



THE BIRMINGHAM CONVERSATIONS

**LIVING AT PEACE IN
A WORLD OF CONFLICT**



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‘LIVING AT PEACE IN A WORLD OF CONFLICT’

How do we discuss issues that we find difficult or where we know there will be real disagreement? This is a challenge for many in society today where sometimes the answer is to use social media to rant or express views that, if spoken, face to face would be deeply offensive. On the other side there is the phenomenon of ‘safe spaces’ where people don’t want to discuss issues that might leave people feeling uncomfortable, where people describe ‘being offended’ as something to be avoided at all costs. The danger with both extremes is that they leave little room for serious engagement with issues that do cause distrust, anger or even conflict. While there may be more that unites us than divides us, it’s the things that divide us that cause so many tensions.

In order to respond to this lack of serious engagement on contentious issues, the Birmingham Conversations was set up in 2014 at the invitation of Rt Revd David Urquhart the Bishop of Birmingham. The aim was to bring together select groups of people of all faiths and none to discuss issues of faith and public life. It was felt that some of the more contentious issues of how faith is lived out rarely got discussed at other interfaith events and the desire was to create a space and methodology that would allow these to be discussed constructively.

The Birmingham Conversations aimed to facilitate robust discussion about how faith is being lived out, and about the issues this raises between and within faiths. The conversations didn’t seek to reach a consensus or result in a list of recommendations, but rather strived to provide a space for honest dialogue.

This was a place where important issues – issues often considered too controversial for discussion – could be brought up and talked about. From the start, the organising group recognised that they couldn’t predict how a group would react, so the conversations became an organic process, rather than a predetermined set of themes or findings.

What was being discussed was not ‘right answers’ or what might be said in places of worship, but lived faith – what was happening in words, attitudes and actions on the street.

There have been several Birmingham Conversations events since 2014, each exploring a different aspect of faith and life in the city. This resource sets out the activities and discussion prompts from 2017’s ‘Living at peace in a world of conflict’.

THE ROLE OF DIALOGUE

Dialogue helps people to listen as well as speak. It challenges us to hear different points of view and offers the chance of a change in thinking, feeling and relationship with others. In their book, *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*, Lisa Schirch and David Campt describe dialogue thus:

“Dialogue is a communication process that aims to build relationships between people as they

share experiences, ideas and information about a common concern. It also aims to help groups take in more information and perspectives than they previously had as they attempt to forge a new and broader understanding of a situation.”

The following are guidelines developed over successive Birmingham Conversations. Use these as a pathway to set up your own dialogue event.

THE PROCESS

The basic methodology is to invite participants who represent different faiths and interest groups, up to a maximum of 30 people. They are asked to commit to the whole process, usually meeting once a month for six months with each meeting lasting three hours. The agenda is left deliberately flexible with a broad starting question that is then unpacked and explored by the group over the period of the conversation. A planning group made up of people from different faiths is set up which plans future sessions based on what has gone before. At the end of the process, the findings are made available in a variety of ways and disseminated, usually through an initial public symposium and then shared online.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Attendance at a Conversations event should be by invitation, rather than it being an event open to all. This is not to deny people access, but to ensure that there is a good balance of faiths, ages and experiences. Tailor the participants to your area, so that all the faith groups in your neighbourhood are represented.

However, you're not looking for 'representatives' of faith – participants shouldn't feel like they are speaking for their faith. Rather, you need people who have an understanding of their own faith and some wider insights into others in their faith who hold different opinions.

It's important to seek out people who might not necessarily agree with each other, and this includes intra-faith as well as interfaith (indeed,

intra-faith disagreement might be the more challenging). This could be tricky, as often we gravitate towards those with whom we agree, especially on social media.

As you gather people for the group, you should try to ensure some kind of equality in the 'level' of participants. Adding in senior faith leaders to the group means that other members of that faith community might be reluctant to state their own views or contradict their leader. This might have the result of shutting down conversation.

The optimum number is 25. Inevitably, not everyone will be able to come to each session, but with 25, you'll still have a large enough group for people to feel at ease and for conversation to flow.

THE VENUE

It's important to choose your venue carefully. A neutral venue (not one that belongs to or is identified with a particular faith) works best, as everyone is in the same boat – there's no sense of having to enter someone else's space.

Think about the ambience of your venue – how can you create a feeling of warmth? A cold, echoey hall isn't going to be the most conducive to relationship building and discussion. Use instrumental background music, candles, abstract artwork, lengths of fabric or fairy lights – whatever you've got – to soften the space and help people to feel at home.

STEERING GROUP

To help you guide and develop the sessions as the Conversations progress, set up a steering group, made up of your organising team, together with a few of the participants on the course, ensuring you have a good mix of faiths. The steering group's role is to review the previous meeting and help plan the next. Decide what worked well and what needs tweaking.

