

OPINION

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4th Jan'23

Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Overcoming the darkness by shining a light of hope

Wars, conflicts, climate emergencies, and the pandemic have affected many lives throughout the last year, but we know that many people's heroic efforts have helped our planet overcome the darkness by shining a light of hope.

One such community project, Inspire FM, was honoured this week for reaching its extraordinary 25-year milestone.

Grassroots, Near Neighbours & Luton Council of Faiths join several others in extending our congratulations to Inspire FM. It is so much more than just a radio station. It has served and



inspired thousands of people. It has given many people access to training, volunteering, and job placements. It has promoted a culture of giving, ensuring no one

goes hungry and that deprivation, poverty, and discrimination in all its forms are duly tackled and addressed.

Inspire FM Director Zaffar

Zaffar Iqbal, Director Inspire FM Luton, with by Prof Zaffar Khan (left) chair, Luton Council of Faiths, and Peter Adams representing St Mary's & Churches Together in Luton.

Iqbal shared: "Radio Ramadan was launched in a back office in 1997. For 13 years it ran only for a month of Ramadan. On public demand it applied for a full-time Community radio license in 2010 and since then, with the help of the community and local businesses, we have been broadcasting full time for the last 12 years and we now have two studios, 30 shows, 50 volunteer presenters."

Luton MPs Sarah Owen and Rachel Hopkins commended Inspire FM for bringing thousands of people together at Eid and Big Iftar celebrations and particularly for its effective public health messaging during the pandemic.

Luton Council CEO Robin Porter said: "Inspire FM and its activities are central to our community engagement programme. It ensures all parts of our communities are involved to socialise and collaborate."

Salma Khan, the manager of the Luton Food Bank, praised Inspire FM for helping to raise thousands of pounds for the organisation and for promoting its services so that individuals who are suffering in silence can receive assistance.

Sujel Miah of the Luton Council of Mosques stated: "Inspire FM offered Muslims a sense of identity, belonging, confidence, and competence. It adequately portrayed our concerns and ambitions for the welfare of all."

Chair of Luton Council of Faiths Prof Zaffar Khan said: "Inspire FM has stayed true to its mission and that is to inspire community for a positive change through engagement and participation. Long may its services continue."

OPINION

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Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
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Tuning chords of harmony in a discordant social milieu

Harmony of the Worlds concert at St Mary's Church, Luton offered an immersive deep listening experience combining spatial audio and vibro-acoustic technology with a live Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Synergy Vocals Choir, and ancient instruments from around the world.

The organiser Satya Hinduja said: "Harmony of the Worlds is more than a concert. It is an invitation to nature's essence and to enable harmonious integrated mind-body connection in the listener and to scientifically research its therapeutic potential."



Joined by the British conductor David Murphy, they led the audience to access a new perspective of listening and embracing our inner selves.

St Mary's Vicar Revd Mike Jones said: "There was everything in it - religion, spirituality, but most importantly, it was an opportunity to calm and con-

nect with ourselves and with the divine."

At the end of the Harmony of the Worlds concert at St Marys, Vicar Revd Mike Jones (L) and concert organiser Satya Hinduja (R) greet one another in an Indian traditional way.

nect with ourselves and with the divine."

Thakor Morarji, a member of the Sathya Sai Service Organisation and Luton Council of Faiths, said: "I felt in harmony with everything within and around me. It stole me away from the thunders and wonders of the world. It made me conscious of 'the sound'; I could hear myself. And I felt the whole universe was within me and it is waiting to hear me and embrace me."

Alchemic Sonic Environment (ASE) is a site-specific multi-sensory deep listening experience designed to invoke states of reflection, receptivity, and exchange.

Explaining this, the founder Satya Hinduja said: "Throughout ancient history, sound has played a fundamental role in our interactions within various environments. It is a transformational tool. We are trying to evolve it as a global nomadic project, exploring the nature of health as a process rather than an event."

"Harmony of the Worlds is inspired by the organic flow and interconnectivity of the natural world, and by the overview effect that astronauts have reported on experiencing the beauty and fragility of our earth from space."

Some of the Harmony of the Worlds School Workshops in Luton have been extremely popular and young pupils said it was one of their best days.

Sharing their feedback in the end, members from the audience said: "With lights dimmed, candles lit, it was like tuning chords of harmony in a discordant social milieu. May there be peace and harmony in the world, as it has begun with us tonight!"

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
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Council of Faiths

Luton Peace Garden initiative awarded the 'Tree of Trees'

Meadow, Mayne Avenue Hockwell Ring as part of the Peace Garden Initiative Project in memory of those lost to Covid-19 during the pandemic in Luton.

The project is also about supporting families across Luton in the bereavement process and bringing communities together and leaving a legacy for the future generation.

Key individuals and supporters in the community were also present including the Councils of Mosques, Churches Together in Luton, Chalk Hill Academy, Inspire FM, Discover Islam, Friends of Wigmore Community Interest Luton and Luton Council Parks Services.

> If you are interested in joining the project email the Peace Garden Initiative at peacegardeninitiative@gmail.com

The Luton Peace Garden Initiative has been honoured with a special tree that was planted at the Wardown Park Arboretum.

The project was selected to receive this special 'Tree of Trees' as part of the late Queen Elizabeth II's Queen's Green Canopy UK-wide tree planting initiative.

The Queen's Green Canopy was a unique tree-planting initiative created to mark Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee.

A field maple, the only UK native maple, was one of the 350 ceremonial trees from the 'Tree of Trees' living sculpture



outside Buckingham Palace during the Queen's Jubilee.

Those 350 trees were gifted to selected communi-

ty groups and organisations across the country to recognise their work and inspire the next generation of tree planters.

Key volunteers and organisations who are part of the Peace Garden Initiative with the Tree of Trees.

Only three were awarded in the county of Bedfordshire.

The event was attended by Lord Lieutenant Mrs Susan Lousada, the High Sheriff of Bedfordshire Lady (Jane) Clifford, Cllr Khatija Malik, Cllr Jacqui Burnett and Cllr Maria Lovell MBE.

Beech Hill Primary School pupils were also invited to the ceremony as one of their pupils – Hanah Miah – participated in all the tree planting.

To date, 480 trees have been planted in Luton in Wigmore Park, Stopsley Common, Bells Park on High Town, Wardown Park, Pope's

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OPINION



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Luton Bahá'ís invited all faiths to celebrate World Religion Day

World Religion Day is a time to celebrate the culture and diversity of all world religions. World Religion Day occurs annually on the third Sunday of January, and was first established by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States in Wilmette, Illinois.

The first day was observed in 1950. Since then, the event has now taken on a life of its own, as it's no longer just followers of the Bahá'í faith that celebrate this day. People from all religions across the globe come together to mark this special day. The Bahá'í



Faith emerged in 19th century Persia (now Iran), and believes all religions have value and that there are common features and similarities between them.

At an event at St Margaret's Parish Centre, Lucas Gardens, commemorating World Religion Day in Luton, Carl Puran, of Luton Bahá'í community, said: "As

L to R: James Cassidy (Catholic), Carl Puran (Bahá'í), Gulie Butcher (Quaker) and Jasbir Singh (Sikh) were few amongst those who attended the World Religion Day event.

Bahá'ís we believe in the oneness of religion and humanity, and that no-one should be treated differently because of their race, age, gender, color, sexuality, or whether they believe in religion or not."

Another member of the Luton Bahá'í community Sam Taylor said: "Based on the Bahá'í core principles, World Religion Day exists to promote interfaith understanding and harmony.

