

KINGSTON STANDING ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

14 MARCH 2007

KINGSTON INTER FAITH FORUM / KINGSTON SACRE YOUTH CONFERENCE
28 FEBRUARY 2007: "LIFE, DEATH, WAR, PEACE, POLITICS, MONEY, SEX, VALUES, FAITH –
WHATEVER..."

REPORT BY THE CONFERENCE CO-ORDINATOR AND CLERK OF THE SACRE

SUMMARY

1. The Kingston Inter Faith Forum (KIFF) and Kingston Standing Advisory Council for RE worked with Kingston Council for about a year on planning the inter faith conference for local sixth formers held on 28/2/07, having been awarded funding for this from the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund (from the Cohesion and Faiths Unit within the Government Department for Communities and Local Government) administered by the Community Development Foundation.
2. Volunteers for the working group to plan the conference were sought from the KIFF on 12 December 2005 and from the SACRE on 22 March 2006 and the working group comprised:

KIFF: Sydney Assor (Chair of Surrey Three Faiths Forum and member of Kingston & District Synagogue; Reverend Stan Brown (Vice Chair Inter Faith Forum and Ecumenical Chaplain of Kingston University) (elected **Chair** of the Working Group), Lally Malik (resigned after not having been able to attend several meetings), and Fleur Standring (Kingston Liberal Synagogue)

SACRE: Maria James (Chair of the SACRE, representing local evangelical churches), Marilyn Mason (Conference Coordinator, and also coopted member representing a humanist perspective)

RB Kingston: Graham Mann-Smith (Kingston Youth Services), Jean Cousens (Democratic Support).

The organisers would wish to place on record their thanks to all the members of the working group (who met in May, July, October and November 2006 and in February 2007 to plan the event) and in particular to Reverend Stan Brown who steered the project with clarity and sensitivity.

3. One of the original elements of the bid was that the event should be held in the south of the borough because it is a little remote from Kingston town centre so its schools do not have such easy access to these kind of events and opportunities. There were three schools in the south of the borough, in particular, to which invitations were initially extended to participate.
4. The proposal for a youth conference had originally arisen out of the discussion at the SACRE meeting in March 2005 when the SACRE started to consider how to increase participation of young people in the annual lecture event. A proposal to seek grant funding for a joint event with Kingston Inter Faith Forum was agreed at the June 2005 meeting.

D2

5. Schools are statutorily required to offer RE to sixth formers but schools often have difficulty in implementing this. Inter faith dialogue is a new topic in the new local RE syllabus and the aim was to give the borough's students an experience of inter faith dialogue. The National Association of SACREs dedicated an editorial and several articles in its newsletter in 2006 to the theme of inter faith dialogue and emphasized the important role of SACREs in encouraging this in schools. The event was built around the idea of providing a "Question Time" with a multi faith panel - enabling students from a range of local schools to work together on their own questions on (and responses to) the issues of the day - news stories with a religious or ethical theme being the chosen stimulus.
6. All students, teachers, panellists, chairs and facilitators received conference packs that included, as relevant stimulus, articles and materials, guidance, schedules, maps, information about the speakers and music, and extracts from Kingston RE syllabus, including self evaluation criteria. A Power Point slide show was created and used as a backdrop to the morning; multi ethnic / multi faith music was played during arrival, registration and breaks to build the atmosphere.
7. 80 students were booked in for the event. The schools attending were Coombe, Holy Cross, Marymount International, Richard Challoner and Tiffin Boys, supplemented by 6 members of Kingston Youth Council. The panellists were Reverend Lesley Charlton (Christian) ; the Venerable Phrakru Samu Lom (Buddhist); Marilyn Mason (humanist); Rabbi Danny Rich (Jewish; Chair of Kingston Inter Faith Forum); Charanjit Singh Makan (Sikh); and Imam Shahid Hussain (Muslim). The overall Chair of the morning was the Mayor of the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, Councillor Mary Reid, and the chair of the "Question Time" panel was local MP Edward Davey.
8. The questions put to the panel were on the ethics of stem cell research, asylum seekers, the fairness of tests for those applying for citizenship, faith schools, and homosexuals' rights. All were well chosen and potentially controversial questions with ethical / religious dimensions, and provoked thoughtful (or "mature", according to one student) answers – but not much disagreement among the panellists, who tended to be on the liberal side of their various groups. Panellists were careful to distinguish their personal views from those of their faith group where they differed, and disagreements between speakers were politely expressed.
9. In the group work that followed, some groups continued discussions on the issues raised in the "Question Time" (e.g. faith schools and homosexual rights) with raps, dialogues, discussions, posters and collages, while others worked on questions that the panel had not had time to answer (e.g. capital punishment, the "war on terror" / Iraq) . One group produced an impressive-looking collage on the theme "One world, many faiths" (one of the images in the backdrop presentation). In the brief time available, the students did well, though the results varied in quality. One teacher commented that they would have spun this out for weeks in school! The organisers notified participants that there would be opportunities for students to submit post-conference responses, for consideration for prizes, if they wished, to ensure quieter pupils would have opportunity to develop their ideas.
10. On 5 March Marilyn Mason attended a Community Development Foundation networking meeting for FCCBF-grant funded organisations and showed them the conference slide show. Jean Cousens has been invited to attend a seminar on 15

