BIRMINGHAM CONVERSATIONS 2016
PRACTICAL INSIGHTS FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES AND POLICYMAKERS

EDWARD CADBURY CENTRE

FOR THE
PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING
OF RELIGION

THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
BIRMINGHAM
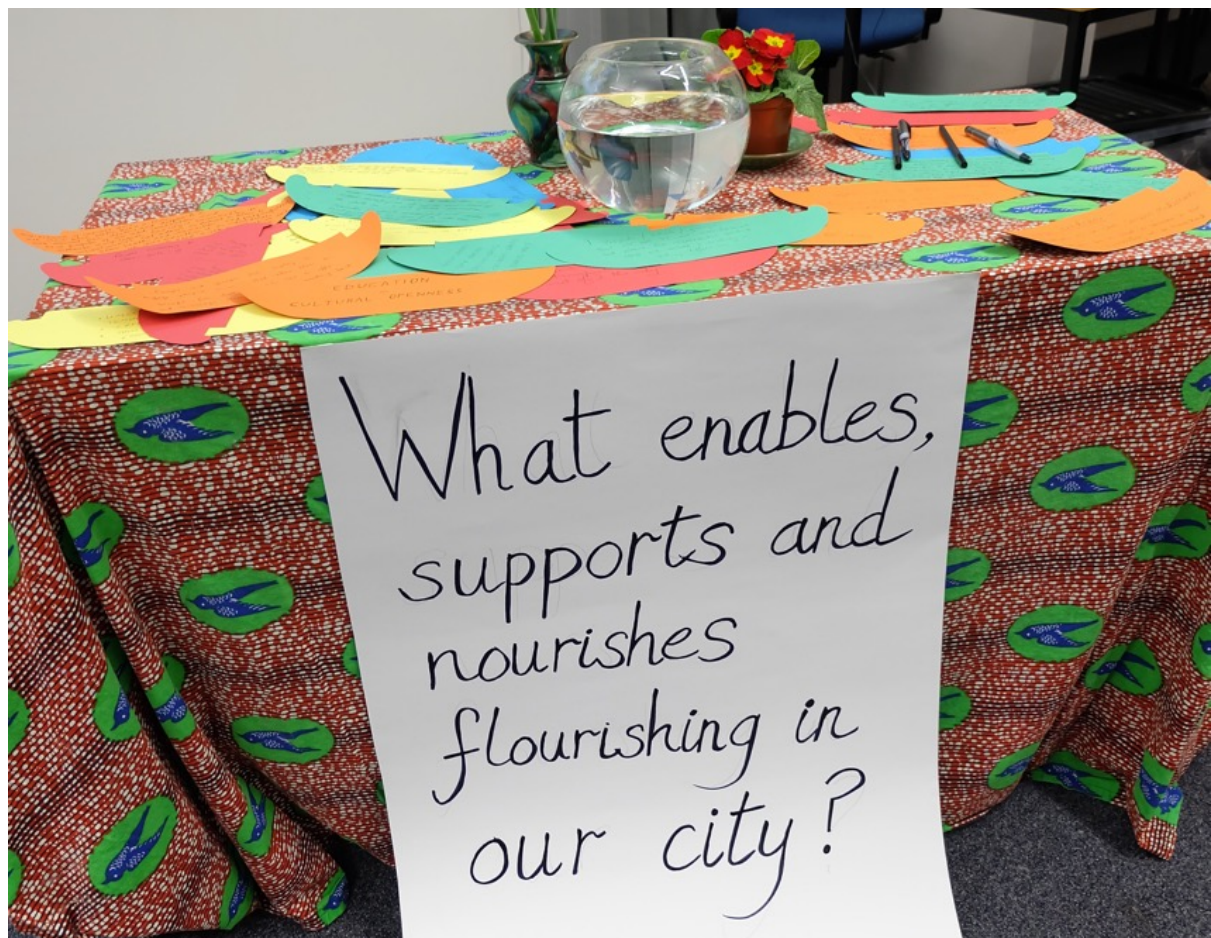
Introducing the Birmingham Conversations

In the first half of 2016, some 30 established and emerging leaders from a variety of walks of professional life gathered for a series of six Conversations to discuss the reality of life in twenty-first century Birmingham. Representing disciplines as diverse as architecture and social policy and careers from engineering to politics, this group of Sikhs, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Humanists and Jews were nevertheless absolutely united in their commitment to building a better city, and sought to represent their community and their professional context in discussions as to what the Birmingham of the future might look like and how the Birmingham of today might be improved. We wanted to see what we could contribute to the active flourishing and the social, spiritual and economic prosperity of our city by asking:

How can faiths contribute to the flourishing of society?