"When celebrating World Religion Day, we remember that it is a time of awareness and peace. Never disparage others for their beliefs as they should never disparage you!"

People from Luton's different faith communities were invited to bring and share prayers, readings, meditations and thoughts on the themes of unity and peace.

Gulie Butcher, Vice Chair of Luton Council of Faiths, said: "The very term 'inter faith' can seem as controversial to many, who feel inter faith work is about creating syncretism – an attempt to amalgamate different religions and cultures, saying we are all the same and so our differences do not really matter."

She added: "While we fully acknowledge that there is more common between us than what divides us, we also strongly advocate and propagate that inter faith work is not about syncretism.

"It is not about negotiating away our differences either. Instead, it is about asserting and affirming our differences, but doing so in a way so that it does not breed conflict and confrontation.

"It rather enriches our learning and understanding."

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1st Feb'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Week of Prayer observed as we strive for the unity of humankind

With more than 100 years of history, the annual observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, involves Christian communities throughout the world, between 18-25 January. During this week, Christians are reminded of Jesus' prayer for his disciples that "they may be one", as it is found in The Holy Bible (John 17:21).

Christians come together to pray for their unity. Congregations and parishes all over the world exchange preachers or arrange special ecumenical (inter-denominational) celebra-



Revd Dr Richard Sudworth, National Inter Religious Affairs Adviser to the Church of England and to the Archbishop of Canterbury was the Guest Speaker at Luton Week of Prayer for Christian Unity event.

tions and prayer services.

In order to prepare for the annual celebration, ecumenical partners in a particular region are invited to produce a

basic liturgical text on a biblical theme. Materials for 2023 have been prepared by the churches of Minneapolis to explore how the work of Christian unity can

contribute to the promotion of racial justice across all levels of society.

In a statement Churches Together in Britain & Ireland said: "As we join with other Christians around the world for the Week of Prayer we pray that our hearts will be open to see and hear the many ways in which racism continues to destroy lives, and to discern the steps we can take as individuals and communities to heal the hurts and build a better future for everyone."

In Luton, Deans and Heads of different denominations got together and invited Christians

to reflect together on the theme - What is Interfaith and why should Christians be involved with this? Guest Speaker Rev Dr Richard Sudworth, Secretary for Inter Religious Affairs to the Archbishop of Canterbury and National Inter Religious Affairs Adviser for the Church of England, shared a wealth of reflections from his experiences of interfaith community engagement.

He called Christians to engage with and witness to all those of different faiths and none, without denigrating another religion or belief. In fact, this applies to everyone. He also encouraged by saying that it takes time to create a culture of dialogue and cooperation. As we deliberately and persistently seek to work together with others for the common good, we also learn to love each other better and that is what matters the most.

Long may we continue to strive for the unity of humankind; unity in diversity indeed.

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Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots and Luton
Council of Faiths

Creating a safer future as we mark Holocaust Memorial Day

Tens of thousands of people from across the country watched the UK Ceremony for Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) 2023 and joined parliamentarians, faith leaders, and their friends and neighbours to light candles in their windows in remembrance of those murdered, and to stand against prejudice and hatred today.

The Commemoration was hosted by BBC presenter and journalist Kirsty Wark and featured powerful testimonies from Holocaust survivor Dr Martin Stern MBE and Amouna Adam, a survivor of the genocide in Darfur.

Grassroots chair, Revd



Canon David Lawson, said: "In a world scarred by genocides, HMD helps us to remember the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, alongside

the millions of other people killed under Nazi persecution of other groups and during more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia

Holocaust Survivor Manfred Goldberg BEM lighting a candle at the end of Holocaust Memorial Day Online Commemoration Ceremony 2023.

and Darfur. Genocide must be resisted every day. We cannot be complacent. Even in the UK, prejudice and the language of hatred must be challenged by us all."

Chair of Luton Council of Faiths, Prof Zafar Khan, said: "Each year across the UK, thousands of people come together to learn more about the past and take action to create a safer future. Together we learn that genocide does not just take place on its own – it's a steady process which can begin if discrimination, racism, and hatred are not checked and prevented.

"We're fortunate here in the UK; we are not at immediate risk of genocide. However, discrimination has not ended, nor has the use of the language of hatred or exclusion. There is still much to do to create a safer future for all."

Introducing this year's theme Ordinary People, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis stated that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were ordinary people who chose to engage in acts of extraordinary evil. Heroes of the Holocaust were not superhuman. They were also ordinary people who chose to engage in acts of extraordinary and remarkable bravery and courage at the risk of their own lives. He said: "Our societies stand and fall on the decisions taken not by mad tyrants and dictators but by ordinary people, persuaded by the propaganda, fed to them. Surely the time has come for all ordinary people to guarantee that never again means never again."

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by David Jonathan,
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Council of Faiths

The Feast serves up fun, food and dialogue to young people

The Feast is a youth organisation that brings together young people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds for fun, food and dialogue.

At the recently held Friends of The Feast evening at St Mary's Church in the heart of Luton town centre, The Feast youth worker Kristina said: "Tonight is about experiencing a Feast event the way our teenagers do."

So guests were invited to "draw something you enjoy doing on a paper plate, placing it on your heads and then show it to the person sitting opposite,



to guess what it is and introduce yourself."

Another fun icebreaker got people moving and walking to the opposite side of the circle

if they had lived in Luton for more than 10 years, if they were born in Luton, if they work in Luton, if they lived in a country other than the UK for more

Discussing The Feast's Guidelines for Dialogue, participants from diverse backgrounds experienced a Feast event the way teenagers do - with fun, food and fellowship. www.thefeast.org

than two years, if they fluently speak a language other than English or have close family members living in a different country.

Later, The Feast's Guidelines for Dialogue were introduced. These are simple but powerful and help transform discussions. People were invited to share which one stood out most to them and why.

Event facilitator Ros said: "At The Feast, we are passionate about the dialogue that allows us to be truly open to someone else's perspective; dialogue that allows others the dignity of their point of view; dialogue

that creates bridges of understanding and cooperation."

"As a youth organisation, our aim is to help young people to be confident in their own identity and beliefs, which help them to be able to live well with and appreciate someone whose identity and beliefs are different to their own."

The Feast works with up to 3,000 young people across the country through an average of 50 Youth Encounter Programmes. Nearly 1,000 people have been trained in the use of The Feast's Guidelines for Dialogue and Approach.

Just last year in Luton, 18 encounters, and a series of workshops have helped young people to develop relationships, gain more confidence, learn about discussing tricky topics better and be able to live well with the difference.

The Feast has been supported by Near Neighbours Programmes, nationally as well as locally in Luton.

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Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
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Council of Faiths

The Catalyst to develop young people into positive role models

Funded by Near Neighbours, Catalyst Youth Leadership is an exciting and innovative programme to help young people, aged 16-26 from different backgrounds, develop into positive role models. It equips young people with the skills and confidence to take on leadership roles, develop local social action and transform their own communities.

Over 50 young leaders have been trained in Luton so far. Last week, 12 more young people from Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and no faith backgrounds completed this amazing 4-day training. The course included



topics of Faith, Identity & Belonging, Leadership Styles, Qualities & Challenges, Media & Effective Communication, Social Action and Positive Change.

Some of the feedback Catalyst participants provided, include "the trainers were extremely good and inspirational", "we gained practical skills and

Luton young people from different faiths and of no faith learning Leadership skills at the Near Neighbours funded Catalyst Youth Leadership Training Programme held last week.

knowledge to build confidence, effective communication and leadership skills", "we are glad to have had this amazing opportunity to discuss and critically think about some of the most pressing issues of our time".

