

Grassroots

...a different point of view



“Without justice and love, peace will always be the great illusion.”

Archbishop Helder Pessoa Camara

Annual Report

2019-2020

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Churches and Other Faith Communities in Luton

Daughters of the Holy Spirit

Ghar se Ghar

Luton Council of Faiths

New Creations

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Carol Bond

Fahad Matin

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Rasitha Madusanka

Thakor Morarji



Message from The Revd Canon David Lawson (Chair)

Monday 23 March 2020 will be a date that goes down in history. It was the day that the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced that people must stay at home, shop once a day for necessities and only take one short form of exercise per day outdoors – so called ‘lockdown’ had begun! This year’s Annual Report covers that period, which for charities like GRASSROOTS, has been a challenging time.



Prior to ‘lockdown’ we said farewell to Karen Campbell and her work as a Church Related Community Worker, all of which was acknowledged at a farewell event in February at Holy Ghost Catholic Church in Luton. Karen has now moved to the new post of United Reformed Church Secretary for Global and Intercultural Ministries. We send her our prayers and good wishes for this new and exciting challenge.

We are glad that Kim Greig’s role as Near Neighbours Programme Development Officer is secured until the end of March 2021. We hope and pray the other staff and their programmes will continue to thrive.

It was also sad to bid farewell to Right Reverend Peter Doyle, Bishop of Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton but at the same time we are glad to welcome the new Bishop David Oakley who is known as “pastoral, discerning and faithful” and is popular for his gentleness and fidelity to the teachings of the Church.

A highlight of the year, pre ‘lockdown’, was the visit to Luton of Barbara Glasson, the new President of the Methodist Conference. The team was privileged to spend an hour with Barbara in the GRASSROOTS’ office, sharing with her GRASSROOTS involvement and commitment to the community in Luton. We were also able to accompany her on the rest of her visit to the Town Hall, for a reception at the Hindu Temple and Community Centre in Hereford Road. Barbara has a particular interest in and commitment to communities like Luton from her own work in Liverpool and Bradford.

‘Lockdown’ has forced many organisations to find new ways of communicating remotely and Grassroots is no exception with us hosting our first Trustees ZOOM meeting in June 2020. This was not an overly business meeting but more to have the opportunity to share with the team and trustees how we were all living with the pandemic and ‘lockdown.’ Throughout ‘lockdown’, the huge number of activities and involvement by Grassroots in so many areas of Luton’s life, has demonstrated Grassroots ‘responsibility’ to the challenges thrown up by the pandemic.

Sadly, the death of George Floyd in the United States in May 2020, led to worldwide protests and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement. GRASSROOTS is ‘motivated and nourished by the spirit of justice and peace’ and this is why racial, economic and environmental justice issues are at the heart of much of GRASSROOTS work. The Annual Report once again reflects the range of work undertaken by the team and their commitment to ‘offering a different point of view’. The Black Lives Matter Movement is a reminder that there is still much work to be done.

As ever my personal gratitude to my fellow trustees for their wisdom, contributions and expertise, freely and lovingly supporting the wonderful and engaging work of Grassroots!

Message from David Jonathan (Director)

State of Hate 2020 Report launched by HOPE NOT HATE (www.hopenothate.org.uk) highlights that political fundamentalism, majoritarianism, xenophobia and general intolerance are contributing significantly to the rise in identity politics. The report points out that the traditional far right parties are weaker than ever before, but what is perturbing is that far right ideas are influencing the mainstream politics now, not just in Europe but all over the world.



In such a context, it fits well what the President of the Methodist Conference Revd Dr Barbara Glasson said at a meeting with 40 representatives from Luton's different faith communities during her visit to Luton. She said we're all called to love and acknowledge our shared humanity. At times, it's costly, but it's the only way to change the world. What she said underpins the work of GRASSROOTS; glimpses of this work are mentioned in this report.

The inter faith relations work undertaken by GRASSROOTS in partnership with LUTON COUNCIL OF FAITHS, is a testament of how in a town like Luton, where 78% of people are religiously affiliated and 130 plus different languages are spoken, we are working constantly to build, enhance and strengthen resilience of the town for harmonious co-existence in a very complex context of inter-community relations and communities' relationships with service providers, local authority, charities, other public sector and community organisations.

Our capacity to act as a buffer and a neutral space for communities and individuals to share their concerns and aspirations, remains an incredible resource for the town and our innovative projects transcend the traditional interfaith work often seen.

The Methodist President during her visit on 2nd March 2020 also highlighted the role played by women especially those working behind the scene and their political significance in an ever-changing socio-political landscape. She said the most effective change comes from the bottom up; yet this is often demeaned as simply social or domestic activity. This affirms GRASSROOTS work undertaken in its project "Working with Women across Faiths and Cultures" in partnership with 'Ghar se Ghar' (Hindi/Urdu words meaning Home to Home).

The Methodist President had also said that 'racialising' or 'criminalising' whole communities of certain ethnicity and faith should not be acceptable. Sadly, we have seen a lot of it happening during the Covid-19 pandemic, whether blaming China for the Coronavirus, or labelling black, minority and ethnic (BAME) communities as being irresponsible during the lockdown.

Our projects Spirituality of Justice & Near Neighbours Programme are therefore so much more important in the current times as it challenges any form of scapegoating and encourages and inspires all to work together for the renewal of our creation, but particularly to uplift those who are vulnerable and those who are on the margins.

