

Dublin City
Interfaith
Forum



Integration and Interfaith: Faith/City Engagement in a Multicultural Context

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Foreword

Dr Inderjit Bhogal

*Leader of Corrymeela Community
and friend of Dublin City Interfaith Forum*

Dublin is a wonderful intercultural City. The City has a great multicultural feel.

This first report of the newly established Dublin City Interfaith Forum (DCIF) celebrates a year of a very significant interfaith achievement. People of different faiths have come together and worked to build good relationships, and to support the City's strategies for the inclusion particularly of people from outside Europe coming to live here. DCIF is a good example of Churches, the local City government and people of different faiths working together towards a common purpose.

DCIF represents a considerable level of commitment and support of all partners. This report shows the value of doing all we can to:

- *Work at creating better understanding of and with each other.*
- *Develop relationships of deeper respect and trust of and with each other.*
- *Come to a point where we really accept each other as human beings.*

The most significant contribution we can make now is to help people to live confidently with and embrace diversity, and to dispel fear of differences, the fear of the "other".

Faith communities, who are at their best at the local level, are a huge resource and have a huge

role to play. We are all committed to the values of hospitality, justice and mercy and peace-making. We are committed to working with partners to develop better understanding, relationships of deeper respect and acceptance of each other as human beings.

Faith based individuals, leaders and organisations have to strengthen efforts by improving religious knowledge and understanding. This will help to challenge people who act out of prejudice and misunderstanding and engage in destructive behaviour.

Religious understanding requires from us all humility to acknowledge that none of us possess the monopoly of truth, and also the capacity to listen attentively to others. We are called to hold on to and honour our own faith and to reach out to people of other faiths.

In government language we are being invited, as faith communities to contribute to the Integration Strategy and supporting the status of Intercultural City for Dublin.

An integrated society is one that is, *"working towards a society in which there is a sense of belonging by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar life opportunities are available to all."*

The obstacles to this goal include mistrust between different groups, lack of meaningful interaction between different groups, and religious illiteracy, including the lack of knowledge and understanding about our own faith, and other people's faiths.

21st century Ireland is undergoing very significant changes with:

- *Developing secularism*
- *Deepening diversity, not least a growing ethnic and religious diversity as a result of ease of travel and migration*

Ireland has a great history of emigration. People have gone from here to all corners of the earth – usually looking for safety, a better life and fulfilment.

Many people are now coming to Ireland. Ireland should rejoice in this, and really express the ancient Celtic spirituality of welcome and hospitality. Your time has come to shine, and to offer sanctuary to people who come here looking for safety, a better life and fulfilment.

I commend the Dublin City Council and the Irish Council of Churches for their initiative to really look at the involvement and role of all faith communities in the City's integration strategy.

Schools, universities, the Police, the Social and other services, and work places are all

challenged to consider the implications of religious diversity, as well as ethnic diversity.

We are quite right to be concerned about how we increase the inclusion and participation of all residents of all faiths in civic and political life, and to do all we can to reduce isolation, fear, racism and tensions within communities.

Those involved in government want to work with faith communities to advance community integration and to address concerns we all have.

Faith communities have a vision to serve and to keep hope alive. They are rooted in local neighbourhoods as well as in worship and prayer and have a strong desire to make life better for all. They address inequality and are well placed to relate to the most marginalised sections of our communities.

Faith communities bring the largest groups of people together on a regular basis. They provide access to a large body of motivated volunteers. Religion occupies a central place in the culture of many minority ethnic and refugee communities.

I congratulate the Dublin City Interfaith Forum for a very successful first year in addressing the challenges before us. Well done. I hope that funding will be secured to sustain this important work for many years.

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Diverse communities attend the launch of Dublin City Interfaith Forum.



The Rationale

Faith communities are an integral group in Irish society, and are at work in every community. A significant percentage of Ireland's population identifies as having some kind of religious faith or link to a religious tradition. The concentration of faith communities varies. In some areas, most faiths are represented (e.g. Dublin City Centre) while in other areas the faith may be predominantly Christian with little representation from others. While those who actually practise their faith will be fewer in number than those who identify as having a faith, there are significant numbers of active participants in faith communities across the city.

Faith communities are increasingly recognised as important partners in working for the common good in their localities. Research has demonstrated that faith communities instinctively respond to the needs of their neighbours.

Forward planning should ensure that rather than working in parallel, or even in competition, faith communities and local authorities work in partnership. Strong leadership from faith communities has a key role to play when incidents trigger concerns about social cohesion.

This document explores the concepts for a framework for setting up an interfaith structure within the Dublin City Council boundaries. ➡

Why and How Faith Communities Should Be Engaged

Intercultural and interreligious dialogue begins at community level, where cultural and religious groups interact with each other most directly in everyday situations – but also where tensions between them are the most tangible. Local authorities play a key role in creating conditions for such dialogue and fostering it.

Faith Communities can make particular contributions to the work of Local Authority and provide important capacities and capabilities in supporting the provision of services.