The course illustrated how our identities are complex because we are shaped by many different factors such as our upbringing in life, where we live, our racial, ethnic, religious backgrounds etc. And all these factors influence our understanding of issues such as immigration, integration, gender and racial justice, violence and extremism, citizenship, equal economic opportuni-

ty and freedom of speech.

Young people therefore learnt about how prejudice and stereotypes are formed and how to identify and tackle the challenges of discrimination. They learnt how we all can take away something positive that another race, religion or belief, other than our own, brings to the British society.

It is possible for young people to come up with a project idea, which Near Neighbours could consider supporting. Thanks to Near Neighbours for supporting programmes like CATALYST and other similar initiatives.

Thanks to the Centre for Youth & Community Development (CYCD) Luton for hosting this training at their premises on Leagrave Road. Thanks to Luton Council of Faiths, Grassroots, The Feast Programme and Att10tive Luton for their support. Together we all share the vision of mentoring youngsters, helping them grow into responsible citizens and leaders for a better world.

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1st Mar'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
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Council of Faiths

Fairtrade isn't charity – it gives growers what they deserve

Fairtrade Fortnight is an annual promotional campaign that happens once every year. The Fairtrade Foundation UK produces resources and guidelines, helping Fairtrade campaigners and activists across the country, to increase awareness of Fairtrade products and the benefits of supporting Fairtrade.

This year during the annual Fairtrade Fortnight Feb 27 – Mar 12, the Fairtrade Foundation UK has brought into the spotlight, the harmful effect of the climate crisis on the future of our food.

Luton Fairtrade Steering Group, convened by Grassroots and supported by the



Luton Council of Faiths, joined in spreading a simple message: making the small switch to Fairtrade supports producers in protecting the future of some of our

most-loved food and the planet.

The 4th Annual Fairtrade Cake Baking Competition held at St Anne's Church is another way of engaging with and involving

Winners of the Annual Fairtrade Cake Baking Competition with Cllr Tahmina Saleem, and representatives from Grassroots, Luton Council of Faiths and Near Neighbours Programme

people from different faiths and cultures in strengthening the Luton Fairtrade campaign going strong for the last 18 years.

The bakers were invited to present their cakes with recipes and the packaging as evidence of the three Fair-trade ingredients. Nearly 50 guests, friends, and neighbours were then asked to taste the cakes and choose the three best cakes – the best-looking cake, the best-tasting fruit cake, and the best-tasting sponge cake. The top three winners were given Fairtrade prizes, sponsored by Near Neighbours.

Expressing gratitude to all those who had taken part in the

competition, the event organiser Revd Anne Crosby, Vicar of St Anne with St Christopher Parish said: "Fairtrade Fortnight is a great time to make or renew our commitment to Fairtrade. By choosing Fairtrade teas, coffees, sugar, fruits, biscuits, and chocolates, available in most supermarkets, you support 7 million people in 59 developing countries."

She added: "Fairtrade helps disadvantaged farmers and communities in developing countries. It guarantees them a fair price. It pays them an additional premium, with which they access education, healthcare, and sustainable farming methods and achieve inclusive and equitable climate solutions."

To find out more about how to take part in Fairtrade Fortnight 2023, visit; www.fairtrade.org.uk/get-involved/current-campaigns/fairtrade-fortnight

Fairtrade isn't Charity – It is Justice. To give people what they deserve, please support Fairtrade.

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots and Luton
Council of Faiths

Faith leaders discuss how to make our town respectful

A thriving community and voluntary sector is a blessing for Luton. Grassroots, the Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF), and the Near Neighbours Programme have worked with the local faith communities over decades to ensure that inter-community relations are not strained.

At times when tensions rise, we are able to mitigate the risks and threats through our strategic interventions, which is great given that 76% of Luton residents identify as being religiously affiliated.

The launch of an intergenerational project, where young



and old can talk together in our schools and across communities about how to make our town (and world) respectful, is one of the many ways we have been

promoting community cohesion in Luton. With help from Near Neighbours we developed a similar project idea five years ago. Considering its success Near

After the assembly on the theme of 'How to make our town (and world) respectful', a panel of Luton's faith leaders posed at St Margaret of Scotland School, Luton.

Neighbours has supported our initiative once again.

Seeing a local group of religiously and culturally diverse faith and community leaders, coming together, creates a positive and lasting visual impact on young impressionable minds. They demonstrate how they work together for the common good, despite their religious differences. And because these are respectable faces in our local communities, it makes it interesting to hear them talk about peace and harmony from a local perspective.

Ryad Khodabocus, Project Lead said: "It entails sharing with young people how to navigate

peacefully and productively through the numerous differences and disagreements in our society. It presents an alternative and a positive model of inter-faith and inter-community relations, especially when compared to the constant negative portrayal in the media that religions are all about hating and killing one another."

It is commendable that the religious and community leaders express their ideas in a way that is faithful to their own faith traditions and does not undermine the 'other'.

Appreciating the project, a teacher sent a message saying: "Thank you so much for coming to our school assembly. After the assembly, we had a long discussion in our class about the meaning of religion, what place they take in our lives, and how people can work together. One student commented he had never seen a Christian and a Muslim together being friends. It opened his eyes."

Long may we continue to inspire young minds!

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Important milestone for Shri Guru Ravidass Sangat Luton

This year Shri Guru Ravidass Sangat Luton marked an important milestone while celebrating its 40th anniversary.

General Secretary Mr Sanjeev Kumar, MBE said: "In 1983, the dream to establish a place for worship and a focal point for the community was finally established. Forty years on, we are delighted that Luton's Ravidassia community has joined once again to mark this anniversary together while also celebrating this year's Shri Guru Ravidass Ji's 646th birth celebrations.

"The overwhelming support for this joint celebration has epitomised the values of our faith



teachings and the principles of 'Sangat' - meaning community togetherness."

Shri Guru Ravidass Ji was born in 1337 in northern India. He was a

significant mystic saint philosopher of the 15th and 16th centuries. He challenged discriminative practices. Throughout his life, he inspired people at every level of

Joined by the two community stalwarts Jagan Nath (L) & Bhagat Ram (R), the Luton Rising Service Director Mark Turner, presented to the Mayor of Luton Cllr Sameera Saleem, the first copy of the 40th Anniversary Souvenir Booklet of Guru Ravidass Sangat Luton.

society, by emphasizing on equality, social freedom, justice for all, and human fraternity. His visionary philosophy is immortalised in the Shri Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh Holy Scripture); 40 of his 'Shabads' (sayings) are included within the holy book.

At a special ceremony, after honouring all the past and present office bearers and committee members, Rachel Hopkins (MP for Luton South) said: "I'm delighted to congratulate Shri Guru Ravidass Sangat Luton on celebrating its 40th anniversary. Their contribution to our Luton community embodies the values of Shri Guru Ravidass, particular-

ly sharing and supporting others, none more so than when providing hot meals for those in need, particularly during the Covid pandemic. Their working across communities and supporting interfaith work have all contributed to helping build strong community cohesion in our town. Thank you for your hard work and commitment to Luton and here's to many more years to come."

In a statement, Prof Zafar Khan, Chair Luton Council of Faiths said: "Guru Ravidass Sangat is more than just a house of worship; it also serves as a vital hub for bringing individuals from various backgrounds together.

