Responding to “A Sense of Belonging”

The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum
1. Introduction and background

1.1. The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum was formed in 1993. The membership of the Forum is drawn from the minority faith communities in Northern Ireland as well as from the main Christian denominations. When we describe “minority faith communities” we mean those faith communities that have a global presence but are minorities in Northern Ireland. The largest of these in Northern Ireland are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Baha’i and Sikh.

1.2. The Inter-Faith Forum describes its vision in the following way:

Faith communities, together, evidencing understanding, mutual respect and trust

1.3. The principal aims of the Forum are:

To provide a forum for the Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh Faiths to dialogue with one another on matters of religious, national and civic importance; and

To support a wider inter-faith dialogue with other religious and belief groups as appropriate

1.4. The Forum is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission in response to the consultation document “A Sense of Belonging: Delivering Social Change through a Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014-2024.” We hope that our submission will assist Ministers and officials in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to develop a racial equality strategy for Northern Ireland. This submission has been developed in consultation with members from minority faith communities and with a number of other organisations that represent minority faith communities. A number of organisations, representing minority communities have endorsed this submission and those organisations are listed at the end.

1.5. The Inter-Faith Forum has also participated in the development of a common platform document, facilitated by the Community Relations Council, and has endorsed that document.

2. Increasing faith diversity

2.1. There is increasing faith diversity in Northern Ireland. When we refer to faith diversity we are referring to the diversity of faith expression that is increasingly evident in our society. This has been evidenced in the census figures. This and other data has been analysed by Dr Norman Richardson and is summarised in the table in Appendix 1.

2.2. The data that is summarised by Dr Richardson indicates significant growth in the numbers belonging to the main minority faith communities. Other groups identified in the 2011 Census include: Spiritualist (229); Scientology (44); Rastafarian (43); Satanist (31); Pantheism (29); Heathen (26); Traditional African Religion (14).

2.3. In our view there are two distinct reasons for the increasing numbers and the increasing diversity. The first is due to increased numbers of migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees who have come to Northern Ireland in recent years. The second reason is that with
the decline of the main Christian churches some indigenous people have sought other forms of spirituality.

2.4. It is important to note however that faith diversity is not a recent phenomenon in Northern Ireland. There have been Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs and Baha’is here for over 100 years – many decades before Northern Ireland was formed. More recently, in the 50s and 60s there were young students who came to Belfast from the Middle East or Africa to study in Queens University. Many of them stayed. They were Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs and Baha’is. Most of them have now retired, some have passed away, but they leave successive generations that are deeply connected with both their faith and their culture as well as being fully integrated into the life of society in Northern Ireland. In addition there are significant groups of people who were brought to Northern Ireland for a variety of reasons. For example in 1979 a group of families, known then as the Vietnamese Boat People, were settled in Craigavon and have since moved to various parts of Northern Ireland and some of them have become very successful businessmen and women. Other groups of people have been brought here as migrant workers to fill labour shortages.

2.5. All these cohorts of families, from various faith backgrounds, are well established and they continue to have an important place in their respective communities. For this group of people it is not appropriate to use a language of “welcoming”. These people, some of whom are fourth generation living in Northern Ireland, do not appreciate being told that they are welcome.

2.6. The group that we have described as migrant workers includes many who have been recruited by public bodies or by private companies and brought to Northern Ireland to fill skills shortages and other general labour shortages. They include doctors and nurses recruited by the Health Trusts from the Philippines, India, Poland and other countries as well as factory workers and farm labourers recruited by private companies. Most of them are settled in Northern Ireland with no intention of leaving. They have adopted Northern Ireland as their home.

2.7. We believe this increasing diversity in Northern Ireland brings enormous advantages to the region. Mention has already been made of the economic imperatives that have driven public bodies such as Health Trusts, as well as private companies, to recruit workers from overseas. In addition to these economic benefits the region has become stronger because of its increasing diversity. Increasing numbers of people from minority faith backgrounds and from minority ethnic backgrounds assist the region to be more outward-looking and they make Northern Ireland more attractive to potential overseas investors. Their presence brings diversity in relation to cultural and artistic expression that is valued by the majority population, evidenced, for example in events such as the annual Mela in Botanic Gardens.

