

The Churches' Officer for the North West liaises with Government Office North West, the North West Regional Assembly and the Northwest Development Agency. He also has strong links with Voluntary Sector North West. Commissioned to speak for the Churches on regeneration, urban and rural affairs, social inclusion, culture and tourism, his role requires him to do so *alongside other world faith communities*. Although unable to speak on their behalf it is acknowledged that there is much that the faith communities can pursue in common.

For further information on faith communities as part of civil society please contact

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The Faith in partnership series is:

- *an information resource for people of faith as they engage with their local communities in the new partnership agenda*
- *a joint enterprise, between The Partnership for Theological Education, Manchester various ecumenical partners from the North West*

Whilst we currently provide this resource for the Christian Community we welcome contributions from other faith traditions.

For copies of the FiP leaflets and further information please contact

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**The Partnership for
Theological Education**

The Faith in Partnership Series

An Introduction to the Relationship between Faith Communities and Civil Society

This leaflet

- Explores the concept of civil society
- Consider why the Churches should get involved in public life
- Reflects on the churches' historical involvement
- Examines practical expressions of involvement.

'CIVIL SOCIETY', sometimes called the 'THIRD SECTOR', is that part of society not covered by government or private enterprise. It includes the voluntary sector and, of course, faith communities.

Why should the Churches get involved in public life?

There has been a recent growth in awareness of the key role of faith communities as part of civil society in the North West due to the following factors

- the contribution made by faith communities to regeneration programmes over twenty years, often invisible
- new forms of participation in government created by regional structures in Scotland, Wales and England
- introduction of Local Strategic Partnerships and faith communities' role within them
- increasing awareness of minority faith groups after the disturbances in Oldham and Burnley
- nomination of the Churches' Officer as a member of the North West Regional Assembly with a commitment to establish a regional Inter-Faith forum
- Inter-Faith Conference Faith in Partnership in Blackburn on 4th April 2002, a first step in establishing a North West Regional Inter-Faith Forum
- White Paper on the English regions, *Your Region Your Choice*, in May 2002

Since the 17th century Christianity has been challenged by rational, scientific and secular values. This has accompanied by a gradual decline in church attendance. In the second half of the twentieth century the Churches became used to being dismissed as irrelevant, retrograde, amateur and unprofessional. Religion was a personal matter best kept to oneself. Refusal to support anything with a religious dimension was perceived as the politically correct approach to be taken by public authorities. But things are changing...

Factors contributing to this change in attitude

- the reappraisal of the value of *civil society* in western democracies
- failure of attempts to build a better society by generations of government grants causing policy makers to look again at the role of other stakeholders, including faith groups, in achieving *sustainable change*
- Increasing awareness of the significance of other world faiths both internationally and as part of multi-faith Britain
- the Birmingham Conference *Inter Faith Co-operation, Local Government and the Regions*, 12 June 2000
- the events of 11 September 2002
- appointment of John Battle M.P. as the Prime Minister's representative on interfaith dialogue
- publication of the document *Faith and Community: a good practice guide for local authorities* in February 2002

A Response

- Working in partnership involves the identification of common ground between partners. Faith communities and public bodies both wish to improve the quality of life. This need not compromise core values
- This is not a route to cutting taxes. Government believes that involvement of faith communities allows them to ensure that public funds are more effectively spent

Some Fears

'Co-operation with government and other partners will distort our primary agenda – preaching the Christian message!'

'Involving faith communities in social welfare provision allows government to cut taxes.'

What is required of the churches?

Crucial to serious participation in this new dimension of public life is the need for churches and other faith communities to organize themselves to speak with a regional voice.