

FACE TO FAITH



Face to Faith: A school programme by Tony Blair Faith Foundation promoting respect and understanding

Abstract

Face to Faith (FTF) program prepares school students aged 12-17 for a globalised world in which boundaries of culture and identity are rapidly changing, by offering them the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with students of other states and countries whose cultural background may differ from their own.

By participating in discussions in the classroom on a secure website and via facilitated video-conferences with other schools, students worldwide have the chance to explore important global issues from a variety of faith perspectives – gaining key skills required to resolve conflict and promote peace through the breaking down of religious and regional stereotypes.

We are currently active in **19 countries** across **4 continents**; Australia, Canada, Egypt, Israel, Indonesia, India, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Mexico, Pakistan, Palestine, the Philippines, Singapore, Ukraine, UAE, UK, USA and Kosovar.

Salient features of Face to Faith program are:

- a series of facilitated video conferences, enabling direct encounter and structured exchange between students of different countries.
- an online community providing sustained engagement between schools as well as opportunities to link with a wide range of schools.
- teacher training and support.
- a comprehensive set of *free* lesson resources with suggested activities for teachers to adapt and fit into their existing curricula needs.
- technical support for schools setting up *free* video-conference facilities.
- a team of facilitators who are on hand to moderate discussions and ensure that schools can find appropriate linking partners.
- regular invites to take part in special day video-conferencing in conjunction with the UN calendar – these always include special guests.

We use a three-stage model to help empower students (and teachers) with the skills of dialogue. The one and half hour workshop will focus on this model giving a glimpse of the Face to Faith programme as well as enabling the participants to take back the tools required for safe and meaningful dialogue.

The Tony Blair Faith Foundation

The Tony Blair Faith Foundation was launched with the aim to promote respect, friendship and understanding between the major faiths of the world and to promote religion as a force for good in the modern world. At a time when religious extremism is on the rise, it is critical that a counter movement be formed that proves the inherent altruistic power of those of all faiths and none to offer a more positive and stable future. As globalization pushes us every closer it is vital that faith is not used as a force for conflict and division. Those who seek to cause religious conflict are small in number but highly motivated, organized and funded. Whilst there are billions of people who are loyal to their own religion, they have not yet learnt how to work together. We can change this.

Our Underlying Ethos



Under the momentum of globalisation, traditional concepts of culture, identity and even nationhood are rapidly changing. As the modern world becomes ever more interdependent different cultures and faith communities are finding themselves thrust ever closer together, increasing the urgency of ensuring they do so in a manner that promotes peaceful co-existence. Key to this challenge is the central role of religion, which is integral to the identity of so many.

Central to all our programmes is the knowledge that in facilitating the ability for those of different faiths to interact together, we are building bridges of communication between communities who would not otherwise have the cause, the confidence or the means to speak to each other. In so doing, we have witnessed the formation of new relationships that over time are developing into long-term friendships, based on mutual appreciation and trust.



Through these relationships we help facilitate the peaceful co-existence of those of different faiths and none.

Our Relevance in the Modern World

The strategic importance of our education programme in today's world is clear. Faced with the harsh realities of the growing threat from religious extremism, and the dangers inherent in allowing ethnic and religious tensions to rise unchecked, it is beholden on us all to ensure that religion is no longer left on the margins. It is to the benefit of all that the positive role of religion in society be celebrated and understood, and that negative stereotypes formed through ignorance or fear are addressed directly. History shows that religion will either help positively shape our society, encouraging people of all faiths and none to retain their

distinctive identities whilst respecting those who hold differing perspectives, or it will divide people and exacerbate conflict.

The Importance of Equipping Young People

In a globalized world, young people need to be equipped with the skills, understanding and connections to become global citizens, allowing them to be at ease with those who are different to them, and to live in peace with others. This is best achieved through lived experience, where young people are given the opportunity to engage meaningfully with others whose religious beliefs and cultural practices are different to their own – enabling them to put the factual knowledge they have learned in the classroom into context through personal experience. Those without this opportunity will find themselves at a serious disadvantage in the 21st century.