"They are to be commended for their outstanding assistance to the needy during the Covid-19, and also for their representation and involvement in several activities throughout the town and beyond. I offer my sincere congratulations to the Guru Ravidass Sangat Luton for accomplishing 40 successful years of its remarkable services."

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
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Council of Faiths

Peace Garden initiative plants 665 trees so far of 800 target

Luton has been hit hard by the pandemic resulting in around 800 deaths to date. Many could not say goodbye to their loved ones which made the grieving process even more difficult.

The Luton Peace Garden Initiative supports people's bereavement process by helping them to plant a tree in memory of their loved ones.

The project was launched with the first-ever Tree Plantation at Wigmore Park in December 2021. Since then, nearly 665 trees have been planted. Over 200 volunteers have joined over the last 3 months alone. They



have helped plant 251 trees. The Project Lead Sujel Miah stated: "The tree planting season will now stop until next autumn but maintenance work will be

required during the spring and summer time. Although some trees may be needed replacing, most trees have withstood the extreme cold weather and

Despite the rain and cold, over 65 volunteers of all ages, including the Catalyst Youth Leadership Training Graduates, braved the weather and joined forces together to plant over 50 trees last Saturday in Riddy Lane, Luton.

scorching hot summer last year. Thanks to the efforts of our many volunteers."

To continually care for the trees, we have also launched the 'Peace Garden Guardians' at Downside Primary School Assembly of 300 children. Many of them later joined in an afternoon of action mulching the trees, which was backed by Lady Jane Clifford, the High Sheriff of Bedfordshire. She encouraged nurturing the next generation of tree planters and carers. She expressed her joy that Luton Peace Garden received the special gift of the Royal Tree given as part of the Queen's Green Canopy (QGC),

a unique UK-wide tree planting initiative, which was created to mark Her Majesty Late Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee in 2022.

Luton Peace Garden Initiative has wider environmental benefits such as greening up Luton by either planting orchard fruit trees or trees like Lime or Beech trees which are adaptable to Luton soil. As Bedfordshire has lost an alarmingly huge number of insects and butterflies, helping the environment in this way will add to the flora and fauna cause.

We are therefore really grateful to all those who have supported the Luton Peace Garden Initiative, including the Luton Council of Faiths, and Luton & Sunni Councils of Mosques. Discover Islam, Grassroots, Community Interest Luton, Churches Together in Luton, iCare, Friends of Parks, Luton Council, Luton Rising, and Natural England.

To support the project visit: <https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/Peacegarden>

OPINION

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Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
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Council of Faiths

Baha'i community celebrated Nawruz with full fervour

For over 3,000 years, Nawruz, the Iranian New Year, has been celebrated by more than 300 million people all around the world, including the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East. It is a secular holiday enjoyed by people of different faiths, but remains a holy day for Zoroastrian and Baha'i faith communities.

Nawruz is celebrated on the day of the astronomical vernal equinox, which usually occurs on March 21. However, the date can shift either a day ahead or behind based on the movement of the sun and planets. This year, it was on March 21.



It marks the first day of spring. The return of spring has a great spiritual significance, representing the triumph of good over evil and joy over sor-

row, stated Near Neighbours Programme in Luton.

The Luton Bahai community celebrated Nawruz with full fervour, after a gap of three

Members from Luton's different faith communities, dignitaries, and Bollywood Vibes Dancers join together for Nawruz celebrations held recently by the Luton Baha'i community

years due to the pandemic and lockdown restrictions.

C of E Bishop Richard Atkinson said: "In Luton, we have seen how time and again people from diverse backgrounds have united to reach out to one another. We pray long may it continue."

HM's Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada said: "In the aftermath of the pandemic, Black Lives Matter, Climate Justice COP 26 & 27, Ukraine War, and the ongoing cost of living and refugee crisis, everyone is hoping for a better world. As we celebrate Nawruz (New Year), we wish for a better

world for everyone."

Commenting on the plight of refugees and asylum seekers, Farzad Forghani, of the Luton Bahai community, said: "They are the most exploited and vulnerable group at the moment. World governments are trying to push them from one place to the other. This is not right when they are already displaced. Governments must tackle the root causes of their displacement."

Gulie Butcher, vice chair of the Luton Council of Faiths, praised Luton for its sense of community in addressing such global and local issues. While savouring the incredible spread of delectable cuisine and Persian rice, she wished the Baha'i community in Luton a very Happy New Year and desired that everyone may have good health and prosperity in this New Year.

For more information on the Luton Bahá'í community, see www.bahaisofluton.org

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
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Hundreds of people attended Big Iftar in St George's Square

Despite the rain, hundreds of people braved the weather and joined together in the multicultural annual community get-together of Big Iftar in Luton Town Centre St George's Square.

Whether religious or not, people of all backgrounds were invited to share food and fellowship with one another. During the month of Ramadan (the Muslim month of fasting), several Iftar (breaking of fast) events are held across the town. Mosques and Muslims invite their neighbours, friends, and colleagues to share Iftar meals with them.

"It is about embodying the spirit of compassion and gener-



osity", stated the Big Iftar organiser Mohammad Tariq of Inspire FM. Highlighting the importance of supporting the Luton Food Bank during Ramadan, Tariq

said: "It is to be a source of support and strength, particularly for those less fortunate around us. This way we express our gratitude, share our blessings with

Inspire FM presented "Making an Impact" Award to the Imam of Jamia Islamia Ghousia Mosque, Allama Qazi Abdul Aziz Chishti, MBE, for his outstanding community services for decades in Luton.

others, and also join with everyone in aspiring for a better world for all."

There were children's activities, stalls, and workshops to mark this year's theme - 'Physical & Mental Well-being'.

A range of local individuals and organisations were also recognised for their efforts through the "Making an Impact" awards, presented by dignitaries on behalf of Inspire FM.

The event was sponsored by Atrumed Healthcare which provides the Emergency GP Clinic at the L&D University Hospital. Several other volunteers, groups and organisations including

Luton Council & Bedfordshire Police supported the event. All proceeds from the event were donated to Luton Foodbank for tackling poverty and hunger in our town.

Laween Al-Atroschi, CEO Atrumed Healthcare said: "As we have entered the blessed month of Ramadan, we are reminded of the importance of giving back to our community and helping those in need. Through our sponsorship of the Big Iftar, we hope to provide a helping hand to those who are struggling and to foster a sense of community and togetherness - let us feed Luton together."

There are only positive gains to be made from communities coming together in this way. Stereotypes can be broken down. Fear of the unknown can be overcome. Friendships are strengthened and prospects of mutual cooperation for the common good are enhanced. With so many advantages, it is worth participating in events like the Big Iftar.

Date published
12th Apr'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Easter celebrated with a call to make our world a better place

Since the earliest days of Christianity, Easter has been the most important Christian festival celebrating Jesus' Resurrection, which reminds us of the eternal hope that death does not have the last word on human destiny.

While it has a deep spiritual significance, Easter has been marked with great secular celebrations too such as Hot Cross Buns, Easter Bunny, Easter Eggs and Egg Hunt.

Easter is preceded by Good Friday when Christians believe Jesus Christ was crucified and died on the cross.



Christians carrying the Cross through the Bury Park area of Luton, as part of the Good Friday Walk of Witness, led by the Beech Hill Bury Park Council of Churches

Besides fasting, praying, and contemplating on the Stations of the Cross at the Church Services recounting Jesus's painful crucifixion, Christians from dif-

ferent Church denominations, join together in Walks of Witness and street processions led by the Church clusters. In Luton, these were held in the town centre,

Stopsley, and Bury Park areas. People stopped outside different churches and shared Scripture readings, meditations, and prayers.

