

**Speech by Rt Hon Viscount Younger of Leckie,
UK Minister of Communities and Faith**

Reception to celebrate faith communities and inter-faith dialogue

**Embassy of Slovakia, London W8
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Thank you very much Anthony for your introduction. I shall be echoing his words in my own brief remarks that I will be making. I thought it was a very interesting and moving account and he thought deeply about his speech.

Thank you very much, Ambassador too, for inviting me to this fantastic reception. It is great to see Her Excellency, who I know as Dana, here too...

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share some brief thoughts on the Government's approach to Faith communities across England.

Let me tell you about our approach.

Firstly, we celebrate the fact that Faith is a vital part of peoples' identities and motivates many. It's been a pleasure for me to meet many diverse faith communities and hear what's on their minds...I've heard about an amazing amount of work undertaken by faith communities to (1) provide food and shelter for the poor... (2) visit those in prison and...(3) tackle mental health issues... Archbishop Angaelos for example who must be commended for his ecumenical work with Churches Together in England...And how can I forget the wonderful Coptic service we attended in September.

I believe people should feel secure in their religious identities...We are making sure that the voices of people of faith are heard by Government...We also now have a faith advisor in post, Colin Bloom, to (1) go around the country...(2) listen to views and ...(3) report back to us.

Secondly, we actively encourage interfaith dialogues across England. We fund projects which foster understanding and respect between people of faith, and indeed those with no faith...These interfaith meetings often happen at a grassroots level where real friendships are built and where neighbours are inspired to improve their neighbourhoods together.

Beyond our funding, but as a result of this facilitation, hope and friendships spring up across communities... Let me give you an example...Back in September I attended the re-opening of a Somali community centre in North London following an awful arson attack. Local Rabbis were also there...they had been among the first to offer support to their Muslim neighbours...The Synagogue had even

hosting Ramadan prayers and annual iftar celebrations. This is an amazing story and gives us all hope...

The Government also is taking steps to tackle Hate Crime aimed at people's faith or race identities...We refreshed our Hate Crime Action Plan in 2018 to eradicate this completely unacceptable behaviour...We are focusing on...(1) changing attitudes and beliefs...(2) encouraging people to report incidents to the police or groups like Tell MAMA...(3) supporting victims...We should all be encouraged that reporting is going up...We also provide funding for security for places of worship for those who need it including mosques and synagogues.

Above all, our freedom to worship 'who' and 'how' we wish, or not to worship at all, is part of what makes Britain the resilient and vibrant country it is today. And our interest doesn't stop in the UK...as the Prime Minister pointed out in his Christmas message.... the UK remains firmly against religious persecution abroad. We now have a 'Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief'...I'm sure you'll all see his work in the international sphere.

So, at the start of this new decade, the Government and I will continue to celebrate the vital role of faith in our national life...(1) guiding the moral outlook of many, (2) inspiring great numbers of people to public service, and...(2) providing incalculable help to those in need. I look forward to meeting many more people of faith this year and hearing about friendships springing up across our neighbourhoods