

**“Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side”:**  
**A framework for inter faith dialogue and social action**

**Response of the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities**

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities welcomes an increasing appreciation of the constructive role that faith communities can, and frequently do, play in developing strong and cohesive communities at local, national, and international levels. We recognise that this consultation deals directly only with the situation in England and Wales, but faith communities do not operate according to geographic boundaries, and we therefore strongly recommend that experiences of and proposals for interfaith initiatives should be shared between London, Cardiff, Edinburgh, and Belfast.

**Inter-faith engagement**

It is important that each faith community should be supported to speak on its own behalf, and the structure of inter-faith engagement should therefore be such as to facilitate communities to participate on their own account. It is essential that national inter-faith organisations should (to quote the Scottish Inter-Faith Council) *“create opportunities for faith communities to speak for themselves in this dialogue rather than claiming to speak on their behalf”*.

However, this ideal is not always met, and in practice there are frequently pressures, both internal and external, that have lead national organisations to be regarded (and sometimes to regard themselves) as though they spoke on behalf of a wide range of diverse faith communities. This is evidently counterproductive, and requires to be addressed both by government and by the organisations themselves.

We welcome the statement that, to achieve meaningful contact, it is necessary for *“conversations to go beyond surface friendliness”*. We have observed that inter-faith dialogue frequently fails to progress beyond ‘safe’ conversation about how much each faith has in common. Genuine respect and understanding will not be achieved until individuals and communities have the confidence to discuss differences between faiths, especially when the beliefs of others are in direct contradiction to their own.

**Shared spaces**

When several faith communities share space, for example, in a hospital prayer room, it is essential to ensure that there are no fixtures that might cause offence to any faith community. Adequate and appropriate storage provision should, therefore, be provided in which to store items such as prayer books and crucifixes, so that they are easily accessible to the relevant community but do not obtrude on others. We emphasise that there must be full consultation with all faith communities concerned to ascertain both which items would constitute an obstacle to their using the room, and also what would constitute appropriate storage for their own prayer books etc.

## **Education about faiths and faith communities**

Education about faiths other than one's own is of immense value in demystifying the unknown, and promoting the development of good relations between communities. However, it is essential that all information is accurate and appropriate, and we would therefore emphasise that all teaching materials must be referred to the relevant community for checking. When this does not take place errors may frequently be incorporated which may result in an inaccurate, and possibly even a negative impression of the community concerned.

## **Structures of inter-faith engagement in Scotland**

Inter-faith activity takes place on many levels, some facilitated by Government, and some by faith communities themselves at both leadership and grassroots levels. For example:

- the Scottish Government engages with faith communities on policy issues through the "Faith Liaison Action Group", and facilitates dialogue between the different communities through its support for the national Scottish Inter-Faith Council (SIFC)
- SIFC acts as a focal point for dialogue, and facilitates meetings between religious leaders in Scotland, as well as supporting an extensive network of local inter-faith groups across the whole of Scotland.

Representatives of the majority of Christian denominations and the Jewish community meet formally in the Scottish Churches Committee to share expertise and experience on a wide range of non-theological issues such as child protection, water rates, and fire safety regulations. This also co-operates on an occasional and less formal basis with other faith communities and with non-faith-based organisations such as SCVO.

Representatives of different faith communities in Scotland also work together on a range of issues either that affect them all, or else to give support to a community on particular issues. For example:

- The Roman Catholic Church actively supported the Jewish community's efforts to introduce an amendment during the passage of the Family Law (Scotland) Act 2006, in order to include a measure enabling the civil courts to take cognisance of the need of divorcing Jewish couples for a religious as well as a civil divorce.
- The Muslim and Jewish communities co-operate on issues that are specific to both communities such as circumcision, and the provision of kosher and halal meat.

In addition to the formal interfaith groups, members of faith communities engage in a variety of activities that contribute to better understanding of each others practices and beliefs. For example:

- members of the Jewish and Muslim communities in East Renfrewshire enjoyed a meal together in the synagogue hall. This was prepared in the synagogue kitchens by the women of both communities, and provided an

opportunity for individuals to meet each other at grassroots level, working together to put on an enjoyable social event;

- synagogues regularly host visits from school children and groups of adults conducted by volunteer guides from the Jewish community;
- children attending the Jewish primary school in Glasgow routinely visit different places of worship such as the mosque as part of the religious education curriculum;
- volunteers from the Jewish community visit schools, social clubs etc to give talks about Judaism and to answer questions.
- Planning is currently well advanced for a multi-faith trip to the Middle East in July 2008. This is being organised jointly by the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, the Church of Scotland, Meem (a Muslim diversity-training organisation), and Bemis (the national umbrella organisation for minority communities in Scotland), and will also include members of the Baha'i, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist communities. The intention is to establish friendships amongst the participants that will lead to greater community cohesion in Scotland, and create a better understanding of faith diversity and the value of enhanced cooperation. It is hoped that, through sharing this experience both locally and nationally the group will be able to provide support and advice to promote other bridge-building activities, and to take a lead on policy issues and debate which are of concern to faith groups at local and national levels.

All this is not to say that there are not sometimes tensions between different faith communities in Scotland. On the contrary, there is much scope for the development of a greater depth of inter-faith dialogue, and wider range of inter-faith activities. We look forward to continuing to participate in a process to strengthen the tartan of faith communities in Scotland, a process in which each thread is visible as itself against the background, but in which all hold together, not despite their intersections, but because of those intersections.

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Note: The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland comprising Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee as well as the more loosely linked groups of the Jewish Network of Argyll and the Highlands, and of students studying in Scottish Universities and Colleges.

In preparing this response we have consulted widely among members of the Scottish Jewish community.