

All Party-Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society

Minutes of meeting: 7 June 2016

Annual General Meeting

Present:

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP (Chair) (ST)
Fiona Bruce MP (Vice-Chair) (FB)
John Baron MP
Stephen Twigg MP
Lord Gordon of Strathblane
Lord Singh of Wimbledon (IS)

Alasdair Gordon – Office of Stephen Timms (AG)
Mahum Nasir – Office of Stephen Timms
Sarah Pellew – Office of Stephen Timms
Daniel Singleton – FaithAction (DS)
Rodie Garland – FaithAction (RG)

Apologies:

Stuart Andrew MP
Sir Peter Bottomley MP
David Burrowes MP
Steve Double MP (Treasurer)
Rt Hon David Lammy MP (Secretary)
Stephen Pound MP
Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP
Gary Streeter MP (Vice-Chair)

Derek Thomas MP
Martin Vickers MP

Lord Alton of Liverpool
Viscount Bridgeman
Baroness Neuberger DBE (Vice-Chair)
Baroness Sherlock OBE
Rt Hon the Lord Tyler (Vice-Chair)

Minutes	Actions
<p>1. Election of officers</p> <p>Officers were elected as follows:</p> <p>Chair – Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP Vice Chair – Gary Streeter MP Vice Chair – Fiona Bruce MP Vice Chair – Baroness Neuberger Vice Chair – Rt Hon the Lord Tyler Secretary – David Lammy MP Treasurer – Steve Double MP</p>	
<p>2. Aims of the APPG</p> <p>The aims of the group were confirmed as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">To promote understanding of faith-based organisations engaged in social action in the UK, and recognition of their value;To highlight the social, civic and spiritual capital that faith-based organisations contribute to communities throughout the UK, and to identify and promote best practice among organisations;To consider regulatory and legislative arrangements which can make the most of the potential contribution of faith-based organisations;To learn from and contribute to international conversations, policy and civic action on the contribution of faith-based organisations.	

3. Activity of the group in 2015-16

- ST invited DS to summarise the activity of the group over the last year. A report on the activity of the group was distributed.
- DS gave a summary of how the Faith Covenant was developed.

A number of initial meetings had been held by the APPG, with the idea of a 'charter' originally suggested by David Lammy MP as a set of principles that would guide engagement between faith groups and local authorities. A drafting period followed, with Birmingham being the first local area to sign the Covenant in December 2014. Another five areas followed.

Different areas have taken different routes to adopting the Covenant: in Birmingham the faith groups and local authorities came together to agree it, whereas in Leeds the process has been driven by the council, which wants to improve its engagement with faith groups. Solihull is noteworthy as it is the only Covenant adopter whose local MP is a member of this APPG – the Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP. In Northamptonshire the Covenant was driven by the Police and Crime Commissioner, Adam Simmonds, who set up an Office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. However, Adam Simmonds has now left his post and the Office has closed, so Northamptonshire needs following up. In Peterborough, the council was keen to adopt the Covenant but faith groups do not see the need for it.

- FB said there was a similar issue with her local council. After she spoke in the House [in the Chamber debate on the contribution of faith organisations to the voluntary sector] she had contact with local faith groups, but faith groups in Cheshire East are not enthusiastic about the Covenant. In this case it seems to be a doctrinal issue.
- AG reported that in Peterborough, a faith leader objected to signing the Covenant because of the line in its text that says that faith groups will not proselytise when offering public services, on the grounds that he saw everything he did as a form of evangelism.
- ST said that the Covenant is about recognising that local authority funding will not pay for evangelism – it does not say that faith groups should not evangelise.
- The group discussed the meaning of the term "covenant". DS reported that at the launch of the Faith Covenant it was pointed out that a covenant is different from a contract and entails an agreement to walk together through thick and thin.
- DS reported that Leeds City Council has offered to host a 'Covenanters' networking event'. ST said that this would be a good idea and an opportunity to learn lessons about what has worked well and what hasn't. DS asked whether people would travel to Leeds. It might be better to do something in London, with council leaders. This could be an opportunity to share the 'nitty gritty' of the kinds of decisions that councils and faith

