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Essay

The Bahá'í Community in Scotland and its Contributions to Interfaith Engagement

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Abstract

The oneness of religion is a fundamental tenet of the Bahá'í Faith. This piece offers some reflections on what the Bahá'í community in Scotland has contributed to interfaith relations over more than a century. It begins in 1906, with Mrs Jane Elizabeth Whyte's invitation to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his visit to Edinburgh in 1913 – arguably the first interfaith encounter in Scotland as the term would be understood today. From there it traces the story through Dr John Esslemont, Stella Reekie's International Flat in Glasgow, the Sharing of Faiths, St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, and the founding of Scotland's first national interfaith body. Along the way it draws on George Ballentyne's recollections and on the author's own journey from Aberdeen to Samoa and on to the directorship of Interfaith Scotland. These are a snapshot rather than a full account, but they demonstrate an on-going Bahá'í commitment to dialogue.

The oneness of religion is a fundamental tenet of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'u'lláh encourages interfaith engagement in statements well-known to his followers, such as "O people! Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship, that there may be inhaled from you the sweet fragrance of God"[1] and "There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly source, and are the subjects of one God."[2]

When I was asked to write a short piece for the Bahá'í Studies Review Journal I jumped at the chance, as Interfaith engagement has been a central feature of my life for almost three decades. Below are my initial musings, they are brief and definitely do not cover all the rich and wide-ranging contributions that the Bahá'í Community in Scotland has made, but they are a snapshot and demonstrate the on-going commitment of the Bahá'ís to interfaith dialogue.

'Abdu'l-Bahá and early interfaith engagement in Scotland

In 1906, a Mrs Jane Elizabeth Whyte from Edinburgh, was one of a small group of western pilgrims who visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the son of Bahá'u'lláh) while he was held captive in the prison city of Acre in the Holy Land. During that visit she extended an invitation for him to come to Scotland when circumstances would permit. Mrs Whyte was the wife of Dr Alexander Whyte, who had been Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland (1898) and

1 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas,* trans. by Habib Taherzadeh and others (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 22.

2 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* trans. by Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), no. CXI.1.

Principal and Professor of New Testament literature at New College Edinburgh (1909-1918). On her return to Scotland Mrs Whyte wrote to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and in response to her letter he penned a rich reply which included a treatise known as 'The Seven Candles of Unity'. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that the "The fourth candle is unity in religion which is the cornerstone of the foundation itself, and which, by the power of God, will be revealed in all its splendour".[3]

'Abdu'l-Bahá was released in 1908 aged 64, having endured imprisonment in one form or another since he was eight years old. Within a few years he embarked on a series of journeys, promoting his father's teachings and was able to take up Mrs Whyte's invitation to visit Edinburgh in January 1913.

This was arguably the first interfaith encounter in Scotland as we would understand the term today. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit was something of a sensation at the time, and unfolded in full public view. It was addressed in some depth by the press, with interviews, announcements and reports of his talks, as well as commentary on his mission and its relevance to the Scottish nation. Coverage was overwhelmingly positive. A pen portrait in *The Scots Pictorial* described 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "a great reconciler of all faiths, as the forerunner of universal peace."[4]

One of the places in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke was Rainy Hall, in the University of Edinburgh. In later years, Rainy Hall has been the site for the launch of important interfaith publications, such as Interfaith Scotland's *A Guide to Faith Communities in Scotland*[5] and exhibitions such as *Stories of Belief* by Edinburgh Interfaith Association.[6] Both of these included Bahá'í contributions, demonstrating the historical link to 1913 and the continuity of Bahá'í input.

Dr John Esslemont, a prominent physician born 1874 in Aberdeenshire, wrote a seminal book on the Bahá'í Faith, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*.[7] Published in 1923 by George Allen and Unwin, this "text book of the faith"[8] promotes the unity of the world's religions – the cornerstone of the Bahá'í approach to interfaith relations. The Scottish Bahá'í community recently commemorated the centenary of Dr Esslemont's passing. A new full-length biography is in the works by noted Bahá'í author, Robert Weinberg.

Friendly engagement with followers of diverse religions continues to be a key feature of Bahá'í community life. The Universal House of Justice (the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith) has stated that,

> the Bahá'í community has been a vigorous promoter of interfaith activities from the time of their inception. Apart from cherished associations that these activities create, Bahá'ís see in the struggle of diverse religions to draw closer together a response to the Divine Will for a

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3 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Tablet of the Seven Candles', in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, trans. by Marzieh Gail and others (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), no. 15, p. 33.

4 *Ion, The Scots Pictorial,* 12, O.S. no. 696 (18 January 1913).