They should be regarded as key communities and important resources with which local authorities and government can engage. There are several reasons for this, including:

- *Their size and distribution.*
- *Existing networks of people, resources, equipment and competencies.*
- *Networks of employed and volunteer skilled staff.*

Faith community leaders offer a unique mix of competencies that can add value to local statutory service providers:

- *They are embedded in the local community and directly engaged with a wider range of people than statutory agencies.*

- *Leaders who are well established within their communities utilise, local knowledge, personal contacts and networks across the faith sector.*
- *They can have an important role in promoting social cohesion.*
- *They have a trusted position of guidance and reassurance.*
- *They have access to channels of communication with cross-sections of the local community which local authorities cannot readily access.*
- *They have access to a range of voluntary social care agencies.*

This demonstrates that faith communities, through their leaders, can help reach vulnerable communities with which statutory service providers may not have direct contact. (For example, refugees and asylum seekers may attend religious services and events but may not be known to statutory agencies).

It also shows that faith community leaders are key people to engage with, if the resources and capabilities of faith communities are to be harnessed for the purpose of promoting integration and social cohesion at local level.

Local Interfaith structures are of great importance: they have a major contribution

to make in helping to create an integrated and cohesive community, at ease with diversity and secure in a sense of common purpose.

The relationship that can be established between local authority, other public agencies and faith communities in their areas, the support which local authorities can give to local inter faith initiatives and the contribution of these approaches may be of vital importance to the wider community cohesion agenda.

Dublin is a city where people of many faiths live side by side. As we look forward to the future, will it be marked by mutual learning, respect and cooperation between the faiths, or do isolation, prejudice and even conflict lie ahead? Can we find ways to respond positively to difference and at the same time to work together towards a shared society, drawing on the values held in common by our distinct faith traditions? The choice is ours.

In this context, the representative nature of a Dublin City Interfaith structure, would serve as a policy sounding board for Dublin City Council, in addition to being well-placed to develop and promote programmes of events supporting interfaith understanding and cooperation.

Other Reasons for Promoting a Dublin City Interfaith Structure

- *To ensure that key figures in each faith community come to know each other and develop relationship of mutual trust and support.*
- *To enable members of different faiths to come together to work to improve civic local life.*
- *To promote mutual understanding among different faith traditions.*
- *To undertake joint projects and contribute to a cohesive and harmonious community.*
- *To help tackle prejudice and stereotypes, minimising the likelihood of inter-religious conflict.*

In developing such an initiative at City level, the following questions arise:

- *What kind of inter faith initiative is best for our area?*
- *Are we aiming to be representative of local faith communities?*
- *What geographical area should our initiative cover?*

Aims of a Dublin City Interfaith Structure

- *To promote knowledge, understanding and mutual respect between various faith communities within our city.*
- *To bring faith groups together in dialogue.*
- *To make a public statement by demonstrating that people of different faiths can talk and listen to another.*
- *To involve faith communities in the civic life of the city.*
- *To provide a means for faith communities to speak and act together on social and community issues.*
- *To provide an opportunity for faith communities to network with each other and the city council.*

Activities of a Dublin City Interfaith Structure

A programme of appropriate and interesting activities which would reflect the commitment of both the faith communities and the city council for developing mutual respect and understanding may be developed to include some or all the following activities:

- *Promoting harmonious community relations.*
- *Raising awareness of interfaith possibilities.*
- *Assisting in multi-faith civic ceremonies.*
- *Acting as a consultative forum on local issues for the city council.*
- *Sending representatives to serve on local strategic initiatives.*
- *Educational events and /or exhibitions.*

Developing a Sustainable and Effective Interfaith Structure

How does a National Church Council and a City Council engage with faith and interfaith groups?

How do they build relationships with these groups and support relationships between faith communities?

The term ‘interfaith’ or ‘interfaith dialogue’ refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, (i.e. “faiths”) at both the individual and institutional level.

The Irish Council of Churches’ Integration project focuses on religious and spiritual diversity within the community. It works to strengthen existing relationships between communities and to foster new ones. Within the project the Council’s role is to support, promote and facilitate these relationships.

The project is an important one within the overall spectrum of the Council’s Integration Programme. A number of factors contributed to the establishment of this project.

Whilst implementing its own integration strategy, the Irish Council of Churches and its dedicated staff recognised there was an opportunity to work with different faith groups to promote the integration of third country nationals.

This was borne out of its previous work which established ten *Affirmations for Migrant Diversity* that were agreed to by all the Council's Member churches. The tenth affirmation focuses on the need to dialogue across religious traditions. Some of the Council's members were already working to engage with faith communities in the region, recognising their unique role in the communities of which they are a part and their contribution within the city as a whole. This project followed an international trend of similar initiatives such as Frankfurt Council of Religions, Zurich Forum of Religions and St Philip's Centre for Study and Engagement in a Multi Faith Society.

The Central Statistics Office started to record data on nationality for the first time in Census 2002 revealing the ethnic make-up of the Irish population. In the subsequent censuses of 2006 and 2011 the same question was asked therefore providing a data series on nationality over the period 2002 to 2011, showing an increase of 143% in the number of Non-Irish nationals over the last 9 years living in Ireland and representing 199 different countries.