Face to Faith – Transforming the Way Young People View and Respect Each Other

Face to Faith seeks to improve understanding among young people from across the world of their diverse cultural and religious backgrounds in order to combat ignorance and fear of religious differences. As such, the project brings together secondary school students to learn directly with, from and about each other. Furthermore, the students have the opportunity to learn about the practice of their own religion in different countries and circumstances - thereby reducing the tendency to assume simplistic stereotypes.

By collaborating in this way, young people not only improve their understanding of the world's faith traditions in a relevant and contemporary context, but also become more aware of their local and global neighbours. By engaging with each other through joint video conferences, following a tailor made modular syllabus and participating in a vibrant online community, students investigate specific global issues of common concern. In so doing, they are offered the opportunity, the confidence, the knowledge and the connections to start a meaningful dialogue with each other, frequently leading to joint social action that alleviates human suffering.



Countries where Face to Faith is Active

“After 30 years of engaging in religious education with a goal of promoting interfaith dialogue among different religious traditions and people, I have finally glimpsed a way forward without parallel. This is clearly a brilliant idea, whose time has come.”

Professor Harry Stout, Yale University

To date we now have over 600 schools registered in 19 countries, with an online community of nearly 11000 students. In the last year alone we have facilitated over 240 video conferences. Feedback from teachers confirms that this is transforming the way young people are being taught about their world, and in particular about religion. By gathering first hand evidence

students learn about the diversity of views within a religion and as such learn to avoid making sweeping generalisations.

“The video-conferencing session with a school in Pakistan removed all the stereotypes I had in my mind about Muslims. I came to understand that they are simply people just like us living across the border.”

Indian student, writing on www.facetofaithonline.org



We know that **Face to Faith** has most resonance in areas that have seen significant religious tension - where the need to break down stereotypes and build bridges of friendship and understanding is greatest. As such we are conducting an increasing number of video conferences in areas that have seen religious discrimination of one type or another and are keen – resource dependent – to engage more, especially in these countries.



“Participation in this programme offered me a chance to Question & dispel stereotypes & interaction with people from diverse cultures & faith.” – Face to Faith Student

“Tony Blair Faith Foundation’s Face to Faith is an exceptional educational programme. In a very subtle way it provides experiences to the children to explore the roots of their faith and interact with students all over the world. Thus, it helps in understanding the humanity and enhances love and respect for other cultures.”—Principal of a Face to Faith School.

Video Conference between India and Australia

In one of the VC’s between India and Australia one of the Indian students asked the Australian students if they were aware of issues to do with the mistreatment of Indian students in Australia, and how they felt about it. This provoked a passionate reaction, and some very penetrating questions from the Indian students. The responses from the Australian students were thoughtful, balanced, impressive and mature. They recognized that racism was a factor in Australian society, although they argued strongly that this was a tiny minority of people, and that not all Australians should be judged on the appalling actions of a few. They pointed out the focused actions that had been taken, and also referred this to wider issues in their own society. They also pointed out the fact that they were obviously not prejudiced, as they were a diverse group from a diverse school.

Face to Faith - The Underlying Pedagogical Approach

Face to Faith is unusual, in that while there are other educational projects that connect young people, none offers a moderated, safe and meaningful environment in which students can specifically build their awareness of the role of faith in their lives and in the lives of others. Avoidance of the discussion of religion is common, often due to sensitivities around the subject matter leading to an inability to cope with difficult discussions about different faiths and a lack of knowledge about the role of religion in today's society.

We therefore took time and care to develop the programme, conducting an initial nine-month international research consultation with more than 50 educational experts worldwide. As a result, the project encourages a spirit of enquiry, putting young people in the driving seat and inviting them to identify the issues to research, the questions to pose and the actions to take rather than "pushing facts" at them. Our underlying pedagogy is innovative, moving from a traditional "teacher as expert" model towards a "student as researcher" approach.

Participants in **Face to Faith** learn from, and about their peers in classrooms around the world via video conferencing, an online community and a modular syllabus. The programme does not promote religion in general nor any faith in particular, and nor does it say a person should have a religious faith. Rather, it seeks to maintain a neutral perspective to foster greater awareness, understanding and tolerance between individuals and communities. Students investigate specific global issues of common concern; discuss the teachings and practices of different religions; and explore the reason for similar and different beliefs, values and opinions, reducing the tendency to assume simplistic stereotypes. Topics include: charity, poverty and wealth; the environment; the art of expression; hunger and disease; and human rights.