5 Interfaith Scotland, *A Guide to Faith Communities in Scotland* (Glasgow: Interfaith Scotland, 2014), https://interfaithscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Guide-to-Faith-Communities-in-Scotland-2014.pdf [accessed 10 June 2026].

6 'Stories of Belief: Celebrating 900 Years of Faith Communities in Edinburgh', *The Edinburgh Interfaith Association,* https://www.edinburghinterfaith.com/stories-of-belief [accessed 10 June 2026].

7 John E. Esslemont*, Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1923).

8 Rúhíyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 102.

human race that is entering on its collective maturity. The members of our community will continue to assist in every way we can.[9]

Interfaith engagement in Scotland since the 1970s

In 1972 the Church of Scotland purchased a first-floor tenement flat in the west end of Glasgow. Hillhead was known for its mixed population, and was the site of the University of Glasgow with its cadre of overseas students. The intention was to have a place which could offer assistance for displaced people and those in need. Living at this "International Flat" and coordinating its work was Stella Reekie – a Deaconess in the Church of Scotland. She had been with the Red Cross at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen and had remained in the camp for several months, aiding those children too frail to be moved. She had also served as a missionary in Pakistan in the 1950s. As Stella's influence grew, so did the remit of the International Flat. The Sharing of Faiths – the first formal interfaith organisation in Scotland – was established at the International Flat in Glasgow in 1975 and operated from there for the following decade.

From the beginning Bahá'ís were involved, and supported both the International Flat and the Sharing of Faiths.

George's story

Below are some recollections by George Ballentyne (b1959) who has made, and continues to make, meaningful contributions to interfaith dialogue in Scotland and beyond. These were recorded in an interview in June 2026 as part of the preparation for this piece, and show how interfaith is not merely a movement, but is at its core made up of the individuals that take part.

> My teenage years were enlivened by an unremitting spiritual curiosity. If you had called Central Casting and asked for a "seeker", they would have sent you me.
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> In June 1978, aged 18, I wandered into the Presentation of Faiths, a three-day public event showcasing Glasgow's diverse faith communities. This was my first encounter not only with the Bahá'í Faith, but also with interfaith in any form. I have to say that I didn't stay long enough for either to make much of an impression on me. But over the following months, the name "Bahá'í" increasingly popped up, and I found myself looking forward to the return of this annual event. I showed up at the Presentation of Faiths in June 1979, spoke at length with Bahá'ís and left with a copy of Bahá'u'lláh's Hidden Words. I was invited to meetings in a local couple's flat and – within a month or so – enrolled in the Bahá'í community. My brother Peter (16 at the time) joined a few days later and our mother, Helen, soon followed suit. Interfaith was the door through which we entered the Bahá'í community.
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> The Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Glasgow invited me to meet them, so they could officially welcome me to the community. They asked if I'd be interested in representing the Bahá'ís of Glasgow on the executive committee of the Sharing of Faiths, which organised the Presentation of Faiths each summer, as well as a range of activities throughout the year. There was already a Bahá'í serving on this: Faye McLeod was minute secretary, an asset to the Sharing of Faiths and a credit to the Bahá'í community. She lived outside the city, and when the local Spiritual Assembly was offered the chance to appoint a

[9] The Universal House of Justice, 'To the World's Religious Leaders' (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, April 2002), https://www.bahai.org/documents/the-universal-house-of-justice/letter-worlds-religious-leaders [accessed 10 June 2026].

second member to the committee, they opted for someone in Glasgow and asked me. Nineteen years old and bursting with enthusiasm, I jumped at the chance!

One bright summer evening, I attended my first committee meeting at the International Flat. I imagined that if I were to recite some short passage from the Bahá'í writings, everyone there would abandon their established ways and hitch their wagons to our star. It didn't take long for me to realise just how naïve I was – a humbling experience for me and no mistake. I was sitting with people from countries I could barely point to on a map, who had gone through experiences I could hardly imagine, whose faith had meant the difference between life and death for them. To one side would be someone who had survived the concentration camps of World War II; to the other, someone who had lived through Partition in 1948 [sic]. And there was I, in my Genesis sweatshirt, flared jeans and long hair – more than occasionally feeling quite out of my depth.

And always buzzing in and out of the meetings was Stella Reekie. I find it hard to imagine what interfaith dialogue in and around Glasgow would have looked like without Stella… There are too many stories from that time to include here: suffice it to say that three years under Stella's informal tutelage (until her untimely death from cancer in September 1982, aged 60) galvanised my lifelong commitment to interfaith.