2.8. There are also some very real challenges. The population of Northern Ireland is the least educated in relation to faith diversity in Europe and because of the historically low numbers of people from minority ethnic backgrounds it is also poorly prepared to receive migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees. Added to this there is a trend across Europe for heightened levels of racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia generally. This has been reflected in Northern Ireland with increased numbers of hate crimes being reported recently by the Police Service. The community buildings owned by the Muslim, Hindu and Jewish communities have all been the subject of attacks recently as well as many attacks on individuals.
2.9. We commend OFMDFM for publishing this consultation document and we are confident that an effective racial equality strategy will make a marked difference in the living experience of people from minority faith and minority ethnic backgrounds.

3. **Definition of racism**

3.1. Racism is defined in footnote 12 on page 21 of the consultation document. The definition is from the 1978 UNESCO Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice:

Racism includes racist ideologies, prejudiced attitudes, discriminatory behaviour, structural arrangements and institutionalized practices resulting in racial inequality as well as the fallacious notion that discriminatory relations between groups are morally and scientifically justifiable; it is reflected in discriminatory provisions in legislation or regulations and discriminatory practices as well as in anti-social beliefs and acts; it hinders the development of its victims, perverts those who practise it, divides nations internally, impedes international co-operation and gives rise to political tensions between peoples; it is contrary to the fundamental principles of international law and, consequently, seriously disturbs international peace and security.

3.2. This definition describes both behaviours and attitudes and includes institutionalised forms of racism. Whatever definition of racism is used must capture these essential dimensions. It is however important that the final strategy includes a definition in the main body of the strategy and not just a footnote.

3.3. There is an increasing tendency for the term “racism” to be used as a general term to describe all forms of racism, xenophobia and sectarianism, including attacks on people from minority faith communities. Many people from minority faith backgrounds would support the use of the term in this way. Such an understanding is also supported by the definition that is used by some international bodies. For example the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (Recommendation 7 in 2002):

“Racism” shall mean the belief that a ground such as race, colour, language, religion, nationality or national or ethnic origin justifies contempt for a person or a group of persons, or the notion of superiority of a person or a group of persons.

3.4. However there is also concern about the term being defined to explicitly include religion for two key reasons:

- First, although there is an acceptance that in cases where there is a race factor discrimination on the basis of religion can clearly be described as racism, there are increasing numbers of people who have grown up in Northern Ireland who have made an active choice to adopt a different faith. This is particularly evident in the Buddhist, Muslim and Baha’i communities. In these cases there is clearly no issue in relation to race or ethnicity since such people are indigenous. Some would feel uncomfortable with a label of “race” being used to describe such a group.

- Second, there is a concern that the inclusion of religion in the definition could create a situation where the specific Northern Ireland issue of sectarianism could dominate all discussion and prevent issues of sectarianism as it impacts on the minority faith communities being addressed.
3.5. However if the definition of racism does not explicitly include religion there will be a problem that discrimination against indigenous people who have adopted a minority faith will be completely excluded. Furthermore in such a situation there are likely to be complex disputes as to whether an attack on a minority faith community had a race dimension or not.

3.6. In the recent controversy surrounding the comments made by a Christian pastor in May of this year the media in many instances described the comments as racist. In that case the comments were an attack on Islam. It is clearly not accurate to say that Muslims in Northern Ireland represent a distinct racial group. Muslims in Northern Ireland come from a wide range of countries including those in the Middle East and Africa and, as already stated, some who are indigenous to Northern Ireland and have adopted Islam as their religion of choice. Our concern is that if religion is not included in the definition the strategy would be ineffective in addressing a situation such as that created by the pastor’s comments.

3.7. For the reasons set out above we are of the opinion that the strategy should include protection against discrimination on the grounds of religion and that this should be explicitly set out in the strategy document in a way that makes it clear that the specific Northern Ireland issue of sectarianism is not included and that there is no implication that all members of minority faith communities are necessarily also members of minority ethnic communities.

