

Project worker declares 'The Luton I leave is not the Luton I came to'

Written by
David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

Church Related Community Work (CRCW) is a ministry of the United Reformed Church (URC) concerned with bringing about positive change in local communities.

Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches in partnership with Grassroots (a Luton-based community development programme), hosted a CRCW Project, which completed its maximum 10-year term recently.

The project had begun with churches in the area exploring 'who are we, where are we and what do we want to be?'

This led to a range of annual events e.g. seaside trips, festive gatherings, creative writing and exercise ses-



Rev Heather Whyte, Luton URC minister, bidding farewell to Karen Campbell in the presence of the Mayor of Luton and High Sheriff of Bedfordshire.

sions. The project contributed to One World Week, International Women's Day and Holocaust Memorial Day events, while it also worked with Roma people, Luton Fairtrade and other Luton Council of Faiths initiatives such as the Faith Woodlands Communities and Archery Projects.

With support from the 'Near Neighbours' programme and its 'Real People Honest Talk' initiatives, it enabled people to explore themes and issues affecting

their lives.

In his address, Rev Dr Andrew Prasad, moderator, URC Thames North Synod, said: "It is hoped there is enough to inspire and continue the adventure even after the project ends.

"Many in Luton will miss the project worker Karen Campbell and Karen will miss many people in Luton, but we must let it all go in confidence to embrace the new and welcome the unknown."

Karen Campbell, CRCW project worker, said: "I know my time in Luton has been worth it.

"There are friendships built across faiths and cultures and people brought together to create 'touching places'.

"I say with confidence that the Luton I leave is not the Luton I came to. In some small way, I know the project has made a difference indeed."

'Bishop Peter Doyle reaches out with love, compassion and humour'

Written by

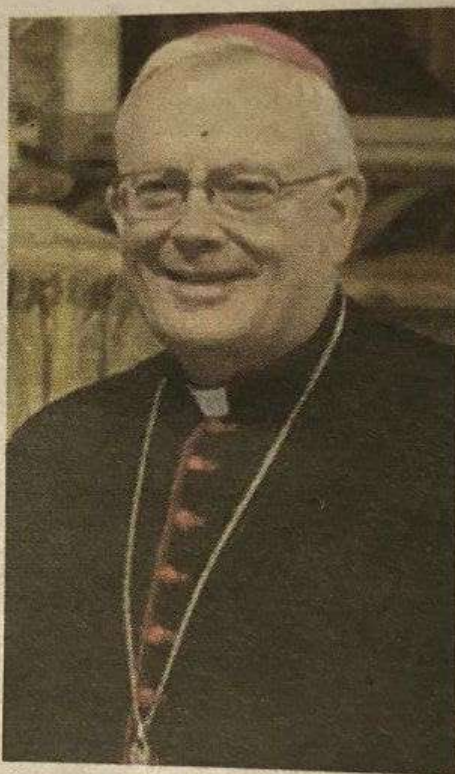
David Jonathan

GRASSROOTS and Luton Council of Faiths

It was a well-attended farewell service of The Right Reverend Peter Doyle, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, at the Cathedral Church of Our Lady Immaculate and St Thomas of Canterbury, the seat of the Bishop of Northampton and the mother church of Catholics across the Diocese of Northampton.

Born in 1944 in Lancashire, Bishop Peter was ordained as a priest in 1968.

Initially he served as an assistant priest in Portsmouth and Windsor, and after working in Portsmouth Cathedral from 1975-87, he then became the parish priest of St Joseph's, Maidenhead, until 1991 and of St



Bishop Peter Doyle.

Peter's, in Winchester, until 2005.

It was on June 28, 2005, that he was consecrated at Northampton Cathedral as the Bishop of Northampton Diocese.

Speaking on behalf of the priests and deacons in the diocese, Mgr Sean Healy

said: "Bishop Peter Doyle's services are punctuated with pastoral and practical initiatives, and his gentle and caring way of reaching out with love, compassion, humour and wisdom has been ever-encouraging for everyone in the diocese."

Sr Maire Hayes, involved in the Diocesan Justice and Peace Network and in the Spirituality of Justice Project at GRASSROOTS, Luton, spoke highly of the support she has always received from Bishop Peter Doyle.

GRASSROOTS chair Revd Canon David Lawson said: "GRASSROOTS owes an enormous debt of gratitude to Bishop Peter Doyle for his unfailing support, both personal and practical.

"He recognised our vision of building cohesive communities in Luton and he wanted the Catholic Church to be a part of it.

"We wish him every happiness in his retirement."

Baking their way to a fairer world with cake competition challenge

Written by

Ryad Khodabocus

Luton Council of Faiths

Supporting Fairtrade is not about charity, it is about justice. It is about giving people what they deserve.

During this year's Fairtrade Fortnight (February 24 to March 8) Luton Fairtrade Steering Group, GRASS-ROOTS and Luton Council of Faiths joined hands with St Christopher's Church, Round Green, for the second time, for a Fairtrade cake baking competition.

Contestants from across diverse backgrounds and age groups participated in the competition and the cakes were presented with their recipe and the Fairtrade packaging as evidence of any Fairtrade ingredients used.

Everyone present got to



L-R: Jean, Rev Anne Crosby, Molly, Bill and David Jonathan, of Grassroots.

taste the variety of cakes and marked the score sheets.

Molly McKinnon, eight, won the Best Sponge Cake, Jean Simmond won the Best Fruit Cake, and the second highest scoring cake for its presentation and taste was awarded to Bill Wrighton.

Two of the prizes were given in memory of the late Mr Natu Bhai Solanki, who was the vice-chair of Luton Council of Faiths, and the late Ms Maureen Borbone, a Catholic and a committed Fairtrade activist and cam-

paigner, who was also one of the trustees of GRASS-ROOTS.

In her welcome address, Revd Anne Crosby, vicar of St Christopher's Church, said it is good that we can respond to God's call to love one another and love God's creation in this way.

The deputy mayor will host a Fairtrade Afternoon Tea in Luton Town Hall on March 11 from 2-5pm.

The competition winners have been invited to take their cakes.

'We're called to love and acknowledge our shared humanity'

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

As part of her visit to the Methodist district of Beds, Essex and Herts, Rev Dr Barbara Glasson, president of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, visited Grassroots Luton, Luton Town Hall and Luton Council of Faiths.

Barbara has worked at the Bread Church, Liverpool, where people make bread and give it away to whoever they want to. It's popular with children, people with learning disabilities and people exploring their faith outside conventional church structures.

Addressing 40 representatives from Luton's different faith communities gathered at the Hindu Temple and Community Centre in



Gulie Butcher presenting Fairtrade gifts to Revd Dr Barbara Glasson (left).

Lewsey Farm, she highlighted the role played by women, especially those working behind the scenes and their political significance in an ever-changing socio-political landscape.

The most effective change comes from the bottom up; yet this is often demeaned as simply social or domestic activity.

She also expressed concerns about "othering" and dehumanising people.

She said we're called to love and acknowledge our

shared humanity. At times, it's costly, but it's the only way to change the world.

Rev Canon David Lawson, chair of Grassroots Luton, Prof Zafar Khan and Mrs Gulie Butcher, chair and vice-chair of Luton Council of Faiths, presented Fairtrade gifts and annual reports to the Methodist president and thanked her for her words of wisdom and encouragement.

At a civic reception at the town hall, Mayor Cllr Tahir Malik presented her with a Luton Town souvenir badge.

Precious Pearls: Luton women are caring for Mother Earth

Written by

David Jonathan

GRASSROOTS and Luton Council of Faiths

Over 100 women from across different faiths and cultures gathered together to celebrate International Women's Day at an event called Precious Pearls on the theme of 'Women Caring for Mother Earth'. The evening focused on ways in which we are trying to care for the planet under the headings of: Creation, Living Simply, Energy Usage, Money and Property, as well as our individual and collective responsibility in caring for Mother Earth.

Talks were delivered about beekeeping, veganism, eco crafts, reusable sanitary wear and Luton Borough Council's Climate Change Strategy. Local projects such as All Saint's Peace Garden,



A dance and music performance at Precious Pearls.

Edible High Town and Luton Environmental Action Forum (LEAF) gave presentations. It was also interesting to hear that a few churches are working towards being eco-friendly churches.

The United Nations Association Luton branch reminded us of the UN's 75th anniversary celebrations this year and its goal for a better world in its call: "For People, For Planet".

"It was a very enjoyable and worthwhile event," said a participant, appreciat-

ing various stalls providing information and promoting local honey.

The evening concluded with a buffet, which included a variety of delicious vegan snacks among other delights.

Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, the event was led by Ghar se Ghar (Hindi/Urdu words meaning 'Home to Home') which is a women's co-operative. For more details about its work, please call 01582 416946 or email: gharseghar@btconnect.com.

World Day of Prayer sees traditional Zimbabwean welcome

Written by
David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths.

Formerly called the Women's World Day of Prayer but now the World Day of Prayer, the event drew millions together across 170 countries for a message of healing and comfort. The 2020 theme was 'Rise! Take Your Mat and Walk', based on a Christian scripture reading from the Gospel of John 5:2-9a.

The reflections and ways to conduct prayer services and other events had been prepared by the World Day of Prayer Committee in Zimbabwe. Each year, materials are developed ecumenically and collectively within a certain country in co-ordination with the World Day of Prayer International Committee.

As a tradition that has



Luton Zimbabwean woman showing a traditional way of welcoming and respecting others by kneeling down and offering a drink.

continued since 1927, among many celebrations taking place around the world was one hosted by Luton Christians, too.

This year it was held at St Mary's Church in which Luton Zimbabwean women expressed friendship and respect for others in a Zimbabwean traditional and cultural way as makers of human fraternity. Everyone prayed for world peace.

Globally, responding to the current threat of coronavirus, the World Council

of Churches secretariat has said: "This will not last forever. There are many who are doing their best to prevent the worst effects of the pandemic. This situation calls for our faith, hope and love for one another."

Locally, Prof Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, said that when the danger has passed we shall all need to join together to make new and better choices and change the ways we live so that we can together heal the Earth fully.

'Hatred targeting any community cannot be tolerated'

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths.

A gunman in Kabul, Afghanistan, stormed a temple used by Sikh and Hindu minorities on March 25, killing 25 worshippers during an hour-long battle with Afghan security forces. Security forces rescued 80 others from the site.

"People who gather to worship should not suffer from senseless acts of hate," said Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths. "Particularly during a time when the world is drawing together as one human family; this attack stands out as an offence against God and humankind."

Luton's faith communities join together in extending their prayers for those who lost loved ones in the



One month ago, Luton Sikh leaders met Luton Council of Faiths members.

attack.

A month ago, in his meeting with Luton Council of Faiths, the Gurdwara president, Mr Balwinder Singh, had recalled how a peace procession led by the Luton Sikh community celebrating the 550th birth anniversary of its founder Guru Nanak was overwhelmingly supported by the different faith communities in Luton and also by the local businesses, particularly in Bury Park.

He said Luton is a testament of how its diverse com-

munities value one another's presence in the town.

Luton Council of Faiths joins our local Sikh brothers and sisters in sharing the grief.

Hatred targeting any community because of its faith and belief is a scourge that must not be and cannot be tolerated. We stand in solidarity with Luton's Sikh communities and together we strengthen our resolve to continue working together for peace and unity in our world.

'Choose hope over hysteria and faith over fear'

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths.

Ever since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, each one of us has had our lives and communities disrupted. Due to lockdown, self-isolation and social distancing, there is fear and panic.

Sadly, some labelling it as the 'Chinese Virus' is not helpful.

It has serious implications for Chinese and East Asian people internationally.

Covid-19 must remind us that we are all created to be interdependent, just like the ecosystem is, and that when suffering bypasses race, gender, religion and nation, we have no other option but to live in mutual solidarity.

Therefore, at Luton Council of Faiths, 'resilience' is the clear buzzword for us 'to



A centrepiece prepared a month ago by Grassroots team member Anny Hyde to reflect on Love, Peace & Hope.

keep calm and carry on'.

We remember the fragility of the most marginalised of people: those in prisons, the homeless and the refugees, as well as our drivers, shopkeepers, till workers, bin collectors, cleaners, postmen, ambulance workers, nurses and doctors, all of whom are risking their lives to keep our society together.

We appreciate and admire Luton's faith communities and all others working and volunteering selflessly

to reach out to those in need – whether it is providing free meals for NHS staff, delivering supplies for the elderly and vulnerable, cheering people online, or serving people in any other way.

It shows that love is the driving force for everything. Love is an essential component of life in all its forms. Love alone overcomes fear.

Together, may we all emerge stronger and better and choose peace over panic, hope over hysteria and faith over fear.

Easter brings a message of courage and hope to the community

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths.

On Good Friday, Christians worldwide lament Jesus's crucifixion which reveals God's sacrificial love for 'ALL'. But soon follows the most important Christian festival - Easter - celebrating Jesus's resurrection, which reminds us of the eternal hope that death does not have the last word on human destiny.

Usually, there are Walks of Witness and street processions led by church clusters across Luton, but as the World Council of Churches (WCC) said in a statement, this year we had to observe Easter in a challenging context amid painful situations due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Many people are experiencing trauma, separation,



Monsignor Kevin McGinnell during Good Friday Walk of Witness in 2019 led by Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches in Luton

isolation or even death in their families.

In such a context, WCC reminded us that the first experience of Jesus's disciples with the Risen Lord Jesus had also occurred in similar circumstances.

Out of fear and to protect their lives, Jesus's disciples had gathered in a room, behind closed doors, when the Risen Christ had appeared, bringing his peace to them.

Easter, therefore, brings a powerful liberating message of courage and hope over-

coming the fear of death and life's uncertainty.

HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire, Helen Nellis, said: "In these difficult times, we must not forget the goodness that is shining through the darkness. There have been so many extraordinary tales of kindness and I hope that we may come out of this as a stronger community."

May the Easter spirit soften our hearts and help us understand the mystery of pain and recognise the miracle of compassion.

Sikh community celebrates Vaisakhi at home to protect NHS

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

Vaisakhi is a historical and religious festival for Sikhs in India and worldwide, celebrated in mid-April. It commemorates the birth and formation of the Khalsa Panth (the body of fully initiated Sikhs) following a sacrificial sword ritual ceremony in 1699 by the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. It was about transforming Sikhs into soldier saints.

Five men who took the test of offering their lives on Guru's call became known as the Panj Piare ('Beloved Five'). They were then baptised into the 'Khalsa' by the Guru sprinkling on them Amrit ('immortalising nectar' - the Sikh term for holy water).



Panj Piare (Beloved Five) receiving Guru's blessings ahead of a Nagar Kirtan (peace procession) held last year in Luton. Credit: Tony Margiocchi.

On Vaisakhi, Gurudwaras (Sikh temples) are decorated. Community fairs and Nagar Kirtan (street processions) are held, and people gather to socialise and share festive foods.

However, this year, it was different. Like Christians celebrating Easter at home, Sikhs also stayed away from each other and celebrated #VaisakhiAtHome together with family and prayed for the end of the Covid-19 crisis.

In a message, Prime Minister Boris Johnson

said: "Wishing a happy and safe Vaisakhi to all celebrating in the UK, India and around the world. While the festival brings communities together, we must remember to stay physically apart to protect the NHS and save lives. Stay at home this Vaisakhi."

Vaisakhi is additionally a spring harvest festival too, for Sikhs as well as for Hindus. In Bangladesh it is known as 'Boishakhi' and is celebrated vibrantly as a social and cultural festival.

Spirits are high during Ramadan as fundraising appeal launched

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, started last week. In the Covid-19 lockdown, this is yet another major religious month-long observance, which will not see Luton's streets bustling with freshly prepared food stalls. Observing social distancing and isolation, Luton's many diverse communities and other religious and civic leaders will not be able to join in with Iftar (breaking of fast) gatherings, which are generously hosted by mosques, Muslim organisations, individuals and families.

Still, spirits are high within Luton's Muslim community, as they and all the other faith communities in the town continue to serve



Inspire FM Ramadan 2020

people, children and families in need across the town and those serving in the NHS and care homes.

Radio Inspire FM, together with Luton's Discover Islam Centre, Luton Council of Mosques and Luton Sunni Council of Mosques have circulated online interactive prayer and Iftar timetables, and guidelines on how to prepare for Ramadan at home. This sets clear goals and daily schedules, and encourages all to stay connected with family and

friends through technology, investing this time in gaining knowledge and doing a new good action each day in the service of humankind and creation.

There is also an appeal for donations to feed and improve the lives of people in Luton, particularly at this challenging time, ensuring no-one goes hungry in our town. To make donations, please ring 01582 481810 or visit bit.ly/3brupAI or www.justgiving.com/fundraising/ramadhanluton

Science and spirituality together

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

In an unprecedented step to mitigate Covid-19 fears and anxieties affecting people's mental health, Ryad Khodabocus, head of community relations and development at Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF), and Jolel Miah, founding chair of Our Minds Matter, have together produced a podcast on 'Spirituality and Mental Health' from different faiths' perspectives, bringing science and spirituality together.

Digital audio files can be downloaded FREE from <https://anchor.fm/ourmindsmatter> to listen to guest speakers invited from different faiths, sharing how they apply spirituality to understand mental health.

So far, Rt Revd Richard Atkinson, Bishop of Bedford, has shared insights from a Christian perspective.

Dr Vikas Acharya has



L to R: Podcast hosts Ryad Khodabocus and Jolel Miah, and contributors Bishop Richard Atkinson, Dr Viaks Acharya, Dr Mamnun Khan and Prof Gurch Randhawa

shared insights as a NHS doctor in L&D Hospital, but also through the lens of his Hindu faith, while Dr Mamnun Khan has talked on Covid-19 from a science point of view, but also adding to it an Islamic perspective and advice for Ramadan.

Prof Gurch Randhawa, public health researcher at the University of Bedfordshire, has talked from a Sikh perspective about his work and its impact on diversity.

Emphasising HeartMath techniques of meditating and synchronising brain and heart, LCoF officer Ryad Khodabocus - using his health psychology background as a professional coach in stress and emotional regulation - has produced a very helpful guide supporting mental health, resilience and well-being.

The guide is available for FREE download from www.lutonfaiths.org

Fitting tribute to the undaunted spirit of communities and volunteers

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths

Every year at this time, HM The Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire, Helen Nellis, holds a Service of Thanksgiving to honour thousands of people who, through their volunteering, play such a significant role in building kind and cohesive communities across the county.

The service this year had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore the Lord-Lieutenant has created an online service to pay tribute to our volunteers and for the 75th anniversary of VE Day.

The service can be viewed on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/Urdq3JM2EoU>

In her message, Helen Nellis said: "On the 75th anniversary of the Victory in Europe, we look back with



PICTURE COURTESY OF EMMA SOHL

Lord-Lieutenant Helen Nellis with Capt Tom Moore on his 100th birthday

pride and respect at all those who helped to secure peace and freedom.

"We are proud to honour Capt Tom Moore as a much-loved son of Bedfordshire as he so clearly embodies the values of courage and generosity, which his generation, during the hardships of war, relied upon to keep them strong in their resolution.

"We can now learn those lessons from this formidable generation, as we seek to play our part in seeking to build cohesive and kind commu-

nities."

Acknowledging multiple acts of kindness and practical help during this difficult time of fighting coronavirus, she added: "To all those who volunteer, my sincere thanks. Your compassion and generosity is fitting tribute to those who gave so much for our country. You are showing every day that the beating heart of the county of Bedfordshire is steady and sound, and grows ever stronger with each act of love."

Pandemic has united all faiths to pray for victory over the virus

Written by
**David
Jonathan**

GRASSROOTS & LUTON COUNCIL
OF FAITHS

In response to Pope Francis calling "believers of all faiths" to unite in a day of fasting and prayer to ask "God to help humankind overcome the coronavirus pandemic", many people joined together on May 14.

This worldwide prayer day initiative came during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset.

Egypt's Grand Imam, Dr Ahmad al-Tayeb, also welcomed the initiative and invited people around the world to pray.

Pope Francis' aide, Monsignor Yoannis Lahzi Gaid, a priest from Egypt and a member of the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity, called people to pray together,



PICTURE COURTESY OF EMILY JUDD, AL ARABIYA ENGLISH

Pope Francis welcomed last year at Presidential Palace in Abu Dhabi

er, each according to their faith, and said it gives proof that faith unites, not divides.

"Covid-19 has brought us all to our knees. But kneeling is the best position to pray," he added.

In Luton, all faith communities have been sending prayers to Luton Council of Faiths for the world's wellbeing. It shows that this pandemic has crossed borders and cultures indiscriminately, affecting people's lives regardless of their religion and background. Sr Maire Hayes, inter faith co-ordinator for

the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, working in Luton, said: "We are all members of the same human family and together we pray that we may act in solidarity to overcome this pandemic."

Other world leaders, who also endorsed the May 14 call for prayer included Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Lebanese President Michel Aoun, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew.

Serving community through pandemic

Written by

David Jonathan

GRASSROOTS & LUTON COUNCIL OF
FAITHS

Eid al-Fitr – the Muslim festival – marks the end of Ramadan, the month-long fasting by Muslims. Besides celebrations, it is also time to thank God for His mercies and provisions, which is why throughout the month of Ramadan, Muslims donate to charities and contribute to the community.

Luton's Discover Islam Centre has been open seven days a week, working tirelessly to provide food to those isolating, needy and key workers, providing educational resources to children, PPE to health workers and so much more: discover-islam.co.uk/communityservices/ramadan2020.

The Discover Islam team, Luton's mosques, Radio Inspire FM, Lantern and numerous other faith com-



Picture courtesy of Discover Islam Centre, Luton

Discover Islam Centre in Luton supporting the food bank during Ramadan 2020

munities, faith-based charities, with support from other public and voluntary sector organisations, have been serving the Luton community throughout this pandemic.

On Eid ul-Fitr, there is an even stronger focus on charity, called 'Fitranaa' or 'Zakat al-Fitr' meaning donations made by Muslims on completion of their Ramadan fast.

Often, Eid celebrations begin with Muslims praying together, visiting relatives, neighbours and community events featuring live entertainment, stalls, exhibitions

and children's activities, attracting thousands of people.

However, this year's Eid celebrations have been affected by the pandemic, just as all the other festivities were, including Nawruz (Bahai), Easter (Christian), Passover (Jewish), Vaisakhi (Sikh) & VE Day.

Still, the least we could do was, to say to our Muslim friends – Eid Mubarak! (Happy and blessed Eid).

May we all join together to serve and heal our world, remembering all those who have died of Covid-19 and all those who are grieving.

'A blanket of care is wrapped around Luton - thank you'

Written by

David Jonathan

GRASSROOTS AND LUTON COUNCIL OF
FAITHS

Moved by Luton's faith communities' contributions to serving those affected by the coronavirus, the newly appointed High Sheriff, Susan Lousada DL, has kindly shared the following message: "It has been said that if the only prayer you ever offered was 'thank you' then that would be enough.

"My installation as the new High Sheriff of Bedfordshire at the end of March this year, will always be marked for me as the week when this country was placed in lockdown.

"My initial fear and uncertainty as to how I was going to fulfil the role of High Sheriff with any meaning, was swiftly swept away as the



The High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, Susan Lousada.

stories of selfless acts, care and dedication from across the county made me realise that the best thing I could do was to simply say, thank you.

"In this column I wanted to say a particular thank you to the many and diverse faith communities in Luton.

"I have been heartened and, indeed, inspired at how the groups have worked together and separately to help wherever there is need.

"Integration and cohesion is just happening, as a collective desire to not see mem-

bers of the community suffer has driven and mobilised the distribution of food, practical help and much needed support.

"Each small act of kindness is gathering momentum until there seems to be a blanket of care wrapped around Luton.

"I am humbled by the county's response to this crisis; please accept both my gratitude and appreciation to you all.

"I leave you all with my simple prayer. Thank you."

Black Lives Matter: Lutonians demand a peaceful society for all

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

The death of George Floyd has triggered widespread protests calling for the elimination of the systemic racism embedded in our society.

In Luton, hundreds gathered from different faiths and ethnicities for the Black Lives Matter protest organised by a group of young people.

St Mary's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation brought together different faith leaders as stewards. Many other eminent faith and community leaders also joined in.

Pas Lloyd Denny, Chair of Luton in Harmony, referring to the Good Samaritan's story in the Bible, said: "We just cannot be spectators.

"We must call out injus-



Black Lives Matter Protest at Luton Town Hall War Memorial.

tices we see and we must do so, inspired by love for all."

Zafar Khan, Chair of Luton Council of Faiths said: "As Luton's faith communities, we are extremely saddened at George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis (US).

"We offer our heartfelt condolences and condemn racism and racist attacks in any form."

He added: "It is essential

for our well-being that different races, religions and ethnicities meet together to listen, learn and share knowledge and expertise for the common good, always being mindful of the dignity and inestimable value of every human being."

May all the nations save and protect all those facing similar threats and challenges around the world.

Planet Earth, 'Our Common Home', is in peril

Written by

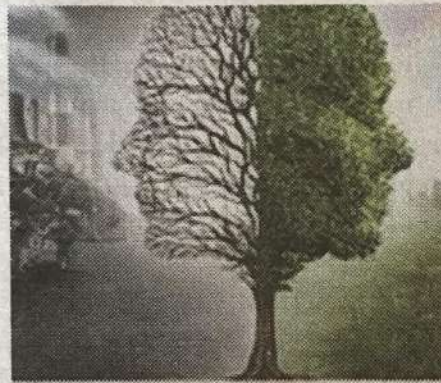
David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

It's five years since the origin of Pope Francis's Encyclical 'Laudato Si' called people of all faiths and none to hear the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.

Sr Maire Hayes, inter faith co-ordinator for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, working with the GRASSROOTS programme in Luton, reminded us of the pope's message, saying our one precious and irreplaceable planet Earth, 'Our Common Home', is in peril.

From the melting of our polar ice caps to the acidification of our oceans, we humans are changing our planet in ways that threat-



"It is our profound conviction that the future of the human family depends also on how we safeguard the gift of creation that our Creator has entrusted to us."

- Pope Francis



en its very existence, and around the world the poorest populations bear the heaviest burdens.

The ongoing pandemic has helped us to realise our "interconnectedness", both locally and globally.

We must, therefore, commit to live more simply so

that others may simply live and advocate protecting our common home – banning the use of fossil fuels and the exploitation and manipulation of nature.

Encouraging us all to think what kind of a world we want to leave to future generations, Deborah Purfield, CAFOD's regional co-ordinator and also a trustee of the GRASSROOTS programme in Luton highlighted Laudato Si action points and other resources available at: <https://cafod.org.uk/Pray/Laudato-Si-encyclical>

CAFOD is the international aid agency of the Catholic church. Its coronavirus appeal has raised nearly £1 million for people living in poverty all over the world, whatever their religion or culture. It campaigns for global justice, so that every woman, man and child can live a full and dignified life.

'We have more in common than that which divides us'

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

The stabbings in Reading last weekend, in which three people were killed and at least three others were injured, have shocked everyone.

Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, said: "We are deeply saddened at this heartbreaking incident.

"We have always unequivocally condemned, in the strongest of terms, any such barbaric and inhuman acts of terrorism against innocent people. Our heartfelt condolences go to all those who have lost their loved ones in this outrageously criminal and cowardly act."

Luton's faith communities stand together in solidarity with people in Reading and send a strong



Luton's faith communities outside Salvation Army (Vicarage Street) during last year's Annual Peace Walk organised by Luton Council of Faiths

message of defiance to all extremists: that we will not be divided.

In its statement, The Inter Faith Network for the UK reminds us that it was this weekend four years ago when another violent extremist murdered the late Jo Cox MP. Her words: "We have more in common than that which divides us", must continue to inspire us.

As Black Lives Matter protests continue, reminding us of Windrush Day, World Refugee Week and Climate

Justice issues, Luton's Near Neighbours Programme co-ordinator, Kim Greig, said: "We must continue to strive for justice and fairness for all in our world; together with our shared values of compassion we can indeed make a difference.

"Near Neighbours Programme has always been supportive of all initiatives that bring communities together. We therefore entirely reject any act or message that causes discord and discomfort in community relations."

Bringing a ray of sunshine to Luton during the lockdown

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

Ever since the coronavirus outbreak and the subsequent lockdown, people have responded in different and unique ways to uplift human spirit in a collective fight against the pandemic. One unique idea caught people's imagination here in Luton.

'A Ray of Sunshine' is a community initiative, giving away a sunflower plant to get communities interested in gardening and the great outdoors. The idea is for each household to take up to four sunflower saplings (donated by Edible High Town), and then see who grows the tallest sunflower.

Initially, Near Neighbours Programme funded Edible High Town, but now it is a



Credit: Jodie Bradley Edible High Town

well-established community project, involving the local community and residents, making the area look aesthetically better, building networks, and producing and sharing healthy home grown food.

One of the co-founders of Edible High Town, Sam Willis, said: "My only real experience of gardening was hoeing weeds and mowing a lawn in my grandad's garden.

"Now I turn neglected green spaces into attractive, vibrant green pockets of edi-

bles and flowers for pollinators; I find it is a win-win."

Kim Greig, Near Neighbours Programme coordinator for Luton, said: "It is about bringing people from diverse backgrounds together to allow for new ways to work with other local people to benefit the community."

Near Neighbours Small Grants Fund are likely to open in the near future.

Visit: www.near-neighbours.org.uk/local-hubs/luton and <https://edibleluton.org/>

Places of worship are first port of call for those in distress

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

Amidst anxiety, fear, bewilderment, grief and loss caused by the pandemic, the role of faith communities and places of worship has remained crucial in sustaining individuals, communities, public and voluntary sector organisations, particularly in Luton where 78 per cent of people are religiously affiliated.

Places of worship and faith leaders have been the first port of call for people in distress, facing death, bereavement, isolation, mental health issues, and issues of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.

It is good news that the places of worship have reopened from July 4.

Considering that Luton



Allam Qazi Abdul Aziz Chishti, Founder, Managing Director and Senior Imam of the Jamia Islamia Ghausia Trust, Luton highlighting safeguarding measures for congregants

has the second highest rate of new cases in the east of England, and that Luton's population includes people who are vulnerable to the disproportionate impact and severity of COVID-19 - including BAME, elderly and deprived populations, the Director of Public Health and Luton Borough Council have held a special briefing session.

It advised local faith communities to stick to two metre social distancing, implement all suggested safety

measures, including trace and track, and keep up to date risk assessments.

In an online Executive Meeting of Luton Council of Faiths, Chair Zafar Khan said: "The decision to reopen places of worship has been broadly welcomed by all religious leaders and communities, although everyone is approaching it with different degrees of caution as they must. We hope and pray it remains physically safe and spiritually fulfilling for all congregants."

PERFORM WUDU AT HOME BEFORE YOU LEAVE

BRING A PRAYER MAT FROM HOME WITH YOU

IT IS ADVISABLE TO WEAR A MASK AND GLOVES AS AN EXTRA PRECAUTION

BRING A SHOE BAG WITH YOU FROM HOME IN ORDER TO SAFELY STORE YOUR SHOES

'Human spirit and creativity rise against all odds'

Written by
David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

The High Town Festival – community event of the year in Luton – is known as the festival 'for community' and 'by the community'. The churches also join the efforts and open their building for concerts, exhibitions and refreshments, and on Sunday they hold a joint family and community service.

However, this year's festival was different. Due to Covid-19 and social distancing, most of it took place online.

The website www.hightownfestival.org, Facebook and Twitter (#HTFest2020) hosted three main festival categories.

Firstly, 'Family Activities' included daily challenges' revealed each day in the



The online festival. #HighTownFestival is yet another example of human spirit and creativity which is ever ready to rise against all odds.

morning for all ages. For example, one morning people were asked to recreate their funniest, favourite or silliest Olympic moment and share it as a picture or a film.

Up to £150 worth of food vouchers were won by people in responding to Festival challenges. Other activities included the High Town Trail, Street-Chalk Competition and Great Big High Town Singalong. The festival organisers also uploaded daily 'how-to' tutorials for people to learn cooking, gar-

dening and musical skills.

Secondly, there were online listings of local shops and organisations selling their wares and advertising their services. This included health and well-being, arts and crafts, and food.

Thirdly, in 'Entertainment', people's pre-recorded acts, musical renditions and songs around the theme of lockdown were all streamed online over Facebook: <https://en-gb.facebook.com/HighTownFestival/> and YouTube.

Petition asks government to help poorest countries during virus

Written by

David Jonathan

GRASSROOTS &
LUTON COUNCIL OF FAITHS

Coronavirus has hit the world's poorest countries very hard. Many are being plunged into a new debt crisis as they respond to the threat of the virus while managing spiralling debt payments.

On July 18, the finance ministers of the G20 countries met. Many around the world lobbied their political leaders asking for debt cancellation for the world's poorest countries.

Pope Francis also called for the reduction of the debt payments at this crucial time, so the money can be diverted to the desperately needed healthcare and infrastructure. Our sisters and brothers overseas do not have access to healthcare



CAFOD's regional director, Deborah Purfield

systems as brilliant as the NHS.

Therefore, out of love for our one global human family, the Catholic Agency For Overseas Development (CAFOD) has launched a petition asking the UK government to prioritise the most vulnerable and marginalised people worldwide and at home.

CAFOD's regional director, Deborah Purfield, who is also a trustee of Grassroots Programme in Luton, said: "The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) will gather in Octo-

ber for their annual meetings. The UK is a powerful shareholder in both and has an important role to play in ensuring these global institutions act fast to avoid the pandemic causing lasting damage to the world's poorest people."

We have seen people across faiths, races and cultures uniting against coronavirus in Luton. Now is the time to 'think globally and act locally'. You can make a difference by signing the petition <https://e-activist.com/page/59334/petition/1>

Donate so that your neighbours do not go hungry

Written by

David Jonathan

GRASSROOTS &
LUTON COUNCIL OF FAITHS

The current month of 'Dhul Hijjah' is one of the holiest periods of the Islamic year, in which Muslims witness two very special events.

One is Hajj – annual pilgrimage to Mecca – and the second is Eid ul Adha – the "Festival of the Sacrifice" celebrated worldwide each year.

The first 10 days of 'Dhul Hijjah' month are considered better than all the other days of the year.

It is believed that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Arab religious, social and political leader and the founder of Islam, had said: "There are no days on which righteous deeds are more beloved to Allah than these 10 days."



Sujel Miah of Luton Council of Mosques and Mohammad Tariq of Radio Inspire FM

Sadly, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, undertaking Hajj has not been possible, but locally, Muslims have been encouraged to include fasting in their other good deeds and to donate the money to Luton Food Bank's amazing campaign, "Sacrifice a Meal" to ensure no one goes hungry in our town.

Sujel Miah, of Luton Council of Mosques, and Mohammad Tariq, of Radio Inspire FM, said: "Covid-19

has had a devastating impact particularly on those who were already struggling.

"We need to ensure there is food on the table for these people who are our neighbours in this town."

They have been campaigning and recommending people to make a minimum donation of £10 for a meal to Luton Food Bank to help feed families during the holidays.

To donate, please click on the link bit.ly/sacrificeameal

Pandemic means a different Eid celebration for Muslim families

Written by

David Jonathan

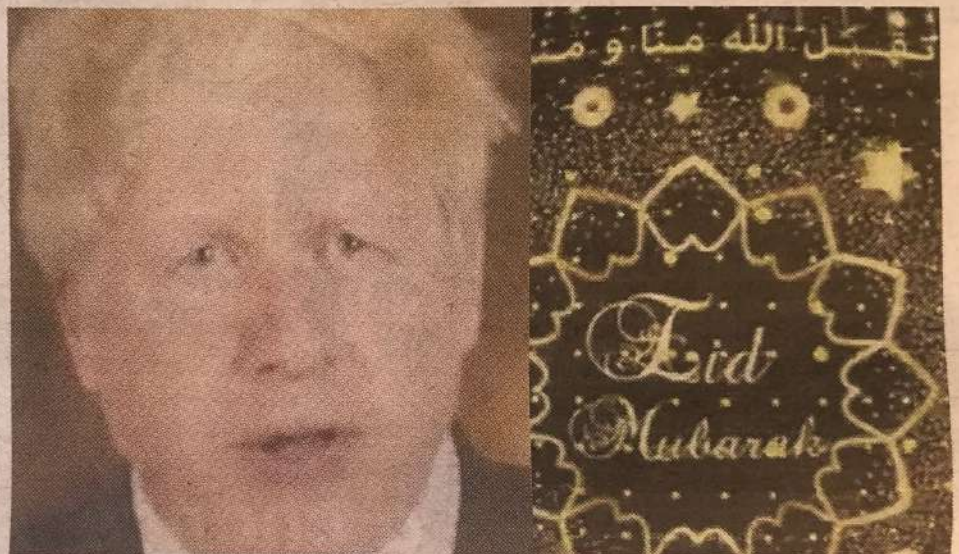
GRASSROOTS & LUTON COUNCIL OF
FAITHS

The Covid-19 pandemic meant that Eid al-Adha last Friday was different for most Muslim families and friends, who wished each other the familiar "Eid Mubarak" greeting on the phone, Zoom and other social media platforms, rather than in person.

"Eid Mubarak" is the traditional phrase used by Muslims to greet each other. The Arabic word "mubarak" translates as "blessed", while "Eid" means feast, festival or celebration.

Eid al-Adha is known as the "Festival of the Sacrifice".

It honours the famous story of the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham for Christians and Jews) willing to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to



PM Boris Johnson greeting Eid Mubarak to Muslim communities

God's command.

However, before Ibrahim did it, God produced a lamb for him to sacrifice instead.

To commemorate this, Muslims sacrifice meals and give money to charities like Luton Food Bank to feed the poorer families in our town and also donate to buy the livestock to feed people in need worldwide.

Luton's faith communities joined the prime minister, Boris Johnson, who, in

greeting the Muslim communities, said: "I want to say a huge thank you for the sacrifices you have made and for all your heroic efforts, literally helping to save lives by giving generously to those in need and looking after the vulnerable as you have through food donations and other help.

"Let me wish all Muslims, here in the UK and around the world, the very best for Eid-al Adha. Eid Mubarak."

Church communities rally round to support Luton Foodbank

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faith and GRASSROOTS

Over a weekend churches in Luton collected 148 crates of food for Luton Foodbank.

Liz Stringer, chair of Luton Foodbank, said: "In the early weeks of lockdown, supermarket shelves were empty, people and volunteers were unable to help as they were shielding, and the needs of people facing hunger had doubled. Thankfully, we had about 10 weeks supply but if it wasn't for emergency grants, we could have faced closure."

Peter Adams, vice-chair of Luton Foodbank and also an executive member of Churches Together in Luton, said: "People want to give. It is a case of assuring they could do it safely."



Rev Tim Madeley and his wife Amanda outside Christ Church Bushmead collecting food donations

"So, churches put together plans for socially distanced outdoor collections and the result has been amazing."

At Christ Church, Bushmead, vicar Rev Tim Madeley worked with the Community Centre and Co-op on Saturday afternoon. At St Luke's, Leagrave, vicar Rev Grace Sentamu Baverstock joined Christ Believers Fellowship Luton and Leagrave Methodists to organise a drive by drop-off.

At St Mary's, young peo-

ple set up a gazebo in the churchyard. At Holy Ghost Catholic Church in Bury Park there were 28 crates and at Olive Tree Church 40 boxes were collected. The Gospel Pentecostal Church with community collected food in Limbury, as did St Peter's in Dallow, St Christopher's in Round Green, and St Anne's on Crawley Green Road.

"When can we do this again?" churches are asking. Luton Foodbank won't be saying no, so may we all continue to help those in need.

Families celebrate Janmashtami in Luton and thank Covid 'warriors'

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

Janmashtami is an annual Hindu festival that celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna, the eighth avatar (reincarnation) of Lord Vishnu.

Janmashtami celebrations include dance-drama enactments of Krishna's life, 'Ratri Jagaran' (night prayer vigil) – devotional singing through to midnight when Krishna was born, 'upavasa' (fasting), and a 'Mahotsav' (festival) the following day.

People also decorate cradles and place Lord Krishna's idol in it, and where possible, they decorate children as Lord Krishna.

The most popular images of Krishna are depicted as a playful, joyous child enjoying butter churned at home and,



Last year's Janmashtami celebrations

as an adult, playing the flute.

Krishna gave the vital message of 'Bhagwad Gita' (literally translated as 'The Song of the Lord'), which is a 700-verse Hindu scripture dated to the second century BC and is a guiding principle for Hindus. Its core message has three themes – 'jnana' (knowledge), 'karma' (action) and 'bhakti' (devoted love).

Mr Kanti Lad, president of Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Luton Hindu Mandir, said: "Lord Krishna's message of Karmayoga is a call to fo-

cus on our responsibilities rather than caring for our rewards. This spirit has been evident in the working of all our warriors fighting coronavirus and our community serving those in need."

Mr Ramnik Gohil, Luton Hindu community ambassador, said: "We were unable to congregate and celebrate in large numbers, but this helped us to spend more time in reflecting on Lord Krishna's message and teachings about the purpose and meaning of our life."

'Never has the promise of that Tree of Life been more needed'

Written by

David Jonathan

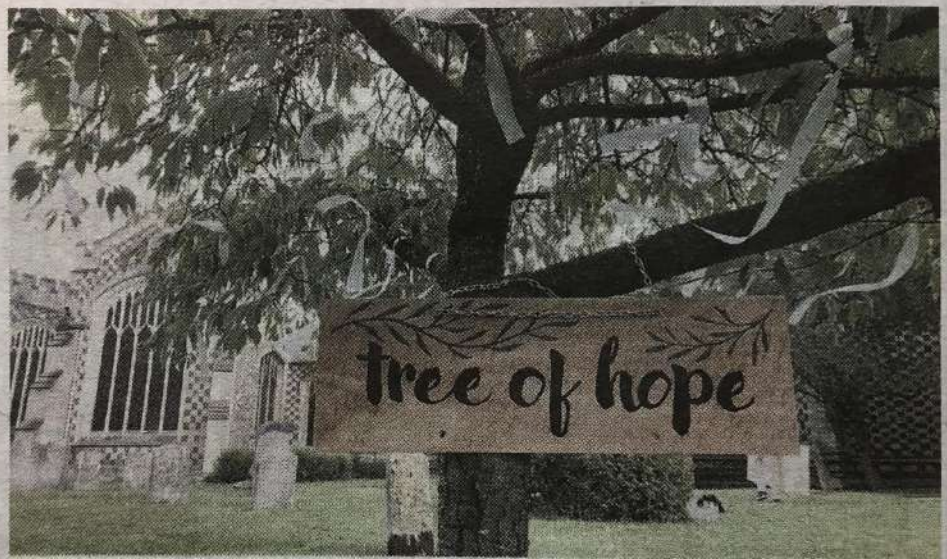
Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

St Mary's Anglican Church in the centre of Luton has seen everything – including a fire destroying much of the town, plague, bombing and now the Covid-19 pandemic.

Therefore, on Sunday, it launched Luton's Tree of Hope in the churchyard.

It is inspired by the Tree of Life, mentioned for the healing of the nations in the Bible's last Chapter 22 in the book of Revelation.

Lay Canon Peter Adams, of St Mary's Church, said: "Covid-19 has taken many lives in our town and its economic impact is very real. Never has the promise of that Tree of Life been more needed. Additionally, the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis,



The Tree of Hope in the churchyard at St Mary's Luton.

USA, has raised the challenge to properly deal with the racism and inequalities that many black, Asian and other ethnic minority people experience regularly.

"As a church we have long experienced a call to work for the unity of all in our community."

Luton's Tree of Hope is located in St Mary's churchyard opposite the Mall.

Whatever creed or colour, all are welcome anytime to

express prayers, laments, sorrow, pain, hopes and dreams by hanging a ribbon on the tree, to signify the collective heart cry of Luton people.

Vicar Mike Jones said: "As we battle our way through the pandemic, we stand among the pain, suffering and loss of our world."

"We want to reach out in hope for everyone's well-being in our town, nation and world."

'We are all meant to be in this together'

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

In his online message, promoting CAFOD's (Catholic Agency for Overseas Roman Catholic Diocese) initiative 'A Summer of Hope', Canon David Oakley, new Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, said we have all experienced the fear and anxiety caused by the recent pandemic; but in developing world, our brothers and sisters have experienced this pandemic in a very different way.

He said: "For many living in crowded conditions, social distancing is simply not possible.

"They cannot wash their



Canon David Oakley, Bishop of The Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton

hands as much as we can because of the lack of water. Hand gel is something beyond their imagination. They are having a much harder time than us and we are all meant to be in this together."

During the lockdown, he confessed, he couldn't go out to have his favourite flat white espresso beverage. He

pledged to give that money to CAFOD for those who are far less fortunate than we are. He invites and encourages us all to do the same.

Due to Covid-19, people couldn't attend his ordination as a bishop, but all across the diocese, which is made up of 70 parishes spanning Bedford, Buckingham, Northampton and Berkshire, people and partner agencies like GRASSROOTS in Luton are offering "sincere prayers and total support" to Bishop David Oakley.

He is known as "pastoral, discerning and faithful" and is popular for his gentleness and fidelity to the teachings of the church. Welcome Bishop David!

To donate to the church, visit: <https://blog.cafod.org.uk/2020/08/08/bishop-david-oakleys-message-of-hope/>

Jacqueline and Karen's message is to share love, care and compassion

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

The South Bedfordshire Methodist Circuit held a farewell service for Deacon Jacqueline Esama-John, who was a breath of fresh air to many Methodist churches in the area, and for Karen Noble, who has been a stalwart lay worker.

Rev Julie Bradshaw, the Circuit Superintendent minister, said: "In these times, it is sad that we are not able to gather in person, but we do believe that a Zoom service is still a fitting way to bid them farewell and to offer our prayers and our love for the next phase of their ministry elsewhere."

Some of the activities that Karen and Jacqueline facilitated include intergenerational Messy Church,



Deacon Jacqueline Esama-John with her family at her Farewell Service on Zoom

Care Home Fellowships, the Breakfast and Lunch Clubs, feeding the homeless, the Gardening Hub etc. They also held youth gatherings. It was all about sharing the love, care and compassion with all, they said.

Throughout their tenure they encouraged people in the community to look after their environment.

Holding a candle in the Zoom service, Jacqueline said: "We are all God's beloved children, regardless of the

colour of our skin.

"Remembering that we serve Christ, the one who came as the light of the world, we must ask 'for whom can I be a light'."

Both Jacqueline and Karen said: "It has been a great privilege to serve in this circuit. It has been a wonderful opportunity to learn and grow, to get to know people and to build relationships, and to learn about God, about humanity and the whole of God's creation."

'Covid-19 reveals our vulnerability to underlying challenges'

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and GRASSROOTS

In commemorating its 75th anniversary, the United Nations (UN) Multi-Faith Advisory Council held an online event this week to promote peace through interfaith co-operation.

Many faith expressions delivered messages of hope and solidarity to the United Nations and called for robust responses to the mounting global crises.

A short video featured an extract from a speech by H.A.H. Patriarch Bartholomew, who reflected: "We must never forget: war in the name of religion is war against religion."

Locally, United Nations Association (UNA)-Luton also convened a Zoom event to mark UN International Day



Dr Nazia Khanum OBE DL speaking at a UNA-Luton event earlier this year.

of Democracy to promote democratic principles and values for equality, respect and peace through appropriate action.

Dr Nazia Khanum OBE DL, chair of UNA-Luton, said: "This is all the more impor-

tant in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the challenges and the issues of inequality faced by many, as also highlighted by the Black Lives Matter campaign."

Covid-19 has not only revealed our vulnerability to pandemics, but also to the underlying challenges of accelerating economic inequalities, food insecurity, systemic racism, forced migration and the growing majoritarianism and xenophobia.

Dr Khanum called for discovering new ways of being and belonging so that together we can pave the way to a 'new normal' where conflict and contempt are replaced by compassion and care.

She applauded the faith-based organisations and religious communities, globally as well as locally in Luton, who have been at the forefront of helping the vulnerable and those in need.

Zooming in for Peace Walk 2020

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council Of Faiths

Every year, Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) commemorates International Day of Peace at its annual Peace Walk event in which Luton's communities of faith or no faith background visit different places of worship and enjoy hospitality.

Due to Covid-19, this year's Peace Walk event was held online. It was called 'Zoom Peace' event.

It celebrated Luton's faith communities' outstanding work during the Covid-19 pandemic, by showing video clips, news items and pictures of community in action. All dignitaries admired and applauded Luton's faith communities, saying places of worship and faith leaders have been the first port of call for people in distress facing death, bereavement, isolation, mental health



L to R: Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis, High Sheriff of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada, chair UNA-Luton Dr Nazia Khanum, Bishop Richard Atkinson, Luton South MP Rachel Hopkins and the presenter Ryad Khodabocus

issues and issues of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. It is great that on 'International Peace Day' our communities are being recognised and affirmed for their outstanding services.

Southfield and Chantry Primary School pupils shared poems and numerous community leaders and representatives contributed to the evening, uplifting everyone's spirit to continue

serving those in need.

Concluding the evening, Right Reverend Richard Atkinson, C of E Bishop of Bedford, said we are all created, loved and valued by God. We must therefore continue to ask what more I can do for others.

High Sheriff of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada said: "Two words I take from this evening are 'HOPE' and 'PEACE'."

A time of self assessment of our behaviour and relationships

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council Of Faiths

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year followed by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the holiest time of the year in Judaism.

Its central themes are atonement and repentance through a process of conscientious self-assessment of our behaviour and relationships.

Only the person who fails to secure the forgiveness of others cannot enter into forgiveness from God.

Three essential steps are suggested: "Teshuva, Tefilla, Tzedaka" meaning "Return (repentance), prayer, charity".

Traditionally, there are five prayers on Yom Kippur and continuous fasting for 25 hours, yet it is the most cel-



ebrated of all festivals.

The fast is broken with a feast signalled by the sounding of a shofar – a ram's-horn

trumpet used in Jewish religious ceremonies.

Most of the day is spent in Synagogue, but in Covid-19 restrictions, not many could come to the Synagogue and to those who came, it did not feel customary, following all the safety and social distancing rules.

Zafar Khan, Chair of Luton Council of Faiths said: "We pray that this may be a time of blessing, joy and peace for our Jewish friends and for everyone.

"May it also be a time of renewed hope, looking forward to the year ahead.

"Let us pray that the nations of the world will work effectively together to establish both public health solutions and also wiser patterns of coexistence to enable all people to share the bounties of God's world in mutual dependence, justice and respect."

'Long live community spirit in Luton!'

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

Luton has more than 26 mosques which work together through the umbrella organisations – Luton Council of Mosques and the Luton Sunni Council of Mosques – to practice their faith, raise awareness about Islam and the Muslim community, and serve the community in Luton.

Mosques have been partnering with churches, other charities, the NHS and Luton Council to contribute on various fronts.

For example, they have been supporting the L&D Hospital Helipad Appeal; serving the needy and vulnerable during the Covid-19 lockdown; promoting flu vaccinations to reduce pressure on healthcare services; and working to close the digital divide by providing laptops and internet to those who don't have them or have



Madinah Mosque and All Saints Church volunteers together remove tree stumps and weeds in Warwick Road's disused raised bed.

restricted access to technology.

One of its latest and most recent initiatives has been to clean, dig and plant at the disused Warwick Road raised bed – a notorious fly-tipping and drugs hotspot.

After clearing glass and debris amassed over the years, the team of volunteers set about removing deeply rooted weeds and tree stumps in order to turn the soil. More than 15 rubble bags were filled and hours

later, to the joy of residents and passers-by, they planted more than 200 vegetable and fruit seeds, bulbs and plants. Many thanks are due to Edible High Town for their guidance, support and tools, as well as to volunteers from Madinah Mosque and the Parish of All Saints Church.

Their next project is to help elderly residents at Warwick Court clear their gardens.

Long live the community spirit of Luton!

Luton Lions boost Age Concern and foodbank with Weekend of Running

Written by
David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths

After months of planning, over 50 participants helped raised funds for Luton's foodbank and Age Concern charities; by taking part in either the 10k, half marathon or full marathon in Luton Lions' Weekend of Running.

Since the start of Covid-19 pandemic, the most vulnerable older people and families struggling economically have been hit the hardest.

The demand on Luton Foodbank has increased. The demand for food parcels rocketed to over 450 parcels a week during lockdown.

The devastating effects of Covid-19 mean that more families than ever before are using the foodbank.

Age Concern Luton has also been supporting the most,



Representatives from Luton Foodbank and Age Concern Luton at the fundraising initiative Weekend of Running organised by Luton Lions

vulnerable and isolated older people in our town since lockdown.

Its volunteers have been providing weekly food parcels, a telephone befriending service, housekeeping, laundry, bill-paying, cleaning services as well as support with welfare and benefits to prevent further hardships.

Thanking Luton Lions for its initiative Weekend of Running, Sujel Miah, of Luton Council of Mosques, said:

"Now more than ever, both these local charities need our generous support to help families and older people facing such challenging circumstances in our town."

A special thank you to Luton Lions, participants from different backgrounds and to all those who donated generously!

You can still donate here: <https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/LutonLionsVirtualRun>

Birthdays of the two central figures of the Bahai faith are celebrated through online prayer meeting

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths

Luton Bahai community invited people of all faiths and none to join in its online prayer meeting on Zoom to celebrate the twin birthdays of the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh – the two central figures of Bahai faith.

The notion of “twin Manifestations of God” is a concept fundamental to Bahai belief.

Bab is the prophet, whose revitalising message prepared the way for the coming of Bahá'u'lláh, whose name means ‘Glory of God’ in Arabic and is the prophet-founder of the Bahai faith.

The online meeting began with a friendly chat acknowledging how difficult and challenging the current year has been for many people,



Dignitaries and guests from different faith communities at the Bahai bicentenary celebrations held two years ago

including faith groups.

Like other faith communities, Luton Bahais have not physically met since March, but they have had some socially distanced gatherings in the park during the summer.

Then the prayers from different faiths sought divine grace to be humble and meek in the service of humanity.

Later, the talks on Bab and Bahá'u'lláh reminded of the turbulent time in world history in the 19th century, in which Bahá'u'lláh, also called ‘Father of the Poor’ had advocated equality of men and women, promoted economic justice and oneness of humanity, and had implored that there be no prejudice against anyone.

The video presentations on Bahai communities highlighted their community building endeavours and showcased how they work together to strive to establish a pattern of community life that embodies the principle of the oneness of humanity.

The event concluded with a melodious, prayerful and devotional song.

'We must continue to fight for truth, justice, equity and peace'

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council Of Faiths

The United Nations (UN) came into existence on October 24, 1945. In 1971, a further resolution declared that UN Day should be an international observance.

Since then, UN Day has been marked throughout the world. The United Nations Association (UNA) Luton branch held an online commemoration event in which Sr Maire Hayes thanked and pleaded God for the UN's success in the pursuit of truth and justice, equity and peace.

Considering three per cent of the world's population died during World War Two, the UN was created so there will be no more world wars. Three million people were massacred systematically and intentionally during the 1971 Bangladesh genocide, claimed one of the speakers, M Sakhawat



L-R: Mayor of Luton Cllr Lovell, Sr Hayes, and Dr Khanum, chair of UNA-Luton.

Hussain, brigadier general (retired) in the Bangladesh Army. He also talked of Rohingya persecution going on since 1978.

The UN's failure in Kashmir, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Bosnia, Yemen and many other countries was also regretted.

Dr Nazia Khanum, chair of UNA-Luton, said: "The UN must stay to protect and promote human potential. We must not become bystanders. We must critique,

reform and influence the UN in hope that particularly rich and powerful nations will become humane and act to preserve humanity."

Dr Diana Pritchard spoke about the role of education and youth, and Dr Wendi Momen spoke about the need for spiritual values to influence aggressive capitalism. She said we must challenge political processes which contribute to the extremes of wealth in the hands of a few individuals and nations.

Luton's Muslims are inspired by their faith to live in peace

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council Of Faiths

The murder of French school teacher Samuel Paty in France has opened the Pandora's Box all over.

In Luton, people have witnessed that Muslims are inspired by their faith to live in peace with their neighbours. They have always joined other faith communities in condemning acts of terror in the name of religion in the strongest terms. We once again deplore such inhumanity and send our thoughts and prayers to all those who have been affected.

This week, Muslims worldwide celebrated Milad-un-Nabi (Prophet Muhammad's birthday) referred as a mercy to mankind in the Holy Quraan. In one incident, an old woman always threw garbage at him whenever he



In previous years, Luton's Muslims have been giving away Roses in St George's Square in celebrating the birth of Prophet Muhammad

passed that way. One day, she did not throw the garbage. The Prophet straightaway went and inquired her well-being. This transformed the woman.

Inspired by such humility and spirituality of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Muslims in Luton have always advocated fostering and safeguarding freedom for all human life and for all to practise their beliefs freely, without insulting others or to be insulted by others.

In teaching freedom of expression, the use of con-

troversial Charlie Hebdo cartoons, which are derogatory to Prophet Muhammad and connect terrorism with Islam, calls for a greater review of the religious literacy about different faiths and even greater focus upon tackling any hateful discourse inciting violence.

In our continuing commitment to education, Luton's faith communities commit to working towards creating space for the reasoned debates and discussions, enabling people to live well together.

Celebrating Inter Faith Week with peace, respect and harmony

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council Of Faiths

Inter Faith Week (November 8-15) begins with Remembrance Sunday.

HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis produced the Bedfordshire Service of Remembrance online due to the pandemic.

She said: "The service shows connections between people from different faiths, who clearly share a joint aspiration for peace, respect and harmony in our world."

Luton Council also streamed online a service and a commemoration event.

In Luton, various other activities were held during Inter Faith Week, including Security Awareness (SAFE) webinars by the Community Security Trust (CST) to prepare and prevent places of worship from any potential terror attacks.



Dignitaries mark Remembrance Sunday

Luton-based charity FAC-ES launched the Community Safeguarding Forum, which connects local communities, schools and places of worship to support, improving the ways we can safeguard children and young people in Luton.

In an online event, 'Sharing Stories of Hope', tens of people shared how they have been helping communities during these difficult times, with help from the Near Neighbours Programme.

A 12-hour Akhand Bhajan (non-stop devotional sing-

ing) for world peace was held online by Shri Sathya Sai Service Organisation.

Inter Faith Week is timed to encourage remembering together the service of soldiers and civilians of many different backgrounds in making our nation The Great Britain.

This year, in the Covid-19 context, it is important that we remember our key workers and many other unsung heroes too, who have kept the hope alive for many who are vulnerable and in need of help.

Keep a light shining this Diwali

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council Of Faiths

Diwali celebrations are the highlight of the year for 1.2 billion Hindus worldwide.

Hindus celebrate the return of Lord Rama and his wife Sita to Ayodhya after their 14-year exile in 5000 BC.

They also celebrate Mother Goddess Durga destroying a demon called Mahisha.

Sikhs and Jains also celebrate Diwali. In fact, the foundation stone of the Golden Temple at Amritsar, the most holy place for Sikhs, was laid on Diwali in 1577.

Sikhs also celebrate it as the 'Bandi Chhor Divas' marking the sixth Guru Hargobind Singh Ji's release from prison in 1619.

Jains celebrate it because their founder Lord Mahavira had attained Moksha (nirvana, or eternal bliss) during Diwali.

The word Diwali comes



Diwali celebrations last year at Luton Hindu Mandir Lewsey Farm, sharing the Peace Light with neighbours and invited guests

from the Sanskrit word 'Deepavali', meaning 'rows of lighted lamps'.

Traditionally, on Diwali Hindus, Sikhs and Jains throng temples in large numbers, decorating, singing, cooking and sharing delicious food and watching fireworks with families and friends.

But this year, because of coronavirus, outdoor celebrations and indoor gatherings have been cancelled. Places of worship are closed.

UK chancellor Rishi Sunak, while lighting oil lamps outside No. 11, said Diwali celebrations will be difficult. He urged fellow Hindus to "follow the lockdown rules".

UK prime minister Boris Johnson, wishing all Shubh (Happy) Diwali, said: "Running through the occasion is the central message of good over evil, hope over despair, knowledge over ignorance, an uplifting message that I believe we can all take to our hearts."

Sharing hope through prayers and reflections

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

Luton Council of Faiths called different faith communities online to share prayers, poems and reflections on the theme: Hope in the face of Loss and Despair – Seeing 'Light' through the Dark.

Stress and anxiety seem to be more dangerous than the pandemic.

Depression, fatigue and sorrow strip hope away from us.

The Holy Quran verses reminded us not to despair.

After a difficulty, Allah will soon grant relief.

A verse from the Sikh scripture Shri Guru Granth Sahib assures: "Why are you afraid, O human! The Creator will save you."

The Quaker Book of Faith and Practice said light



Different Faiths shared hope through prayers and reflections at a Luton Council of Faiths event

is already shining into the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

The Torah encouraged us not to despair. God performs the role of comforter. It reminds us that surviving despair is a character-transforming experience. You realise that life is not about you. It is about others.

A humanist poem also called us to value the love of our friends and neighbours and the beautiful creation.

Bahai reflection highlighted transformation in the human world; in adversities, many are uniting to help those in need.

Hindus, Sikhs and Jains have just celebrated Diwali.

It reminded us that: "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."

Reading the Psalms from the Bible and St Mary's Church's 900-year history of witnessing human suffering and its recovery remain powerful symbols of God's restoring power in the difficult times.

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh's quote sums it up well: "Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear.

"If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today."

Reinforcing Guru Nanak's message of love for all

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

The Sikh religion was founded in Northern India in the 15th century by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. 25 million Sikhs worldwide constitute the fifth largest religion in the world.

Last week they celebrated Guru Nanak Dev Ji's 551st birth anniversary.

Usually, the celebrations include 48-hour non-stop reading of the Sikh holy scripture The Guru Granth Sahib (Akhand Padh).

A day before, the 'Nagar Kirtan', a procession, takes place.

On the day following hymn singing and devotional reflections, a special communal meal 'Langar' is served.

This year, due to Covid-19, celebrations have been re-



Luton Sikh leaders greeted by Muslim leaders from Luton's Central Mosque during the Sikh Peace Procession last year

stricted to align with government rules and guidelines.

People have been encouraged to take special care.

'Sehj Padh', the reading of Guru Granth Sahib will be over a longer period, concluding on Sunday, December 6, with prayers at Guru Nanak Gurdwara, Dallow Road.

Mr Gurpal Singh Binning, vice-president, re-

called that last year, when the procession had passed through Bury Park, the Central Mosque president, head Imam, committee members and several others from the Muslim community had greeted the Sikh leaders with garlands and distributed hot snacks to hundreds of Sikhs.

He added that this reinforces the Guru Nanak's message of love for all regardless of any religion, nation, race, creed, colour, or gender.

He concluded: "Much as Sikhs love their religion, they are equally respectful of other beliefs.

"The word 'Sikh' means 'learner', so as Sikhs we ask all to live out their own respective religious teachings well, so that we all become better Christians, better Muslims, better Hindus, better Jews and better Sikhs."

Sharing positive stories of all the good community work during pandemic

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

The Near Neighbours Programme, through an easy-to-access funding scheme, helps support projects that bring people together from different communities and promotes social action and transformation.

Recently, Luton Hub ran an online event, *Sharing Stories of Hope*, inviting all its beneficiaries and partners to share positive and challenging stories from their work during the pandemic.

The event proved a great opportunity for networking and making connections. It is encouraging how many groups and individuals are making a difference in our town.

Near Neighbours has also held a conference on 'Build-



Near Neighbours Big Conversation community event held last year in Luton

ing Resilience to the Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond' in partnership with Strengthening Faith Institutions.

It was to equip religious leaders, faith-based organisations and faith communities which have been a primary source of support, comfort and guidance for the communities they serve.

The conference highlighted actions that faith communities need to take for the transition to a safer and more sustainable post-Cov-

id-19 world and it also provided training workshops on income generation for faith centres, faith-based social entrepreneurship and safeguarding children at faith organisations.

Near Neighbours' small grants are open until December 11. Contact Kim Greig, Near Neighbours coordinator in Luton, at near_neighbours_luton@btconnect.com or 01582 416946 for more information and grant applications.

Light breaking through as various religious festivals are celebrated

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

As the world is waiting for the Covid-19 vaccine, the language being used for it – 'light breaking through' – is the same as the language used in the last three months to celebrate different religious festivals, which have included the birth of Bahá'u'lláh (Bahai), Milad-un-Nabi birth of Prophet Mohammad PBUH (Muslim), Diwali (Hindu-Sikh-Jain), birth of Guru Nanak Dev Ji (Sikh) and now, just before Christmas, it is the Jewish festival Hanukkah.

"Hanukkah" meaning "dedication" is the eight-day festival of light for the Jewish community, which is celebrated by lighting nine flames of the menorah to mark the rededication of the



Rabbi Yossi Schwei and others lighting the menorah at Hanukkah celebrations last year

Holy Temple in the second century BCE, after a small number of poorly armed Jews had defeated the mighty Greeks and had reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Every year, the Luton Synagogue invites people from different faiths for the celebrations and to enjoy the fish cakes, doughnuts and tea afterwards.

Sadly due to Covid-19, celebrations have had to be withheld. Still a menorah will be lit in every household, as the sign of 'light break-

ing through'. And soon it will be light breaking through the birth of Jesus Christ at Christmas. Therefore, Luton Community Action Group is hosting '12 Days of Luton' to celebrate Luton's community spirit. It will also showcase online the amazing community support and the work of local charities. If you would like to be featured, please send your information, links, images and videos to Fiona at lutoncommunityaction-group@gmail.com or WhatsApp on 07957192174.

We need collective action now, more than ever

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

The United Nations is marking its 75th anniversary at a time of great challenge, including the worst global health crisis in its history. Will it bring the world closer together? Or will it lead to greater divides and mistrust?

Launched by UN, <https://un75.online/> survey promises to be the largest and furthest-reaching global online conversation ever on building the future.

In a world of dramatic changes and complex challenges, from Covid-19 to economic disaster to the climate crisis to population shifts to the unknown course of technology, we need collective action more than ever before. The UN is encouraging people to put their



heads together to define how enhanced international co-operation can help realise a better world by 2045, the UN's 100th birthday.

United Nations Association (UNA) – Luton Branch held a virtual event to mark UN International Human Solidarity Day on the theme: Socio-economic wellbeing and peace by taking actions through faith, interfaith and secular initiatives.

UNA Luton chair Dr Nazia Khanum, OBE, DL said: "We need genuine solidarity across the board – locally, nationally and internationally."

After messages shared by the Mayor of Luton and the High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, numerous community leaders and Luton Council officers spoke on Population Wellbeing & Solidarity in the voluntary sector during and after the Pandemic, Solidarity from Faith and Interfaith Perspective, Solidarity with Creation, Neighbourly Solidarity through Social Action and Women's Solidarity for Humanitarian Actions.

One key message at this event was "The world needs solidarity. Your contribution counts."

Memorial to remember those we lost during the pandemic

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

Approaching the year end, we are more aware of how fragile our hold on life can be.

For many people, Christmas may have been a bittersweet celebration as they miss loved ones who died this year.

Churches across Britain have tried to find ways to reflect the pandemic's effects on their own community and this prompted Luton's Wigmore Church to mount a Covid memorial on the front of the church, on which two members have crocheted and knitted a flower each for every person who died from Covid-19 in Luton.

Rev Heather Whyte, the United Reformed Church (URC) minister, said: "This memorial of flowers is a re-



minder that the numbers of deaths we hear aren't just statistics but people, people with families, people who are loved."

She added: "We hope and pray that not many more flowers will need to be added, but we know the pandemic is still very prevalent in Luton.

"The crafters will continue, so anyone who has lost someone will know that a flower has been created with

love for their loved one and they are in our prayers."

You can see the memorial by walking or driving past the front of the Wigmore United Reformed and Methodist Church, Crawley Green Road, LU2 9TE.

For more info, please contact Rev Heather Whyte at heather.whyte@urc.org.uk

May the New Year bring better news, and a safer, healthier and prosperous world, for everyone!