

York Interfaith and Churches Together in York

Survey Results
of Religions and Belief
Groups in the City
2008



**Sponsored by
CYC Social Inclusion
Working Group**

A Survey of Religions and Belief Groups in the City; 2008

Background to the Survey

In the light of the changing diversity of the population of the city, York Interfaith and Churches Together in York were jointly asked to develop a questionnaire to be sent out to those on their network lists and databases. The survey's aim would be to explore the current work, perceptions, and concerns of the main Religions and belief groups present in the city.

The results would then be reported back to the Social Inclusion Working Group.

It should be noted that within the City there are representatives of the nine main World Faiths. These are named as *Baha'i: Buddhist; Christian: Hindu: Jains; Jewish; Muslim: Sikh; Taoist.*

There are also meetings of Spiritualists, Pagans, and Unitarians. Within the range of the 'Religion and Belief' remit, Humanists also organise and meet together. They are in no way a religion, but they do have beliefs to explore and affirm. Additionally, there are practicing members of other belief groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Christadelphians, to name but three of many.

The Questionnaire was conducted between June and August 2008.

A note on the Responses

45 Centres of Worship and Meeting places of Belief groups were represented in the returns. Replies cover a range of mainstream Christian churches together with other religion and belief groups meeting in schools, Community Centres, their own premises, pubs, worship centres, Mosques, Universities, hospitals, and homes in a range of locations right across the city.

The list of Places of Worship and meeting places referred to in the questionnaire as being used by their own group for meetings and worship is provided in [Appendix A](#).

In 3 returns, the answers reflect responses from group meetings held to discuss the questionnaire. In total, the 3 responses represent the views of 42 people.

Equalities and Diversity; Findings produced in [Appendix B](#)

In addition to the questions on issues relating to the Religion and Belief groups, a separate paper on Equalities and Diversity was circulated to those on the mailing list. The questions asked were stated as optional and returned forms were to be anonymous. It was felt that information supplied by individuals would help the City of York Council create a clearer picture of the people who belong to the wide range of Belief networks. A reasonable response would also assist CYC plans for meeting identified and emerging needs and priorities especially around issues of equality and diversity.

The results were collated separately from the main survey, in order to guarantee that individuals could not be identified. One major factor to be borne in mind is that of those who responded, only 30% completed the form on Equalities and Diversity. It therefore represents a much smaller sample than is to be found in the main questionnaire.

Paul Wordsworth

(On behalf of the joint working party that devised, ran and collated the questionnaire.)

Result of Questionnaire

Question 1: *Which place/space in the City of York is used by your faith community for your own meetings?*

The complete list of replies is reproduced in Appendix A.

Question 2: *Do you know of any places/spaces in the City of York which are used for Inter Faith meetings?*

Replies giving examples:	as %
None Known	25
Unitarian Chapel	15
York St. John University	14
Priory Street Centre	11
Some known (not specific)	8
Friends Meeting House (Friargate)	8
Bull Lane Mosque	5
Spurriergate Centre	2
York District Hospital Interfaith Reference Group	2
St Bede’s Pastoral Centre	2
St.Leonard’s Hospice	2
Holy Trinity Church, Micklegate	2
York University Sacred Space	2
SACRE – Educational	2

Comment

The significant factor here is that a quarter of all replies are unaware of any Interfaith meeting places. Additionally, some answers claim to know of places, but are unable to offer any examples.

Question 3: *How could the availability of these places/ spaces be improved?*

Replies	as %
No answer given	50%
Replies with comments	28%
More publicity of meetings and locations	22%

Some of the comments:

'A request should be made to all interested Faith Groups to appoint a link person who will attend regular interfaith meetings and report back to their own group.'

'Does the City of York Council have a full list of Faith and Belief Groups? '

'Don't need any more spaces or places to be made available'.

'Interfaith gatherings should take place in neutral areas like schools and Community centres.'