Dublin, both the City and the region, is becoming more diverse with greater religious pluralism. According to 2011 census figures, one in six residents of Dublin City's administrative area were born overseas. And it is the most ethnically diverse region in Ireland.

This backdrop of diversity also reflects growing religious diversity. As the number of people affiliated with Christianity continues to drop there has been an increase in people affiliating with non-Christian religions and of people indicating that they have no religion.

Christianity is changing as well. The 2011 CSO figures indicate that, since 2006 the number of people affiliating with the Orthodox Christian denomination increased by 117.4% and affiliation with Apostolic or Pentecostal denominations increased by 73%. The same report also showed massive percentage increases in the Hindu (75.7%), Buddhist (33.6%) and Muslim (51.2%) faiths since 2006.

These figures show that the city is now more and more multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious. We have always maintained that this diversity is a source of strength and vitality for us.

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1 L-R: Imam Jameel Mutoola and Mudafar Al Tawash at the launch of Dublin City Interfaith Forum.

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2 L-R: Ms Katerina Pekridou, Fr Abba Johannes Kebede and Lord Mayor of Dublin, Cllr Andrew Montague at the launch of Dublin City Interfaith Forum.

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3 Members of Dublin City Interfaith Forum and Lord Mayor of Dublin, Cllr Andrew Montague at the launch of Dublin City Interfaith Forum.



However, dealing with it and using its potential for the benefit of everyone presents a major challenge for all levels of governance and society. It is indeed a shared responsibility of many different stakeholders – government, local and regional authorities, civil society and in particular religious organisations, as well as the private sector.

In January 2010 the Irish Council of Churches submitted a project proposal for funding under the European Integration Fund Call for proposals having agreed a co-funding partnership with the Office for Integration in Dublin City Council.

To quote directly from the proposal:

“The Irish Government’s statement on integration strategy and diversity management ‘Migration Nation’ clearly identifies the important role faith communities play within the overall integration process and recognizes that migrant groups have a greater attachment to practising their faith than the native population. The policy statement also reveals that migrants seek support firstly from their faith leaders in relation in information and assistance on settling in Ireland. It is also acknowledged that the provision of such assistance has greatly assisted many migrants

and their families in integrating in Ireland. The Office of the Minister for Integration is committed to put in place arrangements to financially support faith groups in carrying work related to integration activities.

Harmonious relationships between communities of different faiths are intrinsic to ensuring strong, healthy and safe communities in our city. Dublin City takes pride in its diversity and to maintain this culture it is critical to respond to the growing multi-faith profile of our city. There has been a focus on multi-faith relationships internationally and there is a growing recognition that government, and especially local government, has to have a stronger commitment to these relationships”.

The faith communities also are realising the growing importance of ensuring that members of different faiths are educated and aware of each other’s traditions, have mutual respect and are able to coexist harmoniously.

This also helps establish the personal links critical to ensure positive and rapid response if occasional religion tension occurs. Interfaith groups are an emerging sector that needs to be supported through local government.

Project Development

In November 2010 the Irish Council of Churches began implementing of the Dublin City Interfaith Forum Project in partnership with the Dublin City Council's Office for Integration. The Interfaith project focuses on the diversity of faith communities within Dublin City. It works to strengthen existing relationships between faith communities and to foster new ones.

From the beginning the project had the support of the Dublin City Council's Office for Integration, its Director, Gerry Folan and strong leadership from the Irish Council of Churches. The project's aims are to:

- *Support and strengthen the contribution of faith communities in Dublin City.*
- *Educate and encourage people of different faiths to dialogue, reflect and work together in matters of policy, strategy and action.*
- *Promote and support the participation of third country nationals in the civic, community and public life of the city.*
- *Contribute to a fully integrated city for all.*
- *Challenge all forms of injustice and discrimination.*

The Process

Initially the most important element of the project was to develop relationships within the various faith communities and faith networks. The Project Officer met with faith leaders and key people within the various faith communities in Dublin City. We also attended meetings and events held by other faith groups. Dublin City Council had a number of existing relationships with faith communities. The Office for Integration, for example, was engaged through community networks and funding relationships. Our project began building a database containing contacts for and mapping of faith communities based within the Dublin City Council administrative boundaries.

The first of a series of inter-faith workshops took place on Thursday September 29th 2011 between 10.00am and 4.00pm at Wood Quay based in the Dublin City Council Civic Offices.

Approximately forty-five members of six faith traditions from the city, attended the first workshop, facilitated by Dr Inderjit Boghal OBE leader of the Corrymeela Community. Inderjit, who has impeccable credentials in the field of interfaith, was warmly received by members of all the faith communities.

The first workshop proved very valuable and was a unique opportunity for members of various communities to meet in a neutral venue, and to share stories and aspirations in a spirit of friendship and faith. The theme of the workshop was *Local Inter-Faith dialogue and its role in creating inclusive communities where all belong and contribute*.

