

14th January 2009

Press Statement

The rapid deterioration of inter community relations was highlighted at an emergency meeting for Jewish, Christian and Muslim community leaders hosted by St Ethelburga's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in London. The meeting, arranged in partnership with the Three Faiths Forum, the Christian Muslim Forum and the Forum for Discussion of Israel and Palestine (Fodip), comprised an open and honest discussion around the devastating impact of events in Israel and Gaza on British communities.

Faith leaders and activists, together with bodies such as the Metropolitan Police, heard alarming reports of the growing polarization of views. Jewish and Muslim communities tended to identify with either Israel or Gaza. The meeting heard that such divisions were also present within the churches. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggested an increase in anti-Semitic comments not just from the public at large but, worryingly from Christians also.

Those present agreed that such polarization is the fuelling incidents of both Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Attacks on synagogues, other Jewish establishments and individual Jews had increased dramatically in recent weeks. While the view was that, for the most part, these were the result of opportunism on the part of disaffected youths and anti-Semites, it was acknowledged that what was said in the context of faith was of vital significance. Some Muslims felt that the basic needs of their co-religionists were being unfairly politicized, preventing truly humanitarian responses internationally.

The affirmation of the sanctity of life was urged for all people of faith, together with the importance of meeting individual human beings at the point of need. While issues of religious identity were undoubtedly present in the conflict, it was to be remembered that this was not the clash of two faiths. Any solution to the situation had to be an international political one. Moreover, the presence of a Christian community within Gaza was often ignored.