

# THE BIRMINGHAM CONVERSATIONS



A report from the Interfaith Conversations  
that took place between October 2014  
and April 2015 on the theme:

**'What does Lived Faith look like  
in a 21st Century City?'**

**T**he Birmingham conversations were a series of six sessions held once a month between October and March, each lasting for three hours. Twenty four participants from different faiths were invited to commit to all six sessions. The invitees were selected not based on their position or title but as people with 'an ear to the ground' who are active in life in Birmingham and represent different perspectives from within the faith traditions.

The group was convened by the Right Revd David Urquhart, Bishop of Birmingham, and consisted of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Ravidassis and Sikhs. Obviously, in a city as diverse as Birmingham there are many other religious or ethnic groups who could have been included. We tried to get a balance between a fairly representative group and a manageable group size. The group consisted of equal numbers of men and women and ages from 25-70.

Our hope is that this method will prove useful and attractive to others, so that soon further conversations can take place that include different people bringing other perspectives and ideas. This report gives an overview of the process and a brief overview of the content of the conversations. Throughout the booklet there are questions to encourage you to continue the discussion.

## GROUND RULES

The Group developed some ground rules for discussion these were:

1. Be Open and honest, be real, express your views.
2. Represent your perspective, don't speak for others
3. Remember we all have individual viewpoints, don't lump people together, don't generalise about other people.
4. Be respectful, don't give offence and don't take offence.
5. Say if you've been hurt, explain why.
6. Listen when other's talk, no asides, ask helpful questions to understand.
7. Try to be empathetic, don't judge, don't patronise.
8. Bring process concerns to Group Facilitators
9. Discuss the 'conversation' with confidentiality, don't ascribe comments to individuals
10. Make this about actions, not just talk.

To ensure confidentiality the conversations used the 'Chatham House Rule of Confidentiality' which states: 'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

## QUESTIONS

Who would you invite to a 'Birmingham Conversation?'

Which Groups never seem to be represented?

How would you decide who to invite and who to leave out?

What Ground Rules would you include when running a conversation?

# OUTCOMES

The aim of the conversations was not, necessarily, to reach agreement. Neither were we expecting to produce guidelines for how people should live. Rather, the aim was to explore a way to discuss issues usually seen as too controversial, yet which impact the lives of many people on a daily basis. We hoped to find a way of living well together without ignoring issues, and thereby storing up problems for the future but without being naive in thinking we could all agree.

We also wanted to produce this record of the conversations as a way of encouraging others to see how these topics can be discussed. Along with this report there is an academic paper on the methodology used and one on the outcomes from the process.



## QUESTIONS

Do you think we can live well together whilst strongly disagreeing on important issues?

Who might you have disagreements with, how might you have constructive conversations with them?



# THE PROCESS

The Group committed to meet once a month for six months with each session lasting three hours. This was a big commitment and might sound like a lot of talking but at the end of almost every session people wished it went on for longer as we were just getting going. We met once a month to give people chance to think about what was discussed and to bring new thoughts and ideas to future meetings. The length of the process also meant that we could focus on building of relationships between participants. We knew the topics would stir up disagreement and wanted to have those conversations as friends rather than strangers. Discussing difficult topics requires a certain amount of risk taking from everyone as we share things that cause us, or others pain.

We wanted the conversations to be authentic and to grow and develop over the six months, consequently there was no rigid agenda, but the discussions and meetings arose from the group and were specific to our context. Between each meeting a planning group met to evaluate what had gone on and to plan for the next conversation.

Planning each session at a time allowed us to adapt the discussion styles as well as refine the content. As we got to know the group we changed the amount of small group discussions and plenary sessions. We tried single gender groups for some topics and discussion in pairs and time for individual reflection at others. With such a diverse group it was important to offer a variety of styles to cater for different preferences and ways of discussing that people feel comfortable with. Creating the right environment for the discussions became important as it enabled people to focus on the task in hand especially when coming with very busy lives and distractions. Not only did this involve providing time for refreshments, but creating a more relaxing atmosphere with candles, music and even a water-feature!

## QUESTIONS

How important is it to build friendships before discussing difficult topics?

What is your preferred way to discuss issues? How willing are you to adapt to the preferences of others?

How do we create space and time for future conversations?

How do we find the best time to meet when people are available at different times or day?

