

## DIALOGUE

# Towards better disagreement!

**Over recent years** I have seen a number of sessions of Interfaith Dialogue advertised or discussed but, as the term 'interfaith' implies, this has always been between religious organisations. As an atheist for almost fifty years, I was conscious that in the UK there is an increasing proportion of

**Keith Pennington** shares his experience as an atheist, in an innovative project of dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Humanists.

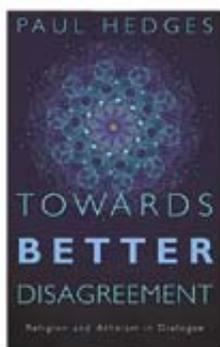
the UK population that claim to have no religious affiliation. The British Social Attitudes survey suggests this is now about half the people in the UK. Therefore, whilst this interfaith dia-

logue is a very worthwhile exercise, I have felt that we were missing a large part of the population from these discussions.

So when I heard of an innovative project that was looking for participants for a dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Humanists in my old home town of Bolton, I rushed to apply to be part of this locally funded initiative. Fortunately I was accepted to be part of an initial group of twelve people (there were four people representing each belief group) and we started to meet each Monday evening for five weeks.

## Creating safe spaces

On the first evening I arrived a little early along with two others, Belinda and Asif. As we sat with our coffees and introduced ourselves, I realised that by a happy coincidence the first discussion table had been formed and that we each represented one of the groups for this interfaith meeting.



As we began the first session together, I was not sure how things would go, or what would be expected of us. Thankfully a full programme had been designed, which started with a short session on creating safe spaces. This was important and gave a springboard on which the rest of the programme flowed. Sometimes we would work in small groups and then feedback to the whole group as we would expand a little on each subject. Each session was led by Ali Amla and Abdul Siddique, our two guides for this new adventure.

## Shared values

The discussions took place in an atmosphere of mutual respect and honesty, which happened naturally amongst a group of people who had never met previously. What this showed us, each week, was that we share the same values about how to live regardless of whether we follow a particular faith or not.

A common thread throughout the meetings was a measure of concern at how the public are fed extreme views about key issues, mainly through the national media. This has the potential to create disharmony in communities and tends to focus on taking a 'bad example' to show what is deemed 'typical' for a particular group. I listened to my new Muslim friends talk of the dismay they feel when they hear the evening news tell of another act of violence attributed to someone with a Muslim sounding name – a view I now find myself sharing when I listen to the news.

As we talked, we learnt that this media image of the 'typical' did not fit anyone, whether they are Muslim, Christian or Humanist. We are simply human beings who care about the world in which we live and want to build something better for the future. What we achieved over the five weeks was the beginning of a path that hopefully will lead to better understanding of others in our communities.

## Learning from one another

When I think back on my initial expectations, I thought that we might have had more heated exchanges as we discussed 'hot topics' or religious differences, but in the



Photo: ©courtesy of Keith Pennington

Keith Pennington (far right) with members of the project

end we found ourselves focussing on what we felt was our common feelings about issues.

Prior to our first meeting I had read the recommended book, 'Towards better disagreement' by Paul Hedges, which had given me useful insights into some of the topics we would discuss. Of course talking amongst real people was much more fun than reading about different beliefs and we probably learnt much more from each other than we would from a hundred books.

As expected the question of the 'elephant in the room' often arose, but despite any anticipated problems over 'difficult' subjects that these might have raised, we seemed to avoid the pitfalls and a useful open discussion emerged. One good reason behind this, was that those who had volunteered for the course came with open minds and a desire to see something successful develop. There was no doubt that we created some very positive feelings and allayed any fears of 'the other who is different from ourselves'. I certainly learnt a great deal, but frequently felt that we needed more time.

### What next?

After five weeks we arrived at the final session and looked to address the question of 'what next?' It was uni-

versally felt that we should find a way to continue in the future – both on a simply social level, but also to have more sessions together to look at different issues, now that we all know and trust each other.

We are not great leaders of countries or political parties, but simply ordinary people. So how could we make a difference in the future? Perhaps simply by talking about what we had experienced here with others in our various social groups, and challenging people when assumptions are made concerning other peoples' beliefs. Or speak out when antisocial actions (or worse) are being attributed to a particular 'faith group'.

We may even get the opportunity to help start similar discussion groups in the future, or perhaps help contribute to more of these dialogues organised by Abdul and Ali.

It certainly was not a hardship to be part of these sessions. Indeed it has been a definite pleasure and honour to be involved. This has been a great initiative, challenging a host of assumptions and has been an excellent 'beginning'.

Finally, I asked amongst the group if anyone would make a contribution that could be included in this article. I received one from Dot McCarthy which summed it all up perfectly *'Turning that curiosity of other faiths into friendships where the unknown has now become the known'*. 🌈