Face to Faith - Our Offer to Schools

The Foundation provides a full curriculum for schools, and helps train and support teachers in the use of these materials as well as the video-conferencing technology. Using a combination of local co-ordinators and lead schools we ensure that help is always available at every step of the process for those new to the programme.

Thanks to the support of donors, **Face to Faith** is a *free* programme available to all secondary schools providing:

- teacher training workshops and on-going support
- a suite of tailor made teaching modules and lesson plans
- a set of proposed social action projects for students
- video conferencing hardware and support (where required)
- moderators who facilitate the video conferences to enable structured exchange between students
- a managed, secure online community providing sustained engagement between students worldwide

In addition, **Face to Faith** holds a series of Special Day videoconferences throughout the year in line with UN calendar dates for Human Rights Day, Human Trafficking Day , International Women’s Day, World Malaria Day, Peace One Day and Older Persons. In each of these videoconferences special guests, who are recognized activists in the field, inform students of their work and encourage them to return to their communities to raise awareness of such issues so that, regardless of their faith, they can join together to work for the common good.

Many **Face to Faith** schools deliver the programme through a range of school classes – from social science to religious education, and from civics/ethics classes to history lessons. These not only enable students to develop a better understanding of the world and its diversity, but it also helps underline the importance of communities working together to overcome difference in order to affect the common good.

Face to Faith – Our Offer to Students

The **Face to Faith** curriculum supports students in acquiring and practicing the core skills they require in order to have meaningful and respectful dialogues with each other. Students are actively encouraged to discuss key issues with global peers, gaining knowledge on various common issues through different faith perspectives but also, importantly, learning to use their voice to express their own beliefs and thoughts. Enabling young people to talk to each other is a powerful way of making “the other” human. These direct encounters with other young people frequently lead to a desire to act together in pursuit of the common good.

Face to Faith seeks to equip students for life in our globalized world by:

- Enriching the religious literacy of students – of all faiths and none
- Helping to prepare students for global citizenship
- Breaking down the barriers, assumptions and stereotypes that often exist around notions of people of different religions and cultural backgrounds, thus opening students’ minds
- Enhancing valuable 21st century life skills including respectful dialogue and communication, conflict resolution, leadership, cooperation, creative use of IT and research skills
- Supporting teachers to help develop their students’ self-esteem and emotional intelligence
- Contributing to the skills and capacity of teachers to address global issues and to manage student involvement and participation in challenging and sensitive situations
- Offering a socially and academically useful “window-onto-the-world” for students, at the same time as giving them a voice to share their insights in a considered, international context.



“Face to Faith has the ability to connect today’s youth with each other to design a true global community. It is my hope that this connection will provide my students and all the students involved with the tools to be successful citizens of our planet living in peace and harmony.”

Ms Christina Teisch, St Thomas the Apostle School, Long Island, USA

Face to Faith – Measuring & Evaluating Our Impact

The University of Warwick in the UK is undertaking an independent evaluation of the project based on qualitative data captured through interviews with students and teachers involved in the project. The Foundation has also designed its own quality metrics, collecting quantitative data that ranges from monitoring the number of video conferences conducted, to the number of students that are active online as well as the extent of in-classroom teaching. Testimonials from students are also monitored along with evidence of joint action to address specific social conditions. In addition, the project includes in-class self- and peer-assessment mechanisms that support students and teachers to reflect on the learning that has taken place.

Face to Faith – Where the Programme is Operational

Australia, Canada, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Kosovo, Lebanon, Mexico, Pakistan, Palestine, Philippines, Singapore, UAE, UK, Ukraine, USA.

Government Liaison – Embedding the Program in National Policy

As part of our key strategy to ensure that the *Face to Faith* program is embedded in local curricula and that the program receives the support and approval necessary in the countries in which we work, we have been continuing to actively engage with both local and national Governments worldwide. We have been most successful in Italy, the Philippines and Palestinian Territories where we have signed Memoranda of Understanding with each Government and are working on agreed targets for the numbers of schools and teachers trained and registered on the program.