At the Good Friday Walk of Witness led by the Beech Hill Bury Park Council of Churches, Monsignor Kevin McGinnell of Holy Ghost Roman Catholic Church said: "Easter is not about the hope that challenges will go away; it is about the hope that we shall be able to see through the challenges no matter how severe and austere they are."

CofE All Saints Vicar Revd Canon David Kesterton said: "The risen Jesus inspires us to know

that the story can be different; that good can and will triumph and that all can be made new."

Since Easter is about renewal and new life, Christians throughout the world are encouraged to reflect and play their part in making our world a better place.

Recalling the unbearable plight of displaced people, refugees, abused women and children, indigenous people, people with disabilities, the neglected, oppressed, and downtrodden, Luton Churches join the World Council of Churches (WCC) in calling upon all Christians to remember the Easter message that Christ makes all things new.

"This assurance must stir and steer us into becoming agents and instruments of hope and light to the world," stated the WCC General Secretary Rev Prof. Dr Jerry Pillay. He added: "It should give us the energy and desire to continue to work toward God's justice, peace, reconciliation, and unity, enabling a better world for all creation!"

Date published
19th Apr'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Luton's unique young people aim to make positive difference

I Am Unique - a recent event held at University of Bedfordshire (Luton campus) by a Luton-based social enterprise Att10tive - brought together nearly 150 people, including many young people from Luton's religiously, culturally and ethnically diverse communities.

Managing director Montell Neufville said: "Besides bringing communities together to make a positive difference, Att10tive also delivers training, support and advice to schools, colleges and other public and voluntary sector organisations. Today is about presenting young people's creative work through poems, photo-



graphs, paintings and drawings, showcasing and embracing individual identities and their uniqueness, as well as celebrating the town's diversity."

Project leader Julia Popielarek said: "To make today happen involved more than 80 young artists' artwork, 4 schools, 2 colleges, and 8 poets."

Lorell, the young poet (L), and Sal Naseem, of the Independent Office for Police Conduct (R), at the I Am Unique event held by Luton-based social enterprise Att10tive at University of Bedfordshire's Luton Campus

Thanking all the Youth Ambassadors, the partners, and the project sponsor Near Neighbours, Julie said: "Today we are demonstrating the motto of Att10tive Luton in action, which is to engage, educate and empower."

A young boy named Lorell shared a poem that perfectly captured the spirit of the event - "Do you really know me? Do you know the hidden stories that have shaped me through my days? I am more than just a writer. I'm a human, with a soul. I have dreams and fears and hopes and doubts, and joys that make me whole. You may admire or criticise. You may love or hate

my work. But don't judge me by a paragraph that cannot scratch my worth. For I am more than what you read; I am more than what you see. I am more than just an author. I'm Lorell, and I'm unique."

The project, according to the coordinator of Luton's Near Neighbours Programme, has undoubtedly boosted the self-worth and self-esteem of many young people. It was a superb piece of creative work, and because it was activity-based, it inspired young people to create and exhibit their artwork to a larger audience.

Sharing his personal life story, Sal Naseem, a Police Accountability Expert from the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) encouraged young people by saying: "Success comes after many failures. You can do anything with fortitude, resilience, and support. Embrace your uniqueness and use your (cultural, ethnic or religious) difference to make a positive difference in our world."

Date published
26th Apr'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Thousands brought together by inspiring Eid festival

Muslims across the world marked the end of Ramadan and celebrated Eid al-Fitr last weekend. Traditionally, Eid prayers begin at sunset on the night the crescent moon is first sighted. Once prayers are finished, Muslims visit their relatives and friends to wish them a happy Eid and often exchange gifts or sweets.

A Luton-based Community Radio Station Inspire FM organised the Eid Festive gala celebrations that brought thousands of people together - making it the largest Eid festival in the region.

The Operations Manager Inspire FM Mohammad Tariq said: "We are a broadcast media



At a vibrant, family-friendly Community Eid Festival in Lewsey Farm, besides thrilling rides, fun activities, and good food, the artists and presenters entertained thousands of people

organisation and have been positively inspiring the community for over 25 years. Our aim was to give the community of Luton an affordable, accessible, and in-

clusive Eid festival. We remain grateful to many community volunteers, donors, sponsors, and in particular our headline sponsor Luton Rising, for their

help and support."

He added: "Over the weekend, we transformed Lewsey Park into a vibrant, family-friendly extravaganza with thrilling rides, fun activities, good food and great entertainment for the community. It was a great opportunity for people to make their Eid memorable at this community festival."

Luton South and North MPs Rachel Hopkins and Sarah Owen said: "It was great to see the packed Inspire Eid at Lewsey Park. There were lots of small local businesses as well as fun rides, and scarier rides for those braver than us. All the perform-

ers on stage welcomed everyone to Inspire Eid and entertained people with their soulful renditions and other presentations."

"Well done to Inspire FM Luton and all the sponsors for a brilliant, inclusive, and fun event for all of Luton!"

Eid al-Fitr is also called the "Festival of Breaking the Fast" which marks the end of the dawn-to-sunset fasting month of Ramadan. Throughout the month of Ramadan, Muslims donate to charities and contribute to the community's well-being. According to the Charity Commission, Muslims in the UK give nearly £100 million to charity during Ramadan. Luton Mosques have also supported various projects of community care and well-being, serving hot meals and providing support to the most vulnerable in the town, including refugees and asylum seekers.

Long live the generous spirit of Ramadan and Eid Mubarak to all Muslim friends.

Date published
3rd May'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Luton Foodbank continues to make a difference 10 years on

The rapid growth of foodbanks across the country is shocking and all foodbanks are experiencing a surge in demand. According to Helen Goulden – CEO of The Young Foundation, there's an 8290% increase in foodbank usage in the last 15 years. On the other hand, donations to foodbank have dropped by 50%, because of the ongoing cost of living crisis.

"This cannot be right", she stated at the 10th anniversary of Luton Foodbank.

"The UK being one of the top 30 richest countries in the world is experiencing this level of pov-



erty and hunger. It is disastrous that foodbank have become the normal and accepted part of the UK welfare system."

Helen reminded whilst char-

ity will always be necessary, charity is not the answer to the challenges facing us today. The answer lies in everyone – government, politicians, businesses,

To mark the 10th anniversary of Luton Foodbank, dignitaries including the Lord Lieutenant & High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, the two Luton MPs and the Bishop of Bedford joined Liz Stringer (3rd from left) chair of Luton Foodbank.

and public-voluntary-faith sectors, acting together differently so that structural injustices are addressed in a systematic way to establish fairness, equality, and equity in our communities.

Luton Foodbank is run entirely for the benefit of people in and around Luton who need emergency food. It is about eradicating food poverty in Luton and supporting people so that they can take steps to overcome the problems that brought them to us.

At the 10th anniversary celebrations, Luton Foodbank founding member Sufian Sadiq said we started Luton foodbank with one mission and that was to

shut it down when there's no-one left hungry in our town. It was started for a 3-month period initially, but after over a decade, we are still here.

Another ardent foodbank supporter Sujel Miah said foodbank celebrates bringing the community together and enabling an active empathy with a sense of common purpose that no-one goes hungry in our town.