# REFLECTIONS FROM THE CONVERSATIONS

What follows are just a few key points from the conversations. The length of the conversations means that there is far too much content to include here. Also the confidential nature means that some was shared for the benefit of others in the group rather than a wider audience. However, we hope the following gives you some idea of the themes raised.

## SESSION 1: SHARING EXPERIENCES, EXPLORING DIVERSITY & COMMONALITIES

All faith communities at times feel that they are victims of discrimination from various sources such as national or local government, other faith communities or the media.

The way faith is lived in a, broadly, secular society presents challenges for all faith communities but often the tensions are about culture rather than faith. Understanding the difference between faith and culture in the lives of others is an increasingly important task for us. Labelling others as a simple group 'Muslims do this...' or 'Hindus believe that...' is commonplace and unhelpful as it demonstrates a lack of understanding and creates simple stereotypes.



### QUESTIONS

Do members of your community ever feel like victims?

How is this articulated, what responses are suggested?

Who else, that you meet, might feel that their community is victimised?

What can you do to help them?

# SESSION 2: CONFLICTS & YOUNG PEOPLE

Conflicts between the faiths might rarely spill out into physical violence in Birmingham, but people shared how negativity towards people of different faiths is worryingly common. Much of this was directed towards Muslims and the reporting of the 'Trojan Horse' allegations had heightened this.

The way we speak to young people negatively, or don't speak positively, about other faiths means they carry our prejudices on. We need to be able to talk about our faith confidently but in ways which is inclusive of others. The effects of austerity and limited resources can build conflict into society which is described (sometimes falsely) in religious terms.

In schools children often only experience one culture. Whilst they might be taught to be respectful and kind to others some still experience prejudice. E.G. 'I can't play with you, you're a Muslim'. If we create an environment where children can't express themselves then we are more likely to cause radicalisation. How we cater for needs of majority and minority pupils is increasingly important otherwise children and parents feel stigmatised and excluded. Communication between schools and parents is key especially over topics such as provision of halal, and non-halal food and sex education.



## QUESTIONS

Do you ever hear negative comments about people of other faiths?

How do you respond to these comments?

What do you tell young people about the beliefs and practices of other faiths?

How should schools balance the needs of different pupils, along with the legal obligations they are under from government?

# SESSION 3: IDENTITY

People described having many different identities, often that were a deliberate choice, but these identities weren't described as flowing into one another but people held multiple identities some which were in conflict within themselves.

The place and role of women in different faith communities varies enormously but is a serious issue in all communities. People faced discrimination for supporting women in leadership, but also for opposing the idea. How women dress is often discussed and legislated for more than how men dress. Freedom for women to choose what to wear, or not to wear, causes tensions within and between some communities.

When living as a minority in a community it can be difficult to express faith publicly and one can arouse suspicion and antagonism from the majority community.



## QUESTIONS

How many ways could you describe yourself?

How many of these do you choose, how many are chosen for you?

What roles do women have in the life of your faith community?

What roles would you like them to have?

Who are the minorities in your area?

What is life like for them?



# SESSION 4: EXTERNAL ISSUES

It was recognised by everyone in the discussion that, in an increasingly globalised world, issues and events outside Birmingham affect people and communities here; whether that's on-going global conflicts, political shifts in other countries, international acts of terrorism or decisions made by politicians in London. It was striking just how many issues were raised and the deep impact they had on people. Taking time to consider different points of view and hearing different perspectives, perhaps through accessing different news media, is important if we are to avoid simplistic reactions and understand the impact of these events on others in our city.



## QUESTIONS

Are there global or national issues which matter to members of your community?

Which other communities in Birmingham might be affected by these issues?

Have you ever considered this issue from a different point of view?

How could you start to do that, and encourage others to do the same?



# SESSION 5: CONVERSION AND RACE

In the last two sessions we revisited some key topics from earlier conversations to explore them in greater detail.

The right for people to evangelise others was discussed at length with people expressing very different viewpoints. The way people do evangelism was seen to be key with some practices being appreciated more than others, people didn't like being criticised by people doing evangelism. Converts from one faith to another described how they sometimes face discrimination, and even intimidation, from communities they have left and lack of understanding from communities they have joined.

## QUESTIONS

How do we protect people's right to choose their faith, or to have no faith?

If you were to stand in the street preaching what would your message be?

How would you feel if someone you knew converted to another faith?

