

Health Preachers Project – Waltham Forest Faith Communities Forum

Waltham Forest is a diverse borough with the third largest Muslim population in London as well as having affluent Hindu, Jewish, Sikh and Christian communities living, working and worshipping side by side. There are also many other beliefs held by individuals and groups who live in Waltham Forest but worship within their homes or outside the borough. The Faith Communities Forum is an umbrella network linking all of these faith groups together, building relationships and forming lasting partnerships between different faith groups.

Early in 2006, through its participation in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) the Waltham Forest Faith Communities Forum held discussions with the local Primary Health Care Trust (PCT) on how the Forum could help convey the key messages to people within Waltham Forest's religious congregations. The idea of "Health Preachers" scheme developed from these discussions.

The key concept behind the idea was that religious people might be motivated by their faith to make positive health changes, especially if they were able to access health messages as part of their faith community experience. The PCT had previously run a course to train local people as Community Health Outreach Workers (CHOWs) and agreed to re-run this scheme for a group of faith community leaders recruited by the Forum. The local authority agreed to

provide LSP funding for the scheme.

The volunteer trainees were recruited as "Health Preachers" and it was made clear that they would be asked to communicate key health messages to their congregations in a way that would seek to engage others with health as a faith issue. There was an enthusiastic response from the faith communities and the scheme recruited 3 Muslim, 3 Sikh and 9 Christian leaders, the last from a wide variety of church traditions. There was no need to find common ground on faith issues and a comfortable environment was created to include some who had no previous experience of inter faith work. The "preachers" learnt much – not only about health but about one another – during the 10 week training course. "Health Preachers"



claims to be the first project of its kind in the UK and there is enthusiasm to promote it as something for others to emulate; a model for faith community engagement on issues of health as well as for inter faith co-operation. However, the proof of the low-fat, high-fibre fruit pudding had to be in the eating. The course made a difference to the health decisions of the trainees; could they convince others, through preaching and activities, to make positive health changes? The results of the evaluation work indicate that they could and demonstrates the success of the scheme. See pages below. For a full copy of the report contact Amy Willshire, Faith Communities Ambassador, amy.willshire@walthamforest.gov.uk, tel. 020 8496 3000 and see also www.faithcommunities.org.uk for the Forum's other projects.

**Taken from the foreword to the report by Fr Steven Saxby,
seen above with some of his fellow "Health Preachers"**

Waltham Forest “Health Preachers” Report and Evaluation – June 2007

The course

It is one thing for your doctor to tell you to make health changes. It is another when your religious leader tells you that it is your religious duty to do so. The danger of course is that the religious leader may give you bad advice with great spiritual authority. Consequently, the “Health Preachers” course was set up with the aim of educating religious leaders so that the advice they give is correct while taking advantage of their position of influence in the community.

The course was set up by the Waltham Forest Faith Communities Forum in order to encourage congregations, principally through the medium of preaching, to make positive health changes in response to the demands of their particular faith tradition. The Faith Communities Forum believed that this course would have a significant impact on the well being of local congregations and thereby help to reduce health inequalities in Waltham Forest.

The course aimed to do this by recruiting between 10 to 19 volunteers to train as health preachers. Applicants would be selected with a view to engaging most of Waltham Forest’s diverse religious congregations.

The course was therefore highly strategic in that it recognised the influence that faith leaders have on their communities and sought to use this influence for the promotion of health. It was set up and run through the co-operation of the Faith Communities Forum, the Waltham Forest Primary Care Trust (which provided course tuition) and the Waltham Forest Borough Council (which provided funding via the Local Strategic Partnership).

At the end of the course the participants were awarded with two certificates: the first was as a Community Health Outreach Worker; the second was as one of the UK’s first “Health Preachers”.

The training program

All of the training was done by health professionals employed by the NHS with some additional input on religious matters from religious leaders.

The course covered a large variety of topics. These are outlined below.

- A theological approach to promoting health
- The NHS
- Health inequalities in Waltham Forest
- What is health?
- Information, advice giving and confidentiality.
- Outreach and Access
- Maternal and infant health
- Breast and cervical screening
- Advocacy
- Communication
- Nutrition
- Smoking cessation
- Sexual health and HIV
- Mental health
- Evaluation and monitoring.

At the end of the course some of the participants read out their sermons for information and comment.

The course took place once a week, beginning at 10am and finishing at 2.30pm with a healthy, 30 minute lunch break. Three of the sessions took place in a church, a mosque and a Sikh centre (with a visit to the Gurdwara).

The participants

A total of 15 participants were recruited onto the course. These came from a wide variety of faith backgrounds representing 3 of the major faith groups in Waltham Forest. There were representatives from the Sikh Community Care Project and the Noor ul Islam Trust as well as a variety of Christian denominations. The majority of participants were Christian but this is to be expected given the large percentage of Christians living in Waltham Forest. The Christian participants represented a wide variety of traditions and denominations within the Christian church, the majority from minority ethnic communities so adding even greater diversity to the group.

The faith / health issue

As well as the normal teaching about the main health issues and approaches to them made by health professionals, this course was distinctive for recognising the spiritual and religious aspect of health. One important question that the participants had to consider was whether their faith encouraged healthy religious practice. It was suggested that there are such things as healthy religion and unhealthy religion.

For example, some religious practice may lead to avoidance of making health changes, such as praying for the sick. While praying for the sick may have positive consequences the practice can lead to avoidance of responsibility by the sick person. In other words, a person may expect God to answer their prayers for healing and neglect the complimentary need to seek medical advice.