In addition, use this group to take the temperature of how the group is feeling and working together. You can also use the feedback gathered by the steering group to inform what subjects you can discuss at future meetings.

GUIDELINES FOR CONVERSATION

The Birmingham Conversations are held under the Chatham House Rule, a principle where information or opinions disclosed during a meeting may be reported by those participants, without ascribing that information or opinion to anyone.

The following are ground rules developed by the first group to take part in the Birmingham Conversations. You might wish to adapt or add to this list.

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 people talk, ask helpful questions to understand, don't make asides.
7. Try to be empathetic, don't judge, don't patronise.
8. Bring any process concerns to the group facilitators.
9. Discuss the 'conversation' with confidentiality, don't ascribe comments to individuals.
10. Make this about actions, not just talk.



THE SESSION

Each session runs on the same loose framework, but you will need to adapt the structure to fit your particular context. The group dynamic will become more obvious after the first session, so work with your steering group to focus subsequent sessions on the interests and make-up of your group.

FOOD

It's important to open the session with some food. Eating together is a great relationship builder and provides space for conversation to flow naturally. Of course, you'll need to make sure you cater for all faiths and that there is something that everyone can eat. In addition, ensure you're aware of food hygiene and allergy issues. Something simple such as jacket potatoes would be

appropriate (this worked well in the original Birmingham Conversations).

On your final meeting together, make your mealtime together more of an event by providing a more substantial meal. See page 23 for more details on how that might work.

ICE BREAKERS

In the first few sessions, some ice breaker questions/activities are essential to get conversation flowing. Suggestions are given in each session plan, yet you may find that, as people get acquainted with each other, they are happy to dive straight into the deeper questions and discussions. This move of focus from relationship building to risk-taking conversations depends on the people in the group.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS

The main body of each session is taken up with one or two longer discussion sections. Some are introduced by an activity to get people thinking, others use work sheets to prompt discussion. There is a mix of pair, small group and plenary discussions to allow people to engage in different ways. It's important to acknowledge

that a whole-group or small-group approach might be frustrating or difficult for some. For example, a whole-group approach enables participants to hear the opinions of all, but it can be intimidating speaking about difficult issues in front of lots of people.



ROUND-UP AND SUMMARY

It's important to finish your session well. These final suggestions will help you round up some of the discussion as well as summarise where you have got to. There are some questions to prompt some positive discussion, particularly if you've been exploring some contentious or emotive issues as part of the session - this stops people leaving on a negative note!

COMMUNICATION

It's important to keep communicating with the participants, both before and throughout the duration of the Conversations. Many people are busy and appreciate regular reminders of the dates, times and locations. Start communicating early and keep it going right through the course!

Use the most appropriate communication channels for those coming to your group - you might find a letter more effective than an email! If people are happy for you to do so, use a text or a messaging service to send last-minute reminders of the session on the day itself.

Once people have agreed to be part of the group, let them know the dates and times of all the sessions, highlighting the first meeting. Then remind them regularly before the event starts - perhaps a week before the session, the day before and on the day of the session itself. This gives people plenty of reminders of where, when and what so that they can attend. After each meeting, send out a thank-you email, letter or message, together with a reminder of the date of the next meeting.



SESSION 1

LIVING AT PEACE

AIM:

To get to know each other, to start to explore the main theme and to identify topics for discussion in future weeks.

This first session is designed to help the members of the group get to know each other and to start to form relationships. Not everyone enjoys ice-breaker style activities, but they are essential to help people feel more at ease with each other and start conversations. The exploration of 'living at peace' will help people to identify topics that are important to them in their community.

ARRIVAL AND FOOD



Serve your food, making sure that you have enough for any latecomers. Encourage people to sit with those they don't know, so that they can start to get to know others in the group straight away.

WELCOME



Once everyone has arrived and the meal has been cleared away, welcome the attendees to the group. Introduce yourself and remind people about the aims of the group, how often they'll be meeting and the ground rules you'll be operating with (see page 5). Introduce the first session, outlining what you're going to cover and the format of the session.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY



Ask the group to find someone they have never met and introduce themselves. They should tell their partner their name, where they are from and what they do. They should also answer the question: 'If you had to identify with a particular group, what would it be?' This should be something like ramblers, gamers, Aston Villa supporters or Eurovision fans. Finally, ask the pairs to find a place of commonality - perhaps they were both born in Smethwick, ride the tram to work or have been to see Coldplay. They should then introduce their partner to the rest of the group.



PICTURES OF PEACE

Before the session, print out the pictures from www.faithfulneighbourhoods.org.uk and stick them around your meeting space.