FaithAction to contact Stephen Mold, the new Police and Crime Commissioner in Northamptonshire

FaithAction to investigate possibilities for holding an event

<p>groups can help each other with. ST agreed this could be good idea. DS said that the APPG should push to get 10 areas to sign up to the Covenant. There was general agreement that the 'Covenanters' event should happen. DS suggested the group take a 'twin track' approach of planning an event and pursuing more adoptions of the Covenant.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DS said that the APPG has found itself in a positive place the 'clearing house' [point of contact] for all things faith-related within Parliament. This was shown in the events held this year and the Chamber debate on faith organisations, which took place after FB and ST raised the issue. <p>4. Discussion of future work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DS informed the group of the next APPG meeting on 14 July, held jointly with Public Spirit, based at the University of Bristol. The focus will be on faith-based organisations' responses to issues of finance, poverty and austerity, which could be very positive for highlighting faith as a place that people turn to. • DS suggested fatherhood as an area of potential interest. FB said that the whole theme of manhood would be worth looking at. • ST said that the group had been asked by the Inter Faith Network to do something in Inter Faith Week in the autumn [13-20 November]. <p>DS said it was worth bearing in mind that 'inter faith' and 'multi faith' work mean different things, to him at least. 'Multi faith' is about different faiths working side by side, recognising that although they might disagree on articles of faith, they agree in their sense of duty to care for 'widows and orphans'. Those involved in inter faith work tend to be more liberal; those who are more fundamentalist in their beliefs will not seek to find common ground in terms of faith with people of other faiths, but can still work together to help those in need. ST agreed that there can be a danger of dishonesty in pretending to agree with others when fundamentally we disagree.</p> <p>DS suggested the group could do something positive for Inter Faith Week such as looking at the <i>work</i> of faith. He reminded ST of his comment in the House that if we had speculated 10 years ago about what would happen if people suddenly found themselves unable to afford food, we might not have predicted that the faith groups would be the ones to step up to help – and yet now we have the phenomenon of food banks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ST asked whether there were any other areas that the group should look at. • FB explained that by default she has become Chair of the APPG on Religious Education (RE). She has realised how large and active the RE community is. The APPG has conducted an inquiry on religious literacy, with a report to be launched in early July, before the summer recess. The message is that the more we understand of other faiths, the more we can promote community cohesion and work against misunderstanding and extremism. She invited members to watch out for the report and to attend 	<p>FaithAction to continue to promote the Covenant to new areas</p> <p>FaithAction to circulate details to APPG members</p> <p>DS to meet with David Lammy MP</p> <p>ST and FaithAction to explore holding the abovementioned Covenanters' event in Inter Faith Week</p>
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<p>the launch.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FB also said that she is still concerned about the issue of prisons and that there could be something for the group to do here. Her understanding is that a huge proportion of the hundreds of voluntary organisations that work in prisons are faith-based. Furthermore, this is an area in which the Rt Hon Michael Gove and the Government are prepared to invest. She reported that Michael Gove uses the word 'redemption' unabashedly and believes every man in prison can be redeemed. So there is an obvious connection with faith groups. <p>DS asked whether there is an APPG on prisons or prison reform. FB said that there is an APPG on prison reform [the APPG on Penal Affairs]. DS suggested a combined investigation of 'what works in prison', looking at faith as a solution.</p> <p>FB said that prison reform was included in the Queen's Speech, but that since there is not much money available, the involvement of voluntary organisations is a good thing.</p> <p>ST asked whether FaithAction is involved in or connected with prison work.</p> <p>DS said that FaithAction did some work in the past with Birmingham Faith in Action, connecting people together for some mutual support. He had also been in touch with the Sycamore Trust. This is something FaithAction can look into further.</p> <p>ST asked Lord Singh of Wimbledon whether this is an area that Sikhs are involved in.</p> <p>IS said that he is responsible for Sikh prison chaplaincy: there are approximately 50 Sikh prison chaplains.</p> <p>FB reported that the new head of prison chaplaincy had asked to meet with her, and she offered to suggest that DS be involved. She said that she is stunned by the numbers of organisations involved in prisons work.</p> <p>IS said that Sikh prison chaplaincy has the aim of ensuring that any Sikh coming out of prison gets a job and does not return to prison. This generally works. He is the NOMS [National Offender Management Service] faith advisor for the Sikh community and his job is to make sure that there is a Sikh chaplain for every prison where there is a Sikh. The chaplain can be any committed lay person, and would generally be someone from the Gurudwara local to the prison, although some chaplains do travel. There is a system according to which IS's office is notified if a Sikh prisoner arrives at a prison, so that a chaplain can be contacted. Occasionally this system falls apart, if prison authorities do not realise their responsibilities in this area. Sometimes it is the prisoner's family that notifies the office. Chaplaincy is not particularly strong in prisons in the sense of having 'clout'; it is the prison governor who has overall control.</p> <p>FB added that this will only increase under Michael Gove's plans to make prison governors more autonomous. She mentioned that the models that</p>	<p>FaithAction to investigate possibility of joint work with Birmingham Faith in Action and/or the Sycamore Trust</p> <p>FB to investigate possibility of DS joining this meeting</p>
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mental health. This is primarily through offering a welcome, hospitality, pastoral care and so on, which are generally things that are being done already by faith communities. However, when this is highlighted to those within the health system, they are surprised and pleased. So Friendly Places helps to put faith in the space of supporting mental health. FaithAction has been approached by a number of organisations wanting to develop their mental health offer, including a chaplain in a mental health trust. FaithAction is also looking at dementia, and is in touch with the Dementia Friendly Gurudwaras project. On dementia are already quite a lot of resources for faith groups available; there is more of a need when it comes to mental health.

