

# Promoting “A Culture of Encounter”

November 2019 – February 2020

an initiative of the East of England Faiths Agency



## ***“The Walking Madonna”***

*A photograph of the sculpture by Elizabeth Frink  
which is positioned outside Salisbury Cathedral.*

*Mary, as an older woman, is shown striding purposefully away from the cathedral. It is a thought-provoking symbol which can challenge us to set out from our comfort zones and embark on journeys with an open heart and mind, not knowing whom we might meet along the way.*



## INTRODUCTION

Nearly 20 years ago the nation was celebrating the Millennium. Many events were arranged around the UK, including a multi-faith service in St Paul's Cathedral. There was much joy openly expressed and an enthusiasm for working together for the common good.

This was spelt out in the following statement which was first read on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2000 at a Shared Act of Reflection and Commitment, held at the Palace of Westminster, for Faith Communities of the United Kingdom.

**In a world scarred by the evils of war, racism, injustice and poverty, we offer this Joint Act of Commitment as we look to our shared future:**

*We commit ourselves,  
As people of many faiths,  
To work together  
For the common good,  
Uniting to build a better society,  
Grounded in values and ideals we share.*

*Community,  
Personal integrity,  
A sense of right and wrong,  
Learning, wisdom and love of truth,  
Care and compassion, justice and peace, Respect for one another, For the  
earth and its creatures.*

*We commit ourselves,  
In a spirit of friendship and co-operation,  
To work together  
alongside all who share our values and ideals,  
To help bring about a better world  
Now and for generations to come.*

**We need to recapture the enthusiasm expressed at the new millennium celebrations and endeavour to inspire the next generation.**

## THEN AND NOW

A personal reflection by Cynthia Capey

In our current times, as a society, we are continually being challenged to build community cohesion. But this cannot be enforced top down and it is certainly not something which the political elite currently exemplify. It has to be actively striven for at all levels and it can only come about through openness to, and embracing of, “the other” - through transforming relationships in a culture of encounter. People of faith are needed to fully engage with this process and to give a lead.

Since Pope Francis was consecrated in 2013, 6 years ago, he has been calling people to embrace “A Culture of Encounter”. These words of his resonate with me and remind me that I, an Anglican, went with my Catholic friend, Loris Squirrell, to the launch of “Meeting God in Friend and Stranger” at Westminster Cathedral in 2010. This was an inspirational project from the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.

Living in openness to “the other”, learning to be “two-eyed” as Bishop John Robinson expressed in his book “Truth is Two-eyed”, needs to be lived out in localities by committed lay people. Some of them make it their life’s work and they do bring about a real change in their communities. They are prepared to step outside their comfort zones and to be totally open to others.

Loris’ tireless efforts to promote good inter-faith relations were recognised by the Pope with the award of a Benemerenti Medal and by the Queen with an M.B.E. I have met people from many different faiths who have made similar contributions to their communities. Sadly though, they are in the minority and when they retire, move away or die their legacy is often lost.

The many local inter-faith groups which have sprung up over the last 40 years and more, supported by the Inter Faith Network UK, and various other national groups and networks, have generally been driven by the passion and vision of individuals and for a time were encouraged and sometimes funded through the government’s diversity agenda. Many of these initiatives are now struggling to survive and there is a danger that, like the Ecumenical Movement, they will lose their vision and sense of commitment

## **A PROJECT FOR “TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS IN A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER” 2019-2020**

There are resources which have been produced in the East of England which are being used to draw in more people to this process and to reinvigorate existing endeavours. The East of England Faiths Agency (EEFA) inherited two of them from Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE). They are the Diversity game and SIFRE’s last book “Sharing our Stories”.

EEFA has made these resources available, free of charge, to support a project which is running from Inter Faith Week UK November 10-17th 2019 to World Interfaith Harmony Week in February 1-7th 2020.

In outline, people throughout the UK are being invited to play Diversity during Inter Faith Week, in order to gain some basic knowledge about faiths practised in the UK and to consider various challenges which face us all as we try to live together in our increasingly multi-faith, multi-cultural society.

“Sharing our Stories” is a collection of over 50 personal stories, highlighting the rich tapestry of faiths present in Suffolk. We hope that it will encourage people to step out of their comfort zones to meet people of different faiths or none in their own neighbourhood and to record and describe their experiences. We hope that we will receive accounts of these by World Interfaith Harmony Week so that we can collate and share them.

Some faith groups are already at ease meeting people of different faiths and offering hospitality; others are less comfortable. We are happy to say that we have identified many groups and individuals around the UK who are prepared to act as hosts or local contacts. Through them we hope to reach many local communities. You can identify them and make contact through our EEFA website. [www.eefa.net](http://www.eefa.net)

**“Let there be one community**

**Calling to good and bidding to honour and forbidding dishonour”**

*Qur’an, Surah3.104*

## COMMUNITY

O mankind! We created you from a single pair of male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that you might know each other. Verily the most honoured among you in the sight of God is he who is most righteous.

*(Islam: Qur'an 49.13)*

Ye are all the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye with one another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship. So powerful is the light of unity that it can illumine the whole earth.

*(Baha'i Faith: Gleanings 132)*

Let your aims be common and your hearts be off one accord, and all of you be of one mind, so ye may live well together.

*(Hinduism: Rig Veda 10.19124)*

You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

*(Judaism: Leviticus 19.18)*

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.

*(Christianity: 1 John 4.7-8)*

Whoever harms another being, seeking his own happiness, will find no happiness hereafter.

*(Buddhism: Dhammapada 13)*

Do as you will but hurt none.