Split the group into two, and ask each smaller group to go around the room and look at the pictures. Everyone should give each picture a score out of ten: if they think the picture is a depiction of ultimate peace, they should give it a ten; if they think it is a violent or disturbing image, they should score it one, or somewhere in between. Give people five minutes to score all the

pictures on their own, then get the two groups to discuss the scores for each picture among themselves, giving people chance to say why they scored it very high or very low, or why one or two people might have scored very differently to others in the group.

When all the pictures have been scored and discussed, come back together and ask the two groups to share which pictures provoked a big difference of opinion.



LIVING AT PEACE

Ask people to form themselves into four small groups. Using the 'Living at peace' handout from page 26, encourage the small groups to brainstorm short phrases that come to mind when they think about 'Living at peace'. Write these down in the first box on the handout. Are there any common themes that come through? Are there any obvious differences? In the second box, invite the group to write down any passages or stories about peace from sacred texts. How do these inform the idea of 'living at peace'? Finally, ask the groups to work on a definition of 'living at peace' that can apply in all situations, eg families, within or between faith communities, neighbourhoods or cities.





FACTORS THAT DISRUPT PEACE

In the same small groups, think about factors that disrupt peace locally, nationally and internationally. Use handout from page 27 to discuss various factors and then decide which are the top three in each context, which participants would like to discuss in future sessions. Local factors might be parking, anti-social behaviour, street evangelists or a new temple being built. National issues could include Brexit, austerity, interracial attacks or sexual harassment. International factors might feature conflicts, religious persecution or political issues.

Come back together and share the findings from each of the smaller groups. On a large sheet of paper, make a note of the five issues that come up the most frequently. Allow a short amount of time for the group to discuss these things. (Feed these five issues into the discussions of the steering group, so that you can shape future sessions.)



CONCLUSION

Recap what you have discussed during the sessions and thank everyone for taking part. You might wish to review your guidelines for talking about these conversations outside the group, particularly as this is the first session. Remind people about the date, time and location of your next meeting.



SESSION 2

AREAS OF CONTENTION

AIM:

To get people to identify sensitive areas of contention and how they feel about discussing them.

We all have different emotional reactions when we hear stories of intra- or interfaith conflict, but often don't recognise this fact. This session is designed to help participants approach areas of contention and conflict with some understanding of how these affect people of other faiths (and those who practise a different expression of our own faith). When we acknowledge how others feel

about issues, we can set aside our own preconceptions and begin to see them from another's point of view.



ARRIVAL AND FOOD



Serve your food, making sure that you have enough for any latecomers. Encourage people to sit with someone they didn't manage to talk to during the previous session.

WELCOME



Once everyone has arrived and the meal has been cleared away, welcome the attendees to the group. Remind people who you are and go over the guidelines for discussion (this will be useful for those who missed the first session). As you introduce the theme of 'Areas of contention', explain that this session might be painful at times. It's not designed to be a competition of goodness or badness in religions. You will think about the good, but there will be a focus on the bad, as these are the things that divide and need to be bridged.

INTRODUCTION ACTIVITY



Ask everyone to come up with five 'labels' that they might use to identify themselves, and list them in order of importance. These labels might include wife, father, man, husband, Hindu, woman, single, Jewish, poet, railway worker, teacher, artist, mother. Get together into pairs or threes and discuss these 'identities'. Which one is the 'trigger' identity, the one that is most important? As the pairs/threes discuss this, they might be surprised about which proves to be the dominant identity!



STUFF HAPPENS

Before the session, search online for pictures of religious conflict, such as Boko Haram, Rohingya Muslims or the Westboro Baptist Church. Print a selection of these to use as prompts. Using the 'Stuff happens' handout from page 28, ask each participant to note down answers to the questions in each of the three boxes. Share out some of the prompt pictures to help them think about the questions. They should include ideas about interaction inside faiths as well as between faiths. The first question is designed to provide a positive start to the activity, but isn't the focus. In the third question, encourage the group to be honest. Acknowledge that it might be hard to say, particularly when there might be people in the room of the faith(s) you are citing.

Once everyone is finished, ask them to find someone of a different faith to share their thoughts with. Encourage the pairs to share as much as possible, but recognise that some things may be difficult. Finally, ask each pair to get together with another and share some of their discussions.

Bring the group together and record some of the common issues on a flip chart.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Introduce this discussion by asking the whole group these two questions: 'What do we feel is done by people we relate to?' 'When do we feel the suffering of others affects us? Why?' Allow the discussion to flow, but make sure that it stays on topic and ensure that your guidelines for discussion are adhered to.

When the group has addressed these questions, ask them to return to the fours from the end of 'Stuff happens' and continue the discussion using these questions (put these up on a PowerPoint slide or print them out on pieces of card). You might find it useful to use the handout from page 29.

