even conflict between them. Our long history of interaction has too often been marked by confrontation, suspicion and mutual denigration, yet it also includes encouraging examples of peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

In some places, Muslims and Christians live together in harmony and mutual respect; in others, they are locked into attitudes of suspicion, tension or open hostility. Both Christians and Muslims will often have a particular concern for communities of their own faith who live as minorities in different parts of the world. In our own country also, relations between the two faiths can vary significantly from place to place. Muslims constitute the largest minority religion in England today, but in some predominantly Muslim areas of our towns and cities Christians are conscious that they themselves are locally a minority community. These complex and fluid factors must always be borne in mind in seeking to understand the ways in which Muslims and Christians interact, or fail to interact, with one another.

Our present time constitutes a critical context for Christian-Muslim relations. It is fraught with the dangers of distrust, division and destruction. At the same time, it offers to Christians and Muslims, each building on their faith in God, the possibility of new and creative partnerships nurtured by a growing trust in one another and directed towards the common good. We can no longer ignore one another's presence, and this challenge meets us not only in our social interaction but also as people of faith. The question facing us is not simply: 'How can we live and work together as different communi-

ties in our society and our world?', but: 'How do we understand and relate to one another within the purposes of God?' To explore that challenge seriously, in a way that recognises both common ground and difference, requires of us both a serious commitment of time and energy in dialogue with one another.

These words, edited at one part, are taken from the report 'Archbishop of Canterbury's Listening Initiative in Christian-Muslim Relations, 2001–2004'. They are just as valid now as then. The report goes on to describe the origins of this initiative:

[Its] history . . . can be traced back to a 1997 reception held at Lambeth Palace for the Sheikh of al-Azhar. On that occasion, the Archbishop of Canterbury spoke in general terms of the importance of finding ways to progress a structured dialogue of Christians and Muslims in this country. His remarks were received warmly by British Muslims present; subsequently several community leaders wrote proposing that the Archbishop follow up his suggestion practically by convening a meeting of Christians and Muslims to establish a joint national organisation of some kind.

One model suggested was that of the Council of Christians and Jews (established 1942), of which the Archbishop is a joint President. In 1998, Dr Manazir Ahsan (a trustee of the Inter Faith Network) wrote to the Archbishop underlining the importance of involving the Muslim community from an early stage in consultations. In responding to this correspondence, the Archbishop reaffirmed his commitment to the principle of forging closer relations between Christians and Muslims in this country, but indicated that he did not yet feel that it was apparent what organizational structure would best serve this purpose. He went on to emphasize the need for careful and extensive consultation before setting up any national framework for Christian-Muslim meeting and dialogue.

In October 2000, the Archbishop drew together at Lambeth an ecumenical group of Christians to discuss an initiative to respond to these possibilities. As a result of that meeting, he asked the Bishop of Aston, the (late) Rt Revd John Austin, to chair a small working group to plan and oversee a process of consultation with a wide range of people from both faiths. The working group rapidly identified the need to involve Muslim colleagues in the process from an early stage, and to this end a Planning Group was established under the Bishop of Aston's chairmanship in 2001. This group had joint Christian and Muslim membership, giving a crucially important

## *Bond: Christians and Muslims in England*

sense of mutuality both to our listening to others and to our discussions and reflections among ourselves. It is our strong opinion that the process of this initiative would have been deeply flawed had there not been such shared participation from the start. Indeed, we feel that our relationships within the Planning Group have been modelling the more permanent ways of working which we propose in the structure of a Forum for Muslims and Christians.

In addition to this Planning Group, a more broadly constituted Reference Group, drawing together a range of senior Muslim and Christian religious and community leaders, was also formed in 2001 to act as an occasional meeting for consultation and advice for the Planning Group. The Planning Group saw it as important that any exploration of a possible framework for Christian-Muslim meeting and dialogue should provide space for a wide and representative range of views to be heard from members of both faith communities at every level. They recognised that it was important to take account of the ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, intra-religious and geographical diversities of both faiths in our society. Given these complexities, it was agreed that the first stage in the process would be for the Planning Group to conduct a national programme of local listening exercises, to ascertain the views both of Muslims and of Christians living in areas of significant Muslim presence. The primary purpose of such exercises would be to come to a mind as to whether it would be appropriate to establish any kind of national Christian-Muslim framework for meeting and dialogue, and to formulate proposals for the structure and work of such a body. Since this listening process was an initiative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, it was agreed that the venues selected for these local listening exercises to take place should all be within England.

