



CHAPTER 6: AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

This chapter looks at the structures, both formal and informal, that exist in England and Wales at national and local level, and within the Church at Diocesan and parish level, which provide opportunities for dialogue and facilitate and promote the building of relationships and dialogue between people of different religions and none.

Summary: The population of both Catholics and people of other religions is unevenly distributed through England and Wales, and therefore the opportunities for interreligious dialogue will vary from area to area. However, there is a 'national context' in which opportunities for dialogue can arise.

The national context: Central government and local authorities may not distinguish much between different religions but they have recognised the value of **faith communities**, or **religious communities**, in promoting **social cohesion** and in helping to deliver services to the most deprived and vulnerable in society. Religious communities contribute through providing volunteers who are motivated to help others by their beliefs, through allowing their buildings to be used to provide services, and by working together with others for a common goal. Religious leaders too can play an important part in their communities building bridges between different groups.

When different local religious communities are brought together by the local authority with other public and private bodies there is an important opportunity for 'dialogue in action'. The idea behind these partnerships is that different local groups work together to provide better services to the local community in education, health, social services and police provision. Catholics are urged to participate in these initiatives and to encourage discussion and debate on the values and principles that are implicit in public policy and to work together with other religious groups for the good of their local communities.

The Catholic context: For those Catholics who think about people of other religions in terms of their need of conversion, the work of dialogue may first need a 'journey of mind and heart' to enable them to respond to dialogue which is part of our baptismal calling. To encourage a response to this call many bishops have appointed a **Diocesan interreligious co-ordinator** to promote and support the work of dialogue in the diocese. An important aspect of this work is formation and education for both clergy and laity so that they fully understand their

involvement in interreligious relations and dialogue is a divine call and an intrinsic part of being a Catholic.

Usually the laity is best placed to engage in dialogue in their daily life and work. The role of the priest is principally to give leadership, to make clear that interreligious dialogue is part of Church teaching, and to encourage and enable the laity.

Religious congregations often play a particular role in interreligious dialogue and understanding because of their missionary work, their academic experience, or their experience of contemplative prayer and mysticism which links them to similar traditions in many other religions.

Schools have a particular part to play in terms of the experience they offer to pupils and through the role they play in the community. Catholic schools often attract families from other religious communities. Children will learn to live as good neighbours alongside each other and respect each others' different religions and cultures as they study together, learn about each others' religious beliefs and ways of life and gain new insights by reflecting on them.

Local opportunities: Other structures and opportunities for interreligious dialogue, both formal and informal, also exist to help those who wish to become involved in interreligious dialogue. Many areas have local '**Council of Faiths**' or an 'Interfaith Forum' in which people of different religions meet together and work for the good of the local community or simply meet and pray. All of these opportunities are enriched by working together with other Christians, so that resources can be pooled and Christians can relate to people of other religions together. Chaplaincies are often ecumenical and interreligious. Catholics play an essential part but must avoid a reductionist approach which disregards differences of faith for a common 'spirituality'.

Opportunities for interreligious 'dialogue of action' exist in

- Government initiatives which view faith communities as partners in delivering services, especially in the most deprived areas
- Offering church buildings and other resources for the use of the community to build good relations between races and religions
- Involvement in local authority consultation exercises on matters of public policy, local strategic partnerships and other such initiatives
- Linking diocesan youth services with the work of interreligious dialogue
- Involvement in diocesan Commissions and Committees and local parish groups for interreligious dialogue
- Involvement with diocesan Commissions and Committees and local parish groups that link with work with people of different religions such as Justice and Peace and support for asylum seekers
- Local 'Council of Faiths' and 'Interfaith Forum' and other informal local groups.

Opportunities for other forms of dialogue exist in:

- Delivering greetings from the Holy See or personal greetings from the parish community to different religious communities at times of change to 'celebration' significance in their religion
- Living, working, studying and praying together in schools and community groups
- Learning about different religions, their beliefs and ways of living
- Co-operating with colleagues of other religions in situations such as chaplaincies.

Formation and education is essential:

- To help clergy and laity understand that interreligious dialogue is part of the work we are called to do by our baptism
- To provide a theological and spiritual basis for the commitment to dialogue
- To enable those engaged in dialogue to feel secure in their knowledge
- To understand the nature of dialogue and its place in the mission of the Church
- To respect each person's individuality and freedom to respond to the call to dialogue in ways appropriate to them
- To learn about the different religions.