The report 'Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19' launched in June 2020 by Public Health England (PHE) highlights some concerning findings around the impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities. Black Lives Matter protests have also highlighted racial and structural inequalities.

GRASSROOTS pledges itself to continue addressing these concerns, besides the growing Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-immigrant rhetoric in the post-Brexit & Covid-19 contexts. It may all look too big an agenda to work on, but Margaret Mead's words are always so encouraging;

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world;
indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.



The President of the Methodist Conference Revd Dr Barbara Glasson during her visit to Luton on 2nd March 2020 met with GRASSROOTS Team & Trustees, visited Luton Town Hall, Hindu Temple and met Luton's different faith communities



Revd Canon David Lawson greeting with Fairtrade Gifts from Luton Fairtrade Shop run by GRASSROOTS Luton



Mayor of Luton Cllr Tahir Malik at Town Hall talks of Luton Investment Framework – £1.5 billion investment transforming the town



Sanjiv Kumar of Guru Ravi Dass Sangat Luton presenting a Cooking Recipe Book created as part of a Near Neighbours funded Project



Visiting Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Hindu Temple in Lewsey Farm, Luton and met with the Hindu Priest, newly arrived from India

Church Related Community Work (CRCW) Project

Church Related Community Work (CRCW) is a ministry of the United Reformed Church (URC) concerned with bringing about positive change in local communities. It encourages the local church to consider 'What does it mean to be a meaningful Christian presence in its place?' The Luton Project was different. Here, the CRCW was called to work with the Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches, comprising: Bury Park United Reformed Church, Oakdale & Beech Hill Methodist Churches, All Saints with St Peters Anglican Churches, Holy Ghost Catholic Church & Asian Christian Fellowship.



At the end of project's 10-year term 2010-2020, on 15th Feb 2020, local dignitaries, faith leaders, and community members gathered to bid farewell to Karen Campbell, Luton Church Related Community Worker (CRCW).

In a special service held at Holy Ghost Catholic Church, many project participants and members from different Churches and faith communities took turns to reflect on the impact the project has had on them and on the community in Luton. It was recognised that many seeds were sown, from which some shoots have developed and flourished, developing multiple branches where Flowers have blossomed and fruit continues to be harvested.

Karen said: "I know my time in Luton has been worth it. There are friendships built across faiths and cultures, and people [have been] brought together. I say with confidence that the Luton I leave is not the Luton I came to. Relationships having been built over time with various church and community groups, including an awareness of their varied heritage. In some small way, I know the project has made a difference."

The Luton project had started work in 2010 with a 'Visions and Dreams' morning, encouraging the Bury Park Beech Hill churches to explore who they are and what they want to be in the context of their realities, their strengths and challenges, their joys and sorrows, within and outside Churches. These early reflections led to a range of initiatives bringing together church and community, including annual seaside trips, festive gatherings, creative writing and exercise sessions.

The project contributed to wider community initiatives too such as One World Week, International Women's Day and Holocaust Memorial Day events, plus Luton Fairtrade and Luton Council of Faiths initiatives, including the Faith Woodlands Communities and Community Archery Projects.

Considerable work took place amongst and in partnership with the local Roma community. With support from the 'Near Neighbours' programme and its 'Real People Honest Talk' initiative, people were enabled to explore themes and issues affecting their lives, working together to propose positive responses.

In the project report "Seeds on the Wind" (available on request), Karen concluded; "Church Related Community Work can sometimes feel like a precarious business. It is often unpredictable. Situations can change almost in the blink of an eye. Much time may be invested but apparently bear little fruit, whilst some initiatives seem to spring up and blossom beyond expectation. Planned projects might come to fruition, but the emerging fruit may hardly resemble that which was expected. New shoots can appear seemingly out of nowhere, whilst established pieces of work may unexpectedly die. I can say with confidence that this ministry is not for the faint-hearted!"

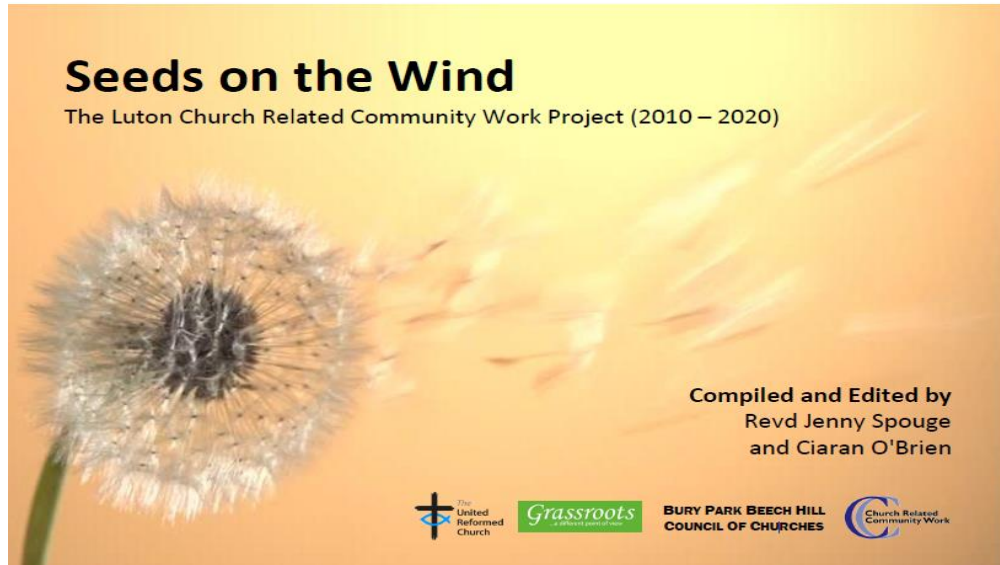
In his address, Revd Dr Andrew Prasad, Moderator of the URC Thames North Synod, commented: "It is hoped there is enough to inspire and continue the adventure even after the project ends. Many in Luton will miss the project worker, Karen Campbell, and Karen will miss many people in Luton, but we must let go in confidence to embrace the new and welcome the unknown."