- i) The **Italian Government** have been particularly receptive to the program, and we hope to shortly sign a second MOU for a further two years which will allow us to focus on providing a sustainable and cost-effective model for the government to mainstream the program across all its public schools.
- ii) In the **Philippines**, our lead coordinator, has been appointed as part of the Government’s Curriculum Reform Group to implement changes associated with the extension of compulsory education from kindergarten to 18 year olds. The Faith Foundation will therefore be making a strong case for the incorporation of *Face to Faith* within this new National Curriculum.
- iii) In the **Palestinian Territories**, a recent workshop in June 2012 with members of the Ministry of Education and *Face to Faith* teachers focused on mapping the program onto

their National text book. This enabled the teachers to relate the program to the curriculum currently provided.

In the **USA**, we have also taken the time to build and maintain an excellent relationship with key officials from the State Department and Justice Department, as well as the Department of Education. Indeed, in January 2012, as guests of the Department of Education, we were invited to present the *Face to Faith* program to key organizations which included the State Department Education Group, the Association of Superintendents and the Secondary Schools Association.

Newer governmental support includes a request from the **Kosovan Government**. Mr Blair recently travelled to Pristina to sign an MOU with the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The Government is currently developing a new National Curriculum, and has asked for our support to incorporate *Face to Faith* into their Social Studies program.

Mainstreaming – Scaling Up the Pilot Models

A key advance in the development of the *Face to Faith* program has been the research and development undertaken to begin to move *Face to Faith* from a smaller bespoke program to a more sustainable mainstream offering.

Providing a program that is both ‘fit for purpose’ and highly effective remains our main priority, as well as continuing to work with a growing numbers of Governments. However, we know that in order for the program to truly be successful, we must work collaboratively and at much greater scale to make *Face to Faith* a critical resource, regardless of the country in question.

In January 2012, we hosted the third annual Coordinators conference in London. The focus of the conference was the sustainability of the program and the Government engagement necessary to support *Face to Faith* in becoming part of mainstream education. The Coordinators spent a considerable amount of time working on country plans to ensure that the program could be effectively mainstreamed within their countries, including hosting an event with the Ambassadors and educational co-ordinators from the Embassies of the countries in which we work. Since the conference, we have seen the quality of interaction and outreach improve, and the coordinators have reported a greater understanding of their role within the program.

Assessment – Independent Evaluations

An important factor in mainstreaming *Face to Faith* is ensuring that we work with international recognized examination bodies. We are pleased to share that we recently signed an MOU with the International Baccalaureate (IB) - the leading international accreditation group. The Faith Foundation has since been asked to work with the IB Curriculum Development Team in order to showcase how *Face to Faith* may be used to teach the Global Engage criteria of the award. The Faith Foundation and the IB team plan to produce joint teacher documents to support this work.

We have also been working with Cambridge Assessment, a well respected examinations body, to contribute to their new International GCSE exam on Religious Studies. IGCSE is an international examination for 14 – 16 year olds. The Faith Foundation, previously worked with

Cambridge Assessment in 2009 to produce teacher training documentation showing how *Face to Faith* could be used in a new IGCSE examination on Global Perspectives.

One of our previous priorities was to review the existing *Face to Faith* modules both in house and externally by key senior academic and religious advisors. This review has been completed and the next stage will be to translate the new resources into Arabic, Hebrew, French, Spanish, Italian, Ukrainian and Albanian; the latter due to our new work in the Ukraine and Kosovo respectively.

The program continues to be independently and externally evaluated by Warwick University who last year provided further formal evaluation of our video-conferences, as well as the everyday experience of schools participating in *Face to Faith*. The second year evaluation received in March 2012, captured data from five cohorts of students in the US, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Pakistan and India:

“There are some examples of higher level discussion among the VCs that indicate that they have potential for the development of the kind of inter faith dialogue to which the Face to Faith project aspires.”

“The students generally view the VC conferences as positive experiences and have a high view of their potential influence for good.”

The Warwick University team made several useful recommendations for improving the program which we are currently implementing:

“In the sessions analysed there were examples where the conversation had not moved beyond superficial learning by using second (and third) questions to interrogate comments participants have made. This raises questions about how facilitators might be prepared and students gradually trained to tease out challenging questions from other people’s contributions to the discussion.”

