

SPEECH FOR COUNCILLOR ALAN RUDGE
FAITHS FOR THE CITY: MAKING A DIFFERENCE
5 NOVEMBER 2009

1. Distinguished guests, I am delighted to welcome you to the city of Birmingham and to the City Council. May I also give a special welcome back to a friend of mine and a friend of the city, the Archbishop of Westminster, who was formerly the Archbishop of Birmingham. I would like to thank him for his selfless contribution to the city's religious life and his promotion of inter-faith relations.

2. A theme running through our deliberations over the last few days has been about relations, and the issues discussed: faith for the city, wellbeing and health, wellbeing and wealth, faith and communities, and family and neighbourliness, a theme which I led yesterday, are all a manifestation of relationships between individuals, communities, and civic institutions.

3. But nothing can be more meaningful than how we can address these issues at a fundamental personal level. If we want to make a difference, there is nothing more valuable than the personal relationships between human beings, and the extent to which we will go to support each other, irrespective of faith, ethnicity, gender, age, or disability. This is why the theme group I led yesterday is, I believe, so important, because

relationships and the support they give begins in the family and is reflected in neighbourliness.

4. Within my own faith, Christianity, the primary source of a good neighbour is derived from the teaching of Jesus. He defined the meaning of the word in answer to the lawyer's question "Who is my neighbour?", using the parable of the Good Samaritan. Here is the archetypal picture of the stranger who gives help to another who has suffered misfortune. The gospel of St John picks up the same theme of love for the other saying, "Greater love hath no man than this that a man should lay down his life for his friends". The other gospel writers would add the qualification that "friends" must extend to the whole of humanity including those normally called "enemies". Developing this line of tradition, St Augustine wrote that a person should have "a heart of flesh" towards others and "a heart of iron" towards himself.
5. These words capture what must underpin relationships, neighbourliness and cohesion to address social issues of the day.
6. During the last four years, I have increased the support and focus on these issues and on the ways in which issues of faith, religion and belief can be harnessed to support efforts to build flourishing and vibrant

neighbourhoods, and to support efforts in respect of community cohesion and positive active citizenship.

7. In my capacity as Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources and in my personal capacity, these are matters which are close to my heart. Cities across the world are generally becoming more diverse and this is often reflected in their multi-faith nature. This is particularly true of Birmingham, where faith has made a considerable contribution to the cultural history of the City.

8. Birmingham as we know is one of the largest ethnically and religiously diverse conurbations in the country and perhaps in the whole of Europe. There are over 800 faith based organisations here and it is one of the best places to celebrate and pay tribute to the work and contribution which faith makes to our communities and will continue to make in the future. Having over 800 faith based organisations here in the city, means that most, if not all, Faiths are represented here and the places of worship and practices of these communities have become important to the way of life for many of us in the city. One has only to cast our eye across the landscape of this area to witness the number of neighbourhoods with Churches, Mosques, Temples, and Gurdwaras.

9. There are many important issues which faith communities have and can contribute to in Birmingham. These include:
- Civic renewal – supporting faith communities to engage with civic society.
 - Citizenship – members of faith communities being neighbourly. Being responsible for each other irrespective of faith background. Creating a sense of pride, belonging and ownership in an area.
 - Community Cohesion – developing clear and shared values for a neighbourhood. Promoting initiatives that bring faith communities together, such as interfaith events which celebrate and exchange ways of belonging to one humanity.
 - Social Justice – Faith communities work in partnership for the justice, so that there is a sharing of social and economic resources. And tackling poverty and the causes and effects of poverty, no matter who is suffering.
10. I think it's worth paying tribute to the enormous contribution which faith communities have provided to Birmingham. They are at the heart of this city: they provide leadership and example on the moral fibre of the city. They have often acted as a conscience for us in terms of measuring the temperature of the city and as a calming influence at times of upheaval and challenge.
11. It is still a sad fact that within our society, despite a great deal of good work, there is still prejudice, misunderstanding and intolerance and a

worrying level of ignorance continues to exist amongst some of our citizens about different religions and faiths and the communities who are representative of them. We do need to work to continue to build positive links between and within different communities in the city to enhance understanding, and to build greater openness and transparency between them. The promotion of multi-faith and interfaith co-operation encourages the development of increased trust and understanding, and can play a valuable and vital role in building effective communities.

12. To promote these principles we need to strengthen a range of attitudes and behaviours which we take for granted, but in the diverse world in which we live we need to further cultivate. Some may say they are the enduring values that make for good neighbours and make our neighbourhood attractive to live in. They are:

- **Value and respect all people** that is, we recognise that all people have ideas, energy, skills and talents. Therefore for individuals to reach their full potential, they must be encouraged and allowed to fulfil their own aspirations and goals, so that they can make a positive contribution to their family, community, neighbourhood, and the city.
- **Trust** is a major source for building good relationships, between individuals, between and across communities, and vital for good citizenship.

Trust cements cooperation between citizens and communities for the common good, and allows for those occasions when individual preferences, goals and opinions are put aside for the greater good of the community and the city as a whole.

