

## Birmingham Policy Commission Healthy Ageing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

As part of the Commission's remit to represent local voices in its deliberations, BPCIII Commissioner Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh invited the Commission to talk to the Birmingham Faith Leaders Round Table. The perspective of faiths and their positive contribution to the experience of ageing will inform the Commission's deliberations.

*The deeper theme for Commissioners to reflect on is around the challenges for 'healthy ageing' posed by a multi-cultural society. "Can, and indeed to what extent, should faith and belief be accommodated when constructing paradigms of health in later life?"*

Notes from Faith Leaders Round table

16 January 2013 7.30pm, Queen Elizabeth Hospital Chaplaincy

Present: Chair: Rabbi Dr Margaret Jacobi (Progressive Synagogue), Most Rev Bernard Longley (Roman Catholic), Rabbi Yossi Jacobs (Singers Hill Synagogue), Dr Mohammed Naseem (Central Mosque), Mr Abdul Rashid (Central Mosque), Mr Sewa Singh Mandla (GNNSJ), Major Samuel Edgar (Free Churches)

In attendance: Jonathan Gurling (Executive Secretary)

Visitors: Dr Andrew Smith (Bishop of Birmingham's Adviser on Inter Faith Affairs), Rev Richard Wharton (Chaplaincy, Q E Hospital), Professor Steve Field, Professor Heather Draper, Deborah Walker, Sonia Large

Apologies: Rt Rev David Urquhart (Church of England), Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh (GNNSJ), Mr Dinesh Chauhan (Hindu Council), Mr John Beard (Buddhist – Karma Ling), Dr Ottaranyana (Buddhist Vihara), Pastor Peter Pennant (Council of Black Led Churches)

Introductions

Following an introduction by Professor Field, Professor Draper detailed the Commission's work.

The emphasis is on exploring the positive aspects of ageing and how the potential of an ageing population can be fulfilled. The focus is on health promotion and ways to enable a flourishing older age rather than considering ageing as a problem for society and the health services. The Commission is especially keen to explore ageing in a multicultural city environment.

Professor Draper invited written or further verbal responses by telephone, to the Commission questions, given the limited time available for the Commission on the meeting agenda.

Commission question: *What in terms of faith does 'healthy ageing' and 'ageing well' mean for your religion? What are the specific faith dimensions to healthy ageing?*

Mr Mandla asked what is meant by 'ageing'. You are as old as you feel; he is 87 and feels vibrant.

Professor Draper agreed this was a very difficult question. It was about when people start to feel they are getting old. The concern is that they start to feel as though they are ageing only when health problems set in. The Commission was not trying to define 'ageing'. That was for respondents to define for themselves

Mr Mandla: If there was a relationship between his religion (Sikhism) and ageing, it was simply to feel that his active old age was a blessing from the God.

Archbishop Barnard Longley: There is a paradox between the processes of ageing which involved both physical and mental dissolution in this life but are part of a path towards perspective and fulfilment in the afterlife. Belief in the afterlife has a fundamental impact on how life is lived today. Christians live an 'already but also not yet' experience in old age as they look to fulfilment in the Kingdom of God in the afterlife.

He outlined aspects of continual formation which were not impeded by the process of ageing, including spiritual formation, the development of the human person and the significance of being part of a community (including a regard for elders within communities).

Major Samuel Edgar (Salvation Army speaking for the Free Churches): Emphasised 'holiness' and that the body is seen as the temple of God. The 'body' will dissolve and be reformed in the afterlife. Taking care of the health of the body is an important aspect of holiness. There is a sense of duty to God and that the physical body must be cared for in order to continue to work for God as long as possible, but spiritual health is paramount. 'We must stay fit enough to serve'.

Faith lends a positive outlook on life that counts blessings. The optimistic view keeps the heart young.

Archbishop Barnard Longley: In Christianity, there is a history of 'dualism' which separates body and soul, but the belief in the resurrection means that what is created is never lost. Therefore there is continuity of the body through resurrection.

Professor Field: Does a belief in resurrection help people to age positively?

Rabbi Margaret Jacobi: From the Jewish perspective, to live 'in this world' and enjoy this life, you are encouraged to question all the time and to be curious about the world

Dr Andrew Smith: the saying 'Young men dream dreams and old men have visions' illustrated that ageing also has to do with 'wisdom' accumulated by elders, and valued within the Community. The desire for healthy ageing is not just about being looked after but about giving back.

How do you preserve a healthy and open attitude and a purpose when you stop working or being active? By having things to share both from experience and from God.

Rev Richard Wharton: noted, based on his experience as a hospital chaplain, that when small and normal choices are taken away from people (what and when to eat for example), they move from questioning 'What am I to do with my life' to 'Who am I?' - a much more fundamental question. Ageing brings the capacity to grapple with paradox, to hold contradictory beliefs. He emphasised the importance of person centred care which recognises the different aspects of people's lives including their faith traditions and stories.

Dr Rasheed Naseem: Older age does not offer a spiritual problem - it is a stage in life. Life and this planet should be considered as the creation of the Creator. Our responsibility is therefore to look after the whole of creation and this responsibility continues as ageing progresses. Mandates do not stop with age. The problem is society and its reactions to aging people and the problem for society is understanding and taking responsibility for people who have all levels and types of infirmity, and responding to all needs.

Professor Field closed by thanking the group and confirming that the Commission would be taking evidence from a range of people to explore whether they could make a recommendation for public policy to help the perceptions of how ageing is perceived and responded to.

Archbishop Longley thanked the Commission team for consulting the Faith Leaders Group.

*The members of the Policy Commission left the meeting.*