The next phase of this independent evaluation will see a specific focus on three countries where the Government’s interest has been significant - Italy, The Palestinian Territories and the US. The evaluation team will also include an analysis of the online site by following 12 user journeys and a large scale analysis of teacher perceptions of *Face to Faith* through a teacher questionnaire sent to all registered teachers.

Technology – Increasing our Accessibility

Our video-conferences continue to improve in terms of the quality and depth of engagement as the schools respond to the expert moderation. We have also been able to increase the technical support we are able to offer schools through the use of a new technical bridge called ‘BlueJean’. This supports schools with lower bandwidth much more effectively, allowing for less dropout and better quality audio and video.

Our secure, moderated website has seen a huge improvement in user numbers with almost 2,500 teachers and 11,000 students active online. To keep pace with changing technology and provide the best user experience possible, the Faith Foundation has upgraded the site to Drupal 7. This allows for greater functionality and the ability to embed a greater series of “rewards” into the site including badges for excellent participation online.

Campaigns and Events – Deepening our Engagement

This year, the *Face to Faith* Team has been working on a new strand for the program entitled “Stories of Co-Existence”. This enables the program to support teachers and schools in exploring areas of conflict, assisting teachers in highlighting positive stories of collaboration, co-existence and faith.

The *Face to Faith* schools have continued to be supporters of the wider Faith Foundation social action campaigns, with a significant number involved in key initiatives such as “Where’s the Net”, looking at messages aiming to eradicate malaria, “SolidariTEA” – asking communities to come together to have a cup of tea and a conversation about their different beliefs, and “Faith Shorts”, the Foundation’s annual short film competition which asks students to explore what their faith means to them.



In December 2011, Faiths Shorts showcased the work of a number of *Face to Faith* students who submitted films on topics that illustrated how their faith influenced them and made a positive contribution to their lives. As a result, this year the Foundation made the decision to create a special category specifically for the *Face to Faith* network of schools, allowing them to work together to produce films that will be positive representations of their beliefs, their communities or their thoughts about the world around them. We are looking forward to our next showcase of films in November 2012.

In May 2012, The Tony Blair Faith Foundation worked with the “Stop the Traffik” charity to raise awareness about the terrible plight of human trafficking, and in particular its effect upon children and young people.

The Faith Foundation hosted a special day video-conference with special guests talking about their experiences of trafficking . This video conference saw a huge response on our website from students who had taken part: *“I knew little about Human Trafficking and the statistics shocked me. I was happy the video conference helped me to become more educated on the topic. I agree with you (response to another student’s post) when you say more should be done. I’m also doing anything and everything to spread the word about this horrible epidemic, and I have vowed not to eat chocolate from companies that enslave children to work on farms. I’m really inspired that both of us are doing what we can, working together for the common cause.”*

And finally, two new versions of *Face to Faith* are also in the pipeline in order to support schools who are located away from local coordinator support and schools without technical infrastructure; *Face to Faith Distance* and *Face to Faith Local* respectively.



Simmi Kher
Consultant
Tony Blair Faith Foundation

Mrs. Simmi Kher a very inspiring educational leader with a vision and purpose and a person truly dedicated to her profession. She works as a consultant with the Tony Blair Faith Foundation and is also on advisory board of the Face to Faith. She has been instrumental in rolling out the Face to Faith Programme in India, Indonesia, and Philipinnes.

She has a Bachelors degree in Engineering, Bachelors in Education and Masters in Computer Applications. She has experience in teaching, teacher training, teacher recruitment and curriculum development; program design and pedagogy. She is a multi-talented educator, who has great contribution in the field of Information Technology, International Understanding, Multicultural dialogues, Inter-faith and Peace education.

During her career, she has received several prestigious awards like Vidyashree Excellence Award for excellence in Education, Digital Learning Power School Award, Mondilogo School Contest, Global Challenge Environmental award, etc. both at International and National levels. She has been associated with different projects with international reputed organizations such as NCERT (National Council of Education Research and Training), INTEL, UNESCO, Tony Blair Faith Foundation and British Council etc. Simmi has been part of the Consultation group for UNESCO ICT COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHERS 2011.