4. Title, term and purpose of the strategy

4.1. Paragraph 2.5 above explains why it is not appropriate to use the language of welcoming in relation to minority ethnic communities or minority faith communities. There are significant numbers of people from various faith backgrounds who have been settled in Northern Ireland for many generations. For these people it is not relevant to have a strategy that is entitled “A Sense of Belonging” in the same way as it would not be relevant for the majority population.

4.2. The description in the title of the strategy being focussed on racial equality for social change is, in our view, limiting. A society that establishes equality between differing groups can still have damaging attitudes. And a society that achieves social change can still harbour damaging prejudices. We are of the view that the strategy needs to be much more comprehensive and the title should reflect a comprehensive approach.

4.3. Furthermore on page 50 the strategy is described as intended to be ‘over-arching and high-level’ and to ‘establish a framework’ centred on six broad aims. The six aims are to be achieved through the actions detailed within a ‘programme of work’ to be developed after the strategy is finalised by the departments working with the Racial Equality Panel.

4.4. We are not convinced that such a high-level approach will be effective in delivering the change that is needed. Rather, we are of the view that the strategy needs to be much more detailed and include specific actions to be carried out by each government department. We think that such an approach would also be more in keeping with recent recommendations from the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

4.5. We are of the view that the six shared aims that are described in the consultation document should be incorporated into the final racial equality strategy and that the seventh additional aim described on page 24 should also be included – promoting opportunities for people to maintain and develop their cultural identity.
4.6. We are aware that there are a number of recommendations from international human rights organisations such as the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that have been made to the UK government. Some of these are directly referring to the situation in Northern Ireland and identify ways in which the application of human rights principles could be improved with regard to racism. It is unfortunate that the consultation document does not identify such recommendations. It is essential that the final strategy lists all such recommendations and details the action that will be taken to address each recommendation.

4.7. We note that the term of the last strategy was 2005-2010. We feel it is very important that a racial equality strategy is in place as soon as possible to fill the current gap. However we note with concern that it is proposed to have a 10-year strategy. We recommend that the strategy should be no more than five years in duration because the demography of Northern Ireland is changing rapidly and it is important that there would be an opportunity to revise the strategy in five years to take account of emerging issues.

5. Political will

5.1. It is very regrettable that the comments by some senior politicians following the broadcast of Pastor McConnell’s views in May of this year did nothing to quell the controversy but rather added fuel to a growing inferno. We were shocked and dismayed by some of the comments because they were rapidly broadcast around the world bringing the office of the First Minister into disrepute and reflecting in an extremely negative way on Northern Ireland generally. At the time of these comments the Inter-Faith Forum issued a public statement and this is appended at Appendix 2.

5.2. The experience of the comments by Pastor McConnell and the response from politicians has highlighted to us the importance of political will in achieving change in relation to the issues of racism and xenophobia.

5.3. The Outcome Document of the Durban Review highlighted the matter of the need for political will stating that the conference:

> Emphasizes the need to address with greater resolve and political will all forms and manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, in all spheres of life and in all parts of the world...

5.4. We are of the opinion that this is particularly important in Northern Ireland, especially in the light of recent experiences. We suggest that there should be a very clear, explicit and unambiguous statement by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister condemning all forms of racism and making it clear that their condemnation includes all forms of religious intolerance. This statement should be included in the racial equality strategy.

6. Specific actions

6.1. There are some specific actions from a faith perspective that we feel should be explicitly referenced in the strategy. These are summarised in the following paragraphs and we would welcome an opportunity to elaborate on them.
6.2. The Inter-Faith Forum has a vision of Northern Ireland recognising and valuing its diverse faith communities while at the same time valuing its strong Christian heritage. It is important that all people in society regardless of their faith should feel that they are equal citizens. Such a view is as important for the increasing numbers of atheists, agnostics, secular humanists etc., as it is for those that belong to a recognised faith community.

