

**Thursday 7th June 2012**

**Whipps Cross Hindu Temple – Near Neighbours Event**

The church youth worker from my teenage years, who is in this room, has reminded me that I wrote an article for our inter-church, youth magazine entitled “I’m Inta Inter-Faith”. *His* memory is that the article was the reason for the magazine being banned from my own church. My memory is that it was banned because of a page called “Smyth’s Slander” which made some disparaging remarks about our parish clergy. I mention this to illustrate that despite my early, theoretical commitment to inter-faith relations, my practical commitment came about much later through a personal, first encounter with a Muslim neighbour. In 2001, against the wider background of the northern riots and the media portrayal of Muslims after 9/11, I formed a friendship with a man called Abdul Aziz.

It was this friendship which inspired me to come to Waltham Forest in 2002 and work for the Faith Communities Project. For the next seven years I worked with others on a range of inter-faith initiatives, all aimed at bringing faith community *leaders* together on Borough-wide issues.

But just over 3 years ago, I applied to become parish priest of St Barnabas Walthamstow - a small parish with a relatively large Muslim population. A key reason for me applying for that post is that I wanted to be part of the fostering of more congregation-to-congregation contact between Muslims and Christians. That said, my good intentions soon met the realities of parish and wider commitments and it has not always been easy, even at St Barnabas, to make sufficient time for the fostering of inter-faith relationships between our church and the nearby mosque.

This is the context in which I am hugely grateful to the Near Neighbours Fund. For what that fund has done for us is give us extra capacity to engage in a piece of work within our neighbourhood which is bringing local Christians, Muslims and others into contact with one another. We chose to focus on issues of safety. We seconded a London Citizens organiser to work among us for three months who engaged in one-to-one conversations with local people. We then brought these people together for a meeting which led to an action when more than twenty of us met and then went out in pairs to talk to over 40 local shop keepers and café owners. We spoke to them about safety issues and obtained their agreement to work with us on making our neighbourhood a safer place to live.

Lina Jamoul has been working with us on the project. Lina, you are an organiser with London Citizens, you are a Muslim who has been working with us for a while at St Barnabas Church. What has been your response to seeing Muslims and Christians work together in our neighbourhood?

And will you briefly share with us what we will be doing on Saturday when we will launch CitySafe Markhouse followed by a Peace Picnic in Thomas Gamuel Park?

I want to say as well that the Near Neighbours funding has helped us produce newsletters which have brought local people together to work on a wider range of neighbourhood issues. We are improving our public flower beds, we have established a parent and toddler group and, most excitedly, we are planning a street party on 8<sup>th</sup> July to celebrate our wonderful multi-cultural and multi-faith neighbourhood. Our next step will be to establish a local community organisation which can continue to co-ordinate CitySafe and a range of other local initiatives, continuing to bring people of different faiths together and deepen their commitment to one another.

It has been a huge joy to see people from different faiths get to know their neighbours and work together for the common good, and for this we appreciate very much the support of the Near Neighbours Fund.

Steven Saxby, June 2012.