This question, of course, is not without its challenges. What do we mean by 'flourishing'? What does flourishing look like? If one community is flourishing then what are implications for others who aren't? And, which communities don't feel they are flourishing, and how can we help them? A truly flourishing community, we determined, is one where there is room for all people to succeed in an environment of mutual trust and interdependence. True flourishing is only partially economic, but dynamically impacts the wellbeing of individuals, producing sustainable strength and resilience within communities and cities. And asking religion to take a back seat in the quest for flourishing would be to tie our strongest arm behind our back. Rather, all people of faith should be working (together) for the good of the community they live in and are called to serve.

We spent six months together pondering and discussing these issues and trying to identify strategies for ways forward which would benefit all of us. This policy briefing seeks to identify some of the wider implications and opportunities of our discussions for faith groups and policy communities, focussing on just four of the key themes that emerged. It will do this first by highlighting some of the key conclusions or *Findings* from our discussions; then attempting to draw out some of the *Implications* of these ideas and ways or areas in which our findings are, we think, particularly significant; before finally offering some *Recommendations* for action, which will be directed at faith groups themselves as well as at policymakers.

One of the many things that united us as a group of Conversationers was the conviction that faith had and still has a significant role to play in the growth and development of our city and the shaping of its future. We present our ideas here in the hope they will play a small part in advancing the city's agenda and in contributing to its flourishing in every way.

1. Faith in the Public Square

Our discussions around the role of faith in public life in general focussed around the issue of the visibility or otherwise of faith in the public square and how religion contributes to the human geography of our city.

Findings

1. Birmingham is a city that cannot be understood without an appreciation of the role that religion plays within it. To try to push faith under the carpet or out of view would only cause harm to communities who are deeply committed to their faith position and increase misunderstanding and disharmony.

2. That is not to say, necessarily, that religion should be prioritised or given superior status – simply that faith should not be shunned, ignored, underestimated or excluded from the discussion, and that its power as a motivating force for individual and corporate choice and action must be fully recognised.

3. Equally, the absence of faith is something which must be recognised and welcomed. Birmingham's nonconformist history has been a significant factor in its growth and development, and it is important that we retain such a commitment to freedom of thought and conscience as well as freedom of religion or belief.

4. However, the recognition of religious diversity and of the increasing proportion of religious 'nones' or people who do not lay claim to any faith does not mean that removing religion from public life is in any way a desirable or positive outcome. We share a deep conviction that faith must remain actively visible in our city, for the wellbeing of our communities and all our citizens.

Implications

1. It is also crucial, however, that faith communities take responsibility for conducting themselves wisely and constructively in the public square. Public presentations or demonstrations, for example, need to be as sensitive as they are passionate and seek to influence thinking, not impose ideas or actions. It is important that deeply-held convictions can be shared, but for the good of all communities, ideas need to be presented in a positive and inclusive manner. We suggest similar concerns also apply to non-religious events.
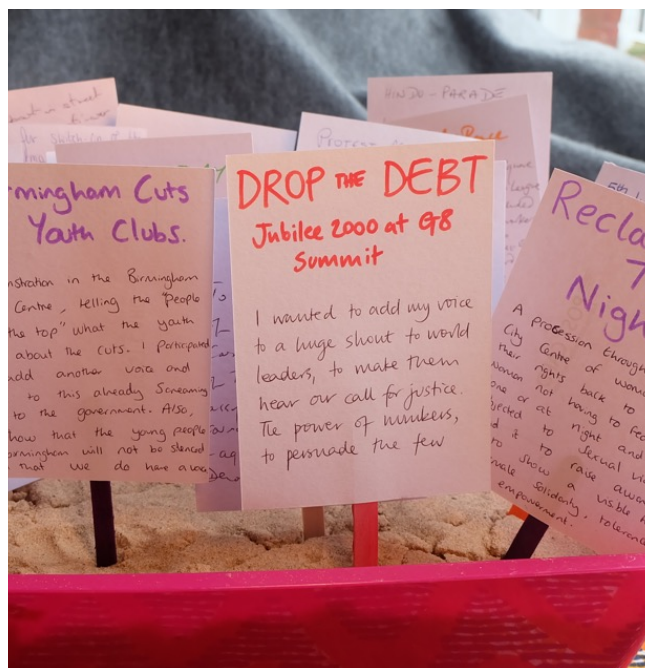
2. We recognise that the city council persistently walks a tightrope in terms of which organisations it permits to have use of public space and when it chooses to intervene. We commend them on their thoughtful and sensitive application of policy.

