

The Shap working party on World Religions in Education



Brian Pearce



In the autumn of 1984 I took a leave of absence from the civil service to launch an informal exploration of ways to enhance the profile of inter faith activity in the UK and to strengthen the links between those involved in this. As a result, I found myself taking part in a series of wide ranging conversations, which eventually led to the formation in the spring of 1987 of the Inter Faith Network for the UK. Creating a new organisational vehicle had not been the project's original intention, but the desire for this emerged very strongly in the course of a number of consultative gatherings. From the outset it was envisaged that national and local inter faith bodies would be member bodies of it. Two interesting additions were embodied in its finally agreed structure. These were, firstly, the coming together into direct membership of representative faith community organisations (although from the outset it had been hoped to have their support and encouragement for the new venture); and, secondly, a membership category for educational and academic bodies.

It became clear in the initial conversations in which I and others were involved what a significant role was being played by people involved in religious education and by academics active in the field of religious diversity and the study of individual religious traditions, and what a rich resource this was for inter faith activity. Indeed, in many areas it was RE teachers who led the way in making contact with newly arrived faith communities as resources for their own work in schools, often going on to help in the creation of local inter faith initiatives in their areas.



The Shap Working Party, a great pioneer of multi faith RE in its early days, became a founder member body of the Inter Faith Network and has remained in membership until now. It is, of course, in itself a multi faith body. I recall that initially some of its members were concerned that joining the Network might in some way jeopardise its academic independence, but I hope that all its members, past and present, would agree that those fears proved to be unjustified. Certainly the Inter Faith Network has gained enormously from Shap's participation and I believe that there was a reciprocal benefit in drawing its work - including its invaluable calendar and other resources - to the attention of a wider range of organisations and individuals.

Finally, rather than picking out specific occasions, I would simply like to put on record my personal indebtedness to Shap members for all that I, as an outsider in terms of the RE world, learned from them and my gratitude for the friendships I made along the way.

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