



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government

Faith in Communities: Bridging the Divide

A report on how faith communities are helping to make
strong neighbourhoods



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Foreword



Over the last year, as the Minister for Faith, I visited over 55 places of worship, across over 20 beliefs and denominations across our country. It was a journey which took me from the Global Generation Church in Margate in the south, to the Abu Bakr Mosque and Community Centre in Middlesbrough in the north; from the new strictly-Orthodox Jewish community in Canvey Island in the east,

across to the Bath Moravian Church in the west and many more places in between. Time and again, I have marvelled at the hidden gems and open and generous communities that exist in the country. We should be proud of the rich fabric of faith communities that help make Britain the strong country we are today.

I was often asked, both in the planning stages and during the visits, why I wanted to hold this faith tour. What did I think I would gain from visiting small places of worship, many off the beaten track? And aren't faith communities, especially the more observant ones, closed off, isolated and unwilling to integrate? What could I possibly gain by visiting these groups?

Let me state categorically that these perceptions could not be further from the truth. Without exception, I found vibrant places of worship, some small, some large, with generous, outward facing congregations, and all with similar motivations – to manifest their values and beliefs into helping to make stronger, more united communities. We are proud in Government that Britain is consistently rated by the Pew Research Group as one of the best places in the world for freedom of religion and belief, and my tour has shown just how this openness has allowed a wide range of faiths and beliefs to flourish. And by doing so, these faith communities have repaid these freedoms, by and large, by supporting the most vulnerable, helping to make areas safer and cleaner, providing places for the lonely to find company and many other services as well.

The work of faith communities and faith-based organisations in local areas is often undervalued. My Tour allowed me to see first-hand the hard work which many faith communities put into supporting their local areas. The [Cinnamon Network Faith Action Audit of 2016](#) highlighted the value of the time given by churches and other faith groups to their communities is worth more than £3 billion each year. The Audit also estimated that two million people from faith groups give at least 384 million hours (288 million unpaid) a year to projects to support 48 million people. Many of those they support are some of the most vulnerable in society. I saw many examples of this on my tour – free meals and health care, employment and debt support, crisis support and measures to combat loneliness – just to name a few.

I also saw how many faith groups regularly reach out to one another to build support networks and local friendships. Often doctrinal beliefs or cultural or historical experiences can make social mixing between people of different faiths and beliefs, or indeed those of no faith, very difficult. But I have witnessed that this doesn't have to be the case. The places of worship, faith organisations and indeed those of no particular faith or belief that I visited show that it is possible to improve social mixing in an area. There is more to do, both from Government, through our Integrated Communities Strategy, and from faith communities and others, to ensure that the good examples I saw are shared and replicated more widely.

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth Minister for Faith
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

Large or Small – faith communities are often at the heart of a local area

Many of us can name a significant place of worship which is integral to a community, beyond spiritual reasons, either as a landmark or for historical or cultural reasons. Of course, cathedrals often spring to mind in this regard. My first faith tour of all the Anglican cathedrals in England highlighted the many roles cathedrals (Anglican and Catholic) play. And this tour was no exception in highlighting the great opportunity large places of worship have in being able to look beyond their primary role to offer innovative services to local people, regardless of faith or belief.

My visit to Birmingham, for example, led me to visit Lozells Methodist Church led by the Reverend Alison Richards. The Church recognised the growing exclusion of some people in the local community and spotted an opportunity for their newly refurbished Community Centre to help increase inclusion and combat loneliness. To address these issues the Centre offers facilities such as computers and free internet access, a 'Chill Zone' for a cup of tea and a chat with friends, as well as a Job Club, a soup kitchen, sewing classes, wellbeing classes, holiday playschemes, among other things. Thanks in part to the support of Near Neighbours grant funding, the Centre has been able to support volunteers to run these projects.



What I saw at this Centre was a desire to ensure that the Church was truly an asset for the whole community, and a recognition from that community that this was a place where everyone could meet, mix and grow together, all while ensuring the spiritual and historical integrity of the place of worship remained.