Luton URC Minister Revd Heather Whyte & All Saints C of E Vicar Revd David Kesterton presenting Luton Memoirs at Karen's Farewell



Mayor of Luton Cllr Tahir Malik, High Sheriff of Bedfordshire Meryl Dolling & Luton Council of Faiths Chair Zafar Khan at Karen's Farewell



The Luton Church Related Community Work Project (2010-2020) Report – Available on Request



Aliens from dancing group 'Diamond Divas' descended at the Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches Christmas programme wanting to know about Christmas



Dancing group 'Diamond Divas' sharing the message of peace and love at the Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches Christmas programme held at Holy Ghost Catholic Church

Spirituality of Justice Project

Inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si, Sr. Maire Hayes contributed to the planning of conferences (some listed below) to raise the prophetic voices regarding climate change and to transform the thoughts and suggestions of Laudato Si into actions, but due to the Coronavirus pandemic they had to be postponed until 2021.



Networking with Justice & Peace Organisations

Action for Life on Earth – The present crisis bears witness to the importance of this title. We are called to upgrade our Christian calling and witness for justice and peace. Ecological conversion is a matter of life and death. This conference organised by NJPN (National Justice & Peace Network) will take place in 2021 calling for our awakening to our children's future. Greta Thunberg (Swedish activist) said, "This coming decade humanity will decide its future. Let's make it the best one we can."

Reclaiming the Politics of the Common Good – In 2016 Pope Francis had called for "prophetic audacity" – this will involve joining advocacy groups in an ongoing process of holding the government to account, which can be and ought to be done in more ways than just casting our votes. Religious of the Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation group will host this conference to be led by Dr Anna Rowlands in 2022.

Scripture in relation to Care of the Earth – Northampton Roman Catholic Diocese Justice and Peace Commission will convene the conference on this topical theme corresponding to and complementing all that is said above, possibly in 2021.

Holocaust Memorial Day 2020

On the 23rd January 2020, this year's theme STAND TOGETHER marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the 25th anniversary of the Genocide in Bosnia. A well thought out drama entitled "The Ten Stages of Genocide" was acted by Stopsley High School Luton. Sr Maire Hayes shared a Prayer, jointly composed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Senior Imam at the Makkah Mosque and the Chief Rabbi. The prayer sought God's forgiveness for times when we give space to grow the fear and hatred of those who are different from us.

Roman Catholic Inter Faith Coordinators Meeting in Leicester

On 12th & 13th Nov'19 Bishop McKinney enabled reflections on our enriching and difficult engagements with people of different faiths and discussed ideas of joint action taking inspiration from the inter faith work reports from Luton shared by Sr. Maire Hayes and the Catholic document "Meeting God in Friend and Stranger". Yasmin Surti, from the Federation of Muslim organizations summed up the spirit of the meeting saying we have so much in common; we must nourish our friendships, which can indeed build a better world.

Fairtrade Fortnight 2020

During the Fairtrade fortnight 24th February – 8th March 2020 GRASSROOTS, Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) and St Christopher's C of E Church joined forces for the second year in organising a Fairtrade Cake Bake Competition. Contestants from diverse backgrounds, ages and faiths participated with their delicious cakes made with fairtrade ingredients. Everyone present took part in the tasting and judging. Two prizes were rewarded in memory of the Late Mr Natu Bhai Solanki a Hindu Vice Chair of the Luton Council of Faiths and Late Ms Maureen Borbone a Catholic and a committed Fairtrade activist and also a former Trustee of GRASSROOTS.



The recitation of the Kaddish (prayer for the dead) following the candles lighting in memory of victims of genocide on Holocaust Memorial Day & Stopsley High School pupils drama on Ten Stages of Genocide



Sr Maire Hayes & Mgr Kevin McGinnell contributing to Podcast on 'Spirituality & Mental Health' produced by Luton Council of Faiths

Contestants from diverse backgrounds in Fairtrade Cake Bake Competition at St Christopher's C of E Church



Zimbabwean cultural greetings exchanged at World Day of Prayer 2020

Receiving 'Langar' (communal meal) at Sikh Guru Ravidass Ji's Birthday Celebrations

Working with Women Across Faiths & Cultures

Ann Hyde has continued to work with women from different faiths and cultural backgrounds through supporting the women's network of 'Ghar se Ghar' (Hindi/Urdu words meaning 'From Home to Home').



Ghar se Ghar Activity Groups

The Bury Park, Ashcroft and Beech Hill groups continued throughout the year, though concluded a week earlier due to the Covid19 situation.

Exercise, relaxation, meditation and discussions on health topics all promoted healthy living. Extra activities and events helped people in making wider social connections, new friendships and stronger social bonds, which was most valuable in maintaining positive mental health and social wellbeing during the Covid 19 lockdown.