In contrast, faith and hope amidst a difficult illness can promote a better psychological outlook which may help healing. The caring community of a local religious community may also promote better health, while the idea of religious faith as a general direction in life can also be applied to health. Just as religious faith may view a person as journeying towards God, despite slip-ups and mistakes along the way, the issue that is important is concerned with the general overall direction of a person's life. The same analogy can be used for health. Is an individual moving towards a healthy lifestyle, despite being tempted to occasionally eat unhealthy food or fail to take exercise?

One of the sessions looked at the issue of 'what is health?' Naturally, the religious faith of the participants also provided a useful perspective on the question. For example, the Christian participants were able to relate the issue of health to issues of salvation. Meanwhile the moral aspects of health and religious practice came sharply into view during a session on HIV/AIDS in which differing views were discovered between some of the health professionals and some of the participants.

Finally, the course provided a good opportunity to consider the difference between core religious beliefs and religious tradition and practice that is not intrinsic to a religious faith. Some of these practices may well be unhealthy but are held on to because of the belief that

they are intrinsic. Consequently the course provided opportunity for consideration of these practices and provided the opportunity to clear up some of these different interpretations.

The inter faith aspect

Although the primary aim of the course was the promotion of health among the faith communities of Waltham Forest, the course also provided an opportunity for those of different faiths to meet, discuss and learn about each other in a relaxed and friendly manner. Working and studying together for 10 weeks gave ample opportunity for conversation and discussion about matters of common interest and concern.

With the aims of the course being around an area in which everybody had a positive interest there was a common sense of purpose and unity in the group. This contrasted with other groups aimed purely at inter faith dialogue in which the differences between people of faith may become the primary issue of discussion. While we were able to note our differences, the aims of the course and a common sense of purpose meant that good relationships were formed on the course.

It should also be noted that many of the representatives from the various Christian denominations were from Christian traditions that would not normally seek inter faith dialogue. However, the nature of the course and the needs of the local congregations meant that the course provided something of value to these church leaders that may have overcome any suspicions of working with those of other faiths.

The course therefore provided a novel approach to inter faith dialogue and contributed to greater community cohesion between some of the leaders of our faith communities.

The impact

Some months after the course had finished the participants were invited to a reunion to consider the outcomes of the course. Part of this reunion looked at the personal impact of the course and many positive comments were made. These included weight loss, healthy dietary changes (which were particularly inspired by the nutritionist) and taking up new forms of exercise. All of these changes were considered to have been inspired by the course.

The course also had an impact on the day to day ministry of many of the participants. For example, the session on advocacy provided one participant with the confidence and skills to provide advocacy for a member of his congregation.

The participants all used the course to promote a greater awareness of health issues within their congregations. Sikh and Muslim participants organised a series of events at their respective centres, all of which engaged large numbers of people and were regarded as effective in encouraging positive health choices. However, the only formal evaluation undertaken by course participants was undertaken by those Christian participants who preached specially targeted sermons on faith and health. Information on this, as well as the results from feedback forms, is presented below.

The preaching

Christian participants on the course agreed to preach sermons on faith and health to local congregations. Evaluation forms were used so that the impact of these sermons could be assessed. A summary of the evaluation forms is provided below.

Sermons were preached in a large variety of settings and evaluation forms were used in at least 8 churches and at one event in a church in Leyton. The sermons were preached in a wide area across the borough.

It is clear from the evaluation forms and feedback received that the preachers reached a diverse group of people of different genders, ages and ethnic backgrounds.

Perhaps the most striking response from these evaluation forms is that out of 155 people who filled in a form, 137 recorded that the sermon or event had encouraged them to live a healthier lifestyle. In addition, 125 people said that they would eat more healthily, do more exercise or do a combination of both as a consequence of this initiative. There was also a positive response to the possibility of more events and seminars on matters of health and faith.

Given these results, it seems only correct to conclude that the health preaching course has had an impact on the well being of local congregations and has gone some way to reducing the health inequalities in Waltham Forest.

Results of the evaluation forms from the church sermons/events

Has the event/sermon encouraged you to live a healthier lifestyle?

Yes	No	Maybe	Already healthy life
137	8	2	4

What practical changes will you make as a consequence to this event/ sermon?

(Some people gave more than one answer.)

Exercise more	Eat more healthily	Healthy eating and exercise more	Continue with healthy habits
34	42	49	6
Give up smoking	Help others	Eat healthily, pray and read bible	
6	1	1	

What changes can this church make to encourage better health in the congregation?

(Some people gave more than one answer.)

More events and preaching on healthy living		Provision of healthy food at church events		Healthy advice on notice board		Events for young people	
35		11		2		4	
Exercise programmes	Education about African food	Prayer	Greater care for each other	Read bible	Better heating in church!		
5	1	2	6	1	2		

What can the church do to encourage better health in the wider community?

(Some people gave more than one answer.)

Inform through events & outreach		Support groups		Encourage exercise/classes			
61		2		12			
Evangelism		Come to church		Be more caring		Talk to friends and family	
3		1		4		3	

What aspects of health would you like more information about?

(Some people gave more than one answer to this question.)

Christianity and health		General health	Cancer	Diabetes	Heart disease		HIV	TB
13		12	8	27	24		1	2
Caring for others		Stop smoking	Children's health		Nutrition	Mental health		Obesity
11		4	2		25	1		1