

The Practices and Approaches of Interfaith Dialogue at Leicester, UK

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ABSTRACT

Interfaith dialogue is an effective mechanism to build mutual understanding and respect among people from different faiths. Leicester, a city located in the East Midlands of England, has a long history of interfaith dialogue. This article discusses the practices and approaches of interfaith dialogue in Leicester. Through a qualitative research consisting of a mixture of library research, participation and interviews with correspondents from religious communities in Leicester, the research concludes that the practice of interfaith dialogue can be categorized into two, namely the formal and informal. Formal practices focus dialogue activities on several groups, while informal dialogue occurs in the social life activities of the society. These approaches have proved by numerous of activities which has been organized by several people who had a lot of experience in interfaith works.

Keywords: Interfaith dialogue, interfaith relation, religious tolerance, Leicester, UK.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The diversity of being is one of God's signs. It is a sign that He has created His world and its inhabitants in varied forms and groups. Diversity exists in nature as well in ethnicity, culture, language and religion. Through it, people are able to recognise and appreciate differences and engage diversity towards developing a healthy and productive society. Naturally, however, diversity poses its own challenges. Such challenges include, among others, misplaced sense of

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superiority, feelings of estrangement and the ambiance of isolation all of which collectively lead to possible confrontation and hostility. It would appear, somewhat unfortunately, that these challenges are seldom overcome to affect a positive sense of diversity such as to forge working relations based on the pursuit of common values be they religious, social, educational and/or human. In all cases of diversity, religion constitutes an important potential source to overcome hostilities. Achieving such however requires people of faith to build trust and engage in respectful conversation – namely through interfaith dialogues and engagement.

Leicester, known as one of the most multicultural societies in Britain, is home to a wide range of ethnicities including Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese and Turkish; and religions like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, Buddhism, Baha'ism, Jainism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Paganism among others. Besides religious communities, there are also nonreligious communities that are recognised as part of the society. Although they have different backgrounds, this is not perceived as a barrier to forming good relationships and mutual understanding. People in Leicester realize the importance of being cooperative and working together as one community. Indirectly, the good relations that have forged over the course of many years mitigate the proliferation of stereotypes and prejudice. The apparent racial harmony permeating throughout Leicester would not have been achieved without sustained efforts towards social cohesion, particularly through the practice of interfaith dialogue.

1.1 History of Multiculturalism in Leicester

The early transformation of Leicester's social landscape, according to Martin & Singh (2002), begins with the arrival of the New Commonwealth migrant process after the Second World War. In the aftermath of the Second World War, there was little indication that Leicester was on the threshold of a major cultural change. By 1951, the Asian population of the city was only 624. It would seem that most of these people settled in Leicester after 1945 because there is little recorded evidence of an earlier presence. Moreover, before the war, contacts between Leicester and people from areas that subsequently became the New Commonwealth were limited to tours by the local regiments, visiting political leaders, students and the occasional early migrant. The early Asian population was made up of the former soldiers in the Indian Army and itinerant visitors before 1945. The Indian Workers' Association (IWA) was founded for people from the Indian subcontinents who were keen to establish links and remain in touch with development in India. This process has involved decades of challenges in adapting to the new culture for both the locals and the

immigrants. The Asians in Leicester have made their own contributions in developing Leicester since 1945 to better accommodate their lifestyle. Such changes include Asian settlements, changes in work, education, religion, community institutions, family, leisure, culture and public life.

According to Martin and Singh (2002), there are two key factors that significantly contributed to the migration process after the Second World War. First, the migration was caused by the independence of India, which was followed by the partition of the province of Punjab between India and Pakistan. This resulted in the dislocation of over 10 million people. Punjab at that time, had a history of outward migration since the nineteenth century; and given their central role in the Indian Army, many former soldiers who had seen service overseas decided to start new lives in foreign countries. Secondly, the right to settle in Britain was given where 'The Nationality Act (1948) awarded every Commonwealth citizen their right to move to the 'mother country'.

By 1961, the new Commonwealth population in Leicester had increased to 4,624 where most of the migrants settled in Highfields and the Belgrave area where rented accommodation was plentiful. The St. Peter's Estate in Highfields was favoured by the Afro-Caribbeans, while Indians and Pakistanis chose properties near the Spinney Hill Park and Belgrave Road where affordable private housing was available. Consequently, migration to the city was hastened by the Commonwealth and Immigration Act (1962), which restricted the right of Commonwealth citizens to settle in Britain. After 1962, migrants required a work voucher in order to ensure entry into the country. This initiative was to avoid more restrictive immigration legislation leading to pre-emptive migration and family unions (Martin & Singh, 2002). By 1968 to 1978, with the large number of Asians coming to Leicester, it significantly became the turning point that transformed Leicester into a truly racially and religiously cosmopolitan city (Open Society Institute, 2010).

The Asians who immigrated to Leicester later realised that even as citizens they were victim to policies of discrimination. However, this community in the early 1960s started to generate their own community life, especially to reactivate their religious practices within their societies. According to Winstone (2006), between 1968 and 1975 where the ethnic minority community in Leicester grew from 5 to 25 per cent, Leicester at that time had inherited a commercial class from East Africa that brought their strong Hindu, Sikh and Muslim beliefs with them. A massive demand for places of worship was created, and curiosity grew about the beliefs and festivals of relatively unknown religions in Britain. This multicultural atmosphere resulted in the communities becoming familiar with other cultures. Martin and Singh (2002) noted that many places of worship were established,

such as the Sikh Gurdwara founded in New Walk, which later became the centre of community life. Furthermore, The Indian Workers' Association (IWA) also actively contributed in organizing campaigns for the migrants against racism, besides cultural work.

In 1972, there was another arrival of Uganda's migrants to Leicester consequently after General Idi Amin expelled the Asian population. Due to the lack of options, Uganda's Asian population were initially told that they could not move to Leicester, however, this message was perceived wrongly, thus motivating them to move to Leicester in large numbers. The Open Society Institute (2010) and Martin and Singh (2002) comment that in 1972, the City Council worried that, "the entire fabric of our city is at risk" from immigrants, and inserted a tersely worded advertisement in Ugandan daily newspaper warning potential immigrants, saying: "...you should not come to Leicester" which ironically promoted 'Leicester' as a place to migrate. Precisely in 1981, the ethnic minority population of the city had increased to 59,709, and this rapid growth created serious political, economic and administrative challenges that ultimately affected the nature of all civic institutions in the city. This rise was an almost threefold rise in a single decade. It had increased to 76,973 by 1991, and to 100,000 by 2001. This resulted in the fundamental change in the character of the city, especially in multicultural aspects. In addition, during the 1990s, the war in Bosnia resulted in a number of refugees arriving at Leicester, and it's continued until 2004.

Meanwhile, according to Martin and Singh (2002), the arrival of Ugandans and Asians set off a wave of racism. Hostility to coloured immigrants had been a constant feature of Asian settlements, but the early 1970s saw the local growth of the National Front which established a base among the white working class of the city. In February 1974, there were general elections and the National Front secured 7.4 per cent of the votes in the constituency of Leicester East, 6.4 per cent in Leicester West, and 3 per cent in Leicester South. The Front did better in local elections. Two years later, in 1976, it came within 61 votes of victory in the Abbey Ward and gained 18 per cent of the total vote in the city. The Front's influence was at its peak in the mid-1970s, but declined after the general election of 1979. The atmosphere of racial hostility created by the National Front's activities manifested itself in other ways. The Imperial Typewriters' strike in 1974 became a symbol of the deeply entrenched racism within the city and its labour movement which was seen as unresponsive to the needs of black workers. This bitter strike which attracted national attention was followed by the Mansfield Hosiery dispute. The activities of the National Front in the city were challenged by the local chapters of the IWA, the Anti-Nazi League, and the Inter-Racial Solidarity Campaign.

In the mid-1970s, the anti-racist mobilization had a strong influence on the local Labour Party. Young activists like Peter Soulsby recognized the importance of the issue, which was reflected in major national developments, such as the Race Relation Act (1976) for example. The new law placed the onus on local authorities to improve race relations. It also created the Commission for Racial Equality to police the legislation. However, the displacement of ‘Old Labour’ was gradual and took almost a decade. It was not until the early 1980s that the ‘new left’ with its commitment to a multiracial city was firmly in power. By 1983, there were nine Labour Asian councillors in the City Council, representing inner-city wards in Highfields and Belgrave (Martin & Singh, 2002).

Similarly, Paul Winstone (2006) justified that the real change for policy makers began in the mid-1980s with the emerging view that faith communities could benefit their generation in cities, as well as the growth of interest in Islam, clearly a religion and not an ethnic group. Issues such as the “greening” of places of worship, often unsuitable Victorian schools and factories, beautiful on the inside but drab on the outside, were enthusiastically embraced. Peace vigils were jointly held in South Africa and the former Yugoslavia, with both Serbian and Bosnian supporters listening to Hindi music on the Spinney Hill Park. In addition, all of the religious festivals were celebrated by the communities, although they were from different religions. The religious activities were supported by the Local Authority for several interfaith bodies, including the Leicester Council of Faiths, that worked on a wide range of issues, including regeneration; with the Muslim Burial Council on the funeral service delivery and with the Hindu community on a whole range of issues including cremation, water death rituals and park management. Over this period, the general public had become increasingly curious about non-Christian faiths.

The society demand to implement their practicing of religions and cultures were used to target services more effectively, to increase the number of non-whites on the City Council’s workforce as to reflect the proportion of non-whites in the population, and to reformulate general policies in areas such as cultural policies. Against the backdrop of the inner city riots of 1981, evidence of high levels of unemployment among Asian and Afro-Caribbean youth was used to attract inner-city grants from the central government. This funding, and the patronage associated with its distribution, became the focus of the politics of the New Asian councillors. In the 1980s, with the support of the Asian community, Leicester became a Labour Party stronghold. In 1987, all three parliamentary seats were won by the Labour Party. Keith Vaz captured Leicester East to become the first Asian MP since 1923 (Martin & Singh, 2002).

In sum, there were three phases that changed the landscape of Leicester. Firstly, in the earlier period, there were a few people from Asian nations who had established their own settlements in Leicester. However, the number was limited compared to that after the Second World War. Secondly, by the Second World War, migrant communities had come to dominate certain. The immigration process happened drastically with a large number of people coming to Leicester. During the first period, before 1970, most immigrants were from East Africa and Asia. Over a decade later, these people become educated and had good jobs. The third period, after 1970 involved migrants from South Asia who had been dislocated from their country. These people, came to Leicester for unskilled work and later built their own lives there. Followed by the next year, there were more migrants coming to Leicester from South Asia and East Africa and these included newly settled Somalis who were impacted by the war. These migrant communities contributed significantly to developing multiculturalism in Leicester, besides its economy and industry.

1.2 The Early Dialogue

The previous section identified that a dialogue occurred in Leicester concerning the growing diversity of the society, which took place over several decades. The increasing number of professional and educated migrants added to the sophistication and earnestness of this dialogue. Sameja (2012) for instance, identified the beginning of interfaith dialogue to be in 1985 with the dialogues that were held through the Islamic Foundation, which were academic in nature. This dialogue debated theological issues surrounding Christianity and Islam. According to Sameja (2012), this group that was established by Dr Ataullah Siddiqui and Revd. Gordon Sealy successfully convened Muslim-Christian encounters for seven years, with approximately 10 to 50 participants. Many of these were sixth formers and students. However, dialogue had come to an end in 1992 due to relocation of their premises. The relocated Islamic Foundation in Markfield consequently froze the dialogue activities for several years.

Bunen (2006) argues that the interfaith work in Leicester began before 1986 with the opening of the Leicester Overseas Centre in Blackfriars Hall in Wellington St. It came about because the Sikh Community had bought the Holy Cross School buildings in New Walk for use as a Gudwara and it seemed sensible to offer the nearby Church Hall as a meeting place for all the communities that had no premises of their own. Opening on Saturdays, it offered a place for discussion of difficulties and problems, both of the religious and secular, besides providing facilities for table-tennis and five-a-side football for the younger members. The establishment of the Leicester Council of Faith in 1986 can be perceived to be the time when the interfaith dialogue was posited

as a main agenda in Leicester. According to Silk (2006), after the formation of this council, all leaders from different faiths, including Christians, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, and Sikh, were brought together in meetings.

The Leicester Council of Faith organised a number of activities besides participating in many interfaith programmes. Most of the programmes aimed to bring together people of different faith to express their feelings regarding particular issues such as in the Day of Grief and Prayer for Bosnia in 1993, that was attended by many people from across faiths and they were addressed by Bishop Tom Butler of Leicester and Maulana M. Shahid Raza, Imam of the Central Mosque. Both represented the two faiths that were most intimately connected with the conflict in Bosnia. Silence was kept and flowers were laid on a map of Bosnia. On May 11th 1994, there was an East Midlands Regional Conference at the Grand Hotel in Leicester, chaired by the Bishop of Leicester and organised by the Inner Cities Religious Council, a body set up by the Department of the Environment. Before the conference, several members of the Leicester Council of Faith had visited Liverpool to see the project setup in the city area by the different faiths (20th Anniversary Brochure for Leicester Council of Faiths, 2012)

Beginning in 2000, with the increase in interfaith bodies in the UK, there were also a number of these bodies at Leicester. These bodies either worked towards bringing together all the main faith groups in Leicester, or focusing on specific faith groups, such as bilateral dialogue groups and the trilateral dialogue groups. One such groups that had been established earlier by the Islamic Foundation, the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group, had been re-established by St. Philips Centre according to Sameja (2012). This group included Dr. Ataullah Siddiqui and the Revd. Canon Dr. Andrew Wingate as key people in interfaith dialogue in Leicester. With the establishment of this group, interfaith dialogue took place afresh among religious groups and this time the approach had wider demographics and included academics and non-academics. Religious and non-religious topics were discussed including the Nature of the Bible and Qur'an, the concept of God, Jesus and Muhammad, and social issues such as abortion, IVF, euthanasia, and so on.

The approach concerned solely with religious issues alone is not enough, because there are many mechanisms that can be used in order to build good interfaith relations. This led the St. Philip's Centre together with the Christian Muslim Dialogue Group to organize many joint events, such as numerous football and cricket matches between Imams and Christian Ministers. They even organized sporting events between joint Christian-Muslim teams representing England against European countries. There were also information stalls jointly

operated by Christians and Muslims, in 2009, located near the Clock Tower in Leicester. The people who joined in were not just lay people but also the priests and Imams themselves. In another aspect, by the cooperation of these bodies the Christian-Muslim Charity dinner was organized annually and continued for 10 years. This does not mean that other faiths were excluded from being involved in such events, for excellent interfaith work was done together even with the Jewish, Hindu, and Sikh communities (Sameja, 2012).

1.3 Main Interfaith Dialogue Bodies

There are three main bodies that have contributed and acted as an umbrella body of interfaith work in Leicester. These are the Islamic Foundation, the Leicester Council of Faith and the St. Philips Centre. The Islamic Foundation was established in 1973 by a prominent Muslim Scholar, Professor Khurshid Ahmad, as a centre for research, training and publishing. However, according to Siddiqui's report (1996), this institute was established in 1968 and in 1971 it was registered as a Religious, Educational, and Charity Foundation. It began work from Leicester in 1973 and in 1989 The Islamic Foundation moved to Markfield. The Foundation began its work from Leicester, when the current director general, Manazir Ahsan, joined the Foundation's full time staff. Its motto, "Make Islam a living reality", encompasses various aspects of education and research, and of social encounters among Muslims and between non-Muslim. Broadly speaking, it had concentrated its work in two major areas: the growing Muslim population in the West, particularly in Britain, and communication about Islam in the West. The objective of writing about the Foundation is to discuss its approach towards dialogue and Mission/Da'wah. This relates to the establishment of the Interfaith Unit and the Christian-Muslim relations project.

From its very inception, the Foundation sought to develop better relations with the churches and to co-operate with them on ethical and social levels. In 1973, when a debate on a Danish film on the alleged love life of Jesus spread, the Foundation appealed for 'a moral convention' to be held "to deal with the lives of the prophets and the sages of mankind". This was well received by the Roman Catholic churches, Evangelicals and Human Rights organizations. The foundation's policy has been to find common ground between Muslims and Christians at the ethical and social levels; however, its approach to the missionary effort to convert Christians to Muslims had taken prominence in its work. A feasibility study was carried out in 1973 to establish a project on Christian-Muslim relations. During the next few years, financial support was sought, and in 1978, the Muslim World League, promised to help it financially.

It was in March 1978 that the board of trustees agreed to establish an “Interfaith Unit” in the Foundation, and within the same year, in July, the Unit began its work and two research associates joined the Islamic Foundation on a full-time basis for this very purpose. The main areas of work in the mind of the planner of this unit were described to carry out studies and researches in the areas of Christian-Muslim relations in their manifold dimensions, ranging from historical to contemporary and to future projections, and from academic dialogue to mission to Muslims in various parts of the world, especially the Muslim world; as well as to inform on those issues that concerned all people, particularly Muslims, in order to help them formulate suitable goals, policies, and strategies, to meet multiple situations in their interactions with Christians. The Unit first established a small library and began documentation of relevant materials. As far as the dissemination of materials was concerned, it took two important lines; (a) the publication of reports and study papers based on field and library research, and (b) the dissemination of information through a bulletin called FOCUS on Christian-Muslim Relations based on Christian journals and bulletins.

The second body that has contributed to interfaith work in Leicester is the Leicester Council of Faith (LCoF). As one of main interfaith bodies in Leicester, the Leicester Council of Faith served the Leicester City from early 1986. There are eight main religions in Leicester to be represented as members, namely Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Baha’i faith, and Jainism. It aims to advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the teachings, traditions, and practices of the different faith communities in Leicester and the surrounding district, including an awareness of their distinctive features and their common ground besides promoting relations between people of different faith. The Leicester Council of Faith demonstrated many initiatives and approaches in interfaith work (Interfaith Organisation in the UK, 2006), particularly: multi faith dialogues; discussions and meetings on religious topic; discussion and meetings on social issues; raising interfaith awareness; promoting good community relations; making statements on current issues; prayer/worship; social gatherings; shared meals; diversity training; educational events/exhibitions; assistance in multi-faith civic ceremonies; providing advice to public bodies; acting as a consultative forum on local issues for the local government; sending representatives to serve in local strategic initiatives; involvement in regeneration/neighbourhood renewal work and regular newsletters.

Meanwhile, the third interfaith body in Leicester is the St. Philips Centre. This centre was formed out of the 2001 disturbances, the 2001 census findings, and events of 9/11 and 7/7. The Church of England nationally encouraged local dioceses to engage in what became known as Presence and Engagement. In

2008, the Anglican Communion published 'Generous Love' and in the 2010-11 periods, this was followed further by the General Synod debate and endorsement with new papers- 'Sharing the Gospel of Salvation' and 'Generous Love for All'. In Leicester, the Bishop took all this to heart and put local support into creating a Presence & Engagement Centre. A new idea in 2004 became a task group in 2005, which formally became the St. Philip's Centre in early 2006.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research is based on a triangular approach of interviews, observation and participation. The interview provides direct and first-hand information about a person's involvement, motivation and priorities in dialogues. The correspondents interviewed represent a wide spectrum of interfaith organisations, particularly the three main organizations which are the Islamic Foundation, the Leicester Council of Faith, and St. Philips Centre. This interview used a semi-structured method, where each of the questions are followed by the answer of the individual. However, if the response did not achieve the main purpose, interviewees were asked further questions for the purpose of clarity. Furthermore, these interviewees were selected carefully for their vast experience in dialogue as well as their religious affiliation. They hold key positions in their respective communities as well as in inter-faith dialogue in Leicester. Besides the interviews, this research also includes the observation and participation in numerous interfaith activities, particularly in the event entitle Interfaith Week. Besides, there are also other interfaith activities that have been organized frequently as well as the Hindu-Christian Forum. Within this period, there are various type of interfaith activities and they are not limited to the formal dialogue but also include informal dialogue with particular activities, as well as Children's Art & Craft Competition, Exchanging Pulpits, Christian Jewish Study Day, Children & Family Faith Trail, Inter Faith Week Exhibition, Inter Faith Week Service, Mitzvah Day 2013, Puppet Workshop & Family Puppet Show, Christianity for Those of Other Faiths, a Forum entitled 'The importance of Inter Faith Relations in a Cohesive Community', Question Time, Highfields Pilgrimages, launching a calendar entitled 'A Festival Year', Unity Feast, Indoor Family Games Night, Storytelling at the New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Faith In Music Concert, and so on. The formal dialogue was jointly organized by the Leicester Council of Faith with the Hindu-Christians Forum, one of the interfaith groups in Leicester. Another organization involved is the St. Philips Centre which organized an Interfaith Marriage Seminar. At times, the researcher had not only been an observer for such activities but was also an

active participant, such as in the Inter Faith Week Exhibition and the Interfaith Marriage Seminar.

3.0 DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The practices of interfaith dialogue in Leicester can be classified into three phases. The first phase begins after the formation of the Leicester society in the Second World War that led to a large number of Asians settling in Leicester. The Second World War meant millions of people were dislocated from their origin country, particularly with the partition of the province of Punjab between India and Pakistan. Furthermore, a huge number of Asians were in the service of the British Army in the War and were therefore awarded special privileges to stay in the ‘mother country’. For several years, migrant activities did not resume, although in 1972, the government announced that Leicester couldn’t accommodate more migrants. Through the migrant activities eventually changed the landscape of the society into multicultural atmosphere. Now a diverse society, the people of Leicester began to learn about each other in order to sustain the essence of cohesion and harmony in the society. On the other hand, the new atmosphere evoked new problems in the society especially discrimination (Correspondent A, 2013) and racism against the minority. To face such issues, cooperation between the minorities and locals was achieved. In such a way the interfaith relation through informal dialogue began to reflect the circumstance in order to develop a healthy society.

The second phase of interfaith dialogue officially began in the 1980s through the establishment of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group in 1986 by the Islamic Foundation. Briefly, the dialogue group was organized for academic purposes. It was in March 1978 that the board of Islamic Foundation trustees agreed to establish an “Interfaith Unit” in the Foundation, fully responsible for the interfaith dialogue activities that led to the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group, and followed by the Leicester Council of Faith. However, the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group was based on bilateral dialogue concerns of two faith communities, not other religions. By the same year, an informal interfaith activity was initiated by the religious community in order to build good relations among the community. The interfaith activities included all faith communities in several activities on the challenges that they were facing in that period.

Another interfaith activity that combined between formal and informal dialogue took place through the establishment of the Leicester Council of Faith. The council, established in 1986, represented by eight religions in Leicester included the Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha’is, Jains, other

religion, and the non-religious community were involved with several interfaith activities, although they were not included as part of the council member. The council aimed to advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the teachings, traditions, and practices of the different faith communities in Leicester and the surrounding district, including an awareness of their distinctive features and their common grounds besides promoting relations between people of different faith. The council demonstrated many initiatives and approaches in interfaith work, particularly; multi faith dialogue; discussion on religious topic; discussion on social issues; interfaith awareness raising; promoting good community relations; making statements on current issues; prayer/worship; social gathering; shared meals; diversity training; educational events/exhibitions; assisting on multi faith civic ceremonies; providing advice to public bodies; acting as a consultative forum on local issues for local government; sending representatives to serve on local strategic initiatives; and involvement in regeneration/neighbourhood renewal work; regular newsletter.

A drastic increase in interfaith activities in the twentieth century reflects the 9/11 and 7/7 incidents. In this third phase, such various dialogue group and interfaith bodies emerged and spread among different levels of society in order to reduce tension which has been evoked by internal and external religious conflict. Such bodies like the Faiths Regeneration Network, Christian-Muslim Women Group, Faith Leader's Forum, Family of Abraham Group, Hindu-Christian Forum, Hindu-Muslim Dialogue Group, and St. Philips Centre were established to promote several interfaith activities in the society. The St. Philips Centre linked with most of the dialogue group in organizing interfaith activities in Leicester (Correspondent B, 2013). Indeed, the dialogue is not only used to reduce the tension, it helps to engage the community in mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding about each other as stressed by Correspondent C (2013):

"It is extremely important to have dialogue. A dialogue happens when a person meets a person and start talking. And once you've started talking, you create the dialogue whereby you remove the barriers, and you learn to trust the person that has different views on you, although you may not accept everything, but you treat them as a human being, and that is so important, to we achieve that level."

For instance, when tension arises against other faith groups, after being enlightened by their religious representative, people were able to distinguish between the real teachings of the religion and the individual acts of the followers. A case addressed by Correspondent D (2013), when a man was murdered by a person from a different religion:

“The victim was just coming on from the gym, and he was trying to help, consequently the tension rise. When the victim just tries to calm down both sides suddenly somebody was stabbed him. The victim was completely not innocence. Eventually, the Police arrested a young man around 20 years old as the main suspect. Although this incident involved a Muslim as victim and the Christian as the suspect, nobody is blaming other religion, because they understand the real issue.”

Obviously, dialogue and good relation in the society has proven capable in reducing prejudice and misunderstanding. Another, Correspondent E (2013) has remarks:

“If people can start having a conversation with the neighbour, it takes away a lot of fear of each other, and it also helps reduce the problem that arises from a lack of understanding of the other, because you can’t understand anybody from the other faith or you don’t have the opportunity to speak to and listen to them, then you can’t adopt a lot of rumours and false information going on, and that’s why you can’t end up with fear and anger developers.”

Another case has been addressed by Correspondent F (2013):

“There is a lot of misinformation, out sort the Muslim community with the non-Muslim, about, because Muslims get bad press, for al-Qaeda, for crime, especially in this country as well. That is always propagated by the media “the non-Muslim you can attack them”, and all these influence other people, without any evidence, although it is nonsense, but people do think so it is. It’s very similar in some Muslim. There are a few Sikh, drinks a lot, and get messed around and they, certainly, received stereotypes that Muslim received from another religion.”

Healthy dialogue and good social relations helps prevent religious communities from blaming each other. Through these initiatives, either from individuals or particular bodies, the society has been colourized with good relations between faiths. In other words, as remarked by Race (2012), it probably caused the people to want to know about their religious neighbours’ ritualistic and social habits, or the reasons for their moral advocacy on certain matters, or why they see the world as they do. It encourages them to get to know their neighbours more than superficially and might help them figure out some answers. In a more spirited civic mood, they might sign up for the social cohesion agenda, thus it is inevitable for having to unravel whether or not religious commitment is supportive of or inimical to social cohesion in a diversity society. In the same

vein, Correspondent G (2013) was convinced that the dialogue works as the main key to engage people of different faiths. Once they have good relationships, any tension that may arise is properly managed. For instance, the English Defence League, an extremist group in Britain, intend to come to Leicester and attack a mosque before marching into the Highfields area, which represents the highest resident population of the Muslim community. Correspondent C (2013) remarks:

“When English Defence League (EDL) and human right groups coming march in the city, all the faith communities get together and give support each other, so for social movement, interfaith also for important for that as well.”

Moreover, the effort against this radical group initially followed by the MP’s of Leicester to ban them from entering the city. Together the religious community showed solidarity based on a formula that if any faith is attacked, it means all faiths attacked (Correspondent H & Correspondent I, 2013). Leicester society seems to have a vast experience in facing such tension or religious conflict. Before the tension worsens, the religious representatives and interfaith bodies play a good role in calming the society through several meetings in order to reflect on the issue, and follow it up with some solutions.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, the practices of interfaith dialogue can be categorized into two kinds of practices; the formal and informal. Formal practices is used to focus on several groups in dialogue activities like the interfaith forum and dialogue groups. It enables the participants to seek an in depth understanding in a common ground, based on the objective of each interfaith activity. In other words, it can be regarded as a Dialogue of Deeds, usually organizes by NGOs in discussing common issues and a Dialogue of Specialization, which refers to the academic and theological discourse. However, it works on those who have a strong background in religious studies, such as in the Leicester Muslim-Christian Dialogue Group and the Leicester Hindu-Muslim Dialogue. Several issues, theology or non-theology based, were discussed through bilateral or multilateral dialogues that involved scholars and clergy. Meanwhile, the informal practices is seen to be close to each level of the community, particularly to the lay people. This practice enables them to learn how they can work together to contribute to the society, in charity, fund raising, promoting a good community, shared meals, visiting places of worship and so on. It also works on developing a common ground rather than having a long discussion to seek that common ground. In addition, these practices seem similar to the Dialogue of Life, which refers to

normal dialogue as reflected by the social life, and the Dialogue of Religious Experience which refers to religious practices. Such dialogue is more common among lay people. Hence, the implementation of good relations through dialogue activities, either formally or informally, impacts significantly on the religious society. Meanwhile, the approaches have proved numerous and organised by people experienced in interfaith relation. Initially, it is able to link each level of the community in discussing a particular issue. Perhaps, it could be a good model in practicing of interfaith dialogue, especially in the Malaysian context.

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