

Cross Party Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief Formation – 21st February 2017

John Mason MSP gave a brief welcome to those attending the meeting, noting the previous CPG on Religious Freedom in the last Parliamentary term and outlining some of his thinking in getting the group up and running again.

Sedurent List: James Fraser(Release International), Laura Westring(Baha'i Community), David Meredith(Free Church of Scotland), John Wilson(Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office), Ray Kelly, Stephen Allison(SOLAS: Centre for Public Christianity), Ruth Donaldson(Solidarity Christian Worldwide), Murdo Fraser MSP, John Mason MSP, Ephraim Borowski(Scottish Council of Jewish Communities), Anthony Horan(Catholic Parliamentary Office), Kate Forbes MSP, Hassan Rabbani(Muslim Council of Scotland)

John read out the list of those individuals and groups who had noted interest in being members of the CPG:

Individuals included; Brian Miller, David Bradwell, Martin Dore, Martin Johnstone, Bill Wishart, Linda Oxburgh, Nigel Kenny, Ray Kelly

Groups included; Open Doors, Church of Scotland, Aid to the Church in Need, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities, Scottish Council of Muslims, Free Church of Scotland, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, SOLAS Centre for Public Christianity, Release International, Bahá'í Community, Iona Community, Steadfast Global, Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, Evangelical Alliance, Catholic Parliamentary Office

The draft purpose was proposed to the meeting. It was felt that the description should be widened to include all forms of belief and not just religious belief. Amended wording was provisionally agreed as “The Group will discuss and consider how to promote freedom of religion or belief for any and all.”

It was decided to have a standard structure of Convener, Vice-Convener and Secretary for the Group. Agreed as there was no money involved the position of treasurer was not necessary.

John Mason MSP was proposed, seconded and duly elected as Convener of the Group.

Murdo Fraser was proposed, seconded and duly elected as Vice-Convener of the Group.

A discussion was had around the Secretary for the group. It was decided that rather than the role being performed by any one faith group it should be performed by a more multi faith organisation. To this end it was proposed that John Mason would speak to **Interfaith Scotland** who the Group believed may be open to serving as secretariat.

Presentation from Release International

Background on Release

Release International as an organisation promotes religious freedom and focusses on persecution against Christians around the world. The reasons for the focus on Christians was simply due to the practical limitations of only being one organisation. Release are a member of the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Religious Freedom in Westminster.

Persecution of Christians

3 quarters of religious persecution is directed at Christians. Most Christians live outside the US & Europe.

Religious Freedom

- Article 15 from the United Nations is the baseline for “Religious Freedom”.
 - Further to this there is a more detailed resolution on elimination of discrimination. It mentions that: “states are to take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion.”
- Notes persecution can be harder to define.
 - One definition is: Any unjust action by authorities, individuals or crowds of varying levels of hostility perpetrated primarily on basis of religion. Resulting in varying levels of harm (ranging from ridicule, restriction, certain kinds of harassment or discrimination to torture, imprisonment, ostracism, murder and execution) as it is considered from the victim’s perspective.”

Current Issues

- In Islamic State controlled areas of Iraq/Syria
 - Christians and other religious groups suffering horrific attacks. Since start of 2000 almost 2/3rds of Christians in region forced to flee. There are 2 million displaced people overall in Kurdistan in Northern Iraq alone.
- Egypt
 - While the situation in Cairo is relatively secure if not entirely positive, outside Cairo Christians are often faced with very real danger.
- Iran
 - Many people within the country consider Christians to be a fundamental threat to the republic. Many Christians are imprisoned due to their beliefs.
- Afghanistan
 - It is illegal to convert in Afghanistan and officially there are no Christians. Of course this number is almost certainly not true, those practising their faith are often open to real discrimination.
- Somalia
 - The Al Shabab militia execute anyone converting from Sunni. The national government is attempting to exert control in the area.
- Nigeria
 - Freedom of religion enshrined in constitution. There are some areas in the north of the country which are attempting to institute some forms of Sharia law. There are also other conflicts which causing huge displacements.
- Pakistan
 - When the country was founded freedom of worship was one of the principles it was built on. Unfortunately, in recent times this has not been the case with Christians facing regular problems. In particular, there are blasphemy laws which are often misused in the country and politicians who attempt to repeal these laws often meet with violence and have even been assassinated.
- North Korea
 - No form of religion accepted.
- China

- State control of religious observance on the increase, religious groups to register with the government.
- India
 - Increase in Hindu extremism, attacks often extremely violent and degrading.
- Sri Lanka
 - Similar issues to India, but in Sri Lanka the attacks come from Buddhist extremists there is no process for churches to be officially registered with the government.
- Eritrea
 - Military conscription is mandatory, terrible record of freedom in general, one of the major contributors to the refugee crisis and at least 170 Christian prisoners who are regularly beaten.

Noted that these are but a few of the problems faced globally and that these problems are not just of a spiritual nature; it is in fact also a humanitarian crisis.

What is the best response to a problem of this scale? Apathy? Despair? Or we can respond as we are able and where we are able. We can keep the issue alive in the political and public arena. Working together hopeful that the CPG can achieve something.

Question and Answer session

Q – What caused the problems in Iraq to arise?

A – The lack of a plan for rebuilding after the Iraq invasion certainly did not help matters. And lack of understanding of religious context did not help either.

Q – Is progress made in the USA under threat now that Trump is President.

A – Possibly depending on what happens next.

The group agreed that Scotland is leading the way in terms of interfaith working relative to many other countries.

Comment from representative from Muslim Council – Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia causes many problems in the region.

- John mentioned that the Muslim Council could be offered a speaker in future to discuss the issue in more depth.

Q – We want to try and avoid generalising religions as being persecutors, is there a specific better way this can be discussed?

A – It is a tough issue to tackle. Talk through ideology helps specify. Like Saudi Arabia ideology. The meeting all agreed on this.

John Mason asked meeting if happy to rotate speakers from different groups. The meeting agreed and Kate Forbes noted that she is very keen to hear from UN or global experts on the issue.

All agree they are looking forward to next meeting, date of which is yet to be set.