

The Inter Faith Network (UK) and NASACRE

In their separate contexts and roles, the Inter Faith Network(UK) and NASACRE have each sought to engage positively and constructively with the increasing religious diversity of our society. Both organisations have origins in the growing awareness from the 1960s onwards that the country was becoming religiously (and ethnically) more diverse through the migration into the UK of significant numbers of people from non-Christian faith communities, a trend which has continued down to the present day. The implications of these changes have been quite profound, and reactions to them among existing UK citizens have predictably been very mixed, ranging from benign, but perhaps rather patronising and naïve liberal inclusiveness to defiant xenophobic hostility.

By the 1980s, local interfaith groups had been forming across the country, and RE in schools had become a battleground between 'Christianity-only' traditionalists and 'multi-faith' progressives. In 1987, the national Inter Faith Network(UK) was formally constituted, and in 1988 the landmark Education Reform Act was passed. This Act not only established SACREs as statutory bodies, but also redefined the role and content of RE in a formula which still governs RE in state schools, requiring all new RE syllabuses to recognise and study other principal faiths alongside Christianity. Following a series of informal SACRE Forums in the wake of the 1988 Act, NASACRE itself was formally launched in 1993.

Since then, the two organisations have led separate but overlapping lives, in a rapidly evolving and shifting public arena. NASACRE became a member of the IFN(UK) soon after its own launch, finding an apparently natural home for itself in the IFN's Educational & Academic membership category. However, NASACRE is "*sui generis*"; it is not really comparable to anything else in the RE or interfaith worlds, and its unique nature, importance and potential contribution are to some degree muffled and misrepresented by its being included in this membership category alongside academic RS departments and professional RE bodies. Nevertheless, NASACRE has played a key role in some significant developments within and beyond the IFN.

The break-up of the normal way of doing things

Both the IFN and NASACRE began their lives under a consensus as to which religions or religious groups deserved to be recognised and related to. The IFN's constitution specified six major religious traditions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism) and three minor religious traditions (Baha'i, Jainism and Zoroastrianism). In the case of NASACRE, SACREs were subject to the guidance for RE given in the 1988 Act, which referred to "Christianity and the other principal religions" represented in the country. These 'other religions' were never spelt out, but it was universally accepted that they were the same as those in the IFN's Big Six.

For many years, there became an established pattern of engagement between the larger religious groups, until cracks began to appear in the edifice through challenges from two different quarters. On the one hand, Humanists began a determined and astute campaign to achieve recognition and parity for Humanism and other secular stances in the field of religious affairs, deploying human rights legislation to this end. On the other hand, smaller religious groups that were excluded from the big conversations began to make their voices and claims increasingly heard and difficult to ignore. These groups included additional religious denominations independent of the normative six (or nine in the IFN's longer list) and also offshoots of the larger religions which were sometimes

regarded as heretical or breakaway movements and therefore subject to anathematisation by the mainstream group in question.

By design or good fortune, the legislation for SACREs contained a mechanism which enabled them to respond to these pressures more readily than the IFN, so that SACREs -and NASACRE - found themselves at the sharp end of developments, and took the lead in recognising additional groups. A SACRE's religious membership is not precisely defined in law; it is to be determined by the local authority, having regard to local as well as national circumstances. Moreover, SACREs can co-opt non-voting members who may otherwise speak and contribute freely. Through this flexibility, Pagans, Humanists, Druids, Mormons, Spiritualists and others began to appear in various SACREs around the country. (The inclusion of Humanists has not been without controversy; it is still a matter of dispute in places.)

In contrast, the IFN had no room for manoeuvre constitutionally. After a torrid period of sniping at the establishment by disaffected representatives on behalf of excluded groups, the IFN set about a strategic review of its aims, objectives and constitution, a review which would have been undertaken anyway in preparation for the IFN's Silver Jubilee, but which was given added urgency by the challenges to the established membership. Arising from this review (to which NASACRE contributed significantly) the IFN has revised its constitution so as to provide a channel by which additional religious groups could become members. However, the process is seen by some as laborious and slow, reluctant rather than welcoming. Unlike SACREs, the process does not yet allow for explicit Humanist representation.

The loss of status for the Big Six can be linked more widely to the loss of the social status for the Church of England, and for Christianity in general – as seen in the 2011 Census. Whereas the default position for an ordinary citizen in the past would have been 'Church of England/Christian' if they were nothing else, the default position now is that of having no professed religious identity at all. This is not the same as someone being avowedly atheistic, but it does represent a seismic shift in the public context. It is a shift by which no one ideology or faith now has the right or the power to exclude or to look down on any other. This is an uneasy equilibrium; individuals and groups still have to find ways of co-existing and collaborating with those they have habitually found abhorrent, if they are to move forward together inclusively.