After introductory speeches from Gerry Folan, Dublin City Council and Mervyn McCullagh, Irish Council of Churches, there was a keynote address “setting the scene” from Inderjit Bhogal, incorporating his own story. This was followed by speeches from the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Dr Diarmuid Martin and Shayk Dr Umar Al-Quadri.

These contextual stories were then followed by coffee and a series of small group discussions during which participants broke up into groups of four to discuss issues and points raised by both Inderjit and the two other main speakers.

The theme of this discussion focused on: *What is an inclusive community, and How can my faith community positively contribute to building an inclusive community?*

The small group discussions proved effective and opened up creative new areas of dialogue and fresh insights. Members of the various

faith communities were being consulted and were having their say. Their input was openly welcomed and treated with due consideration and respect.

After lunch felt tip markers and sheets of paper were handed around so that everyone could write an adjective or verb that described the spirit of the event for them. This proved to be a very powerful experience. Participants displayed and briefly spoke about the adjective/verb they had chosen.

Words used to describe the day included: Listening, Respect, Understanding, Exchange, Justice, Openness, Friends, Integration, Understanding, Home, Mutuality, United, Warmth, Open-Hearted, Respect, Contribution, Sanctuary, Justice, Kyo, Participation, All (In the name of God the beneficent the merciful, there should be no compulsion on religions), Unity, Synergy, Together, Welcome, Co-operation, Salmagundi, Dialogue.

There was a real sense of deep friendship and an even deeper sense of interconnectedness. Underlying key issues throughout the course of the day included *The role of religion in the public square, The role of faith in shaping identities and inclusive communities, Working with each other and challenges of speaking to one another*.

The day ended with a summing up from Inderjit and a look forward to what we as a group hoped to achieve in the process of the second workshop, which took place in room 3074, the Arts building, Trinity College on Thursday 10th November 2011.

The facilitator once again was Inderjit Bhogal and the theme of the second conference was *Setting up the Dublin City Interfaith Forum – Process and Practice*. Thirty people from six faith traditions attended the workshop.

There was an initial welcome from Adrian Cristea of the Irish Council of Churches and feedback from the first meeting by Inderjit, who also outlined the process for establishing a forum as well as the criteria for selecting members. Inderjit offered us two Inter-faith models, those of Humbert and Yorkshire and of Wolverhampton.

Small group questions included:

- *What did you think of the inter-faith structures presented earlier?*
- *How do you envisage an inter-faith structure appropriate to the Dublin City context?*
- *What would you add and what would you change?*

The small group discussions proved to be filled with a lot of energy and enthusiasm. After the small group discussions we broke for coffee and returned to our groups to participate in a game using the materials provided (spaghetti, string tape and a marshmallow) to construct the tallest structure in the time allotted. The game generated a lot of creative interaction and laughter. People developed a variety of operational strategies to deal with the challenges posed. This was effective on a number of levels as it showed who had the capacity to lead and who to listen as well as co-operate at a team level.

At an interpersonal level it successfully generated conversation and participation among the different individuals and religious traditions. People were getting to know one another at a deeper level and were learning about one another via conversations about daily life, personal spirituality, worship, practice and theology.

The workshop raised a number of issues and facilitated important decisions which helped to move things forward. Agreement was reached on the inter-faith model that the DCIF would adopt as well as the given name of the group: Dublin City Interfaith Forum. The selection criteria mooted and provisionally agreed upon were that members of the forum should be deeply informed about their own faith, have wide

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Members of faith communities working together at November 2011 workshop.





respect, influence and a network within their own community, deep respect for other faiths, be from an identifiable world faith community, be committed and able to integrate actively to the integration process.

Faith groups represented include, in chronological order: Baha’I, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh. The general aims of the DCIF were mooted and these included statements such as: *“Support and strengthen the contribution of faith communities in Dublin, educate and encourage people of different faiths to dialogue, reflect and work together in matters of policy, strategy and action, challenge all forms of injustice and discrimination, contribute to a fully integrated city for all”*.

It was agreed that the Forum should be representative of gender and age, not be too large (numerically 23–25), and begin by building relationships. Inderjit while outlining the above aims also proposed “future steps” and “future direction” in the sense of what might prove to be a productive way to move forward. In this context a pre-forum meeting involving key personnel was planned and a date fixed for the inauguration of the new Dublin City Interfaith Forum.

The 31st of January 2012 marked the official launch of Dublin City Interfaith Forum by the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Cllr. Andrew Montague. Over eighty people attended the launch and showed their support for the project.

Welcoming the launch, Cllr. Montague said, *“Dublin’s religious landscape has changed profoundly in the last decade. This has brought about new challenges and opportunities. It is with initiatives such as Dublin City Interfaith Forum that we dialogue and work together through building relationships that promote integration, nurture harmony, and deepen understanding and respect.”* The event was then followed by the first meeting of the Forum.

The first event organized by the DCIF on the 22nd February 2012 consisted in a visit to the places of worship of the various forum members based on the north side of the city. Visits to the City Centre Al-Madinah Mosque, The Buddhist Centre, Dublin Central Mission, St George & St Thomas Church and the Pro-Cathedral contributed to building a deeper sense of friendship and connectedness among the members of the Forum. The close proximity of these places of worship emphasized that there was a strong incentive for new relationships and new friendships to emerge.