Some of the jobs I have held over the years have reflected this commitment: particularly two distinct but overlapping posts in Leicester across a period of fifteen years. In terms of demographics and metrics, Leicester and Glasgow are both "super-diverse" cities. Leicester has even been called "the most multicultural city on the planet". [10] In the first of these posts, I was working for the faith communities in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). In the second, I was working with them.

From 2006 to 2013, I was Equality and Diversity Officer for Leicester Council of Faiths: improving faith literacy among the public, in the media and with service providers; connecting religious and cultural communities through activities, events and projects of common interest and mutual benefit (e.g. education, health, housing). Much of this work was delivered across the East Midlands of England as a member of the Regional Equality and Diversity Partnership (REDP), alongside Leicester LGBT Centre; Leicestershire Centre for Integrated Living, and The Race Equality Centre.

From 2013 to 2021, I was VCS Engagement Manager in the City Mayor's Office at Leicester City Council. I held the ring for the elected City Mayor's relations with groups, organisations and societies related to the Protected Characteristics enumerated in the Equality Act … among these, "religion or belief" remained my specialism. I ran the City Mayor's Faith and Communities Forum; involved 19 different communities of identity and interest in the interment of Richard III at Leicester Cathedral (2015). During the Covid-19 pandemic, Leicester was in Lockdown longer than any other UK city, which aggravated social tensions. I was part of the core team working with local faith communities in their response to, and recovery from, Covid-19. This included inspections of places of worship, ensuring they had safeguards in place which allowed them to reopen.

The older I get, the more I think of interfaith as the most effective topic area in which I have been able to serve. I would not hesitate to say that has been my calling. My introduction

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10 'We're All in This Together: How Leicester Became a Model of Multiculturalism, Even If That Was Never the Plan', The Independent, 26 July 2013, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/this-britain/we-re-all-in-this-together-how-leicester-became-a-model-of-multiculturalism-even-if-that-was-never-the-plan-8732691.html [accessed 10 June 2026].

to the Bahá'í Faith was in an interfaith setting. My earliest service to the Cause was interfaith-focused. My first talks in front of an audience, the first time I read the Bahá'í writings in public, my first visits to schools, the first things I ever wrote from a Bahá'í perspective – all were in support of interfaith. I would have difficulty expressing what my life in the Bahá'í community has been about without placing interfaith front and centre.

Having moved to Leicestershire in 1987, I felt I had come full circle when I took part in an afternoon of remembering for Stella Reekie in Glasgow, October 2022. Marking her centenary (as well as the 40th anniversary of her death) this occasion took place at St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art. I was one of four speakers, alongside Sister Isabel Smyth, Mrs Brij Gandhi and Canon David Lawson – each I considered titans of the International Flat and the Sharing of Faiths while I was involved.

St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art

St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art opened in Glasgow, 1993. Located in the precincts of Glasgow Cathedral, it is one of only a handful of similar museums in the world. As well as being a draw for visitors to the city, it has had a distinctive role in interfaith engagement in Scotland. Bahá'ís have lent their support to exhibitions, interfaith panel discussions and conferences there.

The first formal statement of interfaith collaboration, signed in Glasgow City Chambers in 2002, is on display in St Mungo's. The late Andy McCafferty was Bahá'í signatory to that statement. A complementary statement – the Glasgow 850 Interfaith Declaration – was drawn up in 2025 to celebrate the 850th anniversary of the establishment of the city. Justin Alae Carew (who serves on the Board of Interfaith Scotland) signed on behalf of the Bahá'í community. Justin continues the legacy of his late mother Venus, who was given an award by Queen Elizabeth II for her exceptional services to further education, interfaith dialogue and the Bahá'í community in Dumfries and Galloway. Following her passing in 2023, Dumfries and Galloway Council named one of the meeting rooms in their headquarters after her.

Interfaith goes national

The country's first national interfaith organisation was set up in 1999: The Scottish Interfaith Council (later renamed Interfaith Scotland). As had become customary by this time, the Bahá'í community was involved from earliest days. Standout contributions have been made at this level by Alex Reid, Rita Docherty, Carrie Varjavandi and Jeremy Fox. In 2002 the post of National Development Officer (the first paid interfaith post in Scotland) went to a Bahá'í (the present writer).

Also in 2002, the Scottish Religious Leaders Forum was formed (in the aftermath of 9/11), with Scottish Bahá'ís represented from the beginning (notably Allan Forsyth and Isadora Quay). This high-level forum has met twice a year since 2002 and has had a positive impact on interfaith engagement. Further information can be found on the website of Interfaith Scotland, which functions as Secretariat to the Forum.