Speaking on behalf of faith communities, Bishop of Bedford Rt Revd Richard Atkinson said that Luton Foodbank is not associated with any one faith tradition. Whatever one's personal faith or belief, it values the contributions of all.

Quoting Scriptures from different faiths, the Bishop highlighted that all faiths place a high value on the importance of feeding the hungry and he thanked Luton Foodbank for ten years of doing just that.

You can donate at <https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/LFB10years>

Date published
10th May'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Coronation blessed by clergy of many different faith traditions

Over the long weekend, around the country, in the village halls, city centres, places of worship, and in the countless street parties, celebrations marked the historic ceremony in which King Charles was crowned as the monarch of this multi-cultural and multi-ethnic country and Commonwealth.

"Whether one is a monarchist or a republican, we must wish him Heaven's blessings for such an overwhelmingly onerous task", said Revd Canon David Lawson, Chair GRASSROOTS Luton.

"His Majesty The King has



been a lifelong advocate for Christian faith, and for the diversity of the UK's faiths", he stated.

Prof Zafar Khan, Chair Luton Council of Faiths noted with

pleasure that the Coronation of His Majesty King Charles III and Her Majesty Queen Camilla was blessed by clergy and leaders of many different faith traditions,

L to R:
Councillors
Aslam Khan
(also the Deputy
Leader of
the Council),
Alia Khan,
Maria Lovell &
Sameera Saleem
(the Mayor
of Luton) and
several others
at the Global
Luton Parade
celebrating the
Coronation of
His Majesty King
Charles III

representing diversity of the contemporary Britain.

The presence of a number of different faith leaders, as part of the Westminster Abbey procession, represented the multi-faith nature of our society and the importance of inclusion of different faiths. During the service The King was presented with four items of regalia by peers from Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities.

At the end of the final outward procession, The King was greeted by the leaders and representatives from Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities, who said, "Your Maj-

esty, as neighbours in faith, we acknowledge the value of public service. We unite with people of all faiths and beliefs in thanksgiving, and in service with you for the common good."

At Luton's Global Parade to celebrate the Coronation, Mayor of Luton Cllr Sameera Saleem recalled HM King Charles visit to Luton in December 2022 and said, "We were excited then. We are excited today. Many of King's passions and interests are reflected in who we are as a town. His Majesty welcomes and embraces people from across the world, whatever their language, faith or culture. This is who we are in Luton too. Days like today remind us of the contributions different communities have made who we are today."

The Coronation of HM King Charles is indeed a historic moment in the life of our nation. He is the 40th monarch to be crowned at the Abbey. God save our gracious King! Long live our noble King!

Date published
17th May'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Special service of Thanksgiving celebrates the Coronation

Two weeks ago we witnessed a historic moment. We experienced the pageantry and pomp of the Coronation of His Majesty, King Charles III, and Queen Camilla. There has been much discussion of the ceremony and, in particular, the multi-faith components of the service. Uniquely this service wove the clear commitment HM the King has made not only to his own faith but in being 'Defender of Faith'.

On Sunday, at St Mary's Woburn, HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada held a Service of Thanksgiving



celebrating the Coronation of Their Majesties The King and Queen. This service included inter-faith participation too, which was admirable.

At this special service, Lord-Lieutenant said: 'I have been Lord-Lieutenant now for eight months, and during that time we have lived through the end of an

Different faiths representatives were invited to offer flowers honouring His Majesty The King and his love of creation at HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire's Service of Thanksgiving for the King's Coronation at St Mary's Church, Woburn.

era with the death of Queen Elizabeth the Second and the Coronation of our new King. I felt that I could not let today pass without thanking all of you in this county that have been involved in marking these two historic occasions.

"Last weekend I was both honoured and privileged to attend Their Majesties' Coronation. It was a thrilling, beautiful, and humbling occasion - a memory to be treasured for a lifetime.

"There were several things that I will take from the service such as the Archbishop of Canterbury speaking about 'Service' being 'love in action'. This so resonated with me because I

have seen so much love, care, and kindness throughout our county during my first eight months. Thank you to all who serve this county."

Then she read out an extract from His Majesty The King's Christmas Message 2022, which perfectly summed up what love in action means.

Dr Virendra Soni and Professor Zafar Khan, Chairs of Bedford & Luton Councils of Faiths, thanked the Lord-Lieutenant for weaving the multi-faith components into the service, inviting different faiths representatives to offer flowers, honouring His Majesty The King and his love of creation.

They said: "It was a fitting celebration of the Coronation of Their Majesties. The inclusion of the different faiths in this special service perfectly echoed the message that came from His Majesty; that all faiths are welcome, and should be acknowledged within our communities. Long Live the King."

Date published
24th May'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Playing a part in engaging positively with different faiths

Last week, Luton's All Saints Church hosted a Training Day for a group of Church of England (C of E) 'Readers' from different parts of St Albans Diocese.

C of E 'Reader' is a Licensed Lay Minister (LLM) position authorised by the Bishop to assist Vicars in leading worship services and in carrying out other pastoral duties.

The training day was to enable Readers-in-training to see how Christians can and must play a part in engaging positively with different faiths.

As a host, Diocesan Inter Faith Advisor and Vicar of All Saints



Parish Church Revd Canon David Kesterton remarked: "Engagement with different faiths can help us understand better, not just different faiths, but also our

own faith and belief."

While speaking about his experiences of working with Muslim neighbours, he explained how Muslims are sometimes

Church of England (C of E) 'Readers' from St Albans Diocese visited Madinah Masjid (Oak Road Mosque) in Luton, as part of their Training Day hosted by Revd Canon David Kesterton of All Saints Church, Luton

grouped together while in reality they are just as diverse as Christians and other major world religions. He shared how Muslim neighbours appreciate the Church's presence in the neighbourhood and Christians believe it is necessary to work together for the common good.

The group visited Medina Masjid (Oak Rd Mosque), where Maqsood Anwar discussed a variety of community initiatives carried out by the Mosque and answered enquiries regarding the practice of Muslim faith.

Maqsood thanked all for visiting the Mosque and said, only 10% of Britain's population is said

to have entered into a Mosque. "The biggest battle we face is ignorance, which fuels Islamophobia," he added.

In 2018 a YouGov poll had found that 70% of Britons have never visited a place of worship other than their own. This must change because just as we visit our friends and neighbours in their homes, and host them in our homes, communities visiting and hosting each other helps break down barriers and builds bridges of trust and understanding.

"We must interact with people of all religions and none, without disparaging one other", said Rev Tony Rindl, the vicar of Watford's St Mary's Church and one of the two Diocesan Inter Faith Advisors.

"A culture of dialogue and mutual cooperation must be developed over time. That is what matters most", he said, "so we must be kind and patient as we learn and grow to love one another."

Date published
31st May '23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroot & Luton
Council of Faiths

Faith communities proud of Hatters after their promotion

What a game! Luton fans left Wembley proudly orange on Saturday night. And as Lutonians woke up on Sunday, it was a new sunrise for the town.

It was One Town, One Family and One Dream at Wembley. Over 36,500 Luton Town fans walked to the Wembley Stadium, passionately singing, and chanting to watch the historic, thrilling, exciting, and nail-biting match in which Hatters were eventually promoted to the Premier League.

Never ever has a town deserved this more! "Tensions had turned into elation as the Hatters were victorious in a penalty shoot-out win," stated Laura Hutchinson, Luton Today digital editor. And their sport editor Mike Simmonds said: "Hatters fans are smiling again after coming through the 'dark times' to reach the Premier League. The town will play top-flight football next season."