1. Which acts that we've named are done by people we recognise as being members of our faith?
2. When people commit acts of extreme violence or prejudice, does it put them outside our faith?
3. If they claim to do something in the name of my faith or to be a member of my faith, is it legitimate for me to claim that they are not a member of my faith?
4. How bad do people have to be before we declare them to no longer be members of our faith?
5. Which victims do we feel are people of our own faith that we have a special connection with?
6. Why do some acts against people of our faiths affect us more than others?
7. If the violence is intra- rather than interfaith, does that make a difference to how we view the perpetrators and victims?

Some examples might be:

If we say 'Isis are not Muslims', but they think they are, how do we define what a Muslim is?

The Church of England used to own slaves, so does this mean that the clergy then were not Christians?



IMBALANCE OF ISSUES

Invite people to stand in the middle of your space. Designate one end of the room as 'Matters' and the other as 'Doesn't matter' (it might be helpful to have signs so people remember which is which). Explain that you're going to read out a list of issues and everyone should move to the part of the room that is applicable to them. If they think it matters, but only a little, or they don't know, they should stay in the centre of the room. After everyone has moved, identify why people are standing where they are and how they feel about the topic. Possible issues are:

Israel-Palestine
 Treatment of Rohingya Muslims by Buddhists in Myanmar
 The Operation Bluestar attack on the Sikh Golden Temple
 Women's treatment within faith organisations
 Christians reported to be trying to convert Sikhs and Hindus in India
 Christians being persecuted under the blasphemy law in Pakistan
 Terrorist attacks in Britain

Britain First protests against Islam in Britain
 Government discussions to include 'caste discrimination' in equalities legislation
 Hindus killing a Muslim for selling beef in India
 Police stop and search
 Same-sex marriage and your religion/place of worship
 UK selling arms to Saudi Arabia
 Saudi Arabia bombing Yemen
 Media portrayal of Muslims/white working class/benefits claimants/Christians/religious people

As you discuss people's reactions, draw out that we don't engage with issues with the same level of knowledge or emotional investment. (You don't need to use all of these issues, and you may well have others that are specific to your area and context.)



THE BEST THING

To avoid finishing the session on a negative note, ask people to get into pairs and to share with each other what the best thing about their faith is. You don't need to discuss this at great length.





CONCLUSION

Recap what you have discussed during the session and thank everyone for taking part. You might wish to review your guidelines for talking about these conversations outside the group, particularly as you will have covered difficult and emotive subjects during your discussions. Remind people about the date, time and location of your next meeting.



SESSION 3

DIFFICULT STORIES

AIM:

To learn to listen to other people's stories of hurt and pain, and to be able to identify and own our own emotions when talking about different topics.

Our own stories are emotive things. They grow out of our upbringing, identities, faith and experiences. It is all too easy to dismiss someone else's story as not valid, because it differs from ours. This session will challenge group members about how they approach other viewpoints and confront stories that are different from their own. How easy is it to listen to differing opinions?

ARRIVAL AND FOOD



Serve your food, making sure that you have enough for any latecomers. This time, encourage people to sit with people with whom they worked in the last session, to foster those relationships.

WELCOME



Once everyone has arrived and the meal has been cleared away, welcome the attendees to the group. Recap what you explored during the first and second sessions. You may also wish to share some of the discussions of the steering group to let people know how the sessions are being shaped through the conversations of the group itself. Remind people who you are and go over the guidelines for discussion.

INTRODUCTION ACTIVITY



Before the session, stick the pictures from session 2 (the ones of people of faith doing horrible things to each other) around your space. Invite the participants to go around the room and look at the pictures in threes or fours (making sure there is a mix of faiths in these small groups). The groups should discuss together how they feel when they look at each image. Explore together how reactions are emotional as well as factual. We all come from different places and perspectives.

When groups have look at most (or all) of the pictures, bring everyone back together to share some of their discussions.



LISTENING TO EACH OTHER

To highlight the importance of listening well, do this listening activity. Ask everyone to find a partner. One should speak for five minutes about everything they have done that day. Their partner should not show any signs (verbal or non-verbal) that they are listening. They are to remain completely passive.

Swap over, but this time the listener should be an active listener, making verbal and non-verbal signs that they are listening. How did each speaker feel? How easy is it to speak when the other person isn't listening? It's hard to speak for five minutes without encouragement! We need a listener to be able to talk.



WHEN WE ARE VICTIMS

Encourage everyone to find a partner who is as different from them as possible. In turn, each person talks for four minutes about all the ways the groups they identify with are victims. When do these things happen? Why? How do these things make them feel? Encourage people to be as open as they feel they can be. They don't need to be personal, they can be more community-based if they wish.

The partner should actively listen and then feed back what they have heard (for two or three minutes). Then they should swap over. After both partners have talked and listened, encourage the pairs to ask themselves these questions (put these on a PowerPoint slide or print them onto card).