6.3. In Northern Ireland there are occasional public events that are financed from the public purse that have a religious component. Unfortunately on many occasions such events have an exclusively Christian characteristic. A recent example of this is the World War One Centenary Commemoration Service that was held in St Anne’s Cathedral. This event was resourced in a number of ways from the public purse including the printing of the programme that was funded by the Community Relations Council with funds from OFMDFM.

6.4. Health Trusts regularly hold memorial services for the families of patients who have passed away. Such services are often a source of great comfort for families. However many such services are exclusively Christian in their nature and can be very uncomfortable for family members who are not confessing Christians.

6.5. It is the view of the Inter-Faith Forum that when public funds are being used to support an event such as the WW1 commemoration or a memorial service in a Health Trust, that the content of the programme should be acceptable to all regardless of their faith. Other jurisdictions in the UK have made great progress in this regard and there are frequently interfaith services held to mark special events and occasions. For example after the Scottish Referendum an interfaith service of unity was held in St Giles Cathedral and in Wales after the election of the Welsh Assembly the first occasion when all the newly elected Assembly Members came together was an interfaith service. Why can we not do likewise in Northern Ireland?

6.6. In the area of Education much progress needs to be made on a number of fronts. The syllabus for Religious Education needs to be improved to provide opportunities for pupils to learn about religions other than Christianity. Such teaching about faith diversity should be at all levels including Primary Schools. Schools should be encouraged to incorporate school visits to the buildings of minority faiths, host visits by representatives from minority faiths and learn to share views, learn about others and expand personal beliefs.

6.7. We are particularly concerned that there is no provision for the inspection of the teaching of Religious Education in the way that other subject area are inspected. It is essential that all subject areas should be open to inspection.

6.8. Research by Queens University (Mawhinney, A., et al. (2010) Opting Out of Religious Education: The views of young people from minority belief backgrounds) has demonstrated the difficulty that families from minority faiths experience in relation to their experience of pupils in RE classes. Much needs to be improved in this area and this research identifies 20 key recommendations that should be implemented.

6.9. The legislation requires all schools to provide a form of collective worship. Unfortunately some schools actually provide a form of collective worship in school assemblies that is exclusively Christian in character that can have negative educational consequences for some pupils from minority faith backgrounds attending the school. While it is to be expected that, because of the distinctive Christian legacy in Northern Ireland, collective worship would be predominantly Christian in character we are of the view that this should be done in a way
that is inclusive rather than presenting Christianity in an exclusive way or requiring pupils to engage in any form of confessional activity.

7. Progress

7.1. Despite what we have highlighted above there are some areas where great progress has been made. For example there are many schools that have made great efforts to develop a syllabus that includes teaching about minority faith communities in an exemplary way. There are schools that have demonstrated how pupils from minority faith backgrounds can be shown great sensitivity and full respect in a Christian setting. There are Health Trusts that have developed policies that are fully respectful of a workforce that has within it great faith diversity and provides services to patients and their families that are fully respectful of diverse faiths - often at times when patients are feeling extremely vulnerable. Finally some public bodies have demonstrated great leadership in developing interfaith services that show respect for people of all faiths and none.

7.2. In the 20 years that the Inter-Faith Forum has been operating we have used very limited resources to make a significant impact across range of areas including the following:

- The development of the “Quiet Rooms” at Belfast International Airport and at Craigavon Area Hospital
- The development of exhibitions and publications in relation to faith diversity in Northern Ireland
- The delivery of training on faith diversity to public bodies, community groups and local authorities including recent courses in Downpatrick, Newtownards and Cavan and training for hospital chaplains
- The facilitation of visits to schools from people from minority faith communities.

7.3. We hope that with a revised strategy we will see many good examples of exemplary interfaith practice being replicated across all parts of Northern Ireland.