Luton's different faith leaders gathered to congratulate the Luton Town Football Club for their remarkable victory on Saturday 27th May at Wembley Stadium. Come on you, Hatters, You did it! Premier League - Here We Come!

But we shouldn't pretend it's all about football alone. It is also about people from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds coming together - hugging, cheering, dancing, singing, and exchanging those amazingly alive smiles and acknowledging looks with one another in the stadium, in the trains, in the buses, and in the streets of Wembley and Luton Town. We are Luton!

"This is a dialogue in action. It promotes stronger ties amongst people from diverse backgrounds. It challenges the fear and hostility fostered in the present global political climate," stated GRASSROOTS Chair Revd Canon David

Lawson.

Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) Chair Prof Zafar Khan said: "It communicates a message of hope and the prospect of living side by side as friends, despite our prejudices and misunderstandings, which are also part of life in an ever-evolving multi-cultural multi-ethnic Britain and Luton."

He added: "Luton can pride itself as a super diverse town. It is one big community of several diverse communities. Despite media's relentless efforts to denigrate and ridicule Luton, this football match and Luton fans have once again proved what Luton has to offer in terms of community cohesion and good community relations."

Luton Council held a celebration event in St George's Square on Monday, in which Lutonians gathered in thousands to give our victorious football team the reception of their lives, as they arrived in an open-top bus in St George's Square, following a short ride from Kenilworth Road.

Date published
7th Jun'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Church marks its centenary with special celebrations

Luton All Saints Church of England (C of E) held a special service commemorating its centenary celebrations. Serving and touching people's lives for 100 years is a tremendous achievement and a significant milestone.

Many of the past and present Vicars and church members joined in this service. This included Revd Jemima Prasadam who spoke movingly about her experiences of building relationships with Muslim communities many years ago when she was the Vicar at All Saints. "Those relationships are still there," she



said, pointing to Muslim friends who had come to see her.

A Church member Jenny Lyans spoke of All Saints being her home where she has always

been loved, she has felt safe, and a place where she has made amazing memories. She said: "I am proud to see my church still serving the community. The

At its centenary celebrations, the past and present Vicars of C of E All Saints Church Luton were joined by The Rt Revd Dr Alan Gregory Clayton Smith, the Lord Bishop of St Albans, and also by the members of different faiths and ministers of different church denominations.

world may have changed but the love, care, and compassion given by those serving here remain the same and I am confident this will continue in the years to come."

Mr Chris Davidson, Head-teacher of Beech Hill Primary School, said a member of staff who has worked at the school for over 20 years could not remember a time when the school and the church had not worked closely together. He acknowledged the role played by the church Vicar Revd Canon David Kesterton, not only in sharing Christian beliefs and the features and symbols of a church with the school pupils but also

strengthening the links between people of different faiths and beliefs in the neighbourhood.

He said: "The Church has definitely served its community. The school, its staff, children and I are always in the thoughts and prayers of the All Saints Church congregation and this personally gives me great comfort."

Words of a great hymn sung at the service were so precise in expressing the sentiments of the Church:

"Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided, urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way, sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided: Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today."

Congratulations to All Saints Church!

May it become in the years to come, a beacon of hope and healing, of joy and of abundance, of reconciliation and of peace-making.

Date published
14th Jun'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Visiting different places of worship builds connections

They asked numerous questions at the places of worship and reflected upon how to respect other practices without compromising what may be different beliefs to their own. Bishop Richard emphasised that visiting different places of worship is not just educational; it also helps us all to remain connected with one another. He said: "There is no substitute for being within the art and architecture of different places of worship, experiencing the quiet and spaciousness, and feeling the community."

Susan Lousada said "Bedfordshire is a wonderfully diverse county, and it is very important to me that those of all beliefs, and indeed those with none, feel respected and welcome. I am so grateful to Bishop Richard and Johny at Grassroots for giving the Bedfordshire Lieutenancy the opportunity to meet some of our local faith leaders. I am also deeply appreciative to those leaders and faith communities for welcoming us all so warmly."

experience which I found very rewarding and informative," she said.

She has now supported Bishop Richard's initiative to extend this opportunity to the wider Lieutenancy.

Bishop Richard arranged for the Deputy Lieutenants, to visit the Central Mosque and Guru Nanak Gurudwara during the last fortnight. He will arrange future visits to other places of worship too. The Deputy Lieutenants enjoyed their visits and said: "Our hosts were so welcoming and so very generous with their time and patient in their explanations. We learnt a great deal."

Accompanied by the Bishop of Bedford Right Reverend Richard Atkinson, HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada and the Deputy Lieutenants of the Bedfordshire Lieutenancy visited Luton's different places of worship, including Luton's Central Mosque.



voluntary groups.

Susan Lousada was appointed as HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire in September 2022. Soon after her appointment, she

visited Luton's different faith communities and places of worship, accompanied by the Bishop of Bedford Rt. Revd. Richard Atkinson. "It was a really positive

The Bedfordshire Lieutenancy is one of the 98 Lieutenancies in England. Each Lieutenancy is headed by a Lord-Lieutenant, appointed by The King, and is His Majesty's representative in their county (or Lieutenancy area).

The role of Lord-Lieutenant is voluntary and apolitical. Its duties are broadly to arrange visits by members of the Royal family and to escort Royal visitors, present medals, awards, and honours on behalf of His Majesty, support and liaise with local units of the armed forces and cadet forces, and promote and support local communities and

OPINION

**Date published
21st Jun'23**



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Luton Turk Fest 2023 brings hundreds of people together

Hundreds of people flocked to Stockwood Park at the weekend for the largest Luton Turk Fest 2023 ever held by the Luton Turkish Community Association.

Over 200 volunteers helped coordinate various arrangements at this fantastic family-friendly event. People travelled long distances to be part of this large outdoor extravaganza.

More than a dozen members of the Ottoman Marching Band from Istanbul were funded by Turkish Airlines and flown into Luton to dazzle and entertain the crowds. Children from the Turkish Language School performed



L to R: The Turkish Ambassador HE Osman Koray Ertaş, Luton Rising Chair, Cllr Javeria Hussain, and Luton Turkish Community Chairman Mr Atilla Ustun with Ottoman Marching Band from Istanbul at Luton Turk Fest

excellent stage performances. People could take selfies with men and women costumed as cultural relics in a tent.

There were long queues for

the freshly baked Turkish treats and delicacies, 'Gozleme' – the spinach and cheese stuffed flatbread, and 'Manti' – tiny lamb-stuffed dumplings topped with

sauses. These were sold to raise funds for the Luton Turkish Community Association.

Turkey is known for its vivacious culture – colourful attire, lively music and dancing, exquisite handicrafts and jewellery, and amazing food. People were able to enjoy the flavour of it all at the Luton Turk Fest.

Atilla Ustun, Executive Chairman of Luton Turkish Community Association said: "We are glad that we could offer this experience after a three-year absence due to the coronavirus pandemic."

The Chair of one of the key sponsors Luton Rising, Cllr Jave-

ria Hussain, Lord Qurban Hussain, and Luton Cllrs. Mahmood Hussain and Dave Taylor were also invited. In remembrance of the suffering brought on by wars and conflicts around the world, Atilla invited The Turkish Ambassador to the UK, His Excellency Osman Koray Ertaş to join together in an act of solidarity and fly doves for world peace.

Atilla thanked Luton's diverse communities for their tremendous support and outstanding assistance after one of the worst earthquakes ever to strike areas of Turkey and Syria earlier in the year. He said: "Luton sent over 500 tonnes of aid, which is incredible for a town of our size."