3. If our commitment as people of faith in the city is indeed to work for its flourishing, then engaging with the challenges that our communities face should be a key concern for us. If some of the obstacles to flourishing include economic, social and cultural poverty; lack of aspiration and opportunity; absence of a real sense of community; isolation, prejudice, misunderstanding and fear; then these are the challenges that faith communities must work together to address as part of their commitment to the city.

4. If one of the biggest challenges for religion in society is a lack of religious literacy, then this is a concern for faith communities themselves to take up. Rather than criticising others for their lack of literacy, faith communities should seek to introduce themselves to the world constructively, positively and dialogically, and should give attention to explaining themselves to the wider world as they seek to engage with it. In this regard we particularly highlight the success and ongoing potential of initiatives which encourage people of one faith (or none) to visit the places of worship of other faiths in the quest for greater understanding, or simply encourage cross-community interaction on a social level. Friendship is the best antidote to fear and prejudice. We affirm further that such dialogues can easily take place without any community compromising its fundamental principles, and are in fact part of our mission and calling as people of faith.

Recommendations

1. Street preachers and protestors need to give attention to their manner of speech, and would be wise to remember that a hostile and antagonistic approach actually minimises their impact and influence.

2. Since so much of the success of any community depends upon understanding, we call upon all people of faith to live and proclaim their faith without fear or compromise, but to do so in a positive, listening and affirming environment which welcomes other voices, including the nonreligious.

3. Since leadership at all levels and in all contexts is so crucial to establishing the 'tone' and culture of our city, it is vital that faith communities work alongside and support established leaders, and seek to build and develop emerging leaders from their own communities and from beyond, who will adopt a dialogic and constructive approach, and that we commit to working together for the common goal of the flourishing of our community.

2. Faith in the Workplace

The visibility of faith in public life includes a recognition of the need for religion to be acknowledged in the workplace. Clearly some employers are - not wholly unreasonably - concerned as to the potential negative impact of religious observance at work, and some seem to think that debarring any expression or recognition of faith at work is the only way forward. However, for most people of faith, their religion is not something that can be turned off and on, even though they recognise that the workplace is neutral and secular space. Some people of faith will need to find time to pray during the day; will not be able to work at particular times or days; will need special food provision in the staff canteen. If employers view legitimate requests as irritants, this is likely to cause workplace disharmony and demotivate employers.

Some faiths are more explicitly and publicly observed, and the precise challenges faced have changed over time – so, whilst at one stage many Jewish people encountered resistance over their desire to observe the Sabbath and Festivals, in more recent times, the wearing of Islamic dress (particularly by women) has been more controversial.

Findings

1. Inclusiveness policies in the workplace are sometimes in danger of addressing gender, race, sexuality and age but ignoring religion. However, recognition of the role of faith (and of its absence) is essential for an environment to be considered genuinely and wholly inclusive.

2. Where religion is recognised in the workplace, some employers (perhaps particularly the larger ones) are in danger of assuming that they know what is needed to 'tick the box' in terms of provision for people of faith (often a multi-faith prayer room which is then, to all practical intents and purposes, either massively under-utilised or can sometimes be taken over by a particular faith group, becoming a hostile rather than an inclusive space). This is inadequate and creates more problems than it solves. Inclusivity needs to be an ongoing and internalised process which is integrated into the culture of the organisation, rather than something which is imposed upon it externally.