The day provided the opportunity to ask questions about the role of women within different faith traditions, to learn about specific rituals within each of the faith groups visited and also to learn how people use their resources and cope with different challenges. The versatility of some places of worship and their use for multiple purposes was commended and admired.

The second part of the tour to places of worship took place on the 22nd March 2012. The group started with the Baha'I Spiritual Assembly, followed by the Rathgar Synagogue, the Milltown Mosque and ended at the Sikh Gurdwara in Ringsend.

It was agreed that there is great purpose in inner-city faith communities working together and this visit may initiate various conduits of such interaction. It was an informative and non-threatening experience to be shared by the DCIF members with their own communities.

The hosts also enjoyed the novel experience of welcoming a religiously diverse group such as DCIF and compared it to an interfaith experience within their own homes. This was deemed as a very successful and interesting event as it created the opportunity for forum members to learn about one another's faith in their own community environment.

This was followed in April 2012 by a Capacity Building and Planning Workshop. Fr Alan Hilliard facilitated the session. Alan has a long and varied association with migration as the Director of the Irish Bishop's Commission for Emigrants and the Irish Commission for Prisoner's Overseas.

Between 2008 and 2011, he coordinated an adult education programme in theology entitled the NOSTRA programme at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. He is also the co-founder of the Mid-West Interfaith Network.

During this time he completed his research Masters in Applied Social Policy entitled '*Mind the Gap*': Social Cohesion, Migration and Integration. As part of the facilitation process, Alan devised three broad tasks and invited forum members to walk around the table and stand before the task they would feel comfortable working on. Two groups were formed and people within each group shared ideas. It was agreed that the two groups would make more detailed presentations on their respective tasks at next forum meeting.

The planning session ended with a question raised by Alan and left with the forum members to ponder on: *How do we grow in our understanding of what interfaith is?*

Working at Local Level

North Inner City Faith Communities Meetings

The Dublin City Interfaith Forum continues to meet every second month. From the Forum came the idea of a North Inner City Interfaith subgroup to continue the sharing of information and to highlight different events happening in the North side of the City. At the DCIF meeting on the 4th July, it was suggested that the faith communities living in the north inner city meet to see what we could do together.

The following faith groups: Triratna Buddhist Community, Anwar-E-Madina Mosque, Methodist Church in Abbey Street Lower, The Catholic Pro-Cathedral, The St George and St Thomas Church of Ireland and the Indian Orthodox Church in Cathal Brugha St Orthodox, St George & St Thomas in Marlborough Street, met on the 23rd August 2012 and discussed what could they do together, when, how, where, target group etc. It was suggested to organise six evenings of input on the different faith groups mentioned above.

Meeting with Garda Síochána

The issue of increased number of burglaries and thefts against the members of the Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Christian and Sikh Communities was also raised and feelings of pain and anguish were expressed by people around the table and

it was agreed to arrange a high level meeting with the Gardaí in Harcourt Square Garda Headquarters. DCIF members, who attended the meeting with the Garda Síochána gave feedback on the meeting.

It was welcomed that this initiative will continue on a regular basis with a view to monitor progress and follow on the implementation of measures agreed by both parties. The next meeting with Garda Síochána was to be arranged in the autumn with a focus to ensure attendance from high-ranking gardaí.

Developing an Understanding of Other Religions

In an effort to keep building knowledge, awareness of others' traditions and supporting spaces for dialogue, Dublin City Interfaith Forum continues to work closely with the Office for Integration of the Dublin City Council.

The Forum's first public event was entitled *Come to the Celebration*, a workshop series of panel discussions with speakers from different faith communities invited to discuss the rituals and traditions of their faiths regarding different milestones within life.

Approximately 70 people attended this event, which was judged a resounding success. Small group work provided an opportunity for those

who are working in their local environments with people of other faiths to share and learn about each other's work and to discuss their visions for interfaith activity.

Participants at the event gave amazingly positive feedback: DCIF was commended for organising such an excellent and very worthy event. People also found the event enriching and were delighted to get to know the faith communities present on the day, which was a wonderful opportunity to meet and listen to so many diverse views on faith and culture.

As well as attendance from people who previously participated in other DCIF workshops, this event had significant participation from people new to such workshops who found an atmosphere of trust and respect.

The quality and the relevance of the speeches and presentations given were outlined in almost all the feedback forms and in particular the speech made by Archbishop of Dublin Rev Dr Michael Jackson was found to be very relevant, thought provoking and challenging.

The Archbishop asked, *“What can we do together? We need to make the Government of today work hard at inclusion. Ireland is an angry post-theocratic state. We need to be taken seriously as leaders and servants, as those of Faith, who are key players in building an Ireland*

of the future out of the rubble of economic greed and institutional profligacy. Together we are well placed to challenge a Governmental system which is first and foremost interested in its own re-election to power; secondly is interested in an economic definition of the human person; thirdly is convinced that community is no more than the adjacency of lone individuals. If we do not act urgently, we become, in the words of those who hold power, a malfunctioning sector, the ‘Faith Sector.’ This is the peril of not acting together. For my part it is in the area of education that we need quickly to act together.”

