Maidstone Interfaith Network Chair’s Report

Rev Dr Bonni-Belle Pickard

November 2024

**Introduction**

In 2024, Maidstone Interfaith Network continued its work to promote better understanding of various faith traditions amongst the Maidstone community and to facilitate good working together amongst persons of different faiths. Though the group has remained relatively small, it has still been very active throughout the year, particularly in its work with local schools and the World Religion Day programme. New members are always sought and welcomed.

**World Religion Day**

MIFN’s largest event of the year coincided with World Religion Day in January. The event, entitled ‘Peace and Faith,’ took place at the County Hall on Monday, 22 January, with representatives and contributions from Christianity (Anglican, Methodist, Christian Science), Islam, Judaism, and Bahá’í groups. A Hindu prayer was also included in the programme. The KCC Chair, Cllr Gary Cooke chaired the event which included choral selections performed by the Maidstone Choral Union and an Art Competition for young people. The Mayor, Cllr Gordon Newton, and Mayoress of Maidstone were in attendance with the Mayor giving a brief reflection on World Religion Day. MIFN provided refreshments after the programme, which provided a good opportunity for conversations among the participants and those who attended. A local charity supporting foster and adoption care had a display after the programme. New pop-up banners and business cards had been arranged and added to the professionalism of the event. Funding for the event came from the Creative Communities grant from Maidstone Borough Council.

**School Visits**

During the year, MIFN members provided assemblies and/or classroom lessons for Maidstone Grammar School for Girls, Cornwallis Academy, St Augustine Academy, Langley Park Primary, and Allington Primary. These presentations ranged from interactive lessons on festivals from various faith traditions (Divali, Christmas, Hannukah, etc) to debates on Death and Dying and a panel discussion on ‘Can the UK be considered a Christian country?’ All of the programmes met with considerable interest from the students, though the general level of knowledge about any faith traditions was very low. Many thanks to MIFN who provided these programmes voluntarily!

**Community involvement**

Opportunities to be involved in the community apart from the schools included contacts with HMP Maidstone and Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust. We also worked with the Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust by participating in one of their workshops to discuss religion and its impact on health as part of their Healthy Communities project.

**Members’ meetings**

Meetings of MIFN members were held approximately every second month, either on Zoom or at the Christian Science Reading Room or the home of David and Jackie Grant. Each meeting began with members sharing readings and quotations from their faith traditions; these proved to be a valuable time of hearing from and appreciating the richness of the diverse religious texts as well as setting the tone for mutual respect and cooperation during the business part of the meetings.

**National Interfaith situation**

2024 sadly saw the closure of the National Interfaith group in April after an unfortunate dispute with the UK government over the group’s inclusion of a particular Muslim organisation. A letter of support was sent to the national group expressing dismay at the government decision. MIFN has since sought to find other national or international umbrella groups which might help in connecting further, but no final decision on this has been made.

**Social media/Website**

MIFN’s website and X (formerly Twitter) accounts have been maintained by David and Jackie Grant respectively, so that others can find out about MIFN activities. While these do not generate heavy traffic, they do remain important windows for the outside community.

**Plans for 2025**

An interfaith event highlighting Peace and Creation is being planned for March 2025 as a follow-up to 2024’s World Religion Day -- with high hopes for good interaction with the community. The event funding has come through a Creative Communities grant of £2000 from Maidstone Borough Council. Cultural performances will be the highlight of the programme.

**Officers**

As the Chair of MIFN for the past year, I have been ably supported by the members, especially David Grant as the Secretary, Nicky Younosi as Vice-Chair and contact for several of the community organisations, Jackie Grant as contact for several of the schools and X account manager, Peter Snell as Treasurer, and Gordon Mackley as eager helper for whatever needs doing! My deep appreciation to each of these.

Bonni-Belle Pickard