The issue of race was acknowledged to still be an issue with people from different communities facing discrimination. This discrimination came from within faith communities and wider society. The issue of race highlights the gap, or sometimes overlap, between faith and culture. When someone from a different race joins a fairly mono-cultural faith community it can challenge the stereotypes of those outside the faith; at the same time it can be isolating if the majority do not make the effort to welcome someone from a different ethnic background.

## QUESTIONS

How mono-cultural is your faith community?

Do people from different backgrounds feel welcome to meet and worship with you?

Do you ever hear people from your community being racist?  
How do you respond?

# SESSION 6: EDUCATION, CASTE AND CLASS

The influence parents should be allowed to have in a school through formal or informal means was a source of contention with some arguing that government should set the agenda which parents adhere to and others arguing that parents should be able to influence the experience their pupils have at school. There was agreement that whatever people felt criticism should be directed to the right people, for example not at teachers when they are following the law in the curriculum they teach.

How much pupils feel they can express their faith, or have to hide it for fear of being bullied or ridiculed was also discussed, with a general desire to help pupils be confident in their faith whilst providing them with the best academic opportunities.

Whether there is caste discrimination in the UK was a significant area of disagreement amongst the group discussing this topic. Some people saw the attempt by the House of Lords to introduce it as a problem as it would stigmatise certain faiths and sections of society, others saw it as an essential part of ending discrimination in the UK. Discussing this raised the issues of how issues in other parts of the world impact communities here and to what extent the law is the right way to tackle issues like this.



## QUESTIONS

Who do you think should have the most say in the education of children?

Should schools be entirely secular or should they make space for faith in their daily routines and lessons?

Are there issues in other parts of the world that impact you or your community?

Should Caste Discrimination be part of British Law, if so what might the impact be?

Should all issues like this come under legislation or are there better ways to tackle them?

# WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT

Getting to a point where we can discuss difficult issues takes a long time and real commitment

Getting the right mix of people is challenging but very important

Committing to the whole process ensures the right mix of people at every meeting

Having space between each conversation allows people time to think through what they heard

Planning the sessions one at a time allows for refinement of the process

Having a planning group means you can learn together and bring different ideas to the sessions

Being fairly open with the agenda is risky but opens up interesting new topics

Creating a good environment helps set a good tone for the conversations

Keeping it private, ie. no social media or press releases, gives people confidence to speak openly

Changing the format of the sessions enables people with different personalities to be included

Leading the sessions is emotionally and physically draining

# WHAT NEXT?

We will be using this process to host some further conversations with different groups of people in Birmingham.

We also want to encourage others to take this methodology and use it to help them explore different topics. Start now by discussing the questions raised in this booklet with friends and family members.

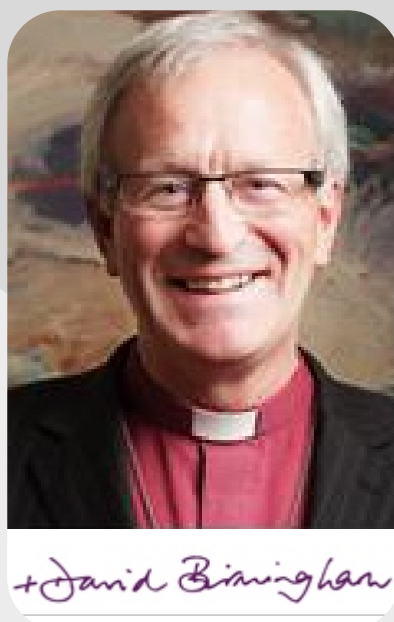
You can download this and two further reports about the Birmingham Conversations at: <http://tinyurl.com/bhamconv>

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# #BHAMCONVERSATIONS





*'In a city as diverse as Birmingham we need to make time to talk to people from different backgrounds; to hear one another's stories and share our hopes and concerns.*

*The 'Birmingham Conversations' provided a space for people of faith to talk together about things that really matter, issues that we don't all agree on but that affect the lives of people in our city.*

*Being good neighbours doesn't mean ignoring our differences or trying to get everyone to agree with us; rather it means learning to live well together with all our rich diversity. These conversations are one example of how people from different faiths and backgrounds can discuss important, and sometimes difficult, topics creatively and fruitfully. I do hope you'll use the questions in this report to join in the Birmingham Conversation'*

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