During 2002–3 the Planning Group conducted five two-day local listening exercises, in Blackburn (and Nelson); Bradford; Leicester; East London; and North West London. This selection of venues was intended to provide not a comprehensive coverage of the country, or of major areas of Muslim settlement, but rather a representative sampling of a number of different locations to explore the diversity and complexity of the situation.

During the course of the listening exercises, over 100 separate meetings took place, involving over 500 people. The majority of our interlocutors were naturally from Muslim and Christian communities, but in different locations members of other faiths were also consulted, as were representatives of local authorities, police, media, and others with an interest in community relations. In each place, the two questions on which the Planning Group focused its listening for answers were these:

- What do you consider to be the most important issues in relations between Muslims and Christians?
- Could a structured national framework for meeting and dialogue help Muslims and Christians address these issues?

Between summer 2003 and summer 2004, the Planning Group met on several occasions to reflect intensively on the outcomes of the listening exercises, and to formulate proposals for a national structure on the basis of what had been heard. In October 2003, they discussed their interim findings with the Archbishop, who affirmed his commitment to the principle of a structured organization bringing together Muslims and Christians at national level in England, and offered the support of his office to help in the establishment of this.

### **Proposal of a Christian Muslim Forum**

The Christian Muslim Forum was proposed as a group of 20 people, with equal numbers of Christians and Muslims, all of them present at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Forum was constituted with two kinds of member:

- four senior religious leaders (Presidents) from each faith, to represent a diversity of traditions in the Muslim and Christian communities;
- second nomination by this group of a further six people (specialists) from each faith.

To ensure a spread of expertise and background among Forum members, and based on the issues which surfaced as particularly significant in the listening exercises, the second group are people with a specialist involvement in the following six areas: family issues; education; youth; media; community and public affairs; international issues. The total of 20 people constitute the Forum, meeting as one body.

The following issues of inclusivity were highlighted in the proposal:

- ensuring the involvement of young people;
- securing a geographical spread across the country;
- balancing continuity of membership and openness to new participants;
- representation of all dimensions of the diversity and complexity of both communities.

The proposal also envisaged that the Forum's work in all its areas of concern would be underpinned by a shared commitment to theological dialogue and to spiritual values.

## **Launch**

The Christian Muslim Forum was launched on 24 January 2006 (this was also the date of Dr Zaki Badawi's death, well known as a leading Muslim scholar and who was to have been one of the Forum's advisors). This followed an 18-month period of approaching potential Forum members, gaining support from Christian and Muslim communities through their organizational structures, fundraising and organisational set-up activities. The launch event took place at Lambeth Palace and was hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

## **Extracts from Launch speeches**

We do it because we love God. Not because it's worthy or the 'right thing to do'. It's also at its best when people who are passionate about their faith meet together. . . . We do dialogue because we care about others. We want to get to know them, become friends with them, stand up for them, help them, as they are also doing for us . . . Stereotypes are broken down, friendships are built and people work together for the good of society. It also shows the rest of society that when people of different faiths get together it doesn't have to lead to trouble – it can lead to peace.

(Extract from Archbishop's speech)

What I see this forum providing, in a political sense, is a forum in which people can look at the key issues that face us today and try and work out what the different perspectives are and how we have a greater knowledge and understanding and how people perceive things in a different way, what their fears are, what their concerns are, what their hopes and expectations are, and how we have that exchange that allows people to come closer together . . . I think this forum . . . is very timely and very right. And I think it's got tremendous potential in the communities here and the discussion of every type of issue as, Rowan was saying, from the educational through to the international. I also think that there is something else and here I switch to a more personal viewpoint, I think it is also tremendously helpful and enriching to people of faith to understand the faith of others and what motivates them and how it motivates them. And also in doing so, to reconsider the context in which our own faith takes place and takes shape.

(Extract from former Prime Minister Tony Blair's speech)

I conclude this formal part of the proceedings by mentioning **five commitments** which I believe lie at the heart of our work as a Forum.

- 1. working together** for the common good and to promoting community cohesion. We are determined not just to become a talking shop.
- 2. facing the hard questions** – to a vigorous realism, if you like. We are aware of the commonalities we share in our faith in one God and how as people of faith we can celebrate together, but we are aware also of the way in which the darker sides of our traditions have sometimes, in the past and the present, failed to live up to the central vision of our faith.
- 3. respecting and celebrating diversity** – both within our communities and within the wider cultural diversity of our society. We believe that God delights in the diversity of his creation and requires of us a fundamental commitment which honours that diversity, difference and mutuality both within humanity and within the wider created order.
- 4. independence and partnership** – we are independent from government agencies as well as particular groupings within our own faith communities – independent even of Lambeth Palace! – and we shall be careful to guard that independence.
- 5. our values as communities of faith** – here lies the distinctiveness of our contribution to the common good. We believe that faith is a gift of God which enriches our lives and provides the foundation and values on which we can work for a healthy and flourishing society.