The quality of the workshops was also highlighted and it was suggested to focus on involving the younger generations in the similar events and activities.

It was suggested repeatedly to continue to work to produce similar events and to ensure media participation at future events organised by DCIF.

This event served as a strong base for Dublin City Interfaith Forum to work from and helped to build new relationships. Members of various faith communities were able to engage as participants. Facilitating the Interfaith events was a pleasant experience given the levels of respect and goodwill. People spoke of the wish not simply to be ‘tolerated like a bad rash’ but be respected. This sentiment is articulated time and again at interfaith gatherings.

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1 Leaders and members of faith communities on the steps of the Mansion House at DCIF's Walk of Peace 2012.

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2 Yusef Syed and friends at DCIF's Walk of Peace 2012.



Participating in Culture Night 2012

This year Culture Night was set for Friday 21st September, which coincided with the UN International Day of Peace. The City came alive with an amazing number of events to cater for all. Music, drama, exhibitions and displays, street and indoor activities all offered fantastic choice to folk from Dublin and significantly further away. Dublin City Interfaith Forum was also part of this magnificent show and organised an Interfaith Culture, Art and Music Trail in cooperation with the Buddhist Centre, Islamic Foundation of Ireland, Anwar E Madinah Mosque and the Indian Orthodox Church, to reveal some of the treasures and talents held by our faith communities.

Celebrating International Day of Peace 2012

Dublin City Interfaith Forum also celebrated 23rd September, the UN International Day of Peace, when a large and successful Walk of Peace led by the religious leaders in the City was organised. Our deputy mayor Cllr Edie Wynne welcomed the group on the steps of Mansion House. The strength of this project is being able to support and respond to local initiatives.

Working at National Level

Although Dublin City Interfaith Forum works in Dublin City, this project has been of interest nationally. DCIF members attended the ENAR

Freedom of Religion and Belief Seminar on 1st May 2012. There were positive comments on the participation and inputs from the DCIF group.

It was noted that the event outlined a number of key issues such as: an increasing need for adequate regulation which takes into account, reflects and celebrates our diversity; the need to move from a model of tolerance to a model of acceptance; to develop and promote an expanded idea of Irishness; and finally the need to remove barriers in accessing employment and education for immigrant parents of Irish-born children.

Other issues highlighted the danger of problematising minorities and educating the majority; the need to continue the discussions on discrimination and its various grounds (ethnicity, race, gender, etc); and the challenge of how to bring these discussions into the public arena. Among the questions raised were: *Do we best serve diversity by allowing each group to have separate education?*

Dublin City Interfaith Forum was also presented in June 2012 at the Pobal Networking Meeting in Limerick where projects funded by the European Integration and Refugee Funds were highlighted and key learning was disseminated among participants. Questions relating to issues of representation were raised and answered.

Current Plans

The Forum is planning to visit The Corrymeela Centre for Reconciliation for a 24 hour residential led by Dr Inderjit Bhogal. The Corrymeela Community was founded in 1965 by the Rev Dr Ray Davey assisted by a group of students from Queen's University, Belfast. Ray felt called to establish a centre in Ballycastle, his vision was to create an open village, where people of all faiths and backgrounds could come together and learn to live in community.

Today there are approximately 160 Community members and more than 5,000 friends living throughout Ireland and beyond who have made a Christian commitment to a vision of working toward a shared future. Communities, families and individuals from all walks of life, backgrounds, beliefs and faiths are welcomed. Corrymeela brings people together to share stories and learn from one another's experiences.

It is a place of challenge and a place of hope. This time will provide an opportunity to reflect on the short but very successful start-up period Dublin City Interfaith Forum has had since its launch and create the space for discussions and plans for the future.

Women's Group

The DCIF Chair, Ms Sinead Lynch initiated this action along with some of the women members on the Forum. They met initially for an informal discussion and this meeting was followed by a structured conversation over the role of women in interfaith work.

Faith to Faith/Face to Face Connection

Faith to Faith/Face to Face is a multi-faith youth leadership programme that works annually with 70 Christian, Muslim and Jewish teenagers, from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds from Northern Ireland, South Africa, the United States and the Middle East to engage in dialogue and interactive activities relating to issues of peace, violence and social responsibility.

Not long after the launch of Dublin City Interfaith Forum, Mr Yusef Syed, a sixteen year old man was admitted onto this youth programme at the recommendation of DCIF. This marks the beginning of an important development in youth work by the Forum. We are now exploring ways to promote interfaith work amongst the young people within our own faith communities.

My name is Yusef Syed and I have been taking part in the Face to Face/Faith to Faith program in Northern Ireland. As a seventeen year old Shia Muslim living in a western country doing my Leaving Cert I personally think the programme was invaluable to me as both a young person in a continually diversifying country but also in developing as a person.

During the program I was exposed to opinions, situations and people I never had access to. I learnt things I was told before but on a more personal level e.g. suicide awareness, anti-bullying etc. In this report I will outline my opinions about the program.