IS said that these sound like very good initiatives, tackling problems that arise. The essence of faiths is to put life in perspective. Faiths should develop strategies to prevent the trend of young people becoming obsessed with the internet. We are all becoming more self-obsessed; the essence of religion is to make us look outwards.

- DS said that in terms of preventing extremism, part of the evidence that was quoted against the proposal to inspect faith groups providing education to children was that the schoolgirls from Bethnal Green who went to Syria were not involved in a madrasa; it was their online activity that persuaded them to go. There must be a role here for parents. We do not want to condemn parents, but to find ways of supporting them in the face of the increasing time young people spend online, and disappearing family time.
- IS said that he is asking a question in the House of Lords after the Brexit debate. Terms like 'extremism' are woolly words that are not defined. Progress cannot be made until we define them. We talk about 'Prevent', but what are we preventing? A much better term would have been 'Enable'. We need to define what we are 'preventing', and if the answer is 'extremism' we need to define that, and if it is 'Islamism' we need to define that.

DS reported that Mustafa Field, director of the Faiths Forum for London, has said that there has been a lazy conflating of religious extremism and social conservatism. So, for example, promoting traditional, conservative marriage could be taken as a sign of extremism. DS said that he was disappointed to hear the Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP express this view.

IS said that in 1984 the Golden Temple was attacked. A person saying anything that suggested that they were not in favour of the Indian Government's policy of massacring Sikhs could be labelled as an extremist. He himself was questioned and asked if he was extremist. These become tainted words. The problem stems from the notion that holy books are the word of God and cannot be altered. Many scriptures have stories of extreme violence in them. The best we can say that is that those were problems of the times and are nothing to do with guidance for today.

ST said that the APPG recently had a meeting on faith and extremism, and that he had a meeting coming up about what the Government is going to do on Prevent.

5. Conclusion and Close

- ST summed up the future suggestions as a meeting in the Autumn for Inter Faith Week, something in the new year on prisons. If the group can keep the Covenant work proceeding at the same time, it will have a full programme.

ST thanked FaithAction for its work and closed the meeting.

Date of next meeting: *Faith and Finance, Thursday 14 July 2016, Room P, Portcullis House*