1. What was it like to describe the times when you (and/or your faith) were a victim?
2. What was it like to listen to the story?
3. What was it like to speak that story back?
4. What was it like to have your story told to you?



LISTENING TO CONFLICTING STORIES

This discussion activity is designed to get the group used to hearing different and conflicting sides to a story, to be able to listen well and identify and own feelings about what is heard. The aim is not to solve the problem but to start the process of listening to and engaging with all sides of an argument.

Split the group into three and give each smaller group a bowl, pens and slips of paper. Read out the first of the following statements about different faith attitudes to LGBTQI issues. Encourage everyone to write down their feelings anonymously on a slip of paper and put it into the bowl. Do this for one or two more of the statements and then invite the groups to take out some papers from their bowl and read them out. If the writer wishes to, they can describe to the rest of their small group why they wrote what they did.

Continue with the rest of the statements, stopping after two or three to allow the groups time to discuss their responses. Ask the groups how willing they were/are to listen to the other side, and to recognise how they feel as they do so?

(You could use another issue where there are different views that don't seem to match up, if there is one that is predominant in your context.)

Finally, ask the groups to consider how they can live with conflicting narratives? Is it easy to separate the local context from the global? Is it possible to listen attentively, without emotions clouding thought?

The following statements are not intended to be authoritative or definitive statements on the position of any of the religions listed. Rather they are particular opinions used here to help people identify the emotions of themselves, and others, when hearing attitudes they might strongly agree or disagree with. This should be made clear to the group and not used to discuss LGBTI attitudes, which would require far more information and more nuanced quotations.

CHRISTIANITY

"Human beings are relational. From the beginning of Genesis, human beings are described as having a need for relationship, just as God himself is relational. Sexuality is a core part of what it means to be a relational person, and to condemn LGBT people's sexuality outright damages their ability to be in relationship with all people – and with God".

Matthew Vines, author of *God and the Gay Christian* (<http://time.com/2842044/gay-christians>)

"If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads" Leviticus 20:13 (NIV).

ISLAM

Homosexuality is not allowed in Islam. There are various verses in Quran where Allah clearly talks about homosexuality.

"We also (sent) Lut: he said to his people: 'Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds" Holy Quran 7:80-81.

"Of all the creatures in the world will ye approach males. And leave those whom Allah has created for you to be your mates? Nay ye are a people transgressing (all limits)!" Holy Quran 26:165-166

Zafar Khan (www.islamawareness.net)

"Every time I speak truthfully about being a gay Muslim, I encounter positivity from other Muslims – from, 'Wow, I've never met someone like you!' to 'I've always suspected my uncle was gay' I wish he could come out.' I've encountered a plethora of other gay Muslims now, including Britain's first out Muslim drag queen, Asifa Lahore, and have found forums such as Stonewall's interfaith seminar, which brought up topics such as how Muslim communities can support LGBT people earlier this year. Change is happening, it's just slow – and will take years of conversations."

Asad Dhunna (<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/as-a-gay-british-muslim-this-is-what-i-think-of-the-survey-finding-over-half-of-british-muslims-want-a6978881.html>)

HINDUISM

The Vedas refer to a 'third sex', roughly defined as people for whom sex is not procreative, either through impotence or a lack of desire for the opposite sex. Members of the third sex are not ostracised, however, and are sometimes recognised for having divine powers or insights. The Kama Sutra, a Hindu text detailing the pleasures of sexuality, states that same-sex experience is "to be engaged in and enjoyed for its own sake as one of the arts."

Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues: Hinduism (www.hrc.org)

Hindu opponents of homosexuality argue that:

"Romantic love is only natural between a man and a woman, since romantic love is only possible between a man and a woman, sex between two men or two women can only be the product of lust, and lust is wrong; therefore homosexual activities are wrong."

(<http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/homosexuality>)

SIKHISM

Anyone is welcome to become a Sikh, including those with homosexual orientation. However, to act upon homosexual tendencies would not be in line with Sikh tradition and code of conduct. No one can force religion or religious code on anyone. However, no one has a license from the Guru to justify their own personal habits, behaviour or lifestyle that is not advocated by the Sikh religion with the label of Sikhi, whether straight or gay.

(<http://www.sikhanswers.com/modern-youth-issues/sikh-attitude-to-homosexuality/>)

Homosexuality is not mentioned in the Guru Granth Sahib. However, the Guru Granth Sahib considers all life and existence to be created by the grace of God, and scientific research has shown that homosexual behaviour is common within nature and amongst animals.

