

## **Christians and Muslims in Bradford: Contributing to a Peaceful City**

*Dr Philip Lewis*



For more than a year before 7/7 the Bishop of Bradford, a Professor from the Peace Studies Department of Bradford University and a leading local policeman, responsible for community relations, had been co-organising a series of meetings with members of the business community, voluntary sector, education, media, and leaders from the city's faiths. The aim was to develop a 'civic network'

able to absorb the impact within the city of an extremist outrage, perpetrated in the name of Islam, committed anywhere in the country.

Two main influences lay behind this development. First, the Madrid bombing on 11 March 2004, in which the Mayor of Madrid immediately offered a public statement that the bombing was not the responsibility of any one religious or ethnic group. This basic message played its role in preventing any backlash against the Moroccan community in Madrid from where the bombers were thought to have originated. The question this raised for us was whether Bradford had a leadership able to replicate this? Who would offer such a message? The urgency of these questions was heightened by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner's statement that a bomb in London was almost inevitable

The second was the research of Ashutosh Varshney - *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Society*, Yale, 2002 - which asked why, after a major eruption in Hindu-Muslim violence, three cities elsewhere in India imploded into violence, while three cities with a very similar religious makeup did not. He concluded that the critical variable which made all the difference was the absence or presence of multiple, robust, cross-cutting associational networks which involved members of both communities - business, trade unions, professional bodies etc. In short, a 'civic network', which created solid, sustainable, shock-resisting structures.

Members of the five sectors in Bradford responded with enthusiasm to the invitation to meet at Bishopscroft. Initially, each sector met separately and the Professor of Peace Studies explained the rationale of the meeting; then, the police put forward a plausible scenario and invited them to reflect on how they would wish to respond to limit damage to inter-community relations in a city already deeply scarred by riots in 2001 and characterised by Muslim and non-Muslim communities living largely 'parallel' lives. We were insistent that each sector invited should identify and involve a new generation of young Muslim professionals. The advantage of this was two-fold: first, by involving Muslims, it made clear that any atrocity would be an assault on all of us; secondly, we were able to bypass some of the older 'gatekeepers' and work with a new generation of British Muslims with a stake in the city. After meeting singly,

each sector met together over a meal to share insights. A small ongoing group drawn from each sector continued to meet.

When 7/7 occurred, the 'civic network' bore immediate fruit and rolled out pre-prepared initiatives. There was a flurry of joint statements and media pictures from the Chamber of Commerce and Asian Businessmen, and Faith leaders. A book of condolences opened at City Hall in memory of those who died was signed by a cross-section of people - young and old - drawn from the city's ethnic and religious communities.

Each sector also contributed something distinctive and relevant within their sector. For example, the education authority had contingency statements and advice which was sent out immediately to local schools to help staff reassure pupils from different communities, as well as enabling intelligent discussion of the issues. The police had also developed a superb network of contacts which they used both to scotch rumours, and to reassure and protect vulnerable communities against any possible backlash. What was clear was the solidarity evident amongst individuals and across key sectors of the city determined that the terrorists would not succeed in sowing fear and hatred between communities.

This civic network is but one of a plethora of developments in Bradford, involving Christians, Muslims and 'secular' agencies which has sought to rebuild relations within the city damaged by riots. Two others deserve particular mention. Firstly, a small group of Christians and Muslims have been organising for four years now a four day residential Inter Cultural Leadership School (ICLS) which is held at Scargill, a Christian conference centre in the Yorkshire Dales. Twice a year, the ICLS selects fifteen young professionals in their twenties - mainly Muslim and Christian - who are role models for young people in their respective communities.

The ICLS serves as a safe space to discuss difficult issues and devotes a day each to the following themes: 'religious literacy' - how do our religious and humanist traditions cope with difference and establish commonalities? 'leadership training'; 'how to work with the media' and finally a day honing 'conflict resolution skills'. These young people form a network of trust and contribute to a new leadership in the city which can work across the ethnic and religious divide. They also seek to nudge their own communities towards a more open relationship with 'the other.'

A second development is engaging with a new generation of British-educated, Muslim, religious leaders - ulama. Recently, two of us from Peace Studies have developed a series of workshops on conflict mediation during divorce within the Muslim communities. This drew together four local ulama, solicitors, court and family mediation services, and the police. One important spin-off from the trust and goodwill developed has been the beginning of a series of meetings between half a dozen of the ulama and local clergy. After 7/7 the ulama recognised that they had to move outside their 'comfort zone' and be willing to relate to people in wider society, including the local clergy.

What is clear in Bradford is the willingness within different sections of the Muslim communities - not least young professionals and the ulama - to reach out and participate more directly with other agencies, including the churches, to address shared local concerns. This augurs well for our shared future. *f*

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