3. Most Conversationers felt they were certainly not encouraged, even if they were ever permitted, to live out their faith at work, by either their employer or, interestingly, their faith community. Many participants didn't know what, if any, faith their colleagues observe, and they felt this sometimes hindered their interpersonal relationships at work.

4. Faith communities do not often adequately encourage their adherents to live out their faith in the workplace and support them adequately in doing so. In some cases, there is almost an active competition between workplace and place of worship, where the priorities (and sometimes the values) of the two organisations seem on occasion to be diametrically opposed. Success in working for an employer sometimes results in increased workload, which puts pressure on attendance at worship and sometimes results in unhappiness, resentment or even rebuke from religious leaders.

5. Employers are sometimes, not unreasonably, concerned at the potential disruption to the workplace that evangelistic activities can produce. However, this is not felt to be a common problem by people of faith. In fact, the feelings and beliefs of those of other faiths are sometimes raised as a reason for keeping faith out of the workplace, though in general, most people of faith have few objections to others' religious observance. Most frequently it was felt that this kind of concern is expressed by those who do not observe any particular faith, and generally not from any hostility but from a desire to avoid offence or prejudice.

Implications

1. Employers need to develop a better and more widespread understanding of what people of faith want and need and offer in response a compassionate but forthright and equitable account of what they can provide. In particular, they need to realise that all faiths do not have the same concerns and needs, and indeed that not all people of a particular faith have the same needs. There is a real need for nuance and subtlety in engaging with these issues. It would be unreasonable to assume any measure of religious literacy on the part of managers, but they can ask people of religious faith what they need and what they want for their faith to be taken seriously.

2. The working week is generally configured around the Christian calendar, and this causes no offence to non-Christians, but does mean that non-Christians find it harder to observe their own festivals and need to request time off for, e.g., Eid or Rosh Hashanah.

3. There is sometimes a lack of appreciation of the positive contribution that faith, and people of faith, can make in the workplace environment. The increasing atomisation of some workplaces can result in a lack of collegiality which leads to isolation and vulnerability. Part of the positive contribution faith can make in this environment might be to build cohesion between colleagues. The removal of informal space and the loss of a staffroom and fixed lunch hours in some companies has sometimes resulted in a lack of opportunity for friendship and interaction, and hot desking sometimes counteracts effective relationship building. However, religion can speak to the humanisation of the workspace.

4. Developing a fully-inclusive workplace demands the incorporation of religion and its absence into strategies for equity and equality. Accommodating the needs of everyone with respect is a highly complex task and needs to be undertaken with sensitivity and dialogically. Effective recognition of the religious needs of employees (whilst similarly acknowledging and valuing their need to be free from any sort of religious pressure) can make a massively positive contribution to the establishment and sustenance of a fulfilled and happy workplace.

Recommendations

1. People of faith need to take their responsibilities in the workplace seriously and appreciate that, whilst their faith governs every area of their life for them, the workplace is fundamentally a secular environment and their religion needs to be observed in a manner appropriate to this context. Faith should be allowed to feed

positively into workplace life as much as it is an everyday part of human existence. All faiths are focussed on relationships as much as ideas, and relationships are the basis of any strong and growing community. Practically in this regard, some organisations might consider making underused multi-faith prayer rooms into shared community space for eating, community and engagement as well as for prayer.

2. Employers need to work with people of faith in order to understand their needs, so they can develop a comprehensive understanding of what, if anything, they can do to meet those needs. A dialogic and constructive approach to management can be more helpful and inclusive for the employer as a whole.

3. In this regard, employers should attempt to respect diversity but realise that people of faith do not want segregation or special treatment – they merely request the freedom to fulfil the requirements of their religion unhindered. Similarly, people who do not have a particular faith need their freedom of thought and conscience defending too. Part of the obstacle for employers is a widespread lack of religious literacy, and the massive complexity of religious and cultural issues, with which too many managers simply do not know how to cope. Larger organisations would be well-advised to offer additional support and training to their staff to help them negotiate these challenges.

4. Employers should try to make appropriate accommodations as they can but these should be linked to the precise requirements of a faith and not cultural accommodations. Employers should take a clear position on where religious exemptions from institutional policy might be permitted and where they are non-negotiable, and apply this policy clearly and effectively across the board. With astute and engaged management, it is possible to balance the needs of employees for religious observance with the employer's need for an integrated and cohesive workforce.