(www.wahegurunet.com/gay-sikh)

JUDAISM

Many who seek to establish full religious rights for gays and lesbians employ the research that points to the involuntary nature of homosexuality. The halakhic (legal) term *ahnoos* refers to someone who, though commanded to do something, does not really have a choice in the matter. In Judaism, one is only responsible for religious obligations that one can freely choose to fulfil. Thus some Jewish authorities have argued that since homosexuality is not chosen, its expression cannot be forbidden. (www.myjewishlearning.com/article/homosexuality-in-jewish-thought)

The sources of Judaism's traditional position on homosexuality and gay issues are well known. Two verses in Leviticus (Leviticus 18:23 and Leviticus 20:13) express unequivocal condemnation of male homosexual sex (although it is not clear whether what is referred to is intercourse or all sexual acts between men). According to Leviticus 20:13: "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them." (www.myjewishlearning.com/article/homosexuality-in-jewish-thought/)

BUDDHISM

As homosexuality is not explicitly mentioned in any of the Buddha's discourses we can only assume that it is meant to be evaluated in the same way that heterosexuality is. And indeed it seems that this is why it is not specifically mentioned. In the case of the lay man and woman where there is mutual consent, where adultery is not involved and where the sexual act is an expression of love, respect, loyalty and warmth, it would not be breaking the third Precept [ethical way of living].

Homosexuality and Theravada Buddhism AL De Silva (www.buddhanet.net/homosexu.htm)

Homosexuality was known in ancient India; it is explicitly mentioned in the Vinaya (monastic discipline) and prohibited. It is not singled out for special condemnation, but rather simply mentioned along with a wide range of other sexual behaviour as contravening the rule that requires monks and nuns to be celibate.

Homosexuality and Theravada Buddhism AL De Silva (www.buddhanet.net/homosexu.htm)

CONCLUSION



Recap what you have discussed during the session and thank everyone for taking part. You might wish to review your guidelines for talking about these conversations outside the group, particularly as you will have covered difficult and emotive subjects during your discussions. Remind people about the date, time and location of your next meeting.

SESSION 4

AGREEING TO DISAGREE?

AIM:

To explore how we discuss issues with people who fundamentally disagree with us.

Continuing on from Session 3, this session provides a framework where people can engage with opinions that are the opposite to our own. Do we treat them as equals or somehow inferior? In an increasingly polarised world, this issue is key to continued dialogue. Quite deliberately, there are two long conversational activities to give time to dig into some of the bigger issues.

ARRIVAL AND FOOD



Serve your food, making sure that you have enough for any latecomers. If there is still someone that they have yet to talk to, encourage the group members to eat with them.

WELCOME



Once everyone has arrived and the meal has been cleared away, welcome the attendees to the group. Recap the conversations so far. If you have any records, such as flip chart notes, then show those again as a reminder (though make sure no one can be identified through those). This summary of where you have got to will be helpful, particularly if anyone has missed a session.

CONVERSATION LAND



Give out copies of the Conversationland map (available from <http://www.faithfulneighbourhoods.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Map-of-Birmingham-Conversationland.pdf>) or print out the questions below for people to use. Encourage the group to circulate and ask people some of the questions to start a discussion.

Do we listen only to what we want to hear?
Should we silence what we feel is best left unsaid?
Where do you get your news from?
Who represents you in the media?
Whom do you follow on social media?

Whom do you trust?
What helps us to flourish in our neighbourhood?
What is the place of faith in our schools?
What should children learn about each other's beliefs?

NO COMPROMISE

Designate one end of your space as 'Agree' and the other as 'Disagree' (it may help to put up signs to remind people which is which). Say that you're going to read out some statements and participants should move to one side of the room or the other depending on whether they agree or disagree (or stay in the middle if they are not sure). After everyone has moved, encourage people to first chat to someone standing near them to discover why they made their decision. Then challenge them to find someone who held a different opinion to them. They should listen to the reasons why they have that opinion, and then share the reasons behind their own decision.

Ask a pair to share their conversation with the rest of the group, and then move onto the next statement:

Conspiracy theories shed some truth on events.
 It is wrong to encourage someone to convert from one faith to another.
 Brexit was a good decision.
 Women and men should have equal roles in places of worship.
 Religions should adapt to modern ideas of morality and ethics.
 We all worship the same God.
 There will be punishment for ungodly people on judgement day.
 It's OK to eat meat.
 The government should stop people from publishing offensive things.
 What happens in other parts of the world doesn't affect me.





DISCUSSION

Split the group into three and ask each smaller group to discuss the questions below to dig into how we treat people when we are convinced we're right about something. How do we view/treat people who disagree with us? Are they just wrong? Do we still treat them as equals, or with contempt?