Ghar se Ghar Referrals

Domestic Violence	Police	Health	Social Services	Housing	Benefits	Counselling	Form Filling	Letter Reading	Letter Writing	Education
1	1	51	19	13	19	21	0	9	1	4

Other Ghar se Ghar Activities

- For those who are assessed as being frail, Healthy Ageing Programme at Beech Hill through a 12 week programme helps people increase their strength, mobility, balance and stability, with a view to improving their physical and mental health and enabling them to maintain healthy and independent lives.
- Some Ghar se Ghar members took part in a research project, "East London Genes and Health". This studies genes of the South Asian population to improve treatment and medicine based on individuals' genes for prevalent conditions such as Diabetes, Hypertension and heart disease.
- Supported by The National Lottery Community Fund, sessions of Qi Qong, mindfulness & HeartMath meditation enabled participants to learn new ways of being healthy and combating stress. A coach trip to Waddesdon Manor was educational for most attending first time a Christmas Fair lined with over 80 Artisan stalls. The illuminated Woodland and Winter Light Trails, decorated with lanterns were wonderful.

Precious Pearls 2020 Theme: Women Caring for Mother Earth

Held on 5th March 2020, this annual event was inspired by the Pope Francis' Encyclical, Laudato Si. The programme included Praise for Creation, Bee-keeping, Hug a Tree, Live Simply, Veganism, Eco Crafts, Poem titled 'Recycling Rant', Energy Usage, Climate Change & Eco Projects by LEAF (**L**uton **E**nvironmental **A**ction **F**orum), Edible High Town undertaking. As always, there was a vast array of talent on display including poetry, piano recitals, singing and dancing, to add entertainment and joy to the occasion.

Circle Dancing

Besides Hockwell Ring Community Centre, Blenheim Baptist & High Town Methodist Church Halls, Circle Dance sessions also benefitted Southfields Primary School, Wigmore Church Harvest Festival, World Day of Prayer and Ghar se Ghar groups. Highlights include "Enas Mythos" a Greek dance of welcome, give a sense of togetherness; "Under Paris Skies" a live street accordion recording transported everyone to France; "Punjabi Love Affair" resounded to Bombay beats; a lovely meditation to Tibetan Incantations gave a sense of inner stillness & peace and "Bells of Norwich," with lyrics by Sidney Carter, reminded everyone that "All shall be well again, I know."



Ann Hyde, GRASSROOTS Team Member! experienced a very different kind of spectacular Circle Dancing event in October 2019 at the Hindu Festival of 'Navratri' meaning 9 nights of dancing



Sessions of Qi Qong, mindfulness & HeartMath meditation enabled participants to learn new ways of being healthy and combating stress

Zimbabwean colourful costumes at World Day of Prayer Service symbolising its turbulent journey towards reconciliation and peace



Images from Precious Pearls Event – Top L to R: “Recycling Rant” Poem composed & performed by the Ghar se Ghar organisers, Diamond Divas Dance Group performance, Anne Hall on Bee Keeping, Debbie Newbound, Parish Nurse at St Thomas Parish Church on re-usable women’s sanitary wear, Storytelling through movement by Amina Khayyam and lastly friendships forged forming strong social bonds

Near Neighbours Programme

The Near Neighbours (NN) Luton Hub, hosted by GRASSROOTS and led by Kim Greig, has had an interesting 9th year in Luton. As always partnership working has been important. Locally it supported International Women's Day & UN Day, Peace Walk and Holocaust Memorial Day. Nationally, Kim supported colleagues in NN head office, in Peterborough and in Leicester.



Near Neighbours (NN) Grants

In 2019 (June-October) saw 18 NN projects funded in Luton. Some fantastic projects included – Safeguarding & Prejudice training by FACES (Faiths Against Child Sexual Exploitation), the Big Music Company ran a Flash Mob sing-along in the Luton Mall, Luton Community Forum set up by Luton Irish Forum, St Thomas Parish nurse delivering health awareness sessions, Mary Seacole Housing Association delivered a football project for Asylum seekers and refugees, Hats of Faiths storytelling by Luton Council of Faiths, a unique Horse Angels project linking primary school children with the care of horses and a series of partnerships across Luton sharing Windrush stories.

NN Grants Review & Networking Session

This event went very well. Feedback from participants was really positive. It was encouraging to hear that new people were meeting who had never met before. Grant recipients promoted their activities and became aware of others' inspiring projects. People are now asked to develop case studies for the Near Neighbours newsletter.

Real People Honest Talk (RPHT) Sessions & Big Conversation Event

Due to its positive impact, popularity and demand we delivered 12 sessions with 4 different groups and a 'Big Conversation' event was held on 28th October 2019. A wide range of topics have been explored and discussed e.g. how to influence press and the social media, the rise of the far right, freedom of speech, lack of youth services, unemployment, knife crime, gangs, drugs, homelessness, mental health and climate change etc. Two groups have continued developing conversations and tackling loneliness by receiving NN grants successfully. Our 3rd Big Conversation event, on the theme of Environment & Climate change, consisted of thought provoking talks by dignitaries, 3 keynote speakers, and round-table discussions, asking people to think about how does this affect me and what can I do about it? We also hosted the Cricket World Cup Trophy won by England in 2019 – Thanks to Cricket East and Wicketz for the opportunity to be involved in the Luton Tour.