My visit to the Khirza Mosque in Manchester was yet another striking and impressive example of a place of worship using its resources to the maximum for the benefit of the entire community. The mosque regularly holds key skills tuition classes as well as careers fairs, health fairs, charity events, such as Macmillan coffee mornings and events to train 'Dementia Friends'. Hundreds of people regularly attend their events. Volunteers from the mosque also run a service feeding over 100 local homeless people and supporting youth work. This generosity of spirit and commitment to the community was no more so demonstrated that on the night of the horrific Manchester Arena terror attack, when the mosque opened its doors to provide a drop-off centre for emergency services and shelter for victims in need of a safe place.

I was thrilled to see that the mosque was awarded four awards at the British Beacon Mosque Awards earlier this year, which it rightly deserved in recognition of the tremendous effort it puts into supporting the community.



As well as many places of worship, my cross-country tour has also led me to visit various community projects. For example, in Newcastle, I visited the Holy Biscuit; the brainchild of Methodist minister Rev. Rob Hawkins and Ramy Zack, the owner of a large commercial art gallery nearby called The Biscuit Factory. Both shared a vision for local regeneration utilising a creative new use for a disused Methodist church. The Holy Biscuit offers a place for the

local community to come together and explore their creativity. Services on offer include free drawing classes for all ages and cooking classes. It was inspiring to hear how the hub had transformed the local area and given residents a new outlook on their area, which helping new friendships to form.

In Sunderland I saw how faith is being used as an innovative way to help patients. I visited an inspiring programme being run by a hospital chaplain at the Sunderland Royal Hospital to help acute dementia patients. Going beyond the traditional role of a faith chaplain, the chaplain there had created a special programme using articles of faith, religious songs and other artefacts to help patients of faith to regain memories and bring comfort to both patients and their families. Faith is an integral part of many people's lives and this initiative shows how it can be a powerful aid to memory recall.



Each community project and place of worship I visited shared two things in particular in common – firstly, a willingness to go beyond their congregations into the community in order to provide additional services which benefit society and secondly, vibrant, hard-working and committed individuals, willing to think differently, try new things and seize opportunities, often volunteering many hours in order to do so.

While larger places of worship may enjoy greater financial and physical resources, smaller places of worship also have much to offer. They are integral to ensuring the legacy of the faith community, provide support for new generations, and utilise their experiences of being a new community in an area to help other communities settle and thrive.

In Margate, I had the pleasure of visiting the beautiful Church of Archangel Michael and met members of the Greek Orthodox community. I heard of the efforts of the church to ensure that younger generations were able to learn Greek and subsequently to understand their roots. As communities shift, this support creates a vital link between generations. I was also fascinated to hear about the church's strong link to the area and particularly to the sea,

which features in their annual Epiphany celebrations, a favourite fixture of locals, open to all, regardless of faith.

Throughout the tour, I heard many personal stories from people of faith as they, or their parents, moved to this country, watched their families grow, and helped form part of the local community. A particularly resonant story was that told to me by members of the Bristol and West Progressive Synagogue, one that must be considered within the context of the many refugees forced to seek safe havens today. They recounted the stories of their parents, who fled the horrors of Nazi Germany, seeking refuge here and how, by and large, their parents were met with helping hands. This experience, of being a refugee with almost no possessions and having to start again from scratch, has defined the community. At the synagogue, I heard of a number of impressive schemes which members were involved in across Bristol, helping new arrivals to the city and encouraging young people to be proud of the diverse roots of the city.

Places of worship are also vital institutions and partners in Government endeavours to combat loneliness. Supporting people to have meaningful social relationships is not just crucial to people's physical and mental health, it also affects wider community cohesion. I saw this in action when I visited the Bradford Hindu Mandir. It is noteworthy for being the oldest place of Hindu worship in West Yorkshire. But it is so much more than a historical footnote – the temple, through its connected community centre, provides hot lunches for elderly people and cultural activities among other services, giving people a place to come, where they will find company and friendship. This daily interaction also brought people together from different backgrounds and encouraged people to leave their houses and take part in community events.



