

[MUSIC PLAYING]

RIAZ RAVAT: Hello, John, I am Riaz Ravat, Deputy Director of St. Philip's center. St. Philip's center is a registered charity. It was formed in 2006, and operates as an interfaith organization, priding itself on providing training, education, and engagement. But St. Philip's has a very distinctive recipe. It is an organization with a Christian heritage. It has a Christian root.

But it's that Christianity which allows the center to work with, engage with, and employ and have volunteers from a whole variety of different faith backgrounds. The key point to note is St. Philip's center is not a representative body. St. Philip's center is a resourcing interfaith organization. We very much see our role as helping organizations to help themselves by navigating issues of religion and belief in society.

JOHN: We're here in the city of Leicester, and I've just taken the taxi from the train station to St. Philips. It's a diverse city. It's known as a multicultural city. How does the location, being actually in the city, influence the work that you do? How is the location important to the work that you do?

RIAZ RAVAT: Leicester is the most multi-faith city in the country. It tells the story of the center and its existence. Our physical location of the center, we are across the road from a mosque and a church, also describes and serves as a reminder about why we exist. In this diversity, we feel that we have an opportunity to try out innovative ideas, to look at ways of peace building, and to then showcase that not only within the city and within the county, but also much further afield.

JOHN: So you describe the St. Philip's center as kind of a resourcing organization. What does the day to day work of the organization look like?

RIAZ RAVAT: The largest footprint of our work is schools. So either us receiving schools or our team going out into schools across the region and beyond. I would say 80% of the footprint of the center will be school children, those who are 18 or under. But if I give some further examples of that, we provide training for public sector workers, the fire service, the police, local authority staff, the health service as well. So that's contributing towards our regular day to day activity.

So the sessions that we've got coming up will be expressing and encouraging young people, your students, to think in a more considered way. So I look at it as considered thinking. I work in the sector, so I should be very, very positive in saying everything is wonderful in the garden, isn't it? It's not.

SPEAKER 1: Do you start to struggle because everyone goes with their own groups?

RIAZ RAVAT: Yes.

SPEAKER 1: And they do whatever they do. And it's hard to interact with those type of people when they're going around in big groups.

DONNA TRUSLER: We're hugely positive about it, hence the reason that we're here today, because we wanted to celebrate the rich relationship that's developed. We have about 4,000 students at any one time on our roll, so we're reaching huge percentage of the city. So if we look at the smaller areas that the city is broken down into, if we can cascade 4,000 people into 8,000, 12,000, which we very easily do once our students go out into those communities, then that can only be a positive thing.

RIAZ RAVAT: Alongside that, to maintain the Christian heritage of the center, we have a church-facing side of work. And this is where colleagues are working with church congregations to understand and to educate and to assist them in understanding their neighbors.

JOHN: So sometimes we use the term religious literacy. I get the feeling that that's something that the center is really trying to build.

RIAZ RAVAT: Religious literacy or religious and belief literacy is fundamental to the work of the center. We see very much our role as helping organizations to help themselves. The work we do with new police recruits, with those from the fire service, health service workers is about helping public sector organizations or public bodies to be more sensitive and receptive to the needs of their communities.

JOHN: Is there a sense in which you're a kind of interlocutor or broker between different religious groups and different political civic agencies in Leicester as well?

RIAZ RAVAT: Because St. Philip's center is not a representative body, because we are a resourcing organization, we are able to have that honest broker role. We are able to mediate, balance, bring people together. We don't have a membership criteria which excludes certain faiths or beliefs from being part of our work. If you look at our schools work, which is arguably the most explicitly inclusive area of work that we have, we have so many different backgrounds and beliefs and currencies that take place, that take part in that.

JOHN: Can I ask you about the unrest in 2022 that was on the national news. It was in the Global news. Did that unrest mean that multiculturalism had failed in Leicester?

RIAZ RAVAT: I believe that the old model or that particular model of multiculturalism had run its course. That's not to say that multiculturalism has failed. What we are looking at is a culmination of suspicion, indifference, a lack of awareness and ignorance between many of our communities, not just some of the sizeable ones within the city. Disorder doesn't just happen overnight. Disorder happens because the seeds were planted many years before. And the challenge for us is that how have we got here. How have we got to a place where Leicester has the most multicultural city, multi-faith city in the UK allowed this to happen, enable this to happen. And so for me, the lessons from that were that we need to create more and more and more arenas of mixing. Back in 2019, we sensed that there were some tensions between some of our communities, and we ran a project related to that. I think what happened with 2022 were the number of organizations that were surprised by the disorder. If you are an interfaith organization with any credibility, you have to be ahead of the curve. You have to spot the signs before it tips over. And what we were able to do on the back of that, on the back of the 2022 disorder, is to almost crystallize some of the wider, underlying issues.

JOHN: How did the St. Philip's center respond to the unrest of 2022? What has the center been doing?

RIAZ RAVAT: One of the most important areas of work. On the back of the disorder were the number of focus groups we ran for those who were 16 to 19 years of age. We were approached by a number of sixth form and further education colleges to go in and to hear the views and opinions of young people. The 16 to 19 age is fundamental. They're not in school, and they're not at university. And quite often, our colleagues in the sixth form or further education sector are telling us that they were being ignored. The young people's voices or the 16 to 19 voice was not being heard. And so we ran a series of focus groups, which included some individual, as well as collective exercises to hear the views and opinions of young people about why they felt the disorder had occurred. And a number of lessons were learned from there. One was around, particularly social media, that social media platforms had a very key role to play in the sense that the social media channels that they were accessing were very partisan and very short, without any nuance or without any perspective. But also, secondly, in relation to that, young people are not surprised that the situation had occurred. They were not surprised by that.

JOHN: Riaz, you have lots of experience in interfaith, locally in Leicester, nationally, and internationally. From that experience, how significant would you say interfaith is to building social capital?

RIAZ RAVAT: Interfaith organizations have a vast reservoir of capital and skills and knowledge. Capital through bricks and mortar, skills and knowledge through humans, through the ability to work with people across many parts of society. The volunteer time and the commitment that faith communities contribute towards alleviating poverty, for example, is vast. It's quite considerable.

JOHN: Thank you, Riaz.

RIAZ RAVAT: Thank you.

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