'We need a free venue'

'Our need is lower costs for hiring, and better advance booking systems in place for booking centres'

Comment

A great deal more publicity of events and meetings is clearly needed. For some smaller groups there is a struggle to locate suitable venues, to meet the costs of hiring halls, and to access larger venues for celebrating festivals when greater numbers are anticipated.

***Question 4: What opportunities are there for you to meet and develop understanding of people with different faiths and beliefs living in your local area?
Please give examples.***

<i>Replies given:</i>	<i>as %</i>
No opportunities known	40

<i>Examples given:</i>	
Specific activities identified	36
<i>In particular, mentioned</i>	
York Interfaith Group meetings	12
'City of Faiths' Initiative	6
Open Day at Bull Lane Mosque	6

Amongst those activities specifically named are:

'Mothers and children from ethnic groups attend weekly Toddler Service in local church. Those with children at local school attend school events and services. The development of understanding is one way- they begin to understand our culture; we do not really develop knowledge of theirs.'

'We have attended Baha'i Festivals.'

'Evening courses at University of York Centre for Lifelong Learning'

'Meeting others through the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign '

'The Hospice is a Christian foundation, but occasionally we do have Muslim patients.'

'The Interfaith representatives group meets at the York District Hospital'

'York Racial Equality Council'

And rather less specifically:

'Someone came to talk to our house group once'

'A Halal shop may provide a meeting place for the few Muslims living in this part of York.'

'Deanery meetings'

Comment

The survey reveals a large number of people who have no knowledge of opportunities for meeting people from other religions and beliefs in their own area of the city. Thereafter, because the survey included the York Interfaith membership in its mailing, there are a variety of events which are specifically known and mentioned.

For those who seek, there are already clear opportunities in York for engagement and interaction with those of different religions and beliefs. However, the information about where these things are happening is apparently not widely known by the leaders within the religion and belief communities, and even less so by their members.

More widespread publicity and the issue of communication are matters that need to be imaginatively addressed.

Question 5: *How could opportunities for learning about different faiths and beliefs be improved in the city?*

In addition to large numbers of 'Not sure' or 'no answer' there were the following suggestions:

'The Open Day at the Mosque is a good idea, and more people should be encouraged to go along. Saturday might be a better day to hold the event.'

'A day of workshops enabling growth of understanding'

'A series of interactive sessions by various religions and belief groups, for those who want to explore and discover what each has to offer.'

'An annual event / Festival which is a city-wide initiative'

'Create a list of knowledgeable local people from various belief and faith groups, prepared to give talks in schools. Provide them with conveniently timed training on how best to meet the needs of schools. This could be linked to the new agreed syllabus for RE in York schools.'

'Religious slots hosted by various faith and belief representatives on local radio to describe and discuss different paths. A section in local newspapers devoted to religion and belief – written by members from a range of backgrounds.'

'Invitations to one another to participate in the different festivals of the religious groups. Well informed speakers who believe in promoting dialogue and understanding between the religions and belief groups could be invited to address widely publicised gatherings at a central city venue. These could be a series of talks.'

'Activities could be improved by adopting a more inclusive language to cover the range of people who might become involved. Instead of having 'Interfaith meeting,' why not have 'Belief Network'?

'Communication is the key: running events of common concern for those who want to learn about different faiths and beliefs depends on good publicity through good channels of communication. The local radio and Press should be used more widely.'

A lone voice suggested:

'Things are gradually improving and there are increased opportunities for learning, compared to five years ago.'

Comment

The replies can largely be summarised in the action: 'by setting up situations of dialogue'.

It would clearly be helpful to expand and make more of existing opportunities, such as the Mosque Open Day. There are opportunities provided by the variety of festivals now held in the increasingly multi-cultural city of York, organised and celebrated by the different religion and belief communities. These provide the framework for a complete annual programme that would lead to greater understanding and learning about each other. Whatever is developed will need good publicity.

