



# All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society

2015-16 Summary Report  
June 2016

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# Introduction

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) exists to explore the role that faith plays in society, particularly through the work of faith-based organisations. It was formed after an initial idea by FaithAction in conversation with the Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP.

The group held its inaugural meeting in January 2012 and has continued to receive support and interest from parliamentarians.

We are grateful to the group's officers, who in 2015-16 were the following:

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

At the Annual General Meeting on 7 June 2016, these officers were re-elected, with FaithAction maintaining its secretariat role.

The aims of the group are:

1. To promote understanding of faith-based organisations engaged in social action in the UK, and recognition of their value;
2. 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;
3. To consider regulatory and legislative arrangements which can make the most of the potential contribution of faith-based organisations;
4. To learn from and contribute to international conversations, policy and civic action on the contribution of faith-based organisations.

The APPG website is [www.faithandsociety.org](http://www.faithandsociety.org)

## The Faith Covenant

The promotion of the Faith Covenant nationally continues to be a focus for the APPG. The Covenant emerged from a series of roundtable meetings held by the APPG in 2012 to explore the work of faith-based organisations. The Covenant is a joint commitment between faith communities and local authorities to a set of principles that guide engagement, aiming to remove some of the mistrust that exists and to promote open, practical working on all levels. For further information on the development of the Faith Covenant, and its text, see the Appendix.

The Covenant was first signed in **Birmingham** in December 2014. In 2015 Birmingham was joined by **Leeds, Northamptonshire, Barnet, Solihull, and Calderdale**, meaning that over 3.25 million people now live in areas that have adopted it.

Some examples of the activity taking place to put the Covenant into action in these areas are:

### **Birmingham**

Birmingham City Council has made efforts to engage with a wider network of faith organisations than it had in the past, guided by the Covenant. To help with this it has launched a **Faith Network**, as a key consultation forum for all its service provision and a vehicle for taking the Covenant forward. Membership has gone from around 15 to 67, with faiths represented that were not in the past.

The Council has also created the **Birmingham Faith Map**, a tool to help the Council and faith communities connect with each other. This details the activities run by faith communities and the groups they support, and currently has more than 650 entries ([www.birminghamfaithmap.org.uk](http://www.birminghamfaithmap.org.uk)).

**Keeping children safe** has emerged as a priority for both the faith groups and the Council, which has arranged a link for the faith groups with Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board. Events and training are planned on this and other issues.

### **Leeds**

Leeds City Council is focusing on improving its engagement with **greater numbers of faith groups**, as the Covenant was initially signed with a small number. It has run **training** for faith groups in how to engage with its services and in consultations.

The Council has secured a funding grant to enable it to begin work with faith institutions to allow them to become **centres for reporting hate crime** – in the hope that this will also help to build up long-term relationships with faith groups.

**Public health** officials are in the process of developing guidance for engaging with places of worship as a way of helping to improve health among Black and minority ethnic groups.

### **Solihull**

Solihull has seen increased engagement of faith groups in **strategic dialogue**, allowing them to have an influence on policy in areas of concern to them, and also allowing the Council to engage better in dialogue with faith groups. From the Council's view, Solihull Faiths Forum has been bolder in approaching it with requests, citing the Covenant.

The role of faith-based organisations in **safeguarding** was identified as an issue around which the Solihull Faiths Forum would like to develop dialogue and strategic influence. The Council therefore facilitated conversations with the managers of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and Safeguarding Adults Board, and are now drawing those from the faith groups with active involvement in safeguarding together for further discussions with the safeguarding boards.

The faith groups have requested a greater understanding of the **planning process** and how they might be involved in influencing planning in order to build stronger communities, so the Council has arranged for the Head of Planning to speak with them.

### **Barnet**

Barnet Council's activity under the Covenant is focused on ensuring that faith is involved in its community participation and engagement activities on the **same basis as the wider voluntary and community sector** (VCS). The Council and Barnet Multi-Faith Forum have a longstanding relationship through Barnet's Communities Together Network (CTN), which has been cemented through the Covenant. The CTN's remit is now being broadened to develop a VCS forum. This will be a key strategic link for the Council, enabling dialogue, the sharing of commissioning priorities and the promotion of opportunities for co-production. BMFF will be a member of the forum's steering group and an important partner in relation to community engagement.

The Council is working jointly with BMFF to **build the capacity of faith volunteers**, and together they have identified that health and wellbeing is an important area for focus. They are exploring involvement in the SPIRIT programme, which engages faith communities in promoting health and wellbeing through giving energy-saving advice, and combating social isolation.

Barnet strategic partners and BMFF are also collaborating on a **Unity of Faiths festival** planned for September 2016, which will highlight the work of faith, including in relation to health wellbeing issues of interest to Barnet communities.

Other areas where there has been interest in adopting the Covenant include Coventry, Plymouth, Blackpool, Essex and Peterborough, and FaithAction continues to offer support to faith groups and/or councils in these areas.

## Other Activity in 2015-16

### Chamber debate on the contribution of faith organisations

Thursday 5 May 2016 saw a debate in the House of Commons Chamber on the contribution of faith organisations to the voluntary sector in local communities.

The debate was scheduled by the Backbench Business Committee after Fiona Bruce MP and the Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, Vice Chair and Chair respectively of the APPG, raised the issue. They spoke at the debate, along with Steve Double MP (Treasurer of the APPG) and other Members of Parliament, to highlight the crucial role of faith organisations in meeting social needs in their own constituencies and more widely.

Stephen Timms called for wider adoption of the Faith Covenant, developed by the APPG as a means of promoting joint working between faith groups and local authorities. Summing up, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government James Wharton said that while faith groups are often ‘unsung heroes’ in communities, they were not at all unsung in the morning’s debate – and he recognised that there was much more going on than there was time to mention.

*“The right hon. Gentleman [Stephen Timms MP] also spoke about the Faith Covenant, the development of which by the All-Party Group on Faith and Society is welcome. We wanted engagement in the delivery of government services – particularly at local government level, as suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton [Fiona Bruce MP] – to take place in a way that would secure the maximum benefit for all who rely on those services, and the Covenant makes a welcome contribution to that discussion.”*

James Wharton, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, speaking at the Chamber debate

## Events

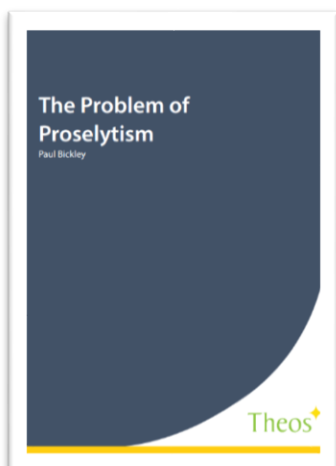
### Faith, Hope and Charity: Can we Overcome the Problem of Proselytism?

In partnership with FaithAction and the religion and society think tank Theos, the APPG hosted a debate on 20 October focusing on proselytism and the third sector. This coincided with the launch of a report by Theos, *The Problem of Proselytism*.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 3.5 million people in the UK are benefiting from the work of faith-based organisations each year, and a great diversity of organisations are providing the help, each with their own

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.theosthinktank.co.uk/publications/2015/10/20/the-problem-of-proselytism](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/publications/2015/10/20/the-problem-of-proselytism)



view on whether they should actively share their faith, and how. As the state is reshaped, the demand for church and faith-based social welfare services will be ever greater in the future.

This forces us to address questions such as how faith shapes services which were previously delivered by 'neutral' state agencies, and whether there things that faith groups should not do when providing public services. These and related questions were the subject of a debate with panellists Daniel Singleton of FaithAction (Chair), Paul Bickley of Theos (author of *The Problem of Proselytism*), Joy Madeiros of the Oasis Charitable Trust, Avril McIntyre MBE of Community Resources, Mustafa Field MBE of Faiths Forum 4 London and Amrick Singh of the Nishkam Centre.

## Mitzvah Day

The APPG held a joint event on 4 November with Mitzvah Day 365 to celebrate Mitzvah Day, the day of Jewish-led social action. MPs from the three major parties dropped in to write 'thank you' cards to staff at various charities in recognition of the great work they do for society, and also took time to find out more about Mitzvah Day and meet movement workers from the UK's Jewish youth groups, members of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and FaithAction, which also supported the event.

The event was sponsored by Mike Freer MP, with speaker the Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP. Others in attendance included Tim Farron MP, Luciana Berger MP, the Rt. Hon. Robert Halfon MP, Louise Ellman MP, Ivan Lewis MP, Matthew Offord MP, Stephen Pound MP and Ruth Smeeth MP.



Luciana Berger MP, Laura Marks OBE, founder of Mitzvah Day 365, the Rt. Hon. Robert Halfon MP, the Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP, Stephen Pound MP and members of Jewish youth movements celebrate Mitzvah Day

## Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life

The APPG met on 7th March to discuss the report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB), in a joint event with the All-Party Parliamentary Interfaith Group. A discussion on the role of faith in public life was begun by some of the Commissioners: The Rt. Rev. the Lord Harries of Pentregarth, Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra of the Muslim Council of Britain and Dr Ed Kessler MBE of the Woolf Institute. A summary of the discussion is available at [www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG-Minutes-7-March-2016.pdf](http://www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG-Minutes-7-March-2016.pdf).

**Dr Ed Kessler, Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, the Rt. Rev. the Lord Harries of Pentregarth, the Rt. Hon. the Baroness Butler-Sloss and the Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP at the CORAB discussion**



## Faith and Extremism

On 22nd March, the APPG invited the Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP to share his thoughts on addressing issues of extremism, with responses from Fiona Bruce MP, Raheel Mohammed of Maslaha and David Brown, education consultant. This was followed by a lively debate in a packed room. A summary of the discussion is available at [www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG-Minutes-22-March-2016.pdf](http://www.faithandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/APPG-Minutes-22-March-2016.pdf).



**The Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP addresses the APPG at the discussion on faith and extremism**

## Plans for 2016-17

A policy roundtable discussion was held on 14 July in Portcullis House, focusing on **faith-based organisations' responses to issues of finance, poverty and austerity**. The event marked the publication of the report *Public Faith and Finance: Faith responses to the financial crisis*,<sup>2</sup> which was presented by authors Dr Therese O'Toole and Dr Katya Braginskaia of the University of Bristol. Omar Shaikh of the Islamic Finance Council UK spoke about the Council's work, and its joint project with the Church of Scotland to develop ethical financial services. Steve Double MP also shared his thoughts in response.

The APPG will continue to focus on encouraging the adoption of the Faith Covenant, and a **celebration of the Covenant** is planned for Inter Faith Week in November 2016. The APPG will be joined by members of Councils that have adopted the Covenant, their MPs and key faith leaders for a time of discussion.

The APPG will also consider **faith-based organisations' work in prisons**, and what is known about 'what works' and the difference that faith can make.

We welcome suggestions of further topics for the group to consider.

## Appendix

### The Faith Covenant: development and text

#### Background

The Covenant emerged from a series of roundtable meetings held by the APPG in 2012 to explore the work of faith-based organisations. These focused on the areas of welfare to work, children and young people, and health and wellbeing, as well as the work of faith groups internationally.

A common theme emerging from these discussions was a concern about the relationship between faith-based organisations and local authorities. On the one hand, local authorities and grant-making bodies can be uneasy about faith playing a part in service delivery. As a consequence, faith-based organisations often feel compelled to downplay the role and importance of faith in their work, although to them it plays a central part – resulting in a lack of integrity. On the other hand, religious illiteracy among local authorities means there is a difficulty in understanding what faith-based organisations are about and how best to relate to them.