Places of Welcome (PoW)

This is a growing network of hospitality, run by local community groups who want to make sure that everyone in their area has a place to go for a friendly face, a cup of tea and a conversation. Age Concern Luton became the 1st local PoW in Luton and now Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches have also opened its doors.

Other Activities

In April 2019, at the start of the lockdown, people were sent the NN postcard saying "Kindness is Contagious" to display in their front window, to show their care for one's neighbour. NN funded project called Edible High Town has been turning the derelict land patches into vibrant green spaces. In lockdown, its initiative 'A ray of sunshine' gave away Sunflower plants to get communities interested in gardening and to see who grows the tallest sunflower. The project was identified and hosted by the BBC Look East on its website.



Real People Honest Talk Session with Safer Luton Partnership in Tokko Youth Centre



Real People Honest Talk Session with Meaningful Education at Futures House Marsh Farm



Real People Honest Talk participants and invited dignitaries engaged in roundtable discussions at the Big Conversation Event



Real People Honest Talk Facilitators summing up the roundtable discussions at the Big Conversation Event



Participants share positive stories and inspirational experiences at Near Neighbours Grants Review & Networking workshop



Edible High Town gave away Sunflower plants to get communities interested in gardening and to see who grows the tallest sunflower

Inter Faith Relations

Contrary to a government report stating inter-faith dialogue is limited to “saris, samosas and steel drums” for the already well-intentioned, our work in Luton is already beyond creating syncretism, beyond mere dialogue; it is about action, following reflections on the global or local concerns which affect our lives and then finding ways and means to respond to it, together. We realise that our actions must speak louder than our words and our actions, inspired by our respective beliefs, must not be about competing against one another, but complimenting one another.



Annual Luton Peace Walk 2019

The 23rd Luton Annual Peace Walk coincided this year with the International Peace Day on 21st September 2019. Nearly 200 people & 60 children from 7 schools joined in visiting St Luke’s C of E Church, Hockwell Ring Mosque, High Street Methodist Church and Al-Hikmah Prayer Hall. School Children led a meditation using HeartMath technique synchronising brain and heart for well-being, a Circle Dance expressing coherence between the breath and physical energy and shared their learning experiences from Guidelines for Dialogue run by The Feast programme. This year’s International Peace Day theme Climate Change was expressed in the Peace Artwork Competition in which eight schools’ entries were exhibited on the day. A very encouraging video message was produced by Chantry Primary Academy interviewing Carlos Islam of Luton, currently working as a Special Events Manager at United Nations in New York. He sent his best wishes for Luton Peace Walk.

Inter Faith Week

Inter Faith Week begins with Remembrance Sunday, and runs until the following Sunday with over 650+ activities across the country as reported by the National Interfaith network. In Luton, a local Imam, Rabbi and Vicar participated in a Remembrance Sunday Service at Luton Town Hall. We also brought families together for Hats of Faiths book storytelling session held at Tokko Youth Centre and William Austin Jr School.

Multi Faith Panel Discussion for Airport Chaplains

On 19th November 2019, at London Luton Airport Chaplaincy over 40 airport chaplains from across the UK and Ireland attended a multi-faith panel discussion on how best to meet the varying spiritual needs of passengers in the aftermath of an emergency, a key role of the airport chaplaincy service. For Rev Canon Liz Hughes, Senior Chaplain, at airports it is really important service, managed mostly by volunteers.

UN 75th Anniversary Celebrations – New School Assemblies

Peace Child International (PCI) is a UK based charity focusing on sustainable development and youth empowerment. It has UN Economic and Social Council Consultative status. Since UN is marking its 75th Anniversary celebrations, in partnership with PCI, we held school assemblies educating young people about the role UN plays and can potentially play in bringing peace and justice in our world. Children raised concerns about environment, refugees, homelessness and NO WAR has been their loud and clear message.

Reading Terror Attack

Following the stabbings in Reading on 20th June 2020, in a statement published locally, Luton’s faith communities shared solidarity with people in Reading, sending a strong message of defiance to all extremists, that we will not be divided. A letter expressing solidarity from Luton’s Mayor to Reading’s Mayor was also a commendable effort.



Over 40 Airport Chaplains from across the UK and Ireland attended a multi-faith panel discussion on how best to meet the varying spiritual needs of passengers in the aftermath of an emergency



Luton's Annual Peace Walk Images commemorating International Day of Peace on 21st Sep 2019

Working our way through the Covid-19 Pandemic

The ongoing global Coronavirus pandemic has put everything to test. Everyone, public institutions, businesses, voluntary or faith based organisations like ours; all have been affected in one way or the other. It has been a demanding time for us as we have been constantly liaising with the local authority, public health, Police and others such as Community Voluntary Service (CVS) Bedfordshire, Bedfordshire & Luton Emergency Volunteers Executive Committee (BLEVEC), Bedfordshire Local Resilience Forum (BLRF) etc. to ensure that we keep

- a) cascading through the places of worship and other faith and community leaders networks, the right and relevant information from time to time as government guidelines have been constantly changing
- b) encouraging faith communities' continued support in preventing the spread of Covid-19, protecting the most vulnerable in our community, providing reassurance to people, countering their fears and anxieties

Amidst anxiety, fear, bewilderment, grief and loss caused by the ongoing pandemic, the role of faith communities and places of worship has remained crucially vital in sustaining individuals, communities and public and voluntary sector institutions and organisations, particularly in the place like Luton where 78% 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.

Supporting and reassuring our faith leaders that they are not alone and that we are all together in this has been at the core of all our work undertaken. We have tried to ensure that all feel affirmed, involved and valued being part of virtual networks that we swiftly created and supported.

Besides helping in 'excessive death planning' and 'cremation and burials', we have also been supporting and promoting appeals for donations from Luton Food Bank (<http://lutonfoodbank.org.uk/appeal>). The devastating effects of Covid-19 have meant that more families than ever before are using the services of the foodbank.

We encouraged responses particularly from black, Asian & minority ethnic (BAME) communities, to a Public Perception Survey, launched during May 29th – June 21st 2020, by the local NHS Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) seeking views about how the pandemic has affected the challenges to healthcare and to assess what changes are needed or working well in service delivery.

We have liaised with the Resources Directorate of HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis and publicised her weekly messages and a virtual Service of Thanksgiving to honour volunteers who play a significant role in building kind and cohesive communities. This service can be viewed here <https://youtu.be/Urdq3JM2E0U>.

We helped the High Sheriff of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada to create a Wall of Thanks on her website. We promoted Luton Council VE Day 75 Virtual Celebrations held on 8th May, which can still be viewed at <https://m.luton.gov.uk/Page/Show/events/Pages/VE-Day-75.aspx?redirectToMobile=True>.

We supported Places of Worship to go through guidelines about re-opening safely from July 2020 onwards. We collected and presented devotional/scriptural quotes/prayers from Luton's faith communities, in a beautifully design and circulated through all our networks, as a resource for support, encouragement, comfort and healing. We also promoted Pope Francis call for all faiths and none to fast together with Muslims on 14th May during Ramadan for end of COVID-19 <https://ara.tv/6ga3n>.

We supported Church of England St Albans Diocese in preparing a Covid-19 Pastoral Care Scheme, for NHS and for communities, across the county of Bedfordshire in which our partner agency Luton Council of Faiths remained one of the key contact points for multi faith needs and services in Luton.

The following two resources, produced by our partner Luton Council of Faiths, have been widely appreciated.

- a) A Guide supporting your Mental Health, Resilience and Well-being while working from home
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5271666ae4b08363c17bd7b4/t/5eaf1ea937ba131c87f41eee/1588534981177/LCoF+Supporting-your-mental-health-LCOF-Final.pdf>
- b) My Daily Action Planner
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5271666ae4b08363c17bd7b4/t/5eaf1e61606a9567bc3da0c3/1588534895774/LCoF+DAILY+PLAN+LoCK+Down.pdf>

Covid – 19 Impact on Local People

Public Health England (PHE) released the ‘Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19’ report in June 2020. It highlights some concerning findings around the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities. Health Secretary Matt Hancock said coming from a non-white background was a "major risk factor" for the virus.
<https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-black-and-asian-ethnic-groups-up-to-twice-as-likely-to-die-from-virus-says-public-health-england-11999167> Luton’s faith leaders and faith communities, concerned with justice and fullness of life for all, are asking the local & national government what could we do better to save lives and to ensure that we are all in it together.

Covid – 19 Impact on Places of Worship

No lettings of places of worship buildings and facilities severely affected its income to sustain buildings. Hence in a meeting of faith leaders convened by Luton Council of Faiths on 26th May, it was agreed that a letter to the Prime Minister be written seeking a specific fund for help. Also re-opening places of worship from 4th July onwards has not been easy, especially considering Luton’s population includes people who are vulnerable to disproportionate impact and severity of COVID-19, including BAME, elderly and deprived populations and also government safety instructions are very demanding. Very few places of worship have opened so far.

Covid – 19 Impact on Luton Council

Luton Council’s severe budget cuts due to Covid-19, added with economic downturn due to sharp drop in income from the London Luton Airport, is having a massive effect on the Council frontline services and its voluntary sector partners. Campaigning/petitioning/lobbying central government for emergency financial support for Luton has yielded not much result. In a public consultation of the Luton Borough Council on 25th June 2020 it was said that the budget cuts are the worst ever. In a faith leaders’ meeting on 23rd July 2020, Chair of Luton Council of Faiths Zafar Khan said it is a gloomy position and that at this moment there are more questions than answers.

Covid – 19 Impact on Luton Voluntary Sector

It remains a big concern in Luton how faith communities, voluntary, community and faith sector organisations will cope with financial & funding crisis particularly those receiving support from the London Luton Airport income. 10%-15% cuts have already been announced, which will have a severe impact on how our partner agency Luton Council of Faiths operates. On the other hand, it is widely recognised that sustaining the leading role of faith sector is critical in a town like Luton, where 78% of the population is religiously affiliated.

John O Donohue “Blessings”



This is the time to be slow, lie low to the wall, until the bitter weather passes. Try as best you can, not to let the wire brush of doubt, scrape from your heart, all sense of yourself and your hesitant light. If you remain generous, time will come good, and you will find your feet again, on fresh pastures of promise, where the air will be kind and blushed with beginning.

Black Lives Matter (BLM)

It is commendable that the BLM protests worldwide continued, despite pandemic restrictions, for over 3 months after George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis (US) on May 25, 2020.

In Luton, nearly 2000 people from different faiths and ethnicities joined in the Black Lives Matter protest held on Sat 6th June at 2pm at the Luton Town Hall War Memorial. It was led by a group of (important to note) black and white young people. And just like any other protest, it was also attracting anarchists and people who would likely be disruptive and rogue. It was therefore crucial and important that Luton's faith leaders offered stewarding of the protest, very well coordinated by Peter Adams, Director, St Mary's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. It was not to support or promote the protest, but to ensure that it remains peaceful and safe for all and that the voices of extreme and their unjustified actions do not hijack this legitimate event and our young people are not criminalised. Besides young people, the other eminent (black) personalities who spoke briefly at the event included Pas Llyod Denny, Pas Trevor Adams, Deputy Mayor Cllr Maria Lovell, Sandra Glenn and Lorna Markland.

Referring to the Good Samaritan's story in the Bible, Pas Llyod Denny, also the Chair of Luton in Harmony, said "We just cannot be spectators. We must call out injustices we see and we must do so, inspired by love for all."

It is encouraging that nationally, there is not a single Church denomination which did not speak out in support of the BLM movement principles. The global and national Christian ecumenical bodies such as World Council of Churches (WCC), Council for World Mission (CWM) & Churches Together in Britain & Ireland (CTBI) have all been actively creating online spaces for relevant discussions in promoting racial justice and in enabling Christians to ponder on questions;

How will anti-racism enable us to read the Bible in new ways?

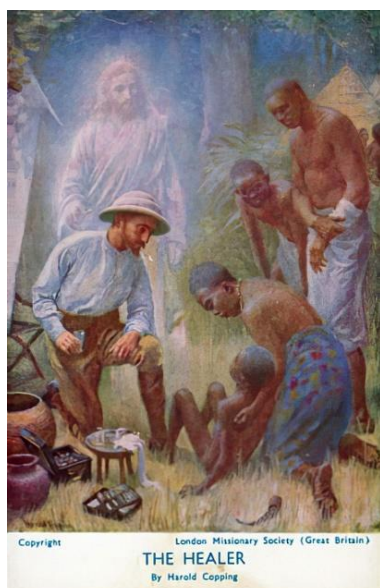
Where is Jesus leading church to engage in anti-racist work?

What would it take for you or your 'institution' to engage in anti-racist work?

Do Black Lives Matter to us as individuals or in our Churches/Organisations/work-places?

Do we know why should it matter to us?

Interestingly, in one of the sessions led by The Council for World Mission (CWM), following image was used to provoke our thinking, imagination, reactions and reflections.



The art piece can also be found at

<https://www.meisterdrucke.uk/fine-art-prints/Harold-Copping/400021/The-Healer-.html>

Painting Description:

An idealised white missionary, guided by Christ standing behind him, applies western medical knowledge to the healing of a sick African child. The missionary has a medicine chest identical in type to the Tabloid medicine chests which the firm of Burroughs Wellcome made for explorers and missionaries. In the foreground is the discarded African surgical instrument, the horn (used for cupping). The white missionary resembles Henry Morton Stanley as portrayed in a wood engraving published in the Illustrated London.

Seeing this image, most agreed that it misrepresents Jesus' identity being a white male with blonde hair. There's also been an interesting discussion on ITV's Good Morning Britain show on the topic "Is It Racist to Portray Jesus as White?" It can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSzy9QZxdhw>

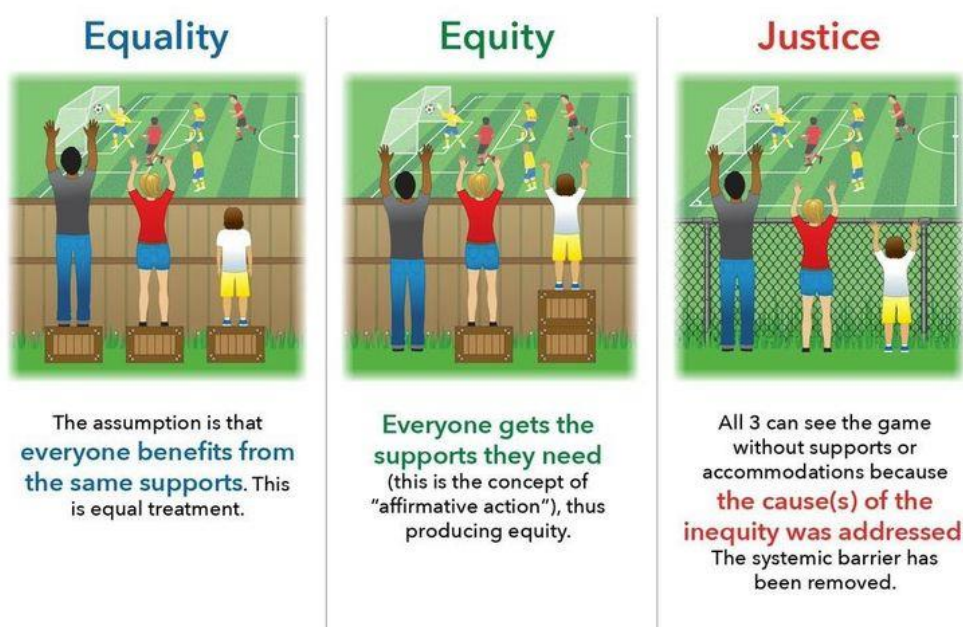
Debates are good but it often pushes towards extreme and polarising positions. Instead 'contemplative reflection' can lead us towards a 'compassionate understanding', which can lead to positive and much better outcomes.

"This is not about black versus white, it's about right versus wrong", said Rev. Al Sharpton in another ITV's Good Morning Britain show on 24th June 2020 where he responded to the newsreader Piers Morgan's request for the "correct response" to people saying "white lives matter, all lives matter." He said, "There's never been any argument that white lives matter. There's never been any debate. When a white life is taken, it is litigated, prosecuted and if convicted, incarcerated. The problem is it has not been equal on the other side. There has been no need to say white lives matter, that has been a given and the system has worked that way. It has not worked that way for black lives. We are not saying black lives matter more, we are saying black lives matter as much, equally and should be treated the same," the civil rights activist said.

It is said, racism is an economic problem as money and wealth are inextricably linked to ethnicity, so it is not enough to 'not be a racist', but be an anti-racist too.

Often media and society's prejudice lead us to think BAME communities take more from Britain than they give to it. It is time we acknowledge that from slave trade to Windrush and from Brexit to Coronavirus, Britain's well-being and survival has depended on immigrants and on BAME communities, as we see, how many of them in NHS have risked, and laid down their lives, in their efforts to save Britain from the Coronavirus.

Like gender justice cannot be achieved without men involved in it, racism and white supremacy cannot be changed without the participation and action of white people. Therefore it is worth hearing the words of Sallie McFague an American feminist Christian theologian, who said, "We, all of us, are being called to do something unprecedented. We are being called to think about "everything that is," for we now know that everything is interrelated and that the well-being of each is connected to the well-being of the whole. This suggests a "planetary agenda" for all the religions, all the various fields of expertise."



Conclusion

It has been extremely encouraging to see the wide range of voluntary organisations and faith communities offering community support to those in need, during and after the lockdown in Luton. There's encouraging growth in a spirit of caring neighbourliness across communities, which is reported to have resulted in 25% increase in Neighbourhood Watch membership in the current times.

However, there are also concerns, particularly about domestic abuse and people who haven't got internet access. A quarter of British people who have died from COVID-19 have been elderly Muslims and people of African and Caribbean heritage. Economic recession, rising and threatening tensions between world's superpowers with enflamed defence budgets and Brexit Deal or No Deal are all added burdens in current time of crisis. With ever scarcer resources, the rise of ongoing 'inter-national' and 'communal' scapegoating is likely to increase more.

Therefore, programmes like Near Neighbours, Spirituality of Justice, Working with Women & Inter Faith Relations in GRASSROOTS are all going to be needed even more, not only to foster our collective human solidarity to sustain us through these extra-ordinary times, but also to influence national & local government policies to be even fairer and transparent, reflecting and complementing what is needed in our society and communities.

The faith and voluntary sector's ongoing invaluable contributions in the service of those in need during these times, typically epitomize and exemplify 'people-power', which ought to be a good reminder for national and local governments that they are made by people. Government policies, policy makers and bureaucracy therefore should be at the service of people and not the other way round.

Money can't fix everything. We have often heard this phrase and yet the 'new normal' does not seem to recognise that. Our focus is still on working our way through the brutal ways of capitalism. In his article "Covid-19 and the Technicolor Dreamcoat", author David McIlroy talks of how (in the Old Testament of The Bible) Joseph's management of Egypt's resources also led the Hebrews to be enslaved. He therefore cautions that even a relatively successful programme of government relief in a time of crisis can lead to profound changes in the economy which can be deeply unfair and destabilising once the immediate crisis has passed.

Pope Francis therefore is advocating a process of dialogue so that we are all in it together for real. He is calling for sacred action of all faiths and none for a future that is just, non-violent and respects the dignity of creation.

On 1st September 2020, at the start of the Season of Creation (1 Sep – 4 Oct), an annual celebration uniting Christians in prayer and action for the protection of our common home, many from different Christian traditions, gathered in the Parliament Square, demanding action by the government to tackle the climate emergency.

There is a need for a paradigm shift. We need to move from consumption to conservation. We need green economic recovery and a more equitable society. At GRASSROOTS, we commit ourselves to work towards this vision, locally and globally.



2019-2020 Financial Summary

Income	£
Grants received	112,000
Donations	7,034
Interest and other income	34
Sale of Fairtrade goods	4,723
	123,791
Expenditure – Charitable activities	
Mission Education and Advancement	43,743
Work with Women across Faiths and Cultures	8,838
Near Neighbours	57,136
Bury Park Beech Hill Church Related Community Work	6,782
IDAI Cyclone Appeal	1,125
Other Events	9,367
	126,991
Governance costs	
Total	3,062
	130,053
Net Expenditure for the year	
Total	(6,262)
Reserves at 31 August 2017	
Unrestricted	45,376
Restricted	18,064

Meet the GRASSROOTS Team and Trustees



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Co-ordinator Community Cohesion and Interfaith Relations

Revd Canon David Lawson

Chair of Trustees



Sr Maire Hayes

Spirituality of Justice and Interfaith Coordinator for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton

Sheila Marsden

Secretary



Ann Hyde

Working with Women of Different Faiths and Cultures

Brian Roe

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Church Related Community Worker (Term Completed in January 2020)

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Deborah Purfield

Trustee



Maggie Hindley

Trustee





(Image taken from Luton's Black Lives Matter Demonstration)

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