

Talk to the London Boroughs Faiths Network 28 February, 2013

My brief: *CR: Would you be able to say something about your years at LCG and how you feel things have changed (within the churches and also the context – government policy, etc), the social action angle and the involvement of different religious communities? If possible, it would be good to meet at Central Hall. Not a huge long speech, maybe 10 mins, but it would be great to hear your reflections on being at the centre of things for a considerable time.*

Focus on London

The beginning - 1999 – 2000

London (Census 2001) 7.1m population, 75% said they had a faith, 58% said Christian (77% of people of faith); 16% said no religion and 8.5 % said Muslim (11% of people of faith). 58% said they were white British and 27% had been born abroad

With the benefit of hindsight London I think London was in a **FEVER of activity**.

Labour Government (elected 1997) in power and full of drive and initiatives.

Single Regeneration Budgets

Neighbourhood Renewal: Among several **novel references** in the 2000 Strategy to the role of **faith communities** was that *regeneration programmes would need to change....to promote community and voluntary sector involvement, especially from ethnic communities, women and faith communities, who have often missed out in the past* (para. 27).

The Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan in 2001 established **Local Strategic Partnerships**.

We had the **Millennium** and the Dome and its Faith and Spirit Zone.

2000 Greater London Authority came into being with an elected Mayor (Ken Livingstone) and 25 person Assembly. In a **novel development** the GLA Act 1999 required the Mayor, in exercising his general powers, to consider consulting, among others, “bodies which represent the interests of different **religious groups** in Greater London”. To help fulfil this the GLA established a multi-faith stakeholder group in May 2000, the Pan London Advisory Group on Faiths.

ES joined the development group for the **Civic Forum** project in July 2000 and the Forum was launched by, among others, the Bishop of London in September 2000. I was a signatory to a Civic Forum SRB bid in 2000 to increase the involvement of minority ethnic and faith communities in London civic government and was part of the steering group for the faith development strand of the project from its inception. It was from that group that the work to develop a **Faiths Forum for London** developed. It was a slow sometimes very frustrating haul but as you know the Faiths Forum was finally launched in March 2010.

In October 2002 the first meeting of the **London Boroughs Faiths Network** was held. This was initiated by Revd Steven Saxby and involved Steve Miller and ES from the beginning.

Faith engagement

This apparent recognition from the government and the GLA gave the churches (and other faiths) lots of energy to engage with the new GLA.

The London Church Leaders held Hustings for the GLA elections – 1800 people came to the 2000 Hustings in St Paul's Cathedral.

We had a working group to study the **Mayor's strategies** on a London Plan, Economic Development, Transport, environment plans (several) and Culture; we consulted experts and then wrote our comments. In the light of the financial crash in 2007/8 you may be interested in what we said about the Mayor's vision in his draft London Plan (2002) *The draft Plan seems to have bought uncritically the values and aspirations of the financial and business sectors and associated architects and developers. . . . We regard the statement in the Mayor's vision that "any attempt to hold back London's growth would....decrease the quality of life..." as grotesque.* We think we achieved the insertion of the word 'social justice' in the final London Plan, which also recognised the need to provide worship centres as part of community infrastructure in new housing developments but in general it has been difficult to discern any other result from all our comments and meetings with GLA bodies.

But after a while the Mayor lost interest in meetings with his faiths advisory group. He increasingly bypassed the mainstream churches, though there was continued engagement with minority ethnic church leaders and I think also with those of some other faiths. Broadly speaking this has also been true of Livingstone's successor, Boris Johnson. As a result, a significant and growing part of my work has been to articulate the role religion plays in expressing and supporting values for the common good and of what faith groups, and in particular the churches, contribute to London and its local communities. This has been supported by **quantitative surveys** carried out to demonstrate the social and community action of faith groups. Croydon led the way but regionally it was the London Churches Group's groundbreaking survey in 2002, conducted in partnership with Greater London Enterprise, *Regenerating London: Faith communities and social action* which inspired and was a model for similar surveys in the other English Regions. We are planning shortly to publish a new survey to build on this work.

It is disrespectful, ignorant and counterproductive to treat the different faiths (and indeed traditions within faiths) as though they are indistinguishable from each other, whether in belief, organisation, resources, history in this country etc. As the Report 'Faithful Cities' put it in 2006 *the failure to realise that mosques, gurdwaras, temples and Pentecostal missions are not organised on the Anglican parish model adds to the official's problems of locating people with whom he can 'do business'.*

What about social issues? Looking back, these were the boom years. Some of the big issues in the eighties – poverty and unemployment for example - lost profile both in government and the voluntary and faith sector. Social action was in many ways being replaced by community development. **Immigration**, refugees and asylum seekers – and related issues of community cohesion became an increasing focus and so did **international issues** such as trade and debt justice, make poverty history. After 9/11 and the London bombs in 2005 there was also an increasing focus on **security and community resilience**. However one social problem steadily grew in importance in London throughout these years: **housing**. As demand and prices have grown it has become increasingly difficult for Londoners to find affordable housing. Neither the GLA nor central government have really faced up to this.

So where are we now?

Boom has given way to bust and cuts in expenditure, and poverty seems to be rising. Certainly the increase in food banks and their use suggests this. Benefit changes and housing benefit caps are putting pressure on the many people who depend on benefits and tax credits. And churches and other faith groups are becoming increasingly engaged and responding to the evidence of growing need, both in meeting needs and campaigning for changes in policy.

And this really brings me to my conclusion from all this and to a personal reflection.

Governments come and go, as do their policies, initiatives and funding offers. We must engage but 'sup with a long spoon'. By this I mean that we must not expect too much nor give up too much integrity. I look back now and wonder quite how much all that engagement has achieved – that responding to consultations, lobbying, meetings . . . of course one never knows. The Labour administration came and went (and will no doubt return). The London Civic Forum closed at the end of 2012. Other Forums dependent on government funding have closed.

But actually, I don't think we stand or fall by engagement with government bodies whether national, regional or local. The great strength of the faiths, the church, is that we don't come and go, we stay. We are present in every community – maybe not doing much in terms of meeting local needs but often even our little is more than most other bodies in the area (to the extent that there are any outside the public sector) are doing. We may take government money in the good times – if we can get it – but at the core we find our funding from our own resources and are significantly self-sustaining. A recent survey in Northwest Region showed that while other voluntary projects were having to retract or close because of funding cuts, some of the faith –based projects were actually finding more money, from their own resources, to meet the increased demand. It is satisfying to be recognised and supported by government but we can manage without and continue to contribute in the community.

Look at **Citizens and the Living Wage** – Citizens' success is based on patient, step by step developing relationships within the community so that members are empowered to act collectively to influence events. Living Wage is now a mainstream fact.

Back to the Census

2011 Census London has 8.2m population, 71% said they had a faith, 48% said Christian (68 % of people of faith); 21% said no religion and 12 % said Muslim (17.5 % of people of faith). 45% said they were white British and 37 % had been born abroad.

This marks **unprecedented change** – we simply do not know yet what the ultimate effect on British life may be.

BUT London has actually coped remarkably well so far in our community relations and the LBFN, the Faiths Forum for London and London Citizens are testaments to that. So we have **challenges** ahead but also a lot of **hope**.

Elizabeth Simon
Executive Officer (retiring), London Church Leaders
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