



Anti-Racist Action in Arts & Wellbeing

‘Engaging with Confidence (Part 1) - The Arts & Faith Communities’ Workshop – Summary

This toolkit document provides a summary of the key findings and learnings from the ‘Engaging with Confidence (Part 1) - The Arts & Faith Communities’ workshop, delivered by Pasha Shah and [Faiths Forum for London](#) in partnership with Flourishing Lives and the Anti-Racist Action Group (ARAG) in Arts & Wellbeing.

The session was designed to help arts and wellbeing organisations build meaningful, trust-based relationships with diverse faith communities by addressing structural barriers and embedding equity into practice.

1. Understanding the Multi-Faith Landscape

To engage with confidence, organisations must move beyond a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to diversity.

- **The Power of Labels:** Lived experience shows that identities are often fluid and imposed by external events. For example, Pasha Shah shared how his identity was viewed through an ‘Asian’ lens during the 2001 northern riots, only to shift to ‘Muslim’ overnight following 9/11.
- **Complexity and Heritage:** Faith is distinct from ethnicity. A person of Pakistani heritage might be Muslim, Christian, or Sikh. It is essential to train our brains to see communities as complex and multi-layered rather than monolithic.
- **Census Realities:** While 46% of the population in England and Wales identifies as Christian and 37% as having no religion, there is a significant presence of minority faiths, including Muslims (6.5%), Hindus (1.7%), Sikhs (0.9%), and Jews and Buddhists (0.5% each). These communities are often geographically concentrated, seeking support near places of worship like Mandirs or Gurdwaras.

2. Challenging Assumptions and Stereotypes

A core takeaway from the session was the quote from Dervla Murphy: "If you know nothing about people, you can believe anything".

- **Invisible Barriers:** Institutions often assume faith communities are ‘too conservative’ for the arts. This creates an invisible barrier where the community feels the arts aren't for them, and organisations feel the community isn't interested.

- **Proactive Curiosity:** To counter ignorance, organisations must foster an environment of open dialogue and education.

3. Nuanced Faith Literacy: Beyond the Calendar

Basic faith literacy is essential, but it must be nuanced to be effective.

- **Celebration vs. Grievance:** A faith calendar may list a date, but it won't always explain the emotional nature of the observance. For example, in the Shia Muslim community, Muharram is the start of the New Year but is a period of deep grievance and mourning, not celebration.
- **Observance Spectrum:** People within the same faith have a spectrum of observances, ranging from very practicing to non-practicing. Both are valid participants in the arts.

4. Relational Engagement and Local 'Hubs'

Trust is not built through blanket emails but through individual outreach and deep listening.

- **Diverse Interlocutors:** Effective engagement requires working through people the community already trusts. Beyond community leaders, organisations should look to corner shops, libraries, GP surgeries, and youth groups as vital bridges.
- **The Role of Black Churches:** These were identified as "huge avenues" for inclusive engagement that are frequently overlooked by the arts sector.
- **Avoiding Gatekeepers:** While building trust takes time, organisations must avoid relying on a single individual who becomes the sole 'voice' of a community, which can lead to institutional dependency.

5. Tailored Approaches and Financial Equity

- **New Arrivals vs. Economic Migrants:** Strategies must differ for those fleeing conflict versus economic migrants. Those from war-torn regions may have low institutional trust but an intense craving for arts and culture to support their mental wellbeing.
- **Remuneration and Reciprocity:** Faith organisations often feel "abused" when institutions ask for help without providing funding. If hosting an event at a Mosque, Temple, Synagogue or Gurdwara, ensure the venue is fairly remunerated.
- **Valuing Lived Experience:** Lived experience is expertise. Participants should be paid for their time, particularly when sharing personal or traumatic experiences of inequality.

6. Summary of Participant Breakout Room Questions

During the breakout sessions, participants generated a rich variety of questions that highlighted the sector's current challenges. These questions centred on four key themes:

- **Trust and Connection:** How can we build trust with "seemingly self-supporting" communities? How do we start an initial conversation that is welcoming and open without being patronising?
- **Practical Delivery:** Is there a "fast way" to transfer knowledge of one community to another in a different area? How can we deliver interfaith programmes without facing internal objections from within our own organisations?
- **Addressing Racism and Hate:** How can we raise awareness of how hate speech and Islamophobia affect both the communities we serve and our own staff? Is racism often rooted in a person's faith rather than their race?
- **Health and Advocacy:** How do faith communities address mental health stigmas internally? How can we support communities of colour to hold their boundaries while advocating for themselves?

Conclusion: Sustaining Transformation

Transformation is a slow, embedded process that requires bravery and commitment. It involves moving from project-based 'tick-box' consultation to long-term partnerships and co-creation.

Part 2 of this series, [*'Tackling Racism & Islamophobia in Cultural Organisations'*](#), will take place on **19th May**, where we will specifically address some of the deeper questions raised regarding microaggressions, institutional racism, and mental health blind spots.