8. Endorsement

8.1. This submission has been endorsed by the following organisations:

- Baha’i Community of the United Kingdom
- Belfast Islamic Centre
- Belfast Jewish Community
- Council of Christians and Jews – Northern Ireland
- Inter-Faith Northwest
- Jampa Ling Tibetan Buddhist Centre Northern Ireland
- Northern Ireland Hindu Community
- Northern Ireland Muslim Family Association
Appendix 1


**WORLD FAITHS**

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<td>1,500 approx.</td>
<td>1943</td>
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<td>825</td>
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<td>319 plus</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>300 approx</td>
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<td>50 approx.</td>
<td>219</td>
<td>200-250</td>
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<td>Chinese Religions</td>
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<td>(7,000 ethnic Chinese estimated)</td>
<td>32 **</td>
<td>35 **</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>(including Taoists)</td>
<td></td>
<td>+ 41 Taoists</td>
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<td>+ 51 Taoists</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jain</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Pagan</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>148 + 20 Wicca + 19 Druid</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>302 + 88 Wicca + 38 Druid</td>
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**Not Religious**

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<td>Atheists</td>
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<td>106 ‡</td>
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<td>Humanists</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>—</td>
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† Another Ireland: An Introduction to Ireland’s Ethnic-Religious Communities by Maurice Ryan (Stranmillis College, 1996)

‡ When the figure for Hindus of the Hare Krishna tradition (Vaishnava – International Society for Krishna Consciousness) is added to the number of other Hindus the total is 2,405.

* This is the number of Jews presumed to be actively associated with the Belfast synagogue. It is reckoned that there are about 1,000 people in Northern Ireland with a Jewish family background (including many who have married out of the faith.)

++ Many members of the Chinese community have substantially secularised but retain traces of traditional Chinese religious practices. The figure given separately for Taoists in 2001 and 2011 should probably be added to the figure for Chinese Religions, giving a total in 2011 of 86.

§ The 2006 figures represent an estimate half-way between official census figures.
It is not at all clear why the numbers for these categories dipped so much in 2001, as compared with 1991 and 2011, though possibly those involved chose an alternative such as “no religion” at that time.

**General Observations**

When one takes account of non-census figures supplied by the faith communities themselves (even though these are often estimates) it is clear that Census figures are somewhat at variance. It seems likely that the Census figures reflect general allegiance rather than active membership, though this does not explain the much higher estimates given in recent times especially by the Muslim and Hindu communities.

Nevertheless, the 2011 Census continues to indicate significant growth in the numbers belonging to faith communities other than the Christian Churches. Other groups identified in the 2011 Census include: Spiritualist (229); Scientology (44); Rastafarian (43); Satanist (31); Pantheism (29); Heathen (26); Traditional African Religion (14). Also included, possibly less seriously, are: Jedi Knight (1,462); and Heavy Metal (59)! Some 434 respondents described themselves as “Mixed Religion”.

Full details of the 2011 Census Results can be obtained from the NISRA (NI Statistics & Research Agency) website: [http://www.nisra.gov.uk/Census/2011Census.html](http://www.nisra.gov.uk/Census/2011Census.html). The information on religious affiliation is from the document entitled “Religion - Full Detail_QS218NI”.

A separate document is available with details of Christian denominations and Christian-related groups, also with comparative figures taken from 1991, 2001 and 2011.

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*Updated Version: May 2013*

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Appendix 2

Statement by the Inter-Faith Forum in relation to the comments by Pastor McConnell

24th May 2014

The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum (NIIF) is concerned about the recent negative comments about Islam and Muslims that have been broadcast in the media following a sermon by Pastor James McConnell at the Whitewell Tabernacle in Belfast.

The comments in the media hurt thousands of Muslims living peacefully in Northern Ireland and also promote hatred against two billion Muslims all over the globe.

While we accept that freedom of speech is a basic human right, this needs to be balanced with the basic human right of respect for others’ faith and identity.

The Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum has a vision for Northern Ireland of Faith communities, together, evidencing understanding, mutual respect and trust.

The mission of the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum is to bring members from world faiths together in a self-governed forum where members work together to facilitate dialogue, promote community cohesion and provide an authentic voice on faith matters, embracing values of faith, diversity, equality, inclusion, partnership, responsibility, excellence and wellbeing.

In keeping with our mission we are happy to facilitate dialogue and to seek to establish understanding in our increasingly diverse society.