D3

March hosted by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion and Citizenship Foundation which has been convened to look at good practice in education to promote community cohesion.

SUCCESSSES

11. The conference was well attended, and gave 70+ young people in Kingston some valuable and stimulating encounters, beyond their normal school experience.
12. The student numbers involved made it an attractive proposition for the RBK Mayor and Edward Davey MP to chair, and for a good range of experienced panellists to participate. Both chairs were excellent (Councillor Mary Reid's background and skills in education of young people being clearly displayed), and contributed greatly to the debate and the smooth progress of the conference.
13. Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive (see selection of comments at end), with students appreciating hearing the views of "experts" as well as those of other students.
14. 75% of the feedback forms chose the "Question Time" as the most interesting part of the conference, and many of those would have liked it to have been longer, to consider more questions, possibly more concisely or possibly in more depth, and to provide more time for students to join in the discussion and respond to the panel's comments.
15. The "Question Time" format and the topical themes seem to have enabled discussion of issues (e.g. homosexual rights, faith schools) which students appeared not to have discussed or heard a range of opinions on previously.
16. Though many found the panel too uniformly liberal, others noticed real differences between the panellists and enjoyed answers which were new to them or unexpected. It is possible that some students misinterpreted politeness and charm as liberalism, as Imam Shahid Hussain in fact provided a fairly orthodox and conservative set of views.
17. Some students found it challenging to be put on the spot by the Chair during "Question Time", but most seem to have enjoyed being treated like adults in an adult debate.
18. A very small number found the panel discussion difficult to follow. 25% found the group work more interesting, though some found that challenging too.
19. The process of this project (the joint working between members of Kingston SACRE and KIFF) was a worthwhile experience in itself (and in accordance with the SACRE's Development Plan Partnership Working key action area 3.2) and we learnt more about each other.
20. Together we could provide more contacts and participants than we or local schools could have provided on their own. Tried and tested potential panellists (including several from the "Think in Kingston" 2006 festival panel) were chosen from a wide range of possibilities by the joint working group early in the process, and invitations

D4

to a diverse range of spokespersons were sent out early (and repeatedly – but see below).

21. The press photographers were well behaved and unobtrusive (Fleur Standing of KIFF undertook a press liaison role). (There were two well-chosen photographs and a brief item in *Kingston Informer*, 2/3/07, though it omitted SACRE involvement, but other local press coverage was not yet out at time of writing this report.)
22. We produced guidance and preparatory materials that may well be re-usable / adaptable to future events, and the conference itself produced student responses that could be used for further teaching / stimulus on inter faith dialogue.

