

NORTHERN IRELAND INTER-FAITH FORUM

Origin

The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum (NIIFF) was formed in May 1993, following extensive discussions with members of the ethnic and religious communities in Northern Ireland. It is still the only fully operational multi-faith association in Northern Ireland..

Aims

The essential aims of the Forum are to promote mutual understanding between different faith traditions and to educate people in Northern Ireland in awareness that we are not a country of two traditions only, but a vibrant community of many faiths whose people come from varied religious and ethnic backgrounds.

Membership

Membership currently stands at over a hundred drawn from many religious backgrounds: Jewish, Baha'i, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh, as well as Christians from different traditions. Forum members are not necessarily official delegates of their respective communities, but represent a balanced cross-section of people desirous of sharing and fostering mutual appreciation of each other's beliefs and cultural diversity. New members from whatever background, who can accept the Forum's aims, are most welcome.

Activities

The Forum meets four times a year, normally at 7.30 on a week-day evening. Activities include social inter-action; talks and discussion; special presentations; visits to community centres and places of worship; etc.

From small beginnings the Forum enjoyed a period of rapid growth and expansion into areas of interfaith activity which were unparalleled in Northern Ireland and were to prove ground breaking in terms of the forging of new friendships and the recognition of the rich diversity of our community and cultural life. In recent years, however, there has been some decline in representative membership, and due to a combination of factors, such as the demise or relocation of a significant number of stalwart founder members and the diminution of financial as well as human resources, some of the Forum's more ambitious projects have had to be curtailed.

However, the Forum continues to be proactive in a number of important ways, including:

- maintaining a high standard of quarterly meetings;
- campaigning for the liberalisation of Religious Education;
- networking with other interfaith organisations;
- pursuing the interfaith ideal within the developing pluralism of Northern Ireland.

Over the years, NIIFF has also been engaged in many educational projects, including:

- Interfaith courses and conferences;
- Provision of training and training materials to the public and private sectors in awareness of religious diversity(as required by Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998);
- Provision of resource materials for hospitals and health boards;
- A major exhibition, In Good Faith, travelling around the Province, which demonstrated the rich variety of religious life which exists here;

- A series of annual Multi-Faith Calendars – a valuable resource distributed to schools, hospitals, libraries and government offices
- Facilitating visits to schools, colleges and faith communities to talk about various faith traditions
- NIIFF also established and maintains The Quiet Room at Belfast International Airport, which provides a space for reflection and prayer for all.

Affiliation with U.K. Inter-Faith Network

The Forum is affiliated with the Inter-Faith Network for the United Kingdom, which links together above one hundred interfaith organisations throughout Britain. The Forum is also represented on the Network's Executive.

Inter-Faith Challenge

Setting up and maintaining interfaith organisations can be extremely hard work and carries tensions and potential pitfalls which can be daunting. While some relationships are deep and lasting, others seem precarious and have to be nurtured. Committed interfaith supporters often have leadership roles in their own communities which can mean divided loyalties. Many suffer too from being a minority within their own faith community and can find it difficult to persuade their own people to see the importance of their work. Some factions may actively oppose efforts to establish dialogue.

In spite of such constraints, NIIFF looks forward to continuing its work as a pioneering interfaith fellowship, and to giving urgent consideration to re-invigorating its endeavours with fresh ideas and newly appointed Executive personnel, as well as to increasing its representative membership and lowering its age profile.

A particularly heartening prospect on the horizon is the possibility of the formation of a sister interfaith association in the north-west. The Belfast-based Forum is keen to support the development of this association and wishes it every success.

The challenge of interfaith remains as strong as ever in Northern Ireland. It is surely time for people of faith to embark together on more imaginative perceptions of the human condition, to defy the gravitational pull of received assumptions, and to reach out in faith to one another on the basis of our common humanity as well as our distinctive spiritualities.

Applications for membership of NIIFF, with name, address, phone number, religious affiliation (optional), and email address if available, should be made to:

Mr Edwin Graham,
 Secretary, Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum,
 28 Derrymore Road,
 Gawleys Gate,
 Craigavon,
 BT67 OBW.
 Telephone: 0777 9600 254. Email: ni.interfaith@gmail.com

Membership subscription to NIIFF is £10 per annum (individual and /or family). Cheques should be made payable to: The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum.