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**Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow**

## **Understanding difference – and respecting all**

The debate around Pastor McConnell's sermon on Islam has now increased following statements by the First Minister. I have been following the controversy with some interest, and have spelled out in [statements](#) and in broadcast interviews what I think is wrong with what the pastor said. Disagreement and criticism on matters of faith, belief and behaviour is part of the acceptable, and necessary, public discourse on religion or politics. Comments which brand all who adhere to a particular faith as people not to be trusted are unacceptable and wrong.



Aside from my role with the Equality Commission, I have been involved in inter-faith dialogue for several decades and it has been interesting to see how members of our increasingly diverse society have shared in this debate.

There was considerable support for Pastor McConnell's words in the social media, and many saw him simply expressing a Christian critique of what they might perceive to be a false religion and believed that the challenge to his words were further evidence of a clamp down on Christian faith.

Often these discussions appeared to show a lack of awareness and knowledge of Islam. Amongst those who were not Muslims there was at times a very confined conversation between those who freely shared their ignorance about a community and a faith system of which they had little real knowledge.

The lack of understanding may not be surprising in the context that, according to a recent ARK survey, almost half of us have never met a Muslim.

Frequently through the debate there has been a recurring exhortation around freedom of religious expression and freedom of speech. These are important rights, which shore up our democracy. But they are set within a legal structure that places important safeguards for our society.

It has caused me to think about leadership – in the home, on our streets, in our workplaces.

I was impressed by the response from employers last week at our Migrant Worker conference – large and small, public and private sectors - all were inspiring in their approach to providing equality of opportunity in their organisation. They are active and engaged.

I contrast this with the response, or in some case lack of response, from other leaders in society this week. Is it acceptable to remain apart from a debate, or to endorse comments wherein entire communities have been branded untrustworthy?

Should leaders not come forward and claim a space for a more balanced debate including how we might learn more about one another and challenge the type of negative stereotyping that has blighted our community for over four decades?

For me, and for the Commission, there is one single issue here. How do we work together to build a true understanding of difference, based on a respect for everyone?

See our policy paper on [Promoting Racial Equality Priorities and Recommendations](#) (*pdf*)

Further information is available on the [Racial Equality section](#) of our website.



Read the Chief Commissioner's blog "*Here's the thing...*"

<http://www.equalityni.org/blog>