During the program I was introduced to a group of people whom I had never met before and who had never met each other which would normally be a very awkward situation in my experience for people my age. However we were presented with an environment where we were able to act freely, relax and drop any pretences that we may have held through the use of games and discussions. These games originally removed us from our comfort zones and pushed us into a new area which would allow freedom of action in front of others. Despite the playful nature of these games I feel they are essential to building the relaxed atmosphere we were presented with later on.

Through the use of discussions we learnt more of each other personally, of each other's backgrounds and beliefs and the world at large and the problems facing it and what we could do as a younger generation to tackle some of these problems, e.g. tensions between different faith groups and how inter-faith could help. Also throughout these discussions I personally grew mentally. As I was exposed to different stories and different sides of those stories pre-held opinions of mine changed over time and I became more accepting of other people's opinions and how to interact with people who may not agree with me but with whom I could work.

One such discussion was about Apartheid in Africa, which we learned from the grandson of its architect. He told us what it was like growing up there and when he left for university abroad how he was exposed to a new world and how his opinions and life had changed.

Through this balance of games and discussions we became more open minded to other people's opinions and also more aware of them. I would strongly recommend a similar programme being established in Dublin so that the youth of different faith groups can begin to form relationships with each other and create a more united, peaceful and accepting city and hopefully in time a more diverse and accepting country.

Interfaith Education in our Schools and Colleges

At its meetings, Dublin City Interfaith Forum has repeatedly reiterated the importance of ensuring that students have access to a panoramic view of religions and to exploring some of the main religious celebrations. This, together with the need for promoting among schools a spirit of dialogue, tolerance and respect for cultural diversity, has become a very important area of work for the Forum.

DCIF aims to develop programmes and resources for educational communities, as we are aware of the countless possibilities offered by the celebrations of the various cultures and traditions for building bridges of mutual understanding between the different ways of living and seeing the world. Pluralism should not be merely the passive juxtaposition of cultural and religious communities in coexistence, but also the interrelation of different communities based on the reciprocal knowledge created through a critical and emphatic presentation of each individual identity.

One of DCIF's first future engagements with educational institutions is scheduled to take place at Oatlands College, Stillorgan around mid-January 2013.

Courses in Religious Understanding

The DCIF became firmly convinced that fuller understanding of other religious traditions needed to be backed up by well-designed courses in our education institutions. This found its first expression in August 2012 when Clonliffe College started off a course in Hindu philosophy and spirituality. This was the result of DCIF intervention to create the recognition of the need for work in partnership with faith communities and support the process of creating better understanding of the newer religious traditions now part and parcel of our society. We hope to develop these ideas further so that people have access to and the opportunity for studying each other's faiths in a meaningful and trusted manner.

Links Nationally and Internationally

One focus of Dublin City Interfaith Forum is to link international and national developments with the local and personal efforts of people and groups in the community. Much is happening at both national and international levels. These conversations and their outcomes inform our project just as the government's political leadership strengthens it.

Working at local government level provides a unique opportunity to straddle and link national and international efforts locally and regionally. We believe that interfaith dialogue builds understanding, goodwill, and relationships across religions and among people.

We recognise that believers, communities and institutions exercise a distinct and vital role in the promotion of peace, development, and human dignity.

We will work to hold local, national, and regional events to build knowledge, respect, and understanding and to provide opportunities for dialogue, thereby deepening relationships and friendships among faith communities and enhancing capacity for interfaith cooperation.

We will work to promote interfaith dialogue at grassroots level to serve as an instrument to promote sustainable livelihoods and community cohesiveness, thus promoting democratisation and the basis of civil society.

Conclusion

People need to meet face to face, experience diversity and discuss issues with people who differ. Communities need to reach out to each other. Dialogue and exchange between people of different views, cultures and faiths is the glue that will hold us together and enrich us all.

The Nature of the Project

The importance to this project of political cannot be underestimated. The project needs high-level support such as that stated by former Dublin City Lord Mayor Andrew Montague at the launch of the Forum. Working within a community development context essentially means a 'bottom up' approach. There can be a myriad of styles at work, goals and visions to achieve. The work is extraordinarily multi-layered. It is always a challenge to stay abreast of what is happening at a community level.

Our relationships with those working at the grassroots level are the nourishment for the work we do within a local community context.

These offer the opportunity to be able to address the most basic building blocks of the conversation, to work out how to build relationships through coffee groups or shared dinners. We are consistently working to challenge, remove and lessen the sense of 'otherness' or at the very least to provide an opportunity to get to know 'other'.

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Speakers and members
of faith communities at
launch of Dublin City
Interfaith Forum.



Within Dublin there is a committed group of people who actively engage with these issues and participate in many public meetings and activities. We frequently need to question how we reach others and identify those individuals and communities out there already doing the work unknown to us. Working within local community always runs the risk of opting to talk to whoever offers the greater ease and convenience. Of the dedicated group we do work with, we need to ask ourselves if we are supporting them appropriately so they have the time, energy and capacity to keep doing the work they do within their own communities, the 'Interfaith community' and in their wider relationships. Do they have the ability to engage with the forum as much as the forum may want?