5. The first priority for all employers and employees should be the humanisation of the workplace. Both can work together to build affirming workplaces which value people for who they are as well as what they can do for the organisation. Workplaces can sometimes be rather too dehumanising, and if religion should be contributing to making the world a better place, then surely people of faith should be working for not just the spiritual, but the wholistic, wellbeing of colleagues across their place of work, seeking to afford everyone the ability and opportunity to be themselves and to flourish in their professional environment. In this regard, it is incumbent upon all parties to treat one another as individuals and not just as representatives of their faith, recognising their common humanity.

6. All people of faith need much better insight from their religious leaders into how they can positively make a contribution to the workplace; a credible theology of work is needed for all the major faiths, as well perhaps as practical guidance.

3. Faith and Education

Faith communities have a longstanding commitment to education, and many of them to this day consider it a priority. However, in the city of 'Trojan Horse', it would be impossible to ignore the potentially controversial aspects of allowing people of faith to have a say in what our children are taught. The crucial challenge here is that what our children learn needs to be a true reflection of how religion is lived 'in the wild', and faith communities can perhaps help here.

Findings

1. In terms of shaping ideas and policies, for example in the context of membership of a school governing board, there is a massive difference between influence and imposition, and the question of control, authority and accountability is a crucial one. In any consultation or dialogue, the question of who has the decision-making power needs to be clear.

2. It is often not clear to parents where would they go to find help with concerns over educational issues, and in fact, there is a general lack of knowledge in some communities on how to interact and engage with professionals constructively. Knowing 'how you get your way' is rather too frequently a rather middle class skill, and the fact that many working-class people feel their voice is not being heard is a cause of further frustration and alienation for them.

3. Whilst faith schools make a significant contribution to our society, there is a certain risk of them creating islands, where children grow up knowing nothing about any other religion than their own. It is vital that all children have at least an elementary understanding of all the key faiths with which they are likely to have to engage in their daily interactions in life, and also appreciate the rational critique of faith.

4. However, faith schools do not always simply attract students of one faith – we noted one church school in the city, for example, is 90% Muslim, but the fact that it is a church school opens up opportunities for interreligious dialogue that most of those children would never otherwise have.

Implications

1. Religious education is not about indoctrination or affirming ideas that students have already developed or been taught at home, but it should never be hostile to religious ideas and ideals either. Rather RE can profitably be heavily focussed on developing the students' understanding and appreciation of diversity and difference, especially in any context which affirms a particular religious perspective (such as a faith school).

2. There are particular challenges for some conservative religious groups across a variety of faiths about the shape of sex education in schools, particularly at primary level. In the light of the many recent cases of sexual grooming reported across the country, children need to know what sorts of behaviour and contact are appropriate and which are not, and clarity needs to overcome embarrassment in discussions of such topics. At many places of worship, support and training on issues around grooming is often focussed upon the parents, and children and young people themselves need better support from their faith communities on such issues (though it needs to be expert and well-advised).

Recommendations

1. Whilst much Religious Education in schools is of an extremely high standard, teaching of this calibre and appropriate classroom materials are not always available. RE teaching should be considered an honourable and prestigious calling by all people of faith, and religious leaders should encourage their most excellent young people to consider a teaching career.

2. Civil society generally needs to work hard to actively encourage participation from all citizens and give attention to forms of communication and dialogue which give a voice to those who presently feel they are not being listened to.

3. We need to seek approaches to sex education which speak the language of the community and can be accepted by them as not breaking cultural taboos, whilst still providing the children with the information and support that they need. Good sex education should engage with the 'mechanics' of sex but also focus on issues around relationships, ethics, sexuality and social expectation. Of course, there is a danger here that some staunchly conservative faith schools might take an insular approach and adopt a hostile approach to any model of sexuality that is not in line with their own. Whilst they are wholly entitled to adopt their own approach to sexual ethics, such schools need to be supremely conscious of the needs of their students to understand issues around sexuality and to discuss them in a secure and safe environment without fear of repercussions.