(Extract from Co-Chair, Bishop David Gillett's speech)

Our relationship is not based on a model of negotiation between parties who have conflicting interests and claims. Rather we see the Forum as a process of mutual empowerment for both Christians and Muslims towards their engagement in public concerns and their joint pursuit of social and racial justice, human dignity and constructive action on behalf of the common good of all citizens. We hope in this endeavour that Muslim and Christians will draw on their spiritual resources. 'What does the Lord require of you' the prophet Micah asks, 'but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8) And, if I pose the same question in the perspective of Islamic traditions, it requires the same love and humil-

## *Bond: Christians and Muslims in England*

ity. For the Qur'an states that '... let not the hatred of others turn you away from justice, be just: that is nearer to piety' (5:8). The demands that our faiths put on us, in a simple straightforward manner, are the demands that require enormous courage and charity.

(Extract from Co-Chair, Dr Ataullah Siddiqui's speech)

## **The Forum's Work**

### *Leaders' programme*

Our first event, in 2006, was a national gathering of 'Imams and Ministers' (and others) to reflect on the role of the religious leader and learn from each other. There was much excitement amongst the participants at meeting others from around the country and a strong feeling that this was a useful new approach. It provided us with evidence that Christians and Muslims in leadership and influencing roles are:

- *keen* to meet with and learn more about each other;
- *appreciative* of the possibilities arising from attending as pairs and either sharing their experiences and ways of working together or being inspired by others;
- *interested* in developing supportive, committed and practical local relationships;
- *in need* of useful resources and support to help and encourage them locally.

Over the years we have explored different themes: leadership, community cohesion, spiritual guidance, citizenship, regional identity, building friendship, role modelling and commending committed relationships, dialogue, mission/da'wah, extremism, inclusiveness and the challenge of secular society. This leaders' programme, now funded by the Department for Communities through the Church Urban Fund, under the 'Near Neighbours' programme, seeks to root the dialogue and engagement process in the training, development and ministry of religious leaders from both faiths. We model this through pairs of speakers, and workshop facilitators, who bring both practical and theological experience and expertise. This modelling and sharing encourages and enables leaders to encourage and support one another in creating community cohesion, particularly in urban areas. The events focus on the experiences and needs of both young and experienced Muslim and Christian leaders to develop ideas which use the resources of both faiths to encourage a confident faith identity which can

## *Bond: Christians and Muslims in England*

engage in inter-faith dialogue in order to address local community concerns. Events have taken place in Leicester, Cheshunt, Leeds, Leicester, Derby, Coventry and Blackburn (in March 2011).

Each event seeks to:

- develop the capacity and ability of Christian and Muslim leaders and people of influence to engage with the other faiths and be good role models for dialogue;
- encourage mutual support amongst Christians and Muslims in a given location;
- develop local pairings between Muslims and Christians;
- resource local Christian-Muslim dialogue through speakers/practical case studies;
- increase involvement in local and regional inter faith activity;
- strengthen and/or develop local Christian-Muslim partnership working.

Our July 2010 national event at Lambeth Palace was an important opportunity for taking stock as after four years of events we brought together pairs of leaders working with each other locally who had attended previous events. Following our usual practice of being as inclusive as possible we extended invitations to members of our women's (only) local group, based in Lambeth, reflecting our ongoing mission to involve women as inclusively and comprehensively as possible and reflecting how specific women's initiatives complement and support our mixed programme. It also heralded the beginning of a partnership with Churches Together in England and the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board. The outcome of the day was shaped by one of our other initiatives, the Ethical Witness Guidelines (described below), through the development and issuing of our 'Local Encounter' letter:

### **Local Encounter Letter**

We write this letter as a group of around 50 Christians and Muslims (both women and men) in positions of responsibility in our respective communities. We met together at Lambeth Palace on 15 July 2010, at an event convened and hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury, organised by the Christian Muslim Forum and run in partnership with the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) and Churches Together in England (CTE). We are keen to share our experiences of meeting, sharing, understanding and working with each other more widely, both with other leaders and members of



## *Bond: Christians and Muslims in England*

worshipping congregations. We therefore make this joint and shared commitment:

- We pledge, as members of both faiths, to live up to the best of our traditions by respecting, welcoming and being hospitable to our neighbours of other faiths.
- We will speak generously of other faiths, scriptures and worshippers with our own congregations, while recognising we have some critical theological differences.
- We will engage openly and honestly with each other about our own faith and scriptures, other faiths and all issues of concern, including sensitive or painful issues. We are open to being challenged by each other.
- We will make a point of developing and sustaining friendships with leaders and members of other faiths in our neighbourhoods and regionally and make such friendships public.
- We see this as a very important part of the wider networks of relationships between people of different faiths.
- We will encourage members of our communities to meet each other, learn about each others' faiths, enjoy hospitality and share each others' joys and struggles.
- We will explore areas where we can work together locally on issues of shared concern, including international issues with local impact, and encourage practical partnerships between our two traditions. We will show solidarity with each other at times of distress.
- As Christians and Muslims we shall offer our engagement to other faiths and the wider community, including common engagement with issues of social justice, equality and discrimination.

Signatories: Alison Adams, Leicester; Rizwan Ali Bhai, London; Anjum Anwar, Blackburn; Hassana Bapulah, London; Hussain Bapulah, London; Rauf Bashir, Pendle; Julian Bond, Leighton Buzzard; Rebecca Brewin, London; Richard Cheetham, London; Chris Chivers, Blackburn; Tim Clapton, Milton Keynes; Bonnie Evans-Hills, Leicester; Mark Fisher, London; Alan Gadd, London; David Gillett, Diss (Norfolk); Hifsa Iqbal, Stafford; Bilal Hassam, Manchester; Anjum Khan, London; Rashid Laher, Kingston; Saira Malik, Oxford; Khalid Nadeem, London; Andy Pring, London; Alan Race, Leicester; Shahid Raza, Leicester; Abduljalil Sajid, Brighton; Marcia Wall, Rochdale; Guy Wilkinson, London; Saadat Yusuf, London.

### *Other programmes*

**Education** – In 2008 we ran a conference ('Belief & Being') for Christian and Muslim teachers working in (secular) state schools. We engaged with the ever-present issue of 'secularism vs. faith' and whether it too is an ideology as, while claiming to be neutral, secular spaces do not always welcome the living out of faith. Many people shared the experience of dealing with 'default atheism', or 'it's normal to be non-religious'. We will be running a similar event in London in autumn 2011. In 2010 we ran a contrasting Faith Schools Seminar and will be delivering another Faith Schools event in Oxford in autumn 2011.

**Family** – Our family programme is developing, following our 2008 'Living Faithful Family Lives' national conference. We have been running a regular Family Forum in Oxford for just over a year now and are in the process of setting one up in Wembley. We are delivering four family training events during 2011; the first two took place in Oxford in the first half of the year.

**International Issues and Media** – We have engaged internationally through visits and exchanges to Indonesia (2007–8), the Holy Land (2008) and Bosnia (2009). We successfully attracted the media's attention through our 'Christmas' statement in 2006, appearing on the front page of the *Daily Mail* and being discussed by Pat Robertson on American television.

**Youth and Women** – Our vision is not to do all the work ourselves but to encourage others. In 2007 we ran 'Getting Engaged' – encouraging Christian and Muslim youth leaders to lead inter-faith youth dialogue and provide training. The training covered ground rules and case studies illustrating what to do when things go wrong. Youth workers were encouraged to find what they had in common, with parallels emerging especially between the experience of Black and Muslim youth workers, and people left inspired to follow our lead. This programme continues with 'Cross, Crescent and Cool' training (2009 onwards), regular youth dialogues (2005-present) and the MYX project – video and downloadable training resources for youth workers and young people interested in dialogue. Our latest youth initiatives are a Christian-Muslim Youth Forum on Trade Justice (June 2011) and NVQ3 accredited youth worker training for mixed groups of Christians and Muslims.

We have always worked to develop relationships between women of both faiths, even before creating a dedicated women's strand. We have run two women's retreats – Women at the Well – in 2007 and 2008 on

## *Bond: Christians and Muslims in England*

the theme of Sarah and Hagar, ultimately inspiring a women's tea party at Lambeth Palace in 2009. The women's experience was also an inspiration for a men's retreat on Abraham in 2010. We now have a Women's Leadership Initiative as part of our Near Neighbours programme.

### *Ethical Witness Guidelines*

We believe that our Ethical Witness Guidelines (alongside the Local Encounter Letter) have the potential to significantly influence Christian-Muslim relations:

#### **Ethical Guidelines for Christian and Muslim Witness in Britain**

As members of the Christian Muslim Forum we are deeply committed to our own faiths (Christianity and Islam) and wish to bear faithful witness to them. As Christians and Muslims we are committed to working together for the common good. We recognise that both communities actively invite others to share their faith and acknowledge that all faiths have the same right to share their faith with others. There are diverse attitudes and approaches amongst us which can be controversial and raise questions. This paper is not a theology of Christian evangelism or mission or Da'wah (invitation to Islam), rather it offers guidelines for good practice. The Christian Muslim Forum offers the following suggestions that, we hope, will equip Christians and Muslims (and others) to share their faith with integrity and compassion for those they meet. We invite others to sign up to the following guidelines.