By the time this report comes out, we will have marked the Centenary of the Armistice and paid tribute to the service men and women to gave their lives in support of the British war effort over the years, On the Tour I visited St Aiden's Church in Bamburgh to take part in a bell-ringing session as the local community was preparing to take part in a special tribute to the 1400 bell ringers who lost their lives in World War One. St Aiden's lost six bell-bingers in that war, similar to many church communities across the country.

I was reminded, at that moment that war touches us all, regardless of faith or belief. That is why I am proud that this year will be the first year that the National Service of Remembrance is truly reflective of the faith communities of Britain, as seven new representatives of faith and belief communities join the other long-standing faith representatives, to mark the contribution of all faiths and beliefs to Britain's war efforts.

Interfaith Networks

On this tour, I was struck by the impact and scope of interfaith networks and relationships and by the benefit these networks bring to a local area. In a large city such as Manchester, it would be expected that there would be a range of faiths and denominations, but what might not be expected is the close relationship many of these faiths have through the Faith Network for Manchester. Through utilising that Network, I was able to meet members of a local Hindu temple, a Sikh Gurdwara, and a Chinese Buddhist temple, all of whom work together with other faiths to speak to issues of regeneration, to build communication between faith groups and to address issues of common concern. I ended my day in Manchester at a fantastic interfaith iftar at the Khirza mosque, where it was humbling to break bread with people from so many different backgrounds, all celebrating and enjoying being a community.

Strong interfaith networks help improve social mixing, breaking down barriers in communities and improving integration. In January, I witnessed a remarkable initiative of the Christian Muslim Forum – the twinning of the Old Kent Road Mosque with the St Philip's church in the Southwark Diocese. I was honoured to be able to observe Friday prayers and to hear the excellent sermon given by Imam Kazeem Fatai, in which he spoke about the importance of inter faith relations.

The Church Mosque twinning programme is an excellent example of inter faith in action. It was clear to me from my visit, that twinning has helped the relationship between the mosque and local clergy to move from initial contact, through dialogue, towards real mutual support and friendship. It is deep inter faith relationships such as this, that will help create the integrated and cohesive communities we all want to see.

Strong interfaith networks also allow for innovative ways to break down traditional barriers. For example, the 466 Manchester, Khizra Mosque's local scouts group, visited the Sri Guru Harkrishan Sahib Gurdwara as part of their work towards the faith badge. They were made to feel very welcome as they learned about the Sikh faith. This partnership between the Mosque and the Gurdwara is helping to create meaningful relationships and challenge misperceptions.

The Rich History of Faith in Britain

It would be remiss of me not to recognise the extent to which faith communities contribute to our cultural heritage, physically shaping the places in which we live today. I will never forget taking the well-trodden pilgrim's walk to Holy Island, Lindisfarne – a path which is only open twice a day – and experiencing with a sense of awe and reverence the site whose religious history stretches back well over a millennium.



The simplicity of places of worship on the Island are in contrast to the stunning grandeur of the oldest synagogue still in use in Britain, the Bevis Marks synagogue in west London, home to London's Spanish and Portuguese Jewish Sephardic community, which is also the only Grade 1 listed synagogue in the country. Standing in that beautiful building, it is not hard to imagine the peace and serenity that has been afforded to thousands of worshippers since it was built in 1701.

Britain is also home to the oldest Methodist Church in the world, the New Room in Bristol, originally built in 1739. Regular worship continues to be held in the Chapel, while the museum tells the story of early Methodism and John and Charles Wesley's respective campaigns against slavery and for social justice. It is a remarkable site of religious and social history which is as relevant today as it was almost 280 years ago. Of course, now that it has been used to film some of the scenes from the recent series of Poldark, it may not remain such a secret for long!

