

Faith in dialogue

It comes as a surprise to some that LSE has a Chaplaincy, with a full-time Church of England priest. However, when they discover the range of activities the Chaplaincy provides, it becomes apparent that such a role is of increasing worth to the life of the School. For while LSE as an institution remains properly secular, the majority of our students come from societies where religious belief is the norm. Indeed, the various religious student societies have an active membership exceeding that of the gym and other sports facilities combined. As a kind of mini United Nations, LSE has in its midst religious communities of just about every kind.

That is why fostering of good and ongoing interfaith relations is central to my work. Within the academic year, the Chaplaincy not only provides resources for our Christian community but also hosts an inter-faith forum in which representatives from each of the religious societies get to know each other and put together a package of activities. Over the year this will include visiting various religious buildings in London, such as St Paul's or the Neasdon Hindu Temple, as an introduction to a particular religious tradition. There is also an annual interfaith holocaust memorial, which includes students reading from various Holy Scriptures, a guest speaker and music from the School choir (this is not an act of worship but an act of solidarity at which all, religious or not, may participate.) The Chaplaincy also organises meals, discussions and lectures, and last year hosted a Muslim-Jewish hip-hop band. These events are often funded by the School, through the discretionary fund of Professor Janet Hartley, pro-director, teaching and learning.

Underlying all of this activity is the desire to enable students from different religious and political backgrounds to forge friendships. Inevitably students are affected by international politics and in a place like LSE, which is so diverse, tensions can arise as students express their views. Well, that is as it should be. I certainly remember doing the same as an undergraduate. When, however, emotions run high they can create an atmosphere where some feel intimidated and that is certainly not acceptable. The friendships and trust which the interfaith work of the Chaplaincy nurtures can help in easing these tensions.

Such work does not grab the headlines for it is quiet and behind the scenes. Nor is it easy, particularly in an institution like LSE with a high turnover of students. To help strengthen it, the School is committed to building a new multi-faith and interfaith suite of rooms in the proposed new student building. These will include new Islamic Prayer Rooms and high quality social space for all religious societies to use. The principle is not to create some kind of all in one 'spiritual' space with which no-one would actually identify, but rather allow each society to have the suite of rooms to themselves at different times and make it their own. However, for this to work it will require the cooperation of all involved, for it will be run by the societies themselves. From this base it is hoped that the contribution that the Chaplaincy makes to LSE will increase both in breadth and depth. ■



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