

DIVERSITY DIALOGUES

Usman is the owner of Sultan of Lancaster, a restaurant and food hall in the centre of Lancaster and his business is unique in at least one, and possibly two ways. Firstly, it is the only in the UK restaurant which incorporates an art gallery displaying works of art inspired by Islam. Secondly, the restaurant is the venue for Diversity Dialogues, opportunities for a wide variety of people to come together to talk and find out about each other.

Usman firmly believes that dialogue should be part of everyday life and something that happens spontaneously when people meet together. Dialogue is necessary for people to get to know and understand each other and happens less often than perhaps it could but is encouraged wherever he is.

When he was approached by NCBI Lancashire, a charity which works to reduce all forms of prejudice and resolve conflict, to host a Diversity Dialogue he readily agreed. In September, 2005, over 100 people came to join a panel of speakers giving their views on the topic: "Does Community Cohesion require assimilation? How can we preserve cultural identities and still belong" The evening opened with two songs by local singing group, Dot Crotchet and the Raging Harmonies. One song commemorated a massacre in Serbia, a stark reminder of the effects of a divided community.

The dialogue featured five speakers, Kusminder Chahal, a well known researcher on race issues; Usman Munshi, the founder of the Sultan Gallery; County Councillor Liz Scott; Khaldoun Jayousi, a local businessman and City Councillor Gina Dowding.

The history of race relations was traced in this country, the role white people must play, personal stories were shared of experiences of racism and notions of tolerance, flexibility and acceptance were referred to as the way forward for communities to thrive together.

As one member of the audience said at the end of the event, "Nature created diversity, people do not need to assimilate. What we do need is strong leadership, the building of bridges across difference and dialogue, dialogue, dialogue!"

One outcome of the event is that the local mosque received 70 visitors who had the opportunity to learn about the function of the mosque and Muslim worship. Myths and ignorance were dispelled and bridges between communities built.

Another outcome is that there are now monthly meetings which take place on the first Friday of each month. These too, take place in the restaurant but are much more modest affairs in terms of numbers: 10 –12 people are invited and are asked to bring 2 or 3 friends if they wish. Those who come enjoy tea or coffee and chat, and it is very much on an "open house" basis. However the tea and chat is leading to the next public Diversity Dialogue on Friday March 3rd and the larger Dialogues will now happen every 3 months.

Usman wants to reach out further – to youth groups and to people on the estates by taking the Dialogue to them.

Through these dialogues, Usman aims to enable more people to realize that differences make life more interesting, and to address the fears that lie behind the barriers that many erect, thinking, “Why should I let go of my culture, my beliefs, my mindset and my life-style in order to interact?”

There is a need for us to tell each other that we need not fear losing our identity. He believes in striving to break away and not belong to any particular group or clique and as Liz Neat of NCBI Lancashire says, “Everyone finds a warm welcome with Usman, he just opens his arms wide and is delighted when people come.”

Local Muslims have also undertaken Peace Marches, going out into the villages that lie outside Lancaster. Local people were very warm and welcoming when the marches passed through, offering food and praising the initiative in again, breaking down barriers and dispelling myths through initiating contact with the hitherto “unknown”.

This is only part of the contribution that Sultan of Lancaster makes to the city. More details can be found on their website.