Conclusion - Increasing Social Mixing

Faith organisations provide a framework to encourage social mixing between people of different backgrounds. Our Integrated Communities Strategy highlights the importance of positive interaction between groups to break down mistrust and suspicion. My experiences on this tour and as the Minister for Integration and Faith show that when people meet and mix under the right circumstances, communities are transformed for the better.

I was encouraged to learn that after my visit to the Luton United Synagogue, they were inspired to explore new ways in which they could work with people of other faiths. This included partnering with a Luton Grassroots project to bring women together of different communities based on arts and crafts work.

The examples given here are just a token of the wonderful, thought-provoking and inspiring experiences I had on my faith tour. It is clear there is much good work happening in communities which should be recognised and applauded. There is, as our recent Integrated Communities Strategy highlighted, still more to do to ensure that all communities are open, connected and working to ensure that local communities are a place where everyone matters. There is room for individuals and faith institutions to go even further in their contribution to communities.

There are several things which we can all do, either as individuals or as places of worship, to help increase social mixing and to build strong, resilient communities.

1. Recognise the valuable contribution of faith and belief institutions. My Tour was only able to capture a small proportion of the work taking place in faith and belief communities but even that small proportion gave weight to the Cinnamon Network's figures mentioned above. A [report by New Philanthropy Capital](#) (NPC) found that a fifth of all charities in the United Kingdom are faith-based, and that faith organisations are often uniquely placed to reach vulnerable communities. They also can help agencies deliver services in a way which resonates with their congregations more readily than standard services, and in a way which considers a person's spiritual needs as well.
2. Remain open to understanding those of other faiths and beliefs within your community. Many places of worship are open for people to walk in at any time, or you can wait until a special event, such as the Open House days, or the Visit My Mosque initiative (next one: 3rd March 2019). Not only will you find a rich history, you will find people willing to talk and to listen. You may find out that you have things in common which you never expected. For some ideas about visiting a place of worship, why not try Inter faith Week, when many places of worship hold special events: <https://www.interfaithweek.org/events/map>
3. For faith institutions and communities – reach out, establish partnerships with other organisations (faith based or otherwise) – you aren't working in isolation. There are

many great projects out there, led by committed and inspiring people, who want to join with others. There is also much to learn from one another. Use social media – share your stories and great ideas so others can learn from them. If you would like advice on setting up a project or would like to read others stories check out the guidance from Near Neighbours <https://www.cuf.org.uk/starting-your-own-project>.

4. Encourage your faith institution to join a local interfaith network. Connected faith communities are stronger. The interfaith networks I met on my visit were full of engaged and committed faith communities, working to improve local areas, and they were able to meet these shared aims more effectively by pooling resources and sharing ideas. They also meant that in times of local crisis, there was a ready network willing to come together to support one another.

If you aren't sure whether your local area has an interfaith network, you can check here: <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/members/list>

5. And if your local area does not have an interfaith network, why not think about setting one up yourself. An interfaith network is not about forcing faith groups to agree with one another's theological doctrines, but it is about faith groups seeking to live well together. Faith groups are often united by a set of shared values, such as supporting the vulnerable, providing charity, and giving of one's time to help others. Having a local group where different faith communities can come together, identify and address local issues, and support one another during times of need makes a community stronger and more successful.

There are many other ways in which faith communities can help drive integration and create cohesive communities. I would be keen to hear your views – please share them on Twitter [@lordnickbourne](https://twitter.com/lordnickbourne) [#faithincommunities](https://twitter.com/faithincommunities)

And I recognise that we, as Government, need to do more to explain our work to communities and to tell people what we are doing. I will explore new ways of engaging with faith communities, so that people feel connected with our aims and efforts. For my next tour, I will be visiting places connected to faith which are going beyond the norm in supporting communities. Send me your suggestions for places to visit at [@lordnickbourne](https://twitter.com/lordnickbourne) [#poweroffaith](https://twitter.com/poweroffaith)

