SEEKING THE COMMON GOOD IN AN INCREASINGLY DIVIDED SOCIETY

Interfaith Relations meets Peacebuilding

Peter Adams     January 2020

Introduction

Over the past ten years Christian and Muslim leaders in Luton have cooperated extensively in a local response to the challenges to community peace and cohesion posed by the presence in the town of the English Defence League (EDL) and other anti-Muslim groups. Parallel with that we have sought together to challenge extremism associated with the Muslim community.

My extensive work with Muslims is not guided by any great knowledge of Islam, but personally by my own skills and experience in peacebuilding. I seek here to give an outline understanding of my approach to peacebuilding, of Luton, of how our close and fruitful relationship has developed, with some thoughts of how Christian ministry needs to respond to the challenges facing our society in this area.

My suggestion is that the landscape we face internationally in 2020 with extremism increasingly vocal across the major world religions means that the cutting edge of interfaith relations should be approached within the paradigm of peacebuilding. The planned outcome should be to facilitate our congregations and the wider world to live at peace with their neighbours, work colleagues and across society. Academic dialogue is still of real importance, but with the specific focus of facilitating maximum engagement across the church.

As a centre based in a church with an evangelical charismatic tradition we have recognise the value of this model in engaging those of a more conservative approach to their Christian faith.

A Call to Peacebuilding

1. An outline “biblical theology” of peace, justice and reconciliation on which I base my practice as a peacebuilder,

   • Shalom as peace, welfare, integrity, prosperity, health, friendship, well-being, rest, safety, favour, greatness. Thus an all embracing wholeness and peace.
An outworking of that for the Jewish people was the call in Babylon to seek the *shalom* of the city – despite the trauma of exile. (Jeremiah 29)

- The glimpses of the future Kingdom of God in the Prophetic writings, especially Isaiah, have a strong emphasis on peace, justice and healing. Eg Isaiah 2.2-4; 9.2-8; 11.1-16; 25, 6-10; 35.1-10; 61.1-11; 65.17-25, etc)
- The ministry of Jesus in announcing that Kingdom introduced a strong focus on teaching that called his people to be heralds of that kingdom. This is especially worked out in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7
  - It’s good to be a peacemaker (Matt 5.9)
  - Apology (Matt 5.21-26)
  - Forgiveness (Matt 6.12,14-15)
  - Don’t judge (Matt 7.1-2; see also Luke 6.37-38)
  - Look in the mirror (Matt 7.3-5; see also Luke 6.41-42)
  - Turn the other cheek (Matt 5.38-42
  - Love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you. (Matt 6.43-48)
- A model often used in peacebuilding is based on Psalm 85.10 Reconciliation as the meeting place of peace (*shalom*), justice (*Tsedeq*), truth (*Emeth*) and mercy (*Hesed*). To me this brings together the heart of the Old Testament Covenant, the work of Christ on the cross, and the sociological challenges of seeking peace in complex situation.

2. **The personal and pastoral issues in application are often complex and challenging, including:**
   - Forgiveness
   - Looking in the mirror
   - Loving the enemy
   - Holding the balance between peace, justice, truth and mercy.

**Luton**

3. Luton is a large town of 205,000 (2011) situated 60 Kilometres north of London. It is a post-industrial working class town in the midst of the very prosperous commuter belt around London, 20-40 minutes away by train. It is on the north south motorway, and served by Luton Airport. Some key demographics:
   - 55% are of non-British ethnic origin. The British are a minority.
   - 75% children of school age are of non-British ethnic origin
   - Under half claim to be Christian (97,000 /47.4%)
   - Approximately 140 languages are spoken.
   - Over 62,000 (30%) are of other world religions
   - About one quarter are Muslim (24.6%)
   - Massive social “churn” – 50-70% pop’n change 2001-2009
   - But what will Luton look like in 2021? In 20131? What attitudes & anxieties does this produce?
   - High levels on in work poverty
   - Very high levels of children and family poverty.

We are thus a superdiverse town, with no single group a majority, everyone a minority, and a complexity of social issues.

4. Luton is an island of relative poverty and diversity in a sea of white affluent Britain.
• The attitudes to Luton are generally very negative with many people not willing to shop, visit or even drive through Luton
• Many have very negative views of Islam despite in many cases never having met a Muslim.

The Church in Luton encountering Muslims, building bridges and seeking the common good.

5. Sarah Snyder, Peace and Reconciliation advisor to the Archbishop of Canterbury, suggests the marks of good interfaith encounter are:
   - All relationships begin with encounter
   - Relationships involve risk
   - Relationships respect the others identity
   - Relationship is based on integrity
   - Relationship is involved in humility and mutual accountability
   - Relationships involve an opportunity to serve.

In the context of our work here we would add these practical guidelines:

6. You don’t have to be an expert, indeed you don’t have to know anything, to build relation with a Muslim. Asking them to tell you about their faith, especially what their faith means to them. Do the same. You learn about Islam and you build a friendship.
   Note: Even where you are living in a place where there are no / few Muslims we would suggest its still important. We are a multicultural nation. Some of your congregation will be working alongside Muslims. Everyone will subject to media shaping their mind.

   (a) Seek as well to get alongside those who struggle with Muslims, and to understand their concerns. Many have real questions. Don’t pick arguments, maybe in time Introduce them to your friends.

7. When difficult national or international events take place, reach out, personally or as a church.

8. Seek to be a voice to challenge hate actions or crimes that take place.

9. Be alert to injustices, or perceived injustices experienced by different groups in your community.

10. Seek to reimagine the civic role of the Church of England in a multicultural multifaith community.

Christians and Muslims working together for the peace of the city: Lessons learned in Luton, England 2007-2018

11. Luton has for two decades had the reputation for extremism. Islamic extremism emerged as a result of various London based preachers working here in the 1990’s, and the town has been home to a significant (but relatively small) branch of al-Muhajiroun, the proscribed extremist group led by Anjem Choudary and locally by Sayful Islam. A number of terror attacks have had some association with Luton.

12. A protest on 10 March 2009 by al-Muhajiroun against a homecoming parade through the town of an army regiment returning from Iraq provoked a riot on the day, and series of ongoing local protests
locally by United People of Luton (UPA). In Summer 2009 UPA went national and became the English Defence League (EDL). This anti-Muslim street protest movement based in Luton quickly spread throughout the UK, has held demonstrations across the UK and in Europe\(^8\), and has spawned a number of other groups associated with the counter-jihad movement.

13. Since then Luton has experienced over ten demonstrations\(^\text{iii}\), the largest of several thousand people, and several more anticipated demonstrations. Whereas in other locations the EDL came and went away Luton is home to the founding leadership of EDL, Stephen Lennon aka “Tommy Robinson” and his uncle Kevin Carroll. Their regular presence here, and their (mistaken) belief that the town was still a hotbed of Islamic extremism and a nursery for terror, meant we experienced their regular rabble rousing around the community.

14. The firebombing of a mosque in early May 2009 led to Church and Muslim leaders responding with a united and total condemnation of the extremism, and a determination that extremists would not separate the town. A commitment made at that time has proved the basis on which the church’s engagement with the Muslim community has been built.

15. **Working Together for Peace and Unity**

“As Muslims and Christians in Luton we are committed to grow in understanding of each other and to work together for good. In doing so we are inspired and challenged by words that lie at the heart of each of our Holy Scriptures, where we are commanded to love God and love our neighbour. As neighbours in this town, we need to discover the things that unite us, and celebrate those. Where we are different we are committed to seek understanding and trust, rather than resorting to hatred and strife. **Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to one another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.** In this time of tension we are calling for people of all communities and every area of life in Luton to take every opportunity to strengthen our unity.”

For the fuller statement see endnote\(^4\)

I’d suggest that this is the heart of the churches commitment to the common good.

16. Church leaders have been increasingly keen to speak out strongly on far right extremism because of the claim by EDL and other street based groups, as well as far right political groups taking a strong position against Islam, that they are seeking to defend our nations Christian heritage. Both they and extremists in the Muslim community view the ultimate issue as a conflict of civilisations between the liberal Christian European world and the Muslim world.\(^v\)

While the town has a strong Council of Faiths\(^\text{vi}\), a significant portion of the engagement over these eight years has been bilateral between Christian and Muslim leaders so as to effectively challenge the narrative of an inevitable clash of the two faiths. Churches Together in Luton (CTL) has provided a united voice for the church, while two councils of mosques represent all the Muslim community.

17. Since 9.11 and especially the 7.7 2005 London bombings the Muslim community had effectively marginalised members of al-Muhajiroun, though they still remained in the community. They campaigned and sought to recruit regularly in a number of key locations and without fail disrupted events where Muslims engaged positively with others and with society. In Spring and Summer 2009
considerable effort was made by the community to further challenge their activity, though ironically they often they found protection from police who interpreted their activity as broadly within the law. This community based work to challenge extremism has continued in different forms and deepened over the years since, despite an uneasiness with the government’s official policy to deal with extremism, “Prevent”.

18. Early research (much online in social media) and personal engagement with those involved in anti-Muslim protest in the EDL, both leaders and those on the fringe, showed us that the reasons for their protest were based not only in far right ideology but in the lived experiences in the town. We recognised that these would not be solved by traditional responses to the far right of anti-fascist counter demonstration, but by dialogue and intervention in the issues that led to protest. This work has also continued and developed to the present with more effective intervention in recent years.

Based on this we defined our engagement with the EDL and wider far right as being pastoral rather than traditional anti-fascist work. We oppose ideas & acts of evil, not people. This has made possible living in the town alongside people with these ideas, and we believe to be the best basis for intervention & deradicalization.

19. The research and engagement with the EDL led to our being experts on the movement, and as a result we were sought out by police and government for understanding and intelligence. While this led to inevitable problems of separation of pastoral care from intelligence, it has meant that close partnership has developed, and policing has been informed by and focused on community cohesion rather than public order.

20. As a result, when faced with plans for major demonstrations in February 2011 and May 2012 we worked extensively together and with local government and police to provide effective community engagement. In the weeks leading up to each demonstration day since 2011, Christian and Muslim leaders sat on community-cohesion groups, spent a considerable time in the Muslim community, spoke at community meetings, and talked to both the EDL and the UAF counter demo. The policing strategy deployed on each occasion was significantly influenced by two of us both working to support and constructively challenge police plans in the operation Gold Commander’s community-reference group.

Our questions was in essence, “How do we bring God’s love to Luton when it is faced with such a major presence of hatred?”

- How do we show love and truth to demonstrators?
- How do we support and show love to deeply scared and angry Muslims?
- How do we serve the town, support the police, etc?

21. At the heart of our work was community mediation before, during and after demonstration days. Our response was most developed in May 2012 when we were faced with the second very large demonstration in the town in 16 months. On that day some 50 Christian leaders (Street Pastors, town-centre chaplains and recognised lay leaders were involved) worked closely with a similar number of Muslim leaders

- Eight Christian and eight Muslims served in police led (via radio) community mediation teams in the areas around protests and expected trouble, intervening where problems were escalating.
A team of five Christians (two clergy) operated in the EDL gathering, march and protest areas. Several of these knew local EDL activists. They wore Hi Vis jackets, the clergy their clerical collars, and were able to operate very freely among the EDL members, having many conversations, seeking to challenge attitudes and wrong ideas; called for peace when tensions were heightened; calmed behaviour; and even had pastoral conversations and prayed for people.18

A small group (Muslim and Christian) operated among the UAF counter demo, though due to our being clear we did not support their protest we did not have the same freedoms.

A cross community team made up of Christians (clergy and laity) working closely with Muslim colleagues stewarded the large groups of troubled young Muslim men who gathered in the main Muslim area; enabling the community rather than public order policing.

The university chaplain and a team worked in the University area (near EDL demo) to safeguard students.

A large number worked in key areas, escorting vulnerable people through protest areas, calmed tensions, countered rumours on text and Twitter, comforted the distressed, directed traffic, and helped people find reassigned public transport.

St Mary’s, the town centre parish church near the EDL demo and on the dispersal route had a team who circulated around the edge of the EDL demo talking to casual observers, served tea to the 1500 or so police in town, and were prepared to be a place of refuge for people troubled (especially Muslims) in the event of a deterioration in order.

A Christian leader sat in the community cohesion hub with police liaison, feeding information via text messages to all the above, and relaying concerns to police.

22. In addition to major demonstrations from their formation in 2009 the EDL also rabble-roused around a number of local issues, requiring a regular and consistent Christian and Muslim voices in the town hall and police station, at community meetings and on the streets.

23. A Britain First demonstration in June 2015 brought similar mobilisation. On that occasion church leaders first wrote & open letter and then formally met BF leaders to ask them not to come to the town.19 Two subsequent flash demonstrations by BF in Luton, followed by several court appearances, them all the time harassing and abusing Muslims, were roundly condemned by the Church.

24. While Steven Lennon aka Tommy Robinson left EDL in 2013, he still counts Luton as home (though living 15 miles away) and his presence in the town has continued to cause issues.

Christians and Muslims working together for the peace of the city:

25. Things we have learned to do that have promoted Integration.

- We seek to talk together face to face, rather than just across a room with police, local government, etc.
- When there is a terror attack anywhere we gather to acknowledge it, mourn those lost, feel each others pain. We are seeking to encourage this more in schools.
- When something bad happens in Luton we act very quickly to reach out to those who have been impacted.
- We seek to work together to oppose ALL hate crime, whoever is the victim.
- Even when there are differences of understanding we try to keep talking
26. In the past three years engagement between Muslim and Christian leaders in the town has become deeper and has sought to address key issues in the town and more widely, especially those that appear in the online narrative of the far right.

