

Doing Inter Faith

reflections from the frontline

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Mitzvah Day Shopping: photo, Riaz Ravat

Over the past year, the dynamics of two major social action days associated with inter faith cooperation have merited considered reflection. There are a number of explicit and hidden narratives in both exercises because of their implications for how we “do inter faith”.

In November 2010, through my work at St. Philip’s Centre I liaised with the Jewish community of Leicester, both liberal and orthodox, to run a campaign to collect toiletries from shoppers at Asda and Tesco supermarkets. These items were then donated to charities which housed people living in safe accommodation having escaped domestic violence. The effort, known as Mitzvah Day or “good deed” day, was Leicester’s first such attempt. It was an amazing success.

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Then in September 2011, I ran another pioneering campaign as part of what is known as Sewa Day. This time we engaged volunteers from three of the world's Dharmic faiths: Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. Here we fed, assisted and entertained elderly members of the West Indian Senior Citizens Project by taking in food donated by Gurdwaras, Mandirs, a Buddhist Temple and a local restaurant. This too was an overwhelming success.

Both Sewa and Mitzvah Days involve sacrificing time and resources for the benefit of others without wanting anything in return. In this age of what our government wants to promote as the "Big Society", such activities make key contributions to the social common good. With so many global inter faith initiatives taking place, what difference could our work in Leicester really make to the wider inter faith world? The answer lies in the special recipe we used.

Leicester would not be Leicester unless we delivered both efforts in our own unique and cosmopolitan style. That is why for us both days were anchored in the wider inter faith context of the city. It is all too easy to run campaigns for individual faiths by individual faiths. The St. Philip's Centre method however, is to innovate, include and excite. Our aim was not only to do good but to enable dialogical encounter across communities. The first narrative running alongside this story was that St Philip's Centre, with its Christian heritage and Muslim employee, was leading these distinctive efforts and provided a platform for other faiths not only to gain

confidence but to deliver on principles enshrined in their own respective faiths.

So, out went insecurity and in came inclusion, out went misgivings and in came maturity. Together on a platform based on trust and long established friendships and through St. Philip's Centre's roots in Christianity, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews and Sikhs demonstrated their common endeavour. This is to utilise the best that each of their faiths offers, to serve wider society regardless of faith or belief.

Not only did our campaigns serve some of society's most isolated and vulnerable groups but these practical actions built relational bridges between and within communities. This was dialogical encounter at its best on the front-line as Jew met Jew, Buddhist met Sikh, Hindu fed Christian, all of which took place while a Muslim pursued the spirit of pluralism.



Sewa Day Service; photo Riaz Razaat

Sceptics would argue that these sorts of initiatives are tokenistic and of limited value. But try telling that to one of the elderly ladies who said that our presence made her feel “Royal”, or the shopper who was once a victim of domestic violence that we must “keep going because there is still so much of this violence happening today”. For those at the forefront, our efforts were welcome and worthy.

We are now entering a period when a realignment of culture and thinking on matters inter faith is being pushed by policy makers. There is still scope for public endorsement of single faith activities because of the recognition of considerable internal diversity but this is no longer seen in the same way. There is a greater emphasis on bridge build-

ing initiatives and stepping out of one’s comfort zone. This may be now termed the ‘Big Society’ but was recognised many years ago, not least in the city of Leicester through the report of 2004 which I wrote, entitled *Embracing the Present, Planning the Future*.

St. Philip’s Centre has for a long time pioneered a number of inter faith initiatives from education to encounter and sport to social action. The world of inter faith dialogue must seize this opportunity to innovate and carve out different ways in how we “do inter faith”. Innovation in approach enables us to reach out to others not yet involved, and inclusion in method enables us to remain true to the principles of all of our faiths.

Riaz Ravat Visiting the Elderly; photo, Riaz Ravat