Question 6a: Are there opportunities for you to work locally with

different faith groups on a common project for the benefit of your community?

Replies	as %
None	66
Some	17
No reply given	17

Examples of existing work

'The International Meal in One World Week is a happy event, and fosters friendship-but it does not go further.'

'The Chaplaincy at the University meets with local Muslims on a regular basis.'

'Examples known in Leeds'

'North Yorkshire Humanist Group has been active in promoting good relations and improved understanding with 'religion and belief' groups holding a series of talks by covering Islam, Roman Catholicism, Unitarianism, and the Quakers. We have not been given the opportunity to speak to those or another group in return.'

Comment

Given the weight of answers which indicate that a reply is not possible (17%) or that there are not any opportunities (66%) - this suggests that 4 out of 5 of those looking at this question had a negative response.

Question 6b: Give an example of a project you would like to see developed.

'Joint fund raising for disaster relief '

'More street clean ups and graffiti removal' (an idea mentioned by 3 other respondents)

'Survey needs of local area, and then use faith community premises for community meetings to explore how those needs can be met'

'More support for One World Week from Faith Groups'

'Involvement from other Faith groups in LEAF (Leeman Road Environment Action Force) would be appreciated by local Christians already at work on this project.'

'Some humanists would like to be more involved in civic ceremonies such as Remembrance Day and the Holocaust Memorial Day'

'An annual local conference of religions and beliefs'

'Celebration together of special days or weeks designated by the United Nations.'

'An Environmental project such as tree planting'.

'Muslim and Christian co-operation on social improvement events'

'Make more of celebrating major Faith community Festivals in the city'

'Create an active 'Faiths Forum' dedicated to helping growth of understanding, friendship, and mutual trust and support.'

'Don't actually see any signs of other faith communities in the local area with whom a local project could be developed. Does anyone have information that would help us to make contact with different groups, with a view to creating a project?'

Comment

The number of responses to this section (6b) suggests that there is no shortage of ideas for ways in which action and events could be set up for joint working together. Sharing in humanitarian action such as fund raising for disaster relief, or supporting a particular aspect of the United Nations agenda are mentioned in a number of replies.

Seeking to improve the local environment by working together in practical ways is also a popular concept for developing dialogue with those of other religions and beliefs. It would also serve as a demonstration to the wider public of the ways in which groups can co-operate together for the greater good of the community. The right project handled properly would certainly capture media attention.

Question 7: *What challenges (if any) do you see facing your religion or belief group in the next few years in the City of York?*

A recurring theme in responses was a perception of increasing intolerance towards religions and those who have belief- from those identified as having 'no faith', or more colourfully described by one respondent as *'lipstick atheists'*. The increasingly secular society is identified as one cause of hostility. Another is the negative image of religions portrayed in the UK media.

Among other general challenges mentioned, not in any significant order:

- *declining membership and financial problems;*
- *lack of Government support for upkeep of historic places of worship;*
- *apathy and unwillingness by believers to engage constructively with issues that affect the future of society;*
- *the rapid growth in the number of different religions and belief groups in the city;*
- *the increasing number of people with no belief or religious affiliation;*
- *finding ways of being Christian church which are accessible and attractive to others;*

And finally, for one respondent it was –

- *'too many challenges to list! '*

Specific issues were also mentioned, in particular;

- *shortage of priests in the Christian churches of the city*
- *finding a proper place of worship for the Hindu community*
- *recognition as a bona-fide religion (Pagans)*
- *lack of adequate human resources to enable the Baha'i community as it seeks to offer a response to the demands of social change*
- *the need to widen public awareness of humanism*
- *developing interaction with the growing Muslim population in the city*

In relation to developments taking place within the city, the following challenges were identified;

- *changing age profiles in the residential areas around the University campuses as the student population continues to expand*
- *embracing the changes that the proposed development of the York Central scheme will bring to the Leeman Road area when (or if) it happens*

Another concern was the difficulty experienced by religions and belief groups when applying for grants to support their community work in the local area.