*(Paganism: Fundamental principle.)*

Religion consisteth not in mere words; he who looketh on all men as equal is religious.

*(Sikhism: Guru Nanak)*

Remember your humanity and forget the rest.

*(Humanism: Bertrand Russell)*

*Readings used at the Ipswich Mayor's Celebration of Community*

*on 7 March 1999*

## HOSPITALITY

In parts of the ancient world the stranger and fugitive were treated as honoured guests. The altar of a temple and the hearth of a home were places where people could claim absolute refuge and safety. It was believed to be a sacred duty to receive, lodge and protect the helpless stranger. Stories were told about the gods coming to earth to visit mankind and woe befell those who failed to give them hospitality. The same attitude prevailed in ancient Israel and among the Celtic peoples.

The ancient Greek word for stranger also meant guest. The classical Latin for stranger "hospes" (from which we get hospitality) also meant host or guest. So, we have in Europe a great tradition to follow.

However, there was an alternative way of seeing strangers which has also been handed on by the Romans and illustrated by Latin vocabulary- the stranger is the enemy, the one who is to be feared, marginalised, cast out and even to be destroyed. This is a more sinister tradition, one which seems to be prevailing in Britain today, as well as in other European states. It is an attitude which prepares the ground for holocaust.

We are at a critical moment in history, a time when each local community, and every individual must make a significant choice between these two attitudes. Fortunately, we have the benefit of the wisdom of the great faiths to inspire us.

Are strangers, newcomers, refugees and asylum seekers welcome into our hearts, our homes, our communities, our religious buildings?

Do we respect and value the person who is different?

Are we prepared to be changed by the encounter?

Are we prepared to take risks?

Are we prepared to give ourselves, whatever the cost?

*This was the theme of the Ipswich Mayor's Celebration of Community  
on 11 March 2001*

## REFLECTIONS ON RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

All religions share a common root, which is limitless compassion. They emphasize human improvement, love, respect for others, and compassion for the suffering of others. In so far as love is essential in every religion, we could say that love is a universal religion. But the various techniques and methods for developing love differ widely between the traditions. I don't think there could ever be just one single philosophy or one single religion. Since there are so many different types of people, with a range of tendencies and inclinations, it is quite fitting that there are differences between religions. And the fact that there are so many different descriptions of the religious path shows how rich religion is.

*H.H. The 14th Dalai Lama*

There was a time when I used to reject those who were not of my faith.  
Now my heart has grown capable of taking on all forms,  
A pasture for gazelles, a convent for Christians,  
A temple for idols, a Ka'ba for the pilgrim,  
A table for the Torah, a book of the Koran.  
My religion is love.  
Whichever the route love's caravan shall take,  
That path shall be the path of my faith.

*Ibn'Arabi (1165-1240)*

Spirituality is not merely tolerance. It is not even acceptance. It is the feeling of a universal oneness. In our spiritual life, we look upon the Divine not only in terms of our own God, but in terms of everybody else's God. Our spiritual life firmly and securely establishes the basis of unity in diversity. Spirituality is not hospitality to other's faith in God. It is the absolute recognition of the other's faith in God as one's own.

*Sri Chinmoy*

When a man appears before the throne of the judgement the first question, he is asked is not  
"Have you believed in God?" or "Have you prayed and fulfilled the precepts?"  
but "Have you dealt honourably and faithfully in all your dealings with your neighbour?"

*Talmud, Shabbat 31*

And who is my neighbour?  
The one who showed him kindness.

*Luke 10, 25-37*



## BACK TO THE BEGINNING

The photograph of the Walking Madonna at the beginning of “Sharing our Stories” is a very powerful symbol, which can pose many unanswered questions for the modern visitor. Did Mary just visit the cathedral? Will she return? Will she be visiting other places of worship? Does she have an agenda? Is she on a mission? Is she touring the city? Is she meeting important people, or will she be open to chance encounters in the streets, the shops and the market places? Wherever she goes, in Salisbury, as in Ipswich, she is likely to encounter people of many faiths and of none.

On the SIFRE board game Diversity, as in “Sharing our Stories”, we can learn about Bahá’ís, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Humanists, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Pagans, Sikhs, Taoists and Zoroastrians, but there are far more people on faith journeys outside those categories than within them. Many people in the UK have dropped out of organised religion while others are wanting to explore the spiritual dimension of life, perhaps for the first time.

We can read books or Google for information, yet every day we are presented with opportunities to meet real people from different backgrounds and with experiences different to our own. Can we greet them with open hearts and minds as fellow travellers on the journey of life? Do we appreciate that we need these encounters for our own growth and maturity?

“We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring is to arrive where we first started and to know the place for the first time!”

*Extract from Four Quartets by T.S.Eliot.*

*INTER-FAITH MEETING IS A LITTLE LIKE A DANCE*

*TENTATIVE, LEARNING THE STEPS,  
TRUSTING, MOVING CLOSER*

*STRUCTURED AND TRADITIONAL  
THEN HARMONIOUS, IMPROVISATIONAL*

*TRANSFORMING*

*AS OUR DANCE ON EARTH*

*BEGINS TO REFLECT THE ETERNAL DANCE*



## WAITING FOR THE LAST BUS HOME

This painting of Richard Dawkins and Rowan Williams by Simon Morriss was on display in the Parish Church in Cirencester. The artist gave his permission for it to be reproduced in EEFA's publications. He was delighted to hear how it resonated with SIFRE and EEFA's work.



**“Waiting for the Last Bus Home”**

Simon Morriss, 2012, Acrylic on canvas, 200 x 160 cm

*Simon Morriss* ([www.simonmorriss.com](http://www.simonmorriss.com))