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*ICCS 2022 Post-Conference Commentary*

## **Training Faith Leaders, Young and Old, for Cohesion**

*By Krish Raval OBE*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Practical examples of multi-faith cooperation demonstrate how functional integration can build bridges across historical fault lines. Leaders matter, and effective programmes and training are needed for leadership in cultivating respect, trust, and a willingness to peacefully accept differences in diverse societies seeking greater social cohesion and resilience.*

### **COMMENTARY**

At the second International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) held recently in Singapore, I was privileged to be invited to share how our UK-based organisation, Faith in Leadership (FiL), is making demonstrable progress through intensive academic programmes toward growing a diverse family of faith leaders who forge lasting relationships that carry forward the positive impact of inter-faith collaboration. Grooming effective faith leaders is increasingly recognized as central to achieving durable social cohesion as discussed at ICCS 2022.

### **Training for Resilience**

Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong mentioned the importance of maximizing "space" for every religious group in building a more cohesive city-state. Similarly, the first goal for training faith leadership is the involvement of diverse faith representatives where all are given room to retain their own identities. At FiL, our programmes do not attempt to create spiritual or political agreement, nor do they aim to find a neutral middle ground. Rather, both senior and emerging faith leaders can

disagree productively and yet engage meaningfully with one another on common values. By training leaders to respond well when they hear others espouse something they do not believe in, we are cultivating behaviours of effective leadership that can enhance societal resilience.

As Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, summed up at a FiL event: “If there is friendship among different faith leaders at critical moments, that friendship can prevent a breakdown in communication, even save peace, save lives.” This was seen when two Shia and two Sunni Imams, FiL alumni, visited the Vatican in 2016 to meet with Pope Francis; or when a non-Jewish faith leader, who was accused of antisemitism in the UK press, turned to his friends in the Jewish community who supported him in sufficient numbers to resolve the misunderstanding.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, foresees the global impact: .

“Those who have been through the [FiL] programme can create the kind of spaces where serious issues can be tackled without anxiety, without panic. Through conversations of mutual criticism and challenge, we all grow. FiL is about building the capacity of those who are going to be setting the tone and pace of our society in the future.”

Effective leaders are central to achieving durable social cohesion, and they become part of a growing network of influencers who share the same values, if not the same faith. This was iterated across ICCS 2022, especially by leaders like Imam Uzair Akbar in the first Plenary, “How Faith Can Bridge Divides,” who put forth that faith gives us the courage to forgive and fight earthly ills.

### **Actionable Goals**

Faith leadership programmes should, secondly, encourage actionable goals. When FiL first began fifteen years ago, securing endorsement and patronage took time and determined effort because some saw interfaith initiatives as merely a means of preventing terrorism. In fact, the focus of FiL’s programmes is not simply violence-prevention or theology-driven; our executive education platform, residential programmes, and structured learning modules empower leaders to return to their public spheres and be a force of change.

One participant summed up our Senior Faith Leadership Programme (SFLP) as a troika of leadership development, media training, and spiritual reasoning. Themes of faith are discussed while at the same time, faith leaders are equipped with skills to respond effectively to national crises and build more cohesive societies.

Puneet Atwal from the Punjab, a previous participant of the Senior Faith Leadership Programme, led teams of Hindus in the arduous task of gathering the dead at the height of the pandemic in India. Quietly and respectfully, they brought home the bodies of men, women, and children from the country’s many different faith traditions, including Muslims. They provided meaningful last rites and were able to convey heartfelt and comprehensible condolence to the families of the bereaved.

Other alumni were also asked to record how their FiL training contributed to social

action in their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, Hindu and Sikh leaders cited *seva* (service) as their primary achievement. Jewish leaders talked of their tradition's commitment to the poor, the widowed and orphaned. Muslim leaders emphasised giving charity as an essential pillar of Islam, and Christians took the opportunity to focus on the commandment to love thy neighbour. More importantly, all made clear that their efforts were not exclusively directed towards their own faith communities but sought to serve all humanity.

## **This Works**

The success of interfaith leadership programming is grounded in the forging of deep friendships. As very different leaders come together in a comfortable and safe environment where they can disagree well, steadfast and counter-intuitive bonding arises. Snapshots of typical scenes outside of structured learning modules may depict an Archdeacon and a Swami discussing the refugee crisis over breakfast. Or a Priest and an Imam sharing skills for helping bereaved congregants as they take a refreshing walk in the gardens. Mixing informally, relaxing together, sharing a table and breaking bread contribute much to the soft power that has led to participants maintaining friendships long after they have graduated from the programme. There are reciprocal invitations to weddings, baptisms, festivals, and places of worship – even an Orthodox Rabbi inviting Muslim guests over for Shabbat.

Intra-faith relations thrive on friendship, as Cardinal Pietro Parolin eloquently shared during his Special Address at ICCS 2022. It was also inspiring to hear from Youth Work Initiatives at ICCS 2022 advocating this very concept, with Shukul Raaj Kumar, Chairperson of Singapore's Inter-religious Organisation's (IRO) Youth Committee, describing how IRO youth *kopi* sessions helped younger members to engage in genuine interfaith conversations with one another over coffee. Friendship and collaboration hold the key to faith leaders' humanizing one another when spiritual and/or geopolitical issues threaten to divide.

## **The Future**

Some years ago, a group of trainee Imams, Rabbis, Priests, and lay professionals ran a youth leadership camp in North Yorkshire. Faith was not on the agenda, but they worked to develop confidence, awareness, and a peer-mentoring system among teenagers. Scott Darby was one of the participants. Years later, as a soldier in the British Army, Scott sustained horrific injuries when he was set on fire at a regimental party by a drunken Private. Scott refused to give into hate and instead worked to cultivate understanding with the soldier who harmed him. When asked why he did not hit back, Scott cited the North Yorkshire youth camp: "I wanted to define my environment, not be defined by it. Just as I was taught by those faith leaders," he said.

The future of faith leadership development should be expanded to bridge intergenerational divides, bringing mature faith leaders together with their younger counterparts so that past lessons learned may be shared with the upcoming generation. Scott's testimony demonstrates that many youths are eager to learn from those they consider wiser, so programming should include them and not merely target senior and/or executive leadership.

Faith leadership programmes go far beyond impacting just the faith leaders themselves; they have the power to transform lives. An important catalyst for social cohesion, programmes should forge genuine friendships; develop pragmatic courses to equip participants with relevant, actionable skills for change; spark interfaith allies; and create neutral, safe spaces for leaders to be themselves. Intentional programmes deliberately executed will contribute to “Confident Identities, Connected Communities,” the theme for this year’s ICCS 2022 conference.

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