4. We further recognise that in engaging with conservative faith communities in particular, the educators' task includes working on building understanding and awareness of parents as well as pupils, and assert that faith leaders should support teachers in this work, albeit not uncritically, and seek to lead their communities in this engagement.

4. Faith and Politics

If politics is truly, as Hunter S. Thompson once called it, 'The art of controlling your environment', then any community that might want to make a difference for itself and for wider society clearly needs to learn how to engage politically. Although discussing religion and politics sounds like the ultimate recipe for dinner party chaos, the Conversations around these issues were constructive, informative and insightful.

Findings

1. Politically, it is often the white working class community that is least heard and least engaged with the political process in our city – partially because it isn't a distinct community *per se* and doesn't have formal representation. This community is disadvantaged geographically in Birmingham too, and is therefore all too often left out of the picture.

2. There is a significant risk that religious faith can be corrupted by power – this is one of the most terrible lessons of history. Our commitment as people of faith should be to pray for those in authority, but also to speak truthfully to them on behalf of our communities and hold them to account in line with our and their espoused values, in a positive relationship of constructively-critical friendship.

3. There are many ways people of faith can contribute to political debate, among them: hosting MPs' or councillors' surgeries, or election hustings, in our buildings; offering pastoral support to politicians; encouraging members of our communities to engage with political discourse and sometimes to stand for office. We urge people of faith to pursue whichever of these opportunities seem best suited to their context.

4. Many Conversationers had concerns about party politics being discussed, or particularly preached on, in places of worship, but felt it this was very unusual anyway. In fact, the opposite problem was more of a challenge: it was sometimes rather too difficult to engage our communities on political issues. The thought that any particular community might have a 'block vote' which could be directed to a particular party was felt to be problematic and to be avoided at all costs, though.

Implications

1. Politics is often the art of hearing the unheard, and in forming faith communities to be politically active we need to think through what political activism looks like. There is a danger that faith communities have a very insular approach to political activism, being engaged really only on issues of our own concern and not those of the broader good of the community.

2. Similarly there is a danger that we fail to recognise that politicians are human beings too, who are often in need of pastoral support from faith communities.

3. All faith communities have values which have political significance and resonance (for example: aspiration; social justice; equality, etc.) and these values can be powerful motivators for political engagement.

Recommendations

1. There was a general consensus that the recent habit of the production of 'faith manifestos' or wish-lists representing the specific needs and desires of individual faith communities around election times were more problematic than helpful. It is unwise to seek to elect candidates purely on the basis of their religion or their interaction with ours, or on their response to one or two specific test questions. Rather, we should allow our decision-making to be informed by our wider religious values rather than narrower religious affairs or issues.

2. Faith communities can make a positive contribution to improving political discourse by, among other things, encouraging civility; modelling good disagreement; engaging politicians as people in their own own right; speaking respectfully of and praying for our leaders and elected representatives. It is a matter of regret that the tone of our language and content of our message as people of faith has not always attained these high standards.

3. Immigrant minority ethnic communities should seek to engage their young people with UK politics, rather than the politics of their country of origin, because of the very real risk that a generation might arise which is more concerned with Asian or Middle Eastern political affairs than British ones. Similarly, however, British politicians should not seek to gain political advantage by playing to overseas political debates.

4. Faith communities can sometimes appear to be involved only in political issues that directly concern them. However, a genuine concern for the wellbeing of their community should surely mean that people of faith have much to say about all aspects of community life and political engagement. In other words, religious people should not just care about religious affairs, but about the good of the wider community too.

Concluding Observations

Such a short report has hardly been able to capture the breadth of our discussions. It has, hopefully, captured something of the depth of commitment to our various faiths and nonreligious perspectives, and to the flourishing of our city. Our learning from these Conversations has been significant and in many ways life-changing. We did not agree on everything we discussed, but this report seeks to represent the consensus that arose among the many voices we heard as fairly and accurately as it can.

Ultimately we learned:

- That there are no simple answers - the challenges we face are great, and require intelligent, nuanced and careful responses;

- That one of the key tasks of leadership in all areas of society at present is in modelling good disagreement; and,

- That dialogue is central to enhancing mutual understanding, and that mutual understanding is essential for a cohesive and integrated society.

We believe attention to the priorities and recommendations addressed in this report, however, will help our city to flourish and prosper in every way.