'Preaching to the converted' is a term that is bandied around at our meetings. One of our challenges is trying to engage with those who do not want to be engaged, ensuring they can be part of the conversation if they wish to be. Some may consider that there is not a conversation to be had, or is the conversation the right one and do people know about it?

Working with a dominant culture, in this instance a nation with a dominant religion, raises challenges as to how space is created and how change happens to allow for expansion of diversity, understanding and acceptance. If you

are in a position of power and privilege what makes you question that position? Given the complexity and multi-layered nature of this work, these reflections raise as many questions as they answer.

We continue to wrestle with them in the everyday work we do in partnership with others, working towards establishing dialogue, promoting interfaith respect and understanding of our religious diversity.

In conclusion the Dublin Interfaith Forum continues to explore ways to achieve its objectives. The conversations around interfaith can be both enlightening and challenging. As the face of Dublin City changes, so does the range of faith communities and the importance of the development of a cohesive society that understands, acknowledges and respects its diverse parts. Dublin City Interfaith Forum recognises the work of others, working alongside them to strengthen and support interfaith dialogue, respect and understanding.

We recognise the work of the Office for the Promotion Of Migrant Integration, the Office for Integration of Dublin City Council, The Department of Justice and Law Reform, Garda Intercultural and Diversity Office and the myriad of faith groups, organisations, communities and individuals who are involved in Interfaith and ongoing relationships.

How and Why We Got Involved

Mervyn McCullagh

*Executive Officer
Irish Council of Churches*

In November 2010 the Irish Council of Churches began implementing a long planned and highly innovative project to show how faith and city interaction can create positive change. It was borne out of our ten principles for Migrant Diversity and Inter-culturalism affirmed by our member churches. The tenth principle affirms that we work together as Churches and network with people of other faiths to promote a greater understanding between denominations and other faiths, ensuring the growth of a society based on respect, dignity and equal rights for all its members. The *Dublin City Interfaith Forum* is the beginnings of a tangible realisation of this affirmation.

Developing the Forum has been a valuable journey for us with much nuanced negotiation, sensitive understanding and active learning. It led us to navigate the uncharted waters of finding appropriate balance and fair representation across multi-layered cultures and traditions. What appeared insurmountable became possible as communities together we agreed numbers of representatives from each faith community while trying to ensure that the rich tapestry of each community's experience and traditions was apparent while always seeking the broad ethnic diversity that is characterizing contemporary Dublin.

The catalyst for the forum was a partnership between Irish Council of Churches and Dublin City Council with the valuable support of EIF funding. The primary objective of the project was to promote the integration of third country nationals within the Dublin City Council area. There has been a symbiosis between our two Councils which has greatly assisted in earning trust and providing legitimacy. However it is only proper that all the member faith communities can now claim ownership of the forum. Their vision to *create communities where all belong and contribute* is an inspiration.

From the moment of the forum's inception it has never been short of ideas. A key challenge has been trying to ensure sufficient focus and prioritization of activity rather than encourage idea generation. This has been truly exciting. The momentum is such that we would encourage all bodies connected to the forum to continue to offer it full their support. With the 'project phase' now technically over the forum now begins a new important phase of its independent journey and ongoing commitment from key dublin based stakeholders is critical.

Faith communities are increasingly struggling to find their voices in proudly secular societies and yet have important and unique contributions to make for the well being of all. We very much appreciate the understanding of Dublin City Council being open to ask what faith communities can bring to the arena of integration. Perhaps more importantly they have listened as we've begun to answer. This forum is a unique model of engagement and one we are very proud to have been part of.

We wish the forum well in its continuing journey and hope that many can take inspiration from this initiative and learn from the valuable lessons we have gained. Not least that a meaningful city/faith engagement is both possible and beneficial. Through listening and understanding we can build on our difference and create societies that we all want to live in and where we are free to believe and to express our beliefs without fear or prejudice. These principles are self evident yet fundamental.

Acknowledgements

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Mervyn McCullagh, managed the implementation of the project and provided the much needed leadership. Karen Kelly and Mark Thompson provided assistance and administrative support.

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To Br Phil McGee (Marist Brothers) who volunteered with us for three months and brought valuable experience of developing municipal interfaith dialogue and who facilitated critical work in developing the Forum's terms of reference.

Finally I would like to thank the Irish Council of Churches for their support and for demonstrating that change for better can be achieved also through dialogue, collaboration and taking the initiative.

Adrian Cristea

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In November 2010 the Irish Council of Churches began implementing a long planned and highly innovative project to show how faith and city interaction can create positive change. In partnership with Dublin City Council Office for Integration they began a journey to develop the Dublin City Interfaith Forum with the vision of *'Creating communities where all belong and contribute'*.

The primary focus of the forum was not religious but to promote integration within a multicultural city. The project channelled the contribution of faith communities towards wider social and civic integration. This was a nuanced and exciting journey. This report charts that journey and demonstrates some of the lessons learned along the way.



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