WHAT WE LEARNT

23. More discussion of aims and objectives of the conference and precisely what we mean by “inter faith dialogue” might have been helpful right at the start, as it was occasionally a challenge to reconcile the RE objectives of the SACRE with the objectives of an inter faith forum not normally involved in education.
24. It wasn't easy (and possibly would not have been practicable anyway) to get a full cross-section of belief systems for the panel. Some minority faiths proved particularly difficult to recruit and there was not always an understanding of the organisers' need for deadlines and written confirmations and biographical information which resulted in uncertainty right up to the week of the conference as to who exactly would be on the panel. In the end the panel numbered six (and was slightly different from the panel described in the students' conference packs) but, despite the Conference coordinator's worries that this was too big for a good discussion, it worked very well, expertly chaired by Edward Davey MP.
25. There is a tension between being fully representative (and including all the diversity within faith groups) and providing a manageable discussion forum. There is also a tension between achieving a liveliness of debate arising from strongly opposing viewpoints and the finding of common ground between the faiths. In this context, it is a valuable lesson to show young people that people from very different faith groups can agree, or disagree calmly and politely, on many social and ethical issues, especially when RE often emphasises the traditional, the orthodox and the differences between religions and between the religious and the non-religious, and when the media focus so much on conflict and extreme views.
26. Getting schools together in order to give students experience of a good size conference and dialogue beyond their normal peer group proved difficult, as it involved taking sixth-formers out of their normal timetables, and possibly spending more time on General Studies / RE than they normally would. Making initial contact with classroom teachers when a direct email contact for the teacher is not yet known was particularly difficult. There was very little school response to the original consultation on the arrangements for the conference, and no particular views expressed on the draft programme or format. Only at a late stage, and after a robust approach to the secondary headteachers meeting, did schools begin to register their students, once the programme was fixed. Our initial worries about take-up were eventually laid to rest and in the end we were slightly overbooked. Even so, the schools we initially targeted did not participate.

27. All the above are understandable – people are busy, the conference was not necessarily anyone else’s priority – and no criticism of anyone is intended, but they did add to the organisational challenges.
28. Kingston has a fairly typical UK population profile, which means that some minority faiths are present in very small numbers. The student cohort reflected this, and so was not quite as diverse as we might have hoped, though the global perspectives of some who had lived in countries where the dominant religion created a very different lifestyle from that here, was very interesting to the others and relevant. Local Roman Catholic schools were substantially in the majority, which may reflect those schools’ greater interest in RE, and their students were amongst those who were surprised by the panel’s liberalism. On the whole, the students seem to have been more conservative in their attitudes than the panelists, and, amongst other things, students discovered on certain topics that the views of a young conservative Christian could be more similar to those of a middle aged conservative Muslim than to those of a liberal Christian. Panellists, helpers and facilitators helped to broaden the debate by being rather more diverse than the students.
29. Some adult facilitators found it difficult to take a back seat in the group discussions – possibly because they were so interesting, possibly because the adults were more articulate and better informed than the students. Something to watch in future, or is this inevitable, even useful? Requests had been included in notes to facilitators to encourage students to lead in the discussions
30. Some adults present (including the Mayor) and a few students felt that some students were a bit quiet and inhibited. A general ice-breaker at the very start, rather than the suggested group ice-breakers (which most didn’t use, I think), might have encouraged less reticence, more participation – or is this range of responses inevitable too? And it is important to recognize that a quiet response doesn’t mean that the student wasn’t listening and learning!
31. A venue large enough to enable group work and the panel discussion, as well as some less formal social interaction was a major cost. The morning’s timetable was a bit squeezed, and it’s possible that a whole day conference might have been more productive (some feedback suggested this) – but that would have cost even more. The King’s Centre proved a very good venue, the room and all arrangements worked well, the lunch packs were fine despite some student grumbles (predictable, I think) and the staff were very helpful. An initial site visit by the working group had been undertaken to ensure that all the different faith representatives were comfortable about an evangelical church community centre being chosen as the venue for the event.
32. It’s possible that our commitment to producing usable resources as well as an interesting discussion was too much to fit into a morning, and skewed the conference time-table towards producing end-products when in fact most students found the panel discussion the more stimulating part of the morning and many would have liked to participate more in that.
33. Timing: judging by feedback and observation, “Question Time” could have been longer and the lunch break shorter or cut out altogether. Some students found the sessions too long while others found them too short and rushed. There were no

signs of inattention during “Question Time”, and after that students seemed very absorbed in creating their group productions, but during the “working lunch” quite a few completed the final feedback exercises very quickly and then didn’t know quite what to do with themselves.

