

Keeping the faith



Expert view
Stephen Shashoua explains the work of a programme that brings young Muslims, Christians and Jews together to forge deeper cross-faith understanding

In recent years Britain's faith communities have collaborated on a range of cultural, political and economic issues. However, there is at times a worrying tendency for some in faith communities (and in wider society) to be at odds, speaking at but rarely to each other. This can lead to tensions and a reluctance to engage with those outside of one's faith group.

In the university context – just one of the areas in which the Three Faiths Forum operates – these attitudes can reduce the likelihood of young people becoming leaders outside of the sphere in which they feel most safe and understood – their own communities.

Our Undergraduate ParliaMentors (UP) programme (funded by the Pears Foundation and City Bridge Trust) directly addresses this phenomenon. Trios of Muslim, Christian and Jewish students are mentored by MPs and peers of all and no

religious beliefs. Over the course of a year they work on a project of their own creation aiming to effect positive social change together.

Through the programme, we not only provide a space for young people of faith to truly understand each other, we

“**The trio had started barely being able to talk to each other – and now they are inseparable friends**

also empower them to take on leadership roles, working towards a more diverse and dynamic society.

Over 100 students and 30 parliamentarians have taken part

in the initiative and its impact is often dramatic.

As Lynne Featherstone MP, former mentor on the UP programme, observed: “My trio had started barely being able to talk to each other – and now they are inseparable friends. The understanding that we all as humans have far more in common than we have in differences will stay with them all their lives.”

And echoing the feedback of many, a former participant said of the programme: “It has given me a great insight into British politics, a real experience as opposed to what is taught and presented by the media.”

We do similar work at many different levels of society, reaching students in schools, colleges, universities and youth groups.

Through workshops where young people are given a chance to ask questions about other faiths, they develop the skills to communicate respectfully with others. They learn how to interact and engage with people from backgrounds sometimes very different from their own.

Our faith school linking programme, Shared Futures, takes this process even further by linking two schools from different faith communities for a year or longer, with students working on projects together fostering shared action.

At the start of the linking programme, children often stated that they were worried that children from the other school “would say something negative about my religion”. When pupils from a Muslim and a Jewish



When faith communities speak with, rather than at, each other, deeper understanding can be forged

primary school were later asked what they thought of meeting each other, they commonly gave answers such as “Jews and Muslims can be friends even if

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Creating a more cohesive society with positive, productive, relations between communities is within our grasp

there is conflict between them around the world,” and “You cannot judge someone by their religion”.

Our work shows, time and time again, that enabling people

from different communities and of different faiths to find common goals and work together can rapidly dispel prejudices, and create better relations between individuals and between communities.

To this end we work in schools, universities and wider society, with students and politicians, community leaders and ambassadors, artists and professionals, educating people and bringing them together for dialogue, but more importantly for joint action.

Creating a more cohesive society with positive, productive, relations between communities is within our grasp. It will take patience, resources and persistence, but we have developed new models and methods that have been shown to work. By building on the support of many parliamentarians and



Establishing common goals helps dispel prejudices, says Stephen Shashoua

policy-makers, we look forward to reaching more schools, university students, young professionals and community leaders to foster collaboration and change attitudes. ●

Stephen Shashoua is director of the Three Faiths Forum. For more information about the Undergraduate ParliaMentors programme email: up@threefaithsforum.org.uk

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