



Statement from the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations on the imminent closure of the Inter Faith Network. 12 February 2024.

The Quaker Committee for Christian & Interfaith Relations of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain (QCCIR) met this weekend and considered, in deep anxiety, the imminent closure of the Inter Faith Network (IFN), the faith relations organisation that has been making an important positive difference to interfaith understanding and cooperation in the UK since 1987.

Quakers have been long-standing members of the Inter Faith Network. Many Friends have engaged with Inter Faith week in particular (which is organised by the IFN), using resources from the network to organise diverse local activities which foster community harmony. At times of potential conflict faith leaders and groups have been able to use the good relationships built up through the network to dispel the notion that trouble is due to faith, when it is usually political or other factors which lead to conflict.

The Government, which has itself emphasised the importance of solid interfaith relations, has withdrawn its support and not even honoured its commitment to a grant which would have given the IFN time to source other funding. The irony of this decision is that IFN has provided a channel for government ministers to communicate directly with a wide range of faith groups in this country.

Across the last year, the IFN has been exploring options for funding its important work, since the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on 31 March 2023 wrote to say that Government funding would cease from the following day. An urgent appeal raised funds to cover the three-month gap in public funding that followed. This included a special grant of £50,000 from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and a matching grant from individual donors, plus other donations and grants that came in during the remainder of the year. Then on the 7 of July last year came news that Government funding of £155,000 would, after all, be available for the period July 2023 to March 2024, but no funds materialised. In December, staff redundancy notices were issued.

QCCIR has now learned that unless the promised funding from the government or some other source arrives by February 22nd this year IFN's work is no longer viable. A letter of 19 January to the IFN Board from the Secretary of State Rt Hon Michael Gove MP makes it clear that the inclusion on the IFN Board of one trustee who is a member of the Muslim Council of Britain poses a 'reputational risk to



Government'. This says little for the Government's intent on engaging with this country's Muslim communities, as the Muslim Council of Britain is one of the largest Muslim community organisations in the UK.

We, as Quakers in Britain, are angered by this act of political interference intended to harm the faith relations work of this tiny, yet disproportionately effective, organisation that is the nation's most prominent interfaith instrument.

The work of social cohesion in general, and faith relations in particular, has become ever more complex, impacted, as it is by detrimental events overseas. Following the outbreak of violence in the Middle East in October 2023, for instance, there has been an increase in both Islamophobia and antisemitism across our country. Interfaith work comes into its own in such difficult times of crisis.

We need to be able to turn to those who can, through quiet work, encourage different faith communities suffering anger and grief, to re-connect with what they hold in common and find hope. IFN has been navigating these choppy waters, however challenging, as best it can and its capacity to do so, to the benefit of continuing social cohesion in Britain, is being wiped out by serious underfunding at the worst possible time.

QCCIR recognises that interfaith work across the complex faith landscape of Britain is not straightforward. Yet, societal transformation through engaging those groups with whom others think they are in conflict is a gift that some of our small, community-focused bodies can deliver for us. This decision to defund the IFN of such modest sums of public finance is short-sighted and deeply misguided.