24 June 2009

- 1) We bear witness to, and proclaim our faith not only through words but through our attitudes, actions and lifestyles.
- 2) We cannot convert people, only God can do that. In our language and methods we should recognise that people's choice of faith is primarily a matter between themselves and God.
- 3) Sharing our faith should never be coercive; this is especially important when working with children, young people and vulnerable adults. Everyone should have the choice to accept or reject the message we proclaim and we will accept people's choices without resentment.
- 4) Whilst we might care for people in need or who are facing personal crises, we should never manipulate these situations in order to gain a convert.

## *Bond: Christians and Muslims in England*

- 5) An invitation to convert should never be linked with financial, material or other inducements. It should be a decision of the heart and mind alone.
- 6) We will speak of our faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faiths of others.
- 7) We will speak clearly and honestly about our faith, even when that is uncomfortable or controversial.
- 8) We will be honest about our motivations for activities and we will inform people when events will include the sharing of faith.
- 9) Whilst recognising that either community will naturally rejoice with and support those who have chosen to join them, we will be sensitive to the loss that others may feel.
- 10) Whilst we may feel hurt when someone we know and love chooses to leave our faith, we will respect their decision and will not force them to stay or harass them afterwards.

The catalyst for the production of these guidelines was the experience of a Forum Member Dr Andrew Smith (Youth Specialist). His work with Youth Encounter in Birmingham, a Scripture Union project, showed that there was a need for ground rules when introducing Christianity in schools and working with groups of young Christians and Muslims. They were aimed at a controversy – how can Christians be involved in inter-faith activities while trying to fulfil the ‘Great Commission’ – but have proved to be controversial themselves. Some phrases within the guidelines have turned out to be sticking points for those holding viewpoints which the guidelines were seeking to address.

The intention of the guidelines is that they express what is, from many (though not all) perspectives, what is at the heart of each faith and honestly expresses within an inter-faith document a shared commitment to witnessing to each faith. Some of the particular concerns within the guidelines relate to treatment of converts and of those who are moving towards and/or away from either faith. The heart of disagreement with the guidelines has been with the sixth statement ‘We will speak of our faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faiths of others.’ This is the dialogical approach to witness which is very much in line with both scriptures and is our own public commitment to giving respect to those who are on the receiving end of witness, by putting aside the ego and avoiding ungracious competitive attitudes. Scripture says:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentle-

## *Bond: Christians and Muslims in England*

ness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

(1 Peter 3.15,16)

Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.

(Qur'an 16.125)

We believe that a commitment to these values not only rightly transforms our outlook about our own faith but also readies us for engaging with the 'other' (nor are we surprised that believers have equivalent injunctions in both scriptures). It is often suggested that inter-faith activity is the preserve of those who are not interested in sharing the gospel. In fact, it is our view that a positive attitude to inter-faith engagement is an ideal preparation for what witness and evangelism are all about, having a meaningful dialogue with those who are not where we are and showing the love of God through the way that we speak to each other. And where there is love there is friendship and commitment, which is at the heart of the Christian Muslim Forum.

### *Future plans*

Our current approach is to:

- work more at the grassroots in the key Near Neighbours areas – Oldham, Burnley, Bradford, East Birmingham, Leicester, Loughborough, East London and also in Oxford, West London and South London (where our office is based);
- create committed local relationships between mosques (masjids) and churches;
- develop more and stronger partnerships with other inter-faith groups;
- enable the dialogue to go deeper using our existing initiatives as a foundation: Ethical Witness guidelines (2009), Scholars' Seminar on Scripture and Dialogue (2010), Local Encounter letter (2010).

We are always keen to make new contacts and work with those who are interested in Christian-Muslim engagement, or those who have yet to be convinced. We would be very happy to hear from ministers, lay preachers, individuals, churches and volunteers who would like to be involved in our

*Bond: Christians and Muslims in England*

work. Subject to availability we can offer sessions to churches or other groups and look forward to seeing Methodist involvement in our Near Neighbours programme. We also hope to be making a senior Methodist appointment to the Forum later in the year.

**NOTES**

- 1 Julian Bond is the Director of the Christian Muslim Forum.