It was felt by some that applications were liable to be marginalized or ignored. Neighbourhood ward meetings were perceived to be less responsive to receiving funding applications from such groups than from other charities and secular organisations.

This particular concern should be read alongside the replies in which the challenge of increased intolerance towards religions and belief groups is mentioned. If that is indeed the reality as well as the perception, then that ought to be measurable within the Neighbourhood Wards and other bodies. It would be reflected in the high percentage of grant applications turned down from religions and belief groups which seek help in expanding work to aid the local community. If the proposed work is clearly laudable and unthreatening, and not solely aimed for the internal benefit of the group, then it ought to receive a fair and equal hearing.

If investigation reveals that religions and belief groups are being unfairly denied access to public money designated for the benefit of the local community of which they are part, and that they are being excluded as a result of increased intolerance towards them, then that becomes a challenge for the City of York Council in seeking to ensure that its commitment to Social Inclusion is not being undermined by people of prejudice. Definitive evidence was not asked for in the questionnaire. This issue is no larger than a cloud the size of a man's hand at the moment. However, it will be monitored, to ensure that it does not grow into a larger and more threatening storm.

Comment

This question provoked more wide-ranging replies than any other in the questionnaire. Here is something that the majority of respondents speak about with some degree of confidence- the future of their own group or community. A cluster of

challenges lie ahead and responses ranged from the optimistic *'we must be faithful to our highest values and insights'* to the slightly gloomy *'too many to mention!'* There also arises a perception of a changing social climate, in which the practicing of religion and the meeting together of belief groups is not viewed by non believers with mere indifference, but with an increasingly aggressive hostility. That suggests developing dialogue between religions and belief groups is essential to ensure that any definitive intolerance, prejudice and bigotry experienced by any such group is monitored and collectively opposed.

Question 8: What challenges, if any, do you see facing Inter faith relations in the City of York over the next few years?

Around 25% of replies had no comment to make on this question. Of the many who did respond, only one stated *'I am not aware of any challenges in this area.'* Others ranged in scope from the local to the global.

There was a view that not to be proactive in working on relationships between the religions and belief groups would present a serious challenge and should not be regarded as an option.

The thought of belief groups and religious meetings not connecting with others in the city, and leading totally separate existences without a link into the local society was a deeply uncomfortable thought to some respondents.

There were other less than optimistic words used in looking into the future.

'I see opposition to the interfaith ethos, a resurgence of fanaticism, tension in race relations, and the challenge of mixing politics and religion'

'The challenges centre around xenophobia and religious intolerance'

'We face the rise of militant atheism'

'Currently, there are misunderstandings or more probably a lack of understanding of the culture and belief of others. There is also an emphasis on political correctness, affecting how one may robustly stand up for one's faith without being misinterpreted.'

'The increase in the number of York residents who have recently come from overseas may cause tension, more for those with no belief commitment. Other challenges likely to arise in the relationships may be in response to what happens globally, and these events cannot be predicted'

More than one reply spoke of the need to overcome lethargy and apathy in the various congregations and gatherings. Relationships between the religions and belief groups in the city are not high on the agenda of many of those who meet for worship or to share their beliefs. The challenge is also to ensure that programmes and activities do not revolve around one religion which takes the lead and dominates the process, nor to leave the future in the hands of a few *'enthusiasts'* who lack the resources to meet the growing needs across the city.

Some ways forward are proposed. These mainly centre on the issues of how to

- *raise awareness of the variety and diversity of religion and belief groups*
- *improve knowledge of each belief represented in the city*
- *bring people together to engage in dialogue, support, and trust building*
- *Publicise information about gatherings and meetings*

A further clue to the approach required in facing the challenges of our relationships in York is offered by a by a Muslim who replied to this question with the following thought:

'Answering a question at a church, where I was giving a talk on Islam, I suggested that on the basis of recent headlines, that just as Muslims are often stereotyped as violent terrorists, Christians tend to be identified in media stories as child-abusers and homophobes.

It continues to be seen as clever by some secular consumerists to ridicule faith and belief, and like Governments, claim that whatever is 'good' is 'ours', and whatever is 'bad' is 'theirs'. Such injustice is not solved by legislation, but by those who have belief persevering to 'let their light so shine before others, that they may see their good works.....'

The quotation makes a telling point that words and actions must walk hand in hand. The challenge has to be faced of ensuring that the many religions and belief groups now represented in York can live peaceably, with mutual trust and understanding of each other. They must also have the freedom to continue practicing their religions and beliefs without being subject to harassment or threatening prejudice.

There are some in the city who glimpse a vision of how things should be, and have already shown the desire to grow in understanding through meeting and listening to each other. The City of York Council is to be commended for taking initiatives on the Social Inclusion agenda, and showing its willingness to be a partner in the process.

It is not an impossible dream that we should learn to acknowledge one another's differences and insights. In so doing, we shall come to understand ourselves more completely and appreciate how our lives can be enhanced by diversity of culture, religion and belief.

This report suggests actions which could be taken, and steps which are recommended as a way forward. The group responsible for preparing the questionnaire do not have authority to implement these actions on behalf of all or any religion or belief group in the city.

However, representatives from York Interfaith Forum and Churches Together in York worked together in partnership on the survey, and those involved will seek to encourage both organisations to circulate the report as widely as possible.

They will also commend the practical outcomes and recommended steps to their respective members, supporters, and associates. The adoption of such actions by the combined network of both groups would be a very positive contribution to the growth of mutual understanding and trust between the religions and belief groups in the city in years to come.

Further copies of the report are available by ordering from:

Survey of Religions and Belief Groups:

10 Burniston Grove, York: YO 10 3RP

email: paul.wordsworth@homecall.co.uk

and the report can be sent to you by attachment.

APPENDIX A

List of 45 Meeting places and Worship Centres represented in Questionnaire

St.Leonard's Hospice
Tang Hall Community Centre
Osbalwick Primary School
Priory Street Centre
York St. John University Chaplaincy Prayer Room
'The Black Swan' Peaseholme Green

Bull Lane Mosque
Friends Meeting House, New Earswick
4th Avenue Mosque
Friends Meeting House, Friargate
York Spiritualist Church
Poor Clares Convent, Lawrence Street

St.Paulinus RC Church, Monkton Road
St.Bede's Pastoral Centre
English Martyrs RC Church, York
St.George's RC Church, Peel Street
Haxby and Wigginton Methodist Church
Central Methodist Church, St.Saviourgate

Clifton Moor LEP Church
Heslington LEP Church
Holy Redeemer CE Church – Boroughbridge Road
St. Barnabas CE Church – Jubilee Terrace, Leeman Road
St.Edward the Confessor CE Church, Dringhouses
St.Michael –le-belfry CE Church

St.Philip and St.James CE Church- Clifton
St.Mark's CE Church, Rawcliffe
St.Hilda CE Church, Tang Hall
St.Chad's CE Church, South Bank

A response came from City Centre Churches- a consortium of churches and centres open for worship and also encouraging local community engagement and heritage aspects of their buildings and facilities. Those which are not listed above include:

York Minster
Salvation Army Citadel-Gillygate
St.Olave's CE Church- Marygate
St.Wilfrid's RC Church
St.Denys CE Church
All Saints CE church, Pavement

St.Mary CE Church, Bishophill
The Rock Church, Priory Street
St.Columba URC Church, Priory Street
York Baptist Church
Holy Trinity CE Church. Micklegate
All Saints CE Church, North Street

St.Martin CE Church. Coney Street
St.Helen's CE Church
Elim Pentecostal Church- c/o St Lawrence Primary School
The Bar Convent, Blossom Street
St.Saviourgate Unitarian Chapel