Ask the groups to discuss these questions (put them on a PowerPoint slide or print them out onto card):

1. If you believe something is right, does it follow that other beliefs are wrong? Or is that a modernistic way of viewing the world? Can there be multiple truths that are equally valid? Is this true in all spheres or is religion different?
2. How do we view people with whom we fundamentally disagree? Are they in some way inferior to us? Does this change if the disagreement is about religion, race, politics, immigration or other topics? How should/can we live at peace with people who hold views that we disagree with?
3. Are there some opinions which are completely off limits or should we be willing to listen to them, however objectionable we find them? If some are off limits, what are they and who decides where the limits are?
4. What topics do you think we should discuss that we rarely do? How can we discuss them well? What topics do you think we should never discuss? Why?



PLENARY FEEDBACK



Ask each of the groups to give their feedback on the different questions. This time is intentionally longer than has previously been allotted, in order to provide space for a fuller discussion. You will need to moderate this carefully so that people feel heard and listened to. Make sure people stick to the guidelines for discussion and allow people to say if they have been hurt or offended, and to explain why. This longer plenary discussion can bring about great understanding between people of differing opinions, so don't shy away from it.

CONCLUSION



Recap what you have discussed during the session and thank everyone for taking part. Remind people about the date, time and location of your next meeting. You may wish to gather suggestions of what you can cover in your final session together.



SESSION 5

FAITH AND PUBLIC LIFE

AIM:

To explore the role faith plays in public life and interrogate the way in which we engage with other faiths in the public sphere.

This session came out of the final question in the 'Discussion' section of Session 4, where participants of the original Birmingham Conversations indicated they would like to explore the idea of faith and the role it can play in our outward-facing lives. You might find that your group takes the final session in a different direction.

Holding to absolute truths might bring people of faith into conflict with the prevailing mores of contemporary culture. How should we approach areas of faith and belief where we seem to be out of step with the world around us? Do we need to change or stand for what we believe?

ARRIVAL AND FOOD



As this is the final session, start your time with a meal that is a little more special than usual. As ever, be sensitive to food allergies and religious dietary requirements, but sitting around a curry served at your table can be a convivial start to your time together. Set out the tables with table cloths, napkins, candles etc – whatever you can find to make it feel special and different from previous weeks. Print out the questions below and spread them across the table to provide some conversation starters.

After the meal, serve coffee and chocolates, and invite group members to change seats in order to speak to some different people.

Discussion starters:

1. Who should be able to influence what happens in school, and over which issues? When does influencing become imposing?

2. How do you feel when you see people of a different faith being active in public spaces? Have you ever felt interested or put off by what they're doing and saying?
3. Have you ever participated in a public event as part of your faith? How did it feel and what response did you get from passers-by?
4. How often do you listen to political views you disagree with? What values should inform the way we vote?
5. Do you ever see your faith portrayed in entertainment shows? How do you feel about this?
6. Do you think it's OK to poke fun at religious institutions? Does it matter if that causes offence?
7. Are you able to practise your faith in your workplace? Are people of faith a help or a hindrance in making the workplace inclusive for everyone?

WELCOME



Once the meal has been cleared away, welcome the attendees to the group. Recap what you explored during the previous four sessions. Remind people who you are and go over the guidelines for discussion.

GROUP DISCUSSION

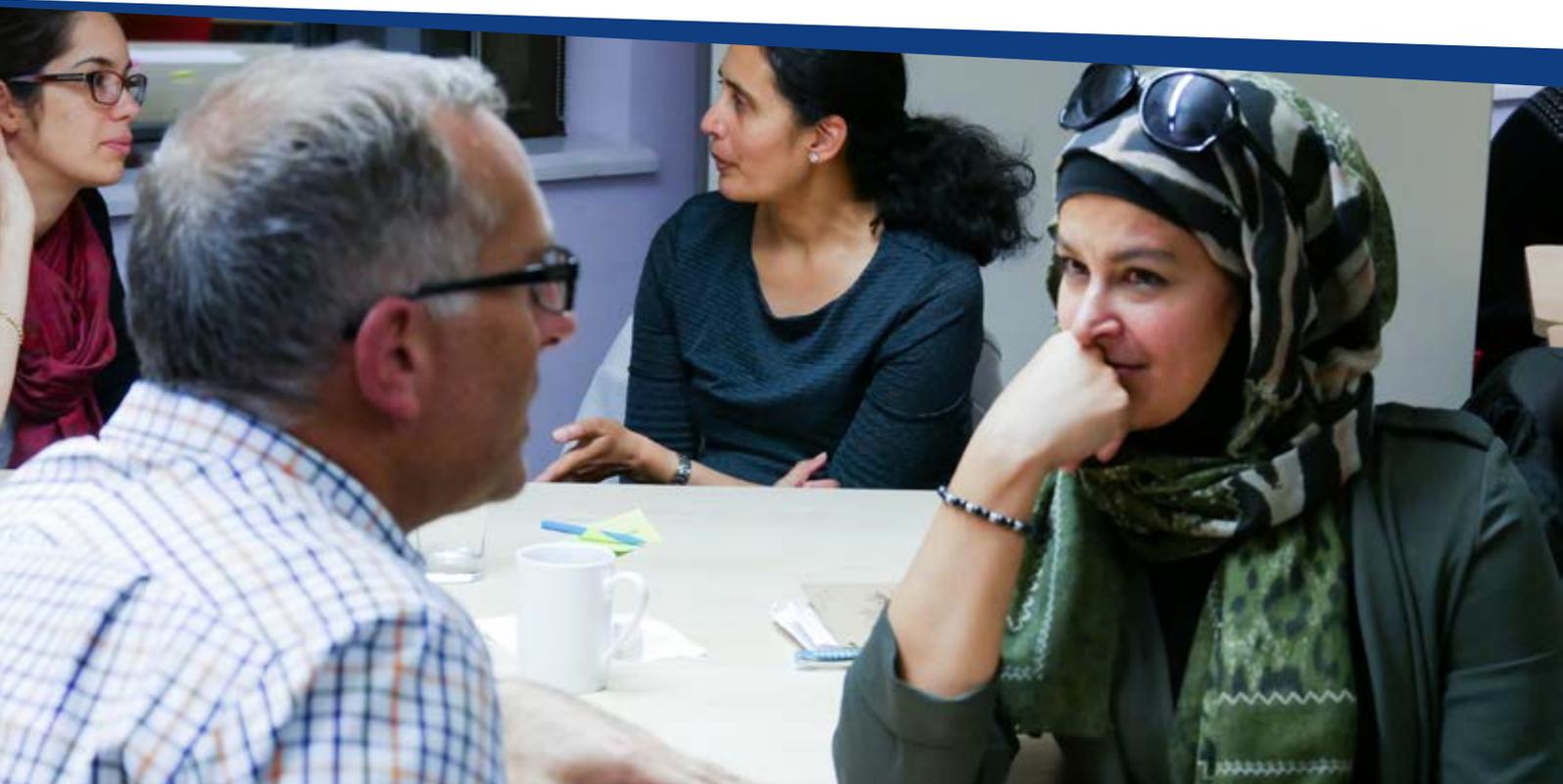


Split the participants into small groups (perhaps of five members each, but be aware of the faith and gender split in each one). Encourage the groups to discuss these questions (put them on a PowerPoint slide or print them out onto card):

1. Can a person of faith be a politician? Do they have to leave their faith at the door, or can it influence their decisions (eg in making decisions about same-sex marriage)?
2. What aspects of your faith are cultural? Is there such a thing as a pure expression of your faith?
3. What happens when the teachings of your faith conflict with the law or general moral mood of the country? How do you resolve this tension? Is it ever OK to break the law to be obedient to your faith?

4. Should everyone be encouraged to engage in interfaith discussion or are there some who we don't think should be given a voice? Are there topics or views that should never be raised or that we are too afraid to raise for fear of what people will think of us?

These questions may not feel enough to provide an hour's discussion, but by now the group should be comfortable 'going deep' with each other. It also helped in the original session that the participants had chosen the topic for this discussion.





TESTIMONY

Hand out copies of the form from page 30 and ask the group to fill it in. What will they take with them from the five sessions of conversations? What have they learnt? What will they do differently?



WHAT NEXT?

Round off the session, and the course itself, with some small-group discussion about where you might all go from here. What would the group like to happen? What are they prepared to help with or commit to?



CONCLUSION

Bring the groups back together and thank everyone for taking part. If you have any plans for going forward in the future, then make sure you keep the participants abreast of developments.



LIVING AT PEACE

Words or phrases - a quick brainstorm

Passages or stories from sacred texts

Living at peace means ...

FACTORS THAT DISRUPT PEACE

Local

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

National

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

International

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

STUFF HAPPENS

When do people of my faith do good to others – and who do they do it to?

When do people of my faith do bad things to others – and who do they do it to?

When do bad things happen to people of my faith and who does it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How do we decide if we consider someone to be a member of our faith?

Why do some issues relating to members of our own faith affect us more than others?

How do they make us feel?

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Spend some time thinking back over the different sessions of the Birmingham Conversation:

Session 1: What is peace, what disrupts peace?

Session 2: When are bad things done to, or by, people of our faith?

Session 3: When are we the victims and of what? How good are we at listening?
Do we recognise and own our own emotions?

Session 4: What are/aren't we prepared to compromise on? How do we treat people whose views contradict our own?

Session 5: Faith, culture and politics

What have you learnt?

What have you appreciated?

What have you found difficult?

What will you do differently?

Who are you going to keep in touch with?

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THE BIRMINGHAM CONVERSATIONS

