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PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST PEOPLE FROM MINORITY FAITH AND ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS

A statement by the Executive Committee of the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum

The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum, in keeping with other interfaith movements around the world, exists in order to encourage understanding and mutual respect between persons and groups from different religion and belief backgrounds. We have been concerned at recent statements made via the media which display negative and unsympathetic attitudes towards members of minority faith communities and challenge their rights as citizens in this society. We recognise that this is in part due to ignorance and limited educational opportunities to learn about our culturally diverse society, but we also acknowledge with deep regret the influence of international events that appear to promote exclusive forms of nationalism. At their worst these influences often result in racist and sectarian smears and sometimes in criminal activity such as attacks on mosques or synagogues or graveyards, or on people's homes.

We believe in a shared and intercultural society in which members of all ethnicities, and of all faiths or none, can take part in their own community activities without fear of discrimination or attack and thereby more confidently share between communities.

We would strongly encourage people from all backgrounds to visit less familiar places of worship, and to this end we commend initiatives such as the Mosque Open Day at the Belfast Islamic Centre and similar shared events at which members of different faiths can communicate, ask questions and learn together about each other. Interfaith meetings, such as those organised by the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum, the Council for Christians and Jews, Interfaith North-West and similar organisations are also excellent opportunities for cross-cultural learning.

This week (February 1st-7th) is the United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week. It would be an excellent time to begin the journey of interfaith encounter and to make a positive statement to counter the negative and discriminatory voices that too often dominate public life.

Please feel free to share this statement with your own contacts.