The local scene

At the local level, SACREs and local interfaith groups exist side by side, often relating to the same faith communities and serving the same local populations, but having different roles, remits and categories of membership. Outside the world of schools and education (sometimes even within that world) SACREs are largely invisible, and their existence and activity are largely not known and not understood. Nevertheless, by their composition they have an inter-faith character, and their work involves them in engaging with inter-faith issues and negotiating multi-faith RE syllabuses with local faith community representatives. Questions therefore are bound to arise - and have arisen - around how local inter-faith groups and local SACREs relate to each other.

Recognising the need to explore this situation, the IFN and NASACRE carried out an important survey exercise in 2008-9 culminating in a joint seminar *Working Together for Understanding and Community Cohesion*. Contexts, opportunities and experiences varied widely across the country,

but some general themes and recommendations emerged: better mutual understanding and awareness between SACREs and local inter-faith groups, better communications and sharing of information, support for each other's initiatives, and mounting joint projects. The collective wisdom contained in the seminar's report is still massively relevant, and is worth revisiting regularly, by both SACREs and local inter-faith groups, and at a national level as well as locally.

Since 2009, however, there has been a general decline in the buoyancy and capacity of the SACRE world through financial squeezes imposed on local authorities, as a result of which many SACREs have lost or reduced the services of an RE adviser, much or all of their budget and/or the administrative support from the local authority. SACREs have had to focus on fulfilling their core responsibilities and using their limited capacities as shrewdly and creatively as possible. In spite of these constraints, SACREs as a whole remain very much 'in business' and frequently have been able to sustain good collaborative relations with local inter-faith groups.

Including young people

Pupils at school are very much the ultimate 'consumers' of the work carried out by SACREs and by NASACRE, but it is inevitable that the membership of SACREs and of NASACRE should be made up entirely of adults, and often older adults at that. Keeping pupils in mind is therefore a priority for SACREs as they carry out their statutory tasks and engage in formal meetings. In the past, SACREs have been able to sponsor various initiatives involving pupils: RE Youth Forums, Youth Councils, RE Conferences, Youth SACREs, Young Faith Ambassadors, 'Pupil Voice' consultative groups and the like. The programme of Westhill/NASACRE Awards to SACREs for projects with schools has enabled many such commendable developments to get off the ground. Some of this good work goes on.

In the inter-faith context, the 2002 Young People's Faith Forum arranged as part of the Queen's Golden Jubilee, proved a major stimulus in prompting the emergence of various groups involving young people as inter-faith practitioners in their own right. One might comment that in earlier years there had perhaps been a tendency to perceive inter-faith engagement as being exclusively for adults who had acquired a depth of life-experience and maturity. This perception needed to be challenged, not least because many young people were already responding to inter-faith situations in their daily lives. A notable event took place when the IFN linked its launch of InterFaith Week 2014 with a celebration of interfaith activity developed by and with young people: *Young Voices, Young Agents for Change*.

Both NASACRE and the IFN have sought to be inclusive towards young people at their high profile Annual Meetings, through showcasing examples of projects and of good practice. Such arrangements are desirable but not always practicable, and time is often at a premium in these meetings. The challenge in our organisations, to be inclusive towards young people, remains.

Looking ahead

The relationship between NASACRE and the IFN has been both fruitful and necessary, in the context of an evolving religious diversity in our society and of an increasing concern to promote community cohesion. Both organisations have faced hard challenges in recent years, and the ongoing squeeze on government funding will have serious implications for both bodies. A further

factor for SACREs and NASACRE is the government's stated policy to turn all state schools into academies. On the face of it, this would ultimately leave SACREs - and perforce NASACRE - without a role or a rationale for existing. However, this is not the whole story.

SACREs have emerged from the initial shock of government cuts and academisation with a renewed determination to continue serving the schools and pupils in their locality, promoting excellence in the delivery of religious education, and working collaboratively with local faith communities, for as long as they are able. They are being actively supported and championed in this by NASACRE. In the short term this shared resolve will prevail. In the longer term, SACREs and NASACRE will be keeping a watchful eye on developments and will look to find the most constructive ways of feeding their unique experience and expertise into the mix, and of participating in the processes of change.

Flowing from the radical formula of the 1988 Education Act, all pupils in state-funded schools have been gaining insight into a range of religions and belief systems for nearly three decades. This is a major contribution to the inter-faith arena, whether or not it leads to any structured inter-faith dialogue, as such, in later Key Stages. This contribution will continue; it is vital that it is recognised as such and properly affirmed and supported. NASACRE's partnership with the IFN is part of this ongoing dynamic. The two organisations will maintain their symbiotic existence, sharing, stimulating, celebrating, helping with their respective members to shape the future of our society.

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