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.publicspirit.org.uk/new-report-on-public-faith-and-finance](http://www.publicspirit.org.uk/new-report-on-public-faith-and-finance) for the report.

During the 2013 Annual General Meeting of the APPG, the Rt Hon David Lammy MP suggested that faith groups might be able to encourage local authorities to sign up to a charter setting out an agreement for how the two would relate to each other.

This led to the development by the APPG of the Covenant for engagement between local authorities and faith groups. Professor Francis Davis also played a key part in drafting the text of the Covenant.

The full text of the Covenant can be found below. The Covenant is a joint commitment between faith communities and local authorities to a set of principles that guide engagement, aiming to remove some of the mistrust that exists and to promote open, practical working on all levels.

## **Covenant text**

The coming decade will see the country facing new social needs and tough new challenges. There will be fresh demands on public health, social care, education, employment support and community inclusion.

These challenges will require the identification of a new set of resources. We will need to unlock the potential of every part of our society to contribute together towards solutions.

We believe that one important resource can be realised by supporting faith-based organisations to work constructively and effectively, as part of civil society, with local authorities. That will mean ensuring that local authorities are confident in commissioning services from and transferring assets to appropriately qualified faith-based organisations, and that they include faith groups when they look for solutions to social needs.

The APPG on Faith and Society is convinced that faith groups have a great deal to offer as providers and advocates for the communities in which they serve, and that some of their potential is being unnecessarily overlooked at present. To help tackle the problem, the Group has drafted a Covenant which can be adopted by faith groups and local authorities in cities across the UK.

The Covenant principles are currently in draft form. Local authorities that are interested in adopting the Covenant should contact FaithAction.

## **The Covenant**

The Covenant is a joint commitment between faith communities and local authorities to a set of principles that guide engagement, aiming to remove some of the mistrust that exists and to promote open, practical working on all levels.

Together, local authorities and faith communities should work out a local version of the commitments below, according to the priorities and needs of that locality.

**The Covenant is built on the following principles:**

- Faith communities are free to practise their beliefs and religious observances without restriction, and to raise their voice in public debate and to be respected, within the framework of UK law.
- Public services and faith based social action should respect service users from all backgrounds, with no discrimination on the grounds of religion, gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, mental capability or long term condition.
- The voice, participation and solutions that faith communities bring are important, and consultation should enable them to be brought to bear for the benefit of the wider community.
- Organisations and services are stronger for drawing on diverse sources of funding; monopolies of funding, action and participation are damaging

**The Covenant entails the following commitments:**

***Local authorities*** commit to welcome the involvement of faith groups in the delivery of services and social action on an equal basis with other groups. In addition, they commit to:

- Building relationships and trust with faith groups;
- Adopting strategies for the engagement of faith communities in consultation exercises;
- Encouraging faith groups and their members to be involved in the reshaping and redesign of local services;
- Establishing clear guidelines around funding;
- Sharing training and learning opportunities between faith communities and the local authority.

***Faith-based organisations*** commit to work actively with local authorities in the design and delivery of services to the public. In addition, they commit to:

- Seeking opportunities to bring people together to serve the community, particularly its poorest and most isolated members;
- Serving equally all local residents seeking to access the public services they offer, without proselytising, irrespective of their religion, gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, mental capability or long term condition;
- Using resources provided for delivering a service wholly for that purpose, and not for any other;
- Ensuring excellence in child protection, health and safety, accountability and transparency;
- Responding to consultations where appropriate;
- Sharing training and learning opportunities between faith communities and the local authority.



FaithAction, secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group of Faith and Society, is a national network of faith-based and community organisations and a Strategic Partner to the Department of Health. FaithAction works to provide support, advice and training for its members, as well as partnering with local and central governments to highlight the contributions made by these organisations to their communities.

[www.faithaction.net](http://www.faithaction.net)

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