

Presence & Engagement Guidelines: Actions in Times of Tension

The Church of England is committed to being a 'Christian presence in every community.' The increasing diversity of our country means that in some communities, questions arise which relate to the nature of that presence among people of other faiths. In order to ensure that Anglican clergy working in these areas are supported in their ministry, Presence & Engagement have put together guidelines addressing a range of frequently asked questions. These are intended to highlight some of the theological and practical issues which need to be considered in multi-religious contexts, and in doing so give clergy the confidence to make decisions which can be the basis of good relations with other faith communities.

The guidelines have been prepared by members of the Presence & Engagement task group and are primarily aimed at Anglican clergy, but may also be of interest to lay people and ministers of other Christian denominations working in diverse settings. Within most dioceses there is also a designated interfaith adviser, who can be consulted for further assistance. To find contact details for diocesan advisers as well as other information and resources, go to www.presenceandengagement.org.uk.

Andrew Smith, Interfaith Director for the Bishop of Birmingham, writes:

Why do something?

It is becoming increasingly common and people turn up for their own reasons. However when there is something that has caused significant turmoil for the country or a local community it can be place of solidarity, reassurance and a point of focus and stability. It is worth taking your time to decide on your criteria for responding; otherwise with all the tragedies in the world it will be every week. For example you might decide that you'll do something in response to a serious terrorist event in the UK or mainland Europe, a significant natural tragedy that affects a community in your location, or an accident that involves a number of deaths such as a plane or train crash.

When?

It needs to happen within a day or two of the event. The challenge is we never know when these things will happen but people want and need a quick response and somewhere to gather.

What's the best response?

Vigil, service, standing in solidarity? If it's a quick response for the whole community then a short vigil often works well. This is very inclusive, easy to arrange and allows people to respond in their own way. The challenge with a vigil for some churches is the feeling that any distinctives in the ways faiths respond gets lost in a general coming together of humanity. For some this is enough, but for others offering a distinctive Christian message of hope in a tragedy will be important. This is possible to do in an interfaith vigil if speakers offer words of comfort from their own tradition, offering comfort to all but drawing on their own faith as the source of comfort.

After the Paris gun attacks in 2015 there was a real sense of shock and confusion, we held a candle-lit vigil outside the Cathedral two days later. We worked with different faith communities but it was hosted by the Cathedral. People of all faiths came we had a few speeches the reading of a pledge to resolve to continue to work for peace and people had the chance to light candles.

Following Brexit and with a rise in hate crime we launched a campaign called 'Love your neighbour' the launch was 1 week after the referendum. It was a group of different faiths, businesses, the local authority, arts groups and more. We met outside the council house and challenged people to 'Do something kind' and ran the campaign for three months following the launch.

Who's hosting it?

Church? Council? Interfaith group? All of these can work – the more involved the harder it is to plan something really quickly, but there is greater ownership and buy in from different communities. Also the image of different faiths hosting something together presents a very powerful message.

How will it be promoted?

Social media, e-mail and local media. It needs to be quick. Using social media can get the word out to lots of people very quickly, but it tends to go to friends or contacts of the organisers. E-mails to all contacts encouraging them to forward it to everyone they know draws in more people who don't use social media. A slot on local radio increases the reach.

Who's invited?

There will be key people to invite such as representatives of faiths, members of the council, people from the country or community affected. It's worth doing a quick search on-line to see if there are groups linked to the community affected who you haven't had contact with but who would like to be invited e.g. social clubs, community groups etc.

Where will it be?

Church or cathedral grounds, public square, outside a group feeling vulnerable e.g. mosque. Somewhere that can host large groups that is easy to access and that feels welcoming to everybody. If it's a quick response to a tragedy then outside a place of worship is still, for many people, an appropriate venue for expressing grief and seeking solace. Parish churches or cathedrals can be particularly useful as they are often seen as belonging to the whole community. Whilst some may feel uncomfortable with having a multi-faith event in the grounds of one faith community, if the language is one of welcome and inclusion and there are people of different faiths visible in the leading then it can work really well.

Who's going to lead it?

This could be a Bishop, a local faith leader, a politician or someone with connection to the group affected. They need to be someone generally recognised as having the authority to lead and, importantly, someone good at public speaking who can keep it focussed.

What will people do there?

Read a pledge, light candles, listen to speeches, pray or keep silence. Whatever you do work out a running order and stick to it. Don't allow the event to get hijacked by people wanting to use it to promote their cause. We've always had political groups or people concerned about a different cause turning up. The advantage of holding the event on private grounds (e.g. outside a church) means that you can take control of which groups you allow to distribute materials or speak at the event.

Who will speak?

Not too many. One person from the faith groups represented someone from the community affected if possible and possibly a civic leader as a maximum. Also brief them as to the length of time you want them to speak for, a maximum of 3 minutes is probably appropriate. People want their voice heard but it can easily go on too long. Also most people coming are not coming to hear speeches but to reflect seek solidarity and solace with others.

Timing

Keep it short - 30 mins max. People get cold outside and aren't expecting to come to a full service. Also people will stay for longer with their own thoughts if they wish to. The vigil can be that point which starts their process of reflection that they are then free to continue with.

What equipment do you need?

You will almost certainly need some form of PA, check there be somewhere to plug it in. At the 'Love Your Neighbour' launch we used a large megaphone. It made it more informal but flexible and was loud enough for people to hear. It also meant that people didn't come up and ask to speak as it was being held by the main speaker so allowed for greater control. It's good to have candles, holders and matches, pledge or prayer for people to read. Plan this before the event and have resources / contact details to hand.