- **Faiths Against Child Sexual Exploitation** (FACES) is based on a cross community working group of leaders committed to challenge among other patterns of abuse the narrative of the far right that Islam legitimises abuse of non Muslim girls by Muslim men. We have worked together to train faiths leaders, develop faith sensitive training for young people, and engage in intervention work.
  - We reject totally the idea that sexual exploitation can ever be justified by faith.

- A Muslim community working group on the UK governments counter extremism policy and challenging extremism has had a Christian leader with them as a critical friend, which led to the Church leaders writing to government to condemn a policy they could not live under.
  - What is extremism? How does it relate to religious conservatism.

- A programme of grassroots engagement by small groups around the town are seeking to talk about issues of being good neighbours in the town.

- Charities & community groups that once would have been single faith are now intentionally mixed.

- An ongoing community mediation capacity based on our work in demonstrations is being developed in cooperation with police.

- We note a one by one gradual increase in development of friendship between individual churches and mosques, sharing of life, and development of friendship around the town.

- We have an informal Muslim Christian working group to develop these and new areas.

Much of the Christian community response has been led and initiated by Peter Adams, a conflict resolution professional based at the town centre Church of England parish church of St Mary. In order to consolidate and multiply the work St Marys launched St Mary’s Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in September 2016. The work in the Muslim community has been led by a variety of people over the years, all volunteers, but over the past two years by Rehana Faisal who has good standing with both groups of mosques and chairs a Muslim women’s group.

27. What can keep us apart?

- History
  - How can we be free from the pain and burden of the past?

- Unacknowledged racism, whether personal or structural. (Including Unconscious Bias)

- We are both missionary faiths.
  - How can we share our faith / conversion take place peaceably?

  - **Ethical Guidelines for Muslim Christian Witness in Britain. Produced by Christian Muslim Forum 2009**

- What about issues in Muslim nations?
  - Creating a different conversation around persecution, etc

- Views of Islam that are un-negotiable:
  - Eg. But how do I trust Muslims when they all lie for their faith. (“taqiya”).

- Etc, etc, etc
I Sarah Snyder: Interfaith and Reconciliation – address to diocesan interfaith advisors.  

II Wikipedia lists some 70 major EDL demonstrations.  

III The main demonstrations in Luton since the March 10 2009 riot have been: 
- United People of Luton -- April 2009 (200); May 2009 (550). 
- EDL – banned /aborted demos in August / Sept 2009; July 2010 (100); Feb 2011 (planning for 12,000, on the day 5-6,000); May 2012 (2-3,000); August 2013 (250); November 2014 (400); Dec 2014 (10). 
- Britain First -- June 2015; Jan 2016 (30), unannounced; Feb 2016 (20), unannounced.

IV See attached document “LCoM and CTL statement May 2009” also available at  
https://www.dropbox.com/s/jekdfbeqbdac4Io/LCoM%20and%20CTL%20statement%20%20May%202009.pdf?dl=0

V English Defence League, Britain First and others in the counter jihad movement have based their campaign on the narrative of an inevitable clash of civilisations, especially expecting war between Muslims and Christian cultures and faiths. The EDL from its beginning used the symbols of the crusades; much of the counter jihad movement go much further and believe in the model of the crusades as guiding how we should deal with Muslims. For Clash of Civilisations narrative see the article in Wikipedia or read the 1993 paper by Samuel Huntington. The Clash of Civilizations is a theory that people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world. It became not only a theory but the game plan of many of the neo-conservatives that guided the foreign policy during George W Bush’s presidency (2000-2008), and especially thinking behind the “war on terror.”

VI Luton Council of Faiths   https://www.lutonfaiths.org/

VII Without opportunity to train people, we restricted our recruitment to known and recognised leaders or others who had accountability structures for their work to ensure nonviolent behaviour when in the face of opposition, etc.

VIII See attached document with text of an article from Church Times 1st June 2012 “The Firm Fair and Friendly Police”, written by a young curate who served as a community mediator.  
https://www.dropbox.com/s/1sy8vlwqcyuknf/Community%20Mediation%20in%20EDL%20articles%20and%20letters%20June%202012.pdf?dl=0

IX People in demonstrations operated at their own risk, though they had previously identified themselves to police commanders with the hope they would be able to be released in the event of containment tactics.

X Open Letter to Britain First can be found at https://www.dropbox.com/s/ystemwblvri7zf99/Luton%20Churches%20Open%20Letter%20to%20Britain%20First.pdf?dl=0

XI