Talking about the Luton Turkish Community Centre, Atilla said: "Although it is a small premises, it is always full and buzzing with people and different activities. There are nearly 300 Turkish families in Luton at present but hit by the cost of living crisis, more are drawn to Luton from expensive parts of the UK."

Date published
28th Jun'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

75 years of Windrush Generation commemorated across country

The 75th anniversary of the Windrush Generation was marked last week with several events across Britain including a national commemoration service at Southwark Cathedral, the King attending an event for young people at St George's Chapel Windsor, United Luton Caribbean & African Committee (ULCAC) holding its 4th Annual Civic Ceremony at Luton Town Hall and Pastors Lloyd Denny and Vincent Cox conducting special Windrush services in the honour of Luton Windrush generation. HMT Empire Windrush ar-



rived at Tilbury Docks in Essex on June 22, 1948, bringing nearly 500 people from the Caribbean. They were the first of thousands encouraged to migrate and help

fill labour shortages in the armed forces, transport, other industries and NHS. HM King Charles hailed the Windrush generation's "immeasurable" impact and

Luton's oldest Windrush Generation member, 103 years old Rose Allen joined by Mayor of Luton, Beds Police Crime Commissioner, Bishop of Bedford, and Pas Vincent Cox, at a special Windrush Civic Service held last Sunday at St Mary's

"profound and permanent contribution to British life".

HM's representative Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada said: "The Windrush generation kept much of our transport system and our NHS functioning and became pivotal in areas of commerce, education, manufacturing, science, engineering and sports. It is my honour to pay tribute to the Windrush generation and their descendants and to thank them all for what they have done for our country."

The Mayor of Luton, Cllr Mohammed Yaqub Hanif said: "The Windrush generation experienc-

es of racism and discrimination resonate with the experiences of his parents and many other migrant communities' experiences too," but applauding the Windrush Generation contributions to Luton's Vauxhall Motors, Electrolux, L & D Hospital, and the railways, he said, "You are all loved, appreciated, and valued."

Sadly, Lord Kitchener's 1951 migrant anthem, "London is the Place for Me," still captures the feelings of numerous unnamed persons arriving on unnamed boats today as they flee repressive regimes, wars, and conflicts only to discover that they are not wanted or welcomed.

We pray that the 75th anniversary of the Windrush Generation will inspire us to stand up for justice, peace, equity and dignity for all human beings, who are created in God's image. We must honour the Windrush generation's resilience and determination and hold light to their experiences to strengthen our communities and build a flourishing future for all.

Date published
5th Jul'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Specialist training in mental health matters is so crucial

The topic of mental health has been discussed far and wide, especially in relation to the lasting effects of the coronavirus pandemic on young people.

After completing Near Neighbours CATALYST Youth Leadership Training in Luton, a few young people from Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, and no faith backgrounds followed it up with a 2-day Mental Health First Aid training programme. This was funded by Near Neighbours and co-delivered by Grassroots, Luton Council of Faiths, Feast Programme and CYCD (Centre for Youth & Community Development) in Luton.



A few community workers and leaders also benefited from this training on mental health and leadership development. A participant remarked:

"It was a specialist training to improve our understanding of mental health issues and how to identify, understand and help someone who may be affected

Young people from different and no faith backgrounds participated in a 2-day Mental Health & Fitness training programme funded by Near Neighbours as part of its youth leadership development initiative called CATALYST.

by it. Additionally, we now know how to use HeartMath to promote personal resilience, boost positive wellbeing, and tackle stigma related to mental health."

A community worker at The Feast youth engagement programme said: "Being on the same learning level as young people has been quite enlightening. It was a good idea to have a cross-generational discussion."

Trainers Rosalind Paul and Ryad Khodabocus said: "We are confident this training will significantly improve the lives of young people in Luton. With the current climate we find our communities in, it has never been more impor-

tant to educate ourselves on how best to support those around us with mental health related issues and how to self-care and grow stronger and resilient as we serve others."

The training course covered key topics such as suicide, self-harm, PTSD, phobias, anxiety and depression. It also discussed how to spot signs of these issues and how best to support individuals suffering from any of these.

In a statement, Luton's Near Neighbours Programme remarked: "The ongoing climate change, refugee and cost of living crises have caused extreme economic and social disadvantages in our world today. These have also increased the difficulties with mental health. Therefore, it is critical to provide training opportunities like these to strengthen our shared relationship and obligation to one another. Each of us may contribute in some way, particularly if we have prepared ourselves by participating in training programmes like these."

Date published
12th Jul'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Colors of Eid Festival – a free family outdoor extravaganza

In Luton, Eid-al-Adha was celebrated a fortnight ago with thousands of people coming out to enjoy affordable fun fair rides and plenty of family entertainment for all ages at Lewsey Farm Inspire Eid Festival – presented by Inspire FM and 1Eid festival celebrations in Wardown Park and Stockwood Park.

Last weekend, another Colors of Eid Festival, an outdoor extravaganza event was held at Luton town centre's Market Hill, with lots of traditional music, poetry, and singing. All faiths and communities were welcomed to try the delights of locally made traditional food and sweet treats and



get a traditional mehndi (henna) design and enjoy the costume display. An opening procession from the Town Hall to the Market Hill Stage was led by Luton's

traditional Desi Bhangra Dhol Drummers, Dhols Royce.

Colors of Eid Festival was organised by Sarah Salim, a British-Pakistani visual artist,

Daf Zikir Drums delivered a spectacular performance using a Middle-Eastern frame drum called 'Daf' setting the scene for storytelling by Rumi's Cave, a community arts organisation inspired by the legacy of 13th-century Persian poet and mystic Jalauddin Rumi.

and founding director of ALIF New Beginnings, an arts organisation that aims to celebrate and promote Islamic arts and culture across all art disciplines.

In 2022, Sarah worked with the UKCCA (UK Centre for Carnival Arts) based in Luton, to create Luton's first Eid parade performance. She said this year we have tried to grow it to the next stage and so we put together stage performances, free of charge, including Qawwali (a form of Sufi Islamic devotional singing) and performances from children groups and talks by inspirational speakers like Dr Nazia Khan OBE DL, Chair of the United Nations

Association, Luton Branch and the champion of human rights, education, and equalities. She spoke of the importance of multi-agency involvement and alliances for sustainable community engagement, development, and cohesion in our super-diverse town Luton.

Eid al-Adha is known as the 'festival of sacrifice'. It commemorates the prophet Ibrahim's devotion to God. To honour God's commandment, Ibrahim (also known as Abraham in Judaism & Christianity), was prepared to sacrifice even his son, Ismail. Miraculously, God replaced Ismail with a lamb to sacrifice instead. Muslims therefore worldwide celebrate the festival by carrying out a 'Qurbani' (Arabic word meaning "sacrifice", which typically means donating two-thirds of the festivities to the poor or vulnerable people, and only one-third kept for family use. It is the second largest and most significant religious festival celebrated by Muslims.

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19th Jul'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Pope's ambassador learns of Luton's hopes and aspirations

Nuncio to Great Britain, Archbishop Miguel Maury Buendia, recently visited Luton.

Explaining Nuncio's role, Monsignor Kevin McGinnell VF of Holy Ghost Catholic Parish said Nuncio is a Vatican representative, accredited as an ambassador that maintains official diplomatic relations, promotes good relations between the government and the government of the Roman Catholic