34. The Post-It note “Give us 5” exercise was very productive (see below) – a reminder that devices that may seem standard to adults can be novel to young people. The evaluation sheets were less productive, probably because participants had already expressed their opinions on the post-it notes.
35. I suspect that students would have worked just as well without prizes. Some helpers thought them a bit invidious, and organising them certainly added to the stresses of the day!
36. Budgeting, admin., planning, organising and co-ordinating, issuing and following up invitations, producing, copying and mailing publicity for schools and preparatory materials, reporting back etc, were far more time-consuming than any of us had anticipated. Marilyn Mason and Jean Cousens both felt a strong commitment to achieve a quality educational experience for the students and put in many hours of work over and above what had been anticipated in the outset. Perhaps it wasn’t surprising that we had such difficulty recruiting a co-ordinator – Marilyn Mason had only taken on the task somewhat reluctantly after the intended co-ordinator (who had submitted the quotation for the original bid) decided to move on to higher education, resulting in frantic advertising for another coordinator to RE professionals in the south east, including through the Association of RE Inspectors, Advisers and Consultants.
37. Much of the work had to be done voluntarily by busy people, and the working group were very grateful for this. We recognise that the teachers were organising their students’ attendance on top of already very heavy RE workloads and appreciate the contribution to the success of the day of these colleagues: Neil D’Aguiar (Richard Challoner), Annah Langan (Marymount International), Helen O’Sullivan (Tiffin Boys), Andrea Waugh-Lucas (Holy Cross) and Ellen Ziriati (Coombe School). A dedicated team of volunteer welcomers and facilitators was also vital in the success of the event on the day, including: Sydney Assor, Gerald Cohen, Durdana Dean, Vicki Hutton, Rashid Laher, Marian Morrison, Graham Mann-Smith, Rabbi Danny Rich, Bob Shaw, Fleur Standring, Hamida Syed. The panellists also gave generously of their time in the student working groups. (The photograph in the Kingston Informer has a particularly good shot of Rabbi Danny Rich working alongside Imam Shahid Hussain and students.)

CONCLUSION

38. There could well be simpler ways of producing similar learning outcomes, e. g. working with KIFF on sending multi faith panels into schools, where the event could be fitted into the school timetable and premises, and the school takes on at least some of the organisation and costs and risks. One or two teachers at the conference requested contact details of the panellists so that they could follow up the conference with a school visit.

D7

39. The benefits of a boroughwide approach -over a school-based debate - include:
- a larger conference involving several schools has an atmosphere, buzz and social interactions which a smaller school-based debate would not have;
 - an individual school might not be able to attract the chairs and panellists that the conference did;
 - therefore school-based panels would probably be smaller and less representative than the conference's;
 - the effort could still prove too onerous for schools by themselves to bother (though Tiffin Boys does something similar – and came to the conference too);
 - individual school events would probably not produce resources to share.
40. The student comments (see Annex below) do reveal some gaps in their experience and learning that this conference filled, and I think it made a very useful contribution to their education (religious and general) by furthering understanding of and between various faith groups. Many of those present would welcome another similar conference, possibly looking at specific issues in more depth.

Co-author of the report: Marilyn Mason, Conference Co-ordinator and SACRE co-opted member

Background documents held by co-author of the report: Jean Cousens, Clerk of the SACRE, email: jean.cousens@rbk.kingston.gov.uk; tel 020 8547 5023:

- Conference post-it evaluation notes and evaluation sheets
- Agendas and minutes of Conference Working Group

EXTRACTS FROM FEEDBACK

Comments from young participants who were nominated by their working groups to receive awards for their outstanding contributions to the conference:

Paul Parks: “Good to know that young people were having their voices heard. The time allowed for the sixth formers to debate should be longer, if anything. MPs and other authority figures say that young people aren’t well enough informed, but there are many of us who do have political views and care about what goes on in the world. If we are a minority, then we are a strong minority and should be respected and listened to more. More of these events should happen, with free-for-all debate. The different strands of opinion should be distinguished and recorded.”

Gemma Savill: “It’s good to ask people for their opinions, for young people to debate and hear what others think; some of that today was very different to my views. Yes, I did feel I had the chance to ask/say what I wanted to, but the time allowed for putting questions to the panel could be shortened, to give the groups more time for discussion.”

Wendy Lin: “When I saw who would be on the conference panel, I was already looking forward to coming, and today I was excited to hear the members’ opinions. I have experienced two religious outlooks: one at home (Buddhist), the other at school (Catholic). My parents leave me free to make my own choice, and I’m interested in learning about a range of faiths and beliefs. It was good to see a Buddhist representative on the panel. The number attending was quite large; I was glad we split into groups straight away where we could get to know each other. That helped me to have the confidence to express my views in front of everybody. It was a great experience.”