Interfaith Scotland has been privileged to be funded and supported by the Scottish Government and the Bahá'ís have enjoyed, along with the other faiths of Scotland, engagement with the Scottish Government, various First Ministers and Ministers of Government and have inputted to important Government consultations.

As the Sharing of Faiths morphed into Interfaith Glasgow, so other groups were popping up around the country; the majority of which benefit from Bahá'í involvement. A key and influential local interfaith group is Edinburgh Interfaith Association (EIFA) founded in 1989. Edinburgh –

capital of Scotland since 1437, seat of its Parliament since 1999, and the place where 'Abdu'l-Bahá set the scene, in 1913, for Bahá'í interfaith engagement – has been blessed with the Edinburgh Interfaith Association for almost forty years. Local Bahá'ís have contributed to its development, most notably Dr Ruhy Paris, who has served on the Board of EIFA for many years, on behalf of the local Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Edinburgh.

My personal interfaith journey

I attended Aberdeen University from 1990 to 1994. It was during those years that I first encountered the local Aberdeen Interfaith group. Part of my undergraduate degree was Religious Studies and so the academic study was considerably enhanced by the experiential engagement with 'other faiths' during my time with the Aberdeen Interfaith Group. The Bahá'í theological stance on the 'oneness of religion' became a lived reality when spending time with the diverse faith communities I befriended through interfaith engagement.

After completing my undergraduate degree, I moved, with my family, to the Pacific Island of Samoa to undertake my doctoral studies on religion and gender. Again, I had deeply meaningful opportunities to spend time with religious communities other than my own and on return to Scotland in 2002 I was keen to continue with this engagement.

In April 2002, in the same month that the Universal House of Justice issued a significant letter to the world's religious leaders, the Scottish Interfaith Council advertised for a National Development Officer. I applied, got the job and eventually became the Director of Interfaith Scotland in 2012. I write this article in the early weeks of retirement from Interfaith Scotland. Reflecting on my engagement in Aberdeen and Samoa in the 1990s and my 24 years working for Interfaith Scotland I am deeply humbled by the people I have met and the experiences I have had. This interfaith journey has allowed me the privilege of contributing to a country I love dearly and to engage with interfaith activists across the world (including many from the Bahá'í community). I was honoured with one of the first Interfaith UK/US Fulbright Scholarships in 2007 which allowed me to travel extensively in the USA and to make an educational video 'Beyond Tolerance' which has been used in schools throughout Scotland to promote an acceptance of religious diversity and interfaith dialogue.

In October 2024 a further interfaith highlight was to return to the Pacific Island of Samoa to work alongside the Samoan Bahá'í Community, to organise two interfaith services at the Bahá'í House of Worship to welcome people who were attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM). It was the first time a Small Island State in the Pacific had hosted the biennial summit. It was a glorious occasion, and as prayers and readings from world scriptures where read, sung and chanted I felt I had been afforded a tiny glimpse of a future world where humanity lives together and celebrates its incredible diversity with love and wisdom. I had been commissioned, during an interfaith week on the Scottish Island of Iona, to bring a carefully crafted letter[11] from those gathered that acknowledged both our shared humanity and the critical need to protect our precious planet – this letter was read during those Commonwealth celebrations.

In conclusion, my deepest and honest reflection would be that I have more stories than could fill a book! But more importantly I can say that the world needs people from diverse faiths to work together for the common good. We are living in a divided and polarised world and the

[11] 'Message *from Iona to Samoa',* Interfaith Scotland (September 2024), https://interfaithscotland.org/climate-action-resources [accessed 10 June 2026].

potential for faith communities to contribute to unity and understanding is immense (although not always realised). I am proud of what the Bahá'í community in Scotland has contributed to interfaith relations and I urgently hope that Bahá'ís, wherever they reside, will continue to see interfaith engagement as a vital aspect of their commitment to promoting meaningful discourse, harmony, love and friendship and to building a better and more inclusive world for everyone.

Author biography

Maureen graduated from Aberdeen University with a PhD in Religious Studies. She taught sociology and history at the National University of Samoa, and created the Scotland Abroad Faith Exchange (SAFE) programme after becoming the first UK Scholar and interfaith activist to be awarded a Fulbright US/UK International Interfaith scholarship.

Maureen has been the Director of Interfaith Scotland from 2012 to 2026. She has served as a Trustee of the Coordinating Committee of the European Women of Faith Network, and for the Board of the UK Interfaith Network. She is a member of the Bahá'í Faith and has served on various National Bahá'í Institutions both in Scotland and in Samoa. Maureen has been married to her husband Nick for over 40 years and has 4 children and 7 grandchildren.