



Making a nature area at St. Luke's church in Crosby, Liverpool.

Interview Mark Hillsdon

# You gotta have faith

Annie Merry, Director, Faiths4Change

Following a successful trial in Liverpool, a new multi-faith environmental project is rolling out across Merseyside, Manchester, Burnley and Preston.

Merry has always been involved with what she calls “positive social change”, work which gives communities the power to bring about change themselves.

Her experience working at a homelessness project for young people in Bradford first opened her eyes to the way in which faith communities address social issues. She recalls a strong sense of social justice and a desire to offer a level of support that went beyond basic needs and tried to solve the root cause of the problem. It’s no coincidence, she says, that the areas where Operation Eden flourished were also those where both faith and community spirit were particularly strong.

Funded by the Northwest Regional Development Agency, the Environment Agency and local authorities, Faiths4Change now has six full-time staff. Its remit has also widened to take in areas of Preston, Burnley and Greater Manchester, with much of the land and many of the buildings where projects take place provided by local faith communities themselves.

All the current projects include what Merry terms “deep sustainability” and there’s an emphasis on encouraging people to develop a greater respect for natural resources.

There is also a greater skills agenda this time around, with much of the training now accredited to give volunteers the building blocks they need to move on to other things.

The current round of prospective projects range from reclaiming areas blighted by fly-tipping so they can be used to grow community food, to a feasibility study on installing solar panels on the roof of the Salvation Army’s popular community centre in Preston.

Faiths4Change is also working with St Hugh’s Roman Catholic Primary School in Liverpool, a school with pupils from over 26 countries, to support work on land donated by Liverpool City Council. The scheme involves designing and creating a garden that reflects the diverse heritage of the school’s pupils, which will also be used by the local community.

In Burnley, the Faiths4Change Project Officer is based in the important multi-faith

partnership project Building Bridges Burnley, a joint Muslim and Christian organisation created after the town’s race riots in 2001.

Ostensibly one of the local community projects in Burnley involves the reclamation of a stretch of canal but, says Merry, the benefits go much deeper. “It’s about offering young people in a deprived area the chance to learn new skills, rather than a simple clean up campaign. It’s enabling people to do something practical and then transfer these skills to other areas of their lives.”

Merry believes there’s a lot of common ground between faith communities on environmental and social action, and that Faiths4Change can act as a catalyst to bring them all together.

“It’s about building relationships with your neighbours regardless of whether you have a faith or not,” she says. “It’s about getting to know each other as people and building the kind of communities where we all want to live.”

When Annie Merry came across the advert for the post of project co-ordinator at Operation Eden she couldn’t believe her luck. “In all honesty it was my dream job,” she says. “It was a job that I’d wanted ten years before but which just didn’t exist then.”

Four years on, and Merry is now director of Faiths4Change, the successor to Eden, which has taken up the challenge of spearheading a range of multi-faith environmental projects in urban areas across the Northwest.

“The idea behind Eden was that all faith communities have something positive and strong to say on the environment,” she explains. “They are all committed to caring for the earth.”

Operation Eden was the brainchild of the Bishop of Liverpool, the Right Reverend James Jones, and operated across Merseyside in some of the most deprived areas of the country. And it proved a phenomenal success, bringing together over 1,500 volunteers and 200 different partners to work on 57 projects.

These involved volunteers from many different faith communities working in partnership with other local residents to create small scale environmental programmes, from growing food on disused land to cleaning up of a section of the Leeds Liverpool Canal in Bootle.

Eden brought people and the environment closer together, says Merry. It allowed communities to identify local problems, and then provided the support they needed to solve them. “It was the whole package,” she says.

And crucially, by involving groups from different faiths in a common cause, it also helped to relieve local tensions, which were often fuelled by misunderstanding and ignorance.

## TURNING POINTS

**1990** Worked on a desert reclamation project in Spain and first became interested in how people and the environment had to learn to live together.

**1995** began a BA (Hons) Peace Studies degree at Bradford specialising in conflict resolution.

**2000** Completed an HNC in People Ecology and the Land.

**2004** Took the role of project co-ordinator at Operation Eden.