Danujan Sayandan: “All the different views of ethnic groups and religions can seem so far apart from each other, yet they share many similarities too. I could see tensions between beliefs coming through, e.g. attitudes to homosexuality, and I learnt quite a lot from the conference. There was discussion about the need to speak and understand English in order to be equipped to vote. We should remember how low the turnout at elections is of all those eligible to vote in this country. That needs to be addressed, not just the issue of immigrants’ fitness to be enfranchised. Next time it would be good to have more microphones available, and more of the time allocated to the participants’ group discussion.”

From the Post-It notes “Give us five...” exercise

(There was much overlap and repetition, and some contradictory messages from these, but a representative selection follows.)

1 thing you enjoyed: “Variety of different religions present”; “Co-operation with people of different religions / cultures”; “Heated discussion”; “The opportunity to consider and talk about issues that we don’t always get to at school”; “Working with people of different opinions”; “The debates with the theists”; “Hearing views of those from different religions”; “Dialogue with other schools”; “The gay rights debate”; “Good discussion”.

1 thing that interested you personally: “Faith schools debate”; “People’s open attitude to moral issues”; “The views of the liberal Jew and Christian – I have never encountered a

liberal Jew before and it was interesting...”; “The various opinions within the panel and floor”; The fact that different faiths often have the same opinion”.

1 thing that surprised you personally: “How little I knew”; “How similar people’s morals are but at the same time how different their views are”; “How representatives of religions can be so neutral towards topics, suggesting that we as a community can work together quite effectively”; “The good communication we had in our working group”; “How liberal all the representatives of religions on the panel were”; “A broadly ranged panel, which is positive because it provides more varied opinions”; “How orthodox the students from non-faith schools were!”; The willingness of strangers to co-operate quickly and efficiently”; “How open the conference was”; “There are people in the world who do not recognise homosexuals as equal to heterosexuals”; “The views of the religious leaders on homosexual rights”.

1 suggestion for how inter faith dialogue could be supported: “More debate”; “More debate using both audience and panel”; “More atheist and anti-theists to question the religious on their beliefs. Maybe also scientists and doctors”; “Allow more students to speak and extend the time for open debate”; “Have the questions open to the audience”; “Another conference to focus on life and death issues”; “More controversial guests”; “More events like this!”; “Longer Question Time”; “More orthodox views for a contrast”; “More in-depth discussion”; “Encourage more involvement – some people were content to sit back and watch”;

1 idea that you will take away with you: “The hope that people of different faiths can work together to make the world a better place”; “It will reaffirm my belief that the religious are ignorant and that religion is an oppressive institution”; “A broader knowledge about different religions’ views on controversial topics”; “The new information I have learnt and the opinions I have gained”; “Various viewpoints , and it doesn’t seem to be religion v religion, but religion v politics, science, society. Good or bad?”; “My views on topics expanded”; “The opinions of the panel and how they clash”; “Knowing more about different religions and how similar people’s views are”; “More secure knowledge of other faiths’ beliefs on important subjects”; “Getting to know different people”; “A happy memory”.

From the evaluation sheets

“I was surprised at how well religious communities with a variety of views co-operated with each other. Thank you for this opportunity.”

“I never realised there are so many views on a certain topic.”

What could we have done better? “Nothing.”

Comments from teachers

“I wanted to thank you and congratulate the whole team for yesterday. It was very interesting and our students really enjoyed it as it was different to anything else that they have been involved with in school. The workload must have been enormous and the organisation was extremely efficient!”

“Thank you, I was happy to play a small part in the Inter Faith Conference last Wednesday. It was very well organised with some very eminent speakers, which made the day very interesting for the students. They really enjoyed listening to the Question

D10

time panel responding to their topics. I think the students came up with some very good questions and felt they had a positive input during the day. I also had the opportunity to meet colleagues from other schools and the whole experience was really enjoyable.”

“Great conference today. A really successful initiative which I was delighted to have made a small contribution to. Some students I know would have liked to debate more so maybe next time there could be greater opportunity for them to discuss the panel's comments and then feedback their own views? But ...brilliant! Well done and thank you. “