Glossary

Faith communities or religious communities: The term used mainly by central and local Government to describe religions as one set among many private sector organisations with potential to be partners in local initiatives to create social cohesion. Not to be confused with the usual Catholic usage of religious communities which refers to *communities of consecrated male or female religious*.

Social cohesion: The 'glue' that holds society together to ensure the well-being of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization.

Diocesan Interreligious Coordinator: a priest, religious or layperson appointed by their bishop to coordinate and advance the work of religious relations and advise the bishop about any issues arising from relations with those of other religions.

Council of Faiths: Local authority initiated bodies or forums formed by representatives of the different religions in an area designed to foster 'interfaith' dialogue and to be the 'voice' of religions responding to local government initiatives and policies.

We strongly encourage Catholics ...to respond as much as they can to these government initiatives and be willing to work in partnership with statutory bodies, with people, communities and organisations of other religions, and indeed with anyone involved in these projects. #176 p76

Traditionally Catholics have tended to view those of other religions exclusively as people in need of conversion; it takes quite a journey of mind and heart to respond to the Church when it calls us to dialogue with those we were previously only exhorted to call to Christ and welcome into the fold. #176 p77

Questions for discussion

On the text

- Which religions do people in your diocese belong to and how many of them are there? How does this affect the bishops' call to interreligious dialogue?
- What does the document mean when it talks about changes in government attitudes to religion and religions (Para 169)? What influence does this have on the Church's work in interreligious dialogue?
- Describe how the bishops see the roles of clergy and laity in dialogue.
- How do the bishops describe the role of the Catholic school in relation to dialogue?
- How do you view the work of Catholic chaplains? How can they be supported?

From your experience

- How do you feel when you hear that the bishops are asking you personally to become involved in interreligious dialogue?
- What are the opportunities or obstacles to dialogue in your situation? Describe any interreligious events or contacts you have been involved in. What would you like to be involved in, for example in parish, school, or work place?
- What sort of formation do you think you might need to engage in dialogue? Where would you go to get it?
- What opportunities for interreligious dialogue and formation are there for students and staff in your local Catholic school? How might you influence this?

Ideas for Action

To begin with:

- Develop neighbourly relations with members of other religions in your area, seeking opportunities to share meals and events, and greeting people with the greetings used in their religion.
- Once you have got to know someone of another religion, talk to them about their culture and faith, and share some thoughts on yours.
- Use books, the media and the Internet to find out about other religions, especially at the time of their festivals – bidding prayers might be a good time for this.
- Pray for local communities of other religions.
- Find out where local places of worship are. Ask a neighbour or acquaintance if he/she will take you to visit their place of worship; invite them to visit yours.
- Ask your parish priest if he will invite the Diocesan Coordinator to offer an introductory talk and discussion about dialogue to a parish meeting, or invite local faith council representatives to talk at an occasion in the parish or school. Ask your parish priest to invite the Diocesan Interreligious Coordinator to speak and lead a discussion on dialogue at a parish meeting. Invite local faith council representatives to speak in the parish or school. Find out if the school takes pupils to visit places of worship of other religions in your area and offer help in organising visits.

To go further

- Set up a parish interreligious group
- Find out about the local council of faiths and any local government initiatives such as Strategic Partnerships. Find out if they have Catholic representation – volunteer your services if not.

- Encourage links between individuals and parish – and other faith individuals and communities.
- Suggest appointment of a parish “interreligious dialogue contact person” who could:
 - Organise and inform the parish of all local interreligious activity.
 - Form a parish interreligious Group.
 - Contact and develop links with local faith communities and local interreligious groups.
 - Seek to be involved in any Diocesan interreligious activity or organisation.
 - Put up a parish notice board to keep people updated.
 - Encourage parish group visits to local places of worship.
 - Invite speakers of other religions in to parish organisation meetings, parish council or similar meetings – this could be on the occasion of their festivals.
 - Make contact with local places of worship to talk about joint action or to extend friendship.
 - Invite groups from other religions to visit your church.
 - Encourage joint Islamic Relief, CAFOD and J&P fund raising
 - Find out what support the local Catholic school needs to teach about other religions and the place of dialogue in parish catechesis.
 - Take the Holy See’s greetings to Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus on their festivals.