- **Empowerment** allows us to ensure that the social capital that citizens and communities bring, generates and releases individual capabilities and collective resources, so that we can all contribute to the growth of one another, our communities, and thus making our city prosperous, vibrant, and harmonious.
- **Relationships** are dependent on the values I have just mentioned: respect, trust, and empowerment. Relationships are key to good community cohesion. And as someone said: *hard to make easy to break*. Yet, it is through relationships we build partnerships, whether in marriage, the family, the community, the neighbourhood, and across communities. Through relationships people work together, they develop bonds of trust and respect; which they develop over time and through experience. These bonds open up a network for ideas and resources to flow. The friendships between individuals, as well as the relationships that individuals build with groups, and groups with communities are the organic backbone for a cohesive, peaceful and stable city.

13. I can add many more values that are important but I believe these to be the essential ones. In meeting our aspirations we need to recognise that these values have to be embedded into the social ethos of our society, and mediated through our social institutions. Therefore I would like to give some pointers where I think emphasis needs to be made.

14. The first is **the family**. The values of neighbourliness begins in the family, and this to me is important because we live in a world where the family is under threat; more and more pressures and demands are put upon the family, and increasingly the family is being fragmented and ignored as an important source of social development for our young. Yet, for all our faiths and cultures in Birmingham, the family is at the core of human and spiritual development, and the centre of community growth and stability. That is why it should be valued and recognised as a source of strength for our quest in supporting neighbourliness. It is the quality of the family and its inner strength which gives rise to the quality of our neighbourhoods and our city.

15. A misunderstood section of the family is our children, for some they can be a challenge, for others they are an inspiration. Birmingham is one of the most youthful cities in Europe, and as someone who has been involved in youth work; I am always amazed at their resilience, and inspired by their courage and creativity. That is why I believe special attention be given to this section of our communities, because they will be the future leaders and

managers of our city, and they will make major contribution to the social, cultural, and economic development of the city. However, we cannot ignore the fact that some of our young do get into difficulties and are engaged in criminal activity, and, that is why for my part, I lead on Birmingham Reduction of Gang Violence, and Preventing Violent Extremism. My contribution is to work with our partners to ensure a small minority of young people do not undermine the good work and positive and constructive contribution by the majority of young people to the welfare of our city.

16. The second **is faith**. Faith communities are an important part of our city, although they do have distinctive characteristics and potential of their own. As sources of values and commitment, and with substantial constituencies, they have a valuable contribution to make, in building a sense of local community and renewing civil society, in addition to developing community cohesion.

I believe the new challenge for faith communities, and in particular their leadership, is how in a secular multi-faith society, they can emerge a theology that transcends their boundaries to reach out to others to work for a mission which promotes neighbourliness between individuals of different faiths, which now make a significant contribution to the Birmingham landscape. *In other words, there will be no peace until there is continuing peace among faiths.*

17. The third is the **voluntary and not for profit sector**. I am passionately committed to the work of the voluntary and not for profit sector, having myself been a life long volunteer, and involved in a number of voluntary organisations, in particular youth groups. I believe that voluntary and community sector organisations have a crucial role to play in the reinvigoration of civic life and promoting values that contribute to neighbourliness. In Birmingham we have thousands of individuals who selflessly make a major contribution to supporting and working with community groups and individuals, making a difference to the lives of hundreds and thousands of people, to the sick, to the young, to the elderly, to the environment, to those in need.

I look towards the voluntary and not for profit sector to help us rekindle the spark in individuals and communities that fires the building of strong relationships between individuals and community groups irrespective of race, age, faith and non-faith, disability, gender, or sexual orientation; to build a bridge between the needs of individuals living in those communities and the capacity of the city council to improve their lives.

18. The fourth is our **democratic culture**. There is no other country in the world than Britain that has led the way in evolving a strong democratic culture. The Progressive Alliance in Birmingham City Council has been a champion

and advocate of local democracy, and recently in partnership with Be-Birmingham we have established the Neighbourhood Boards Strategic Partnership, which I now chair.

I see democratic and civil renewal as a key priority for us where equal and high participation by our citizens in civic life is a central goal. Civil renewal should be about developing constructive dialogue between people and local government. Working together to make life and our environment better. People are core to the solutions, influencing the decisions that affect them and their communities, taking responsibility for addressing local problems, rather than expecting others to do so for us. In this way we are building, what I call democratic cohesion, the relationship between civic institutions and its citizens.

I believe that consultation, engagement and participation with the broadest cross section of our communities, is at the heart of the Council policy-making. That is why I have established a number of community networks to ensure we are able to hear the voices of citizens in various local communities, not the usual suspects, but the unheard voices, those work tirelessly without proper recognition.

19. Local authorities have an important leadership role for encouraging, promoting and assisting multi-faith and inter-faith co-operation and this is an

important event for us in terms of demonstrating our continued commitment to faith communities who can help to shape and advise on key policies and issues in the city.

20. Communities of faith have an important part to play in the regeneration of the city, not only in terms of social and economic terms but also in terms of their moral and spiritual role. Let us build a progressive society in which all have a place and space to make that contribution.

Councillor Alan Rudge
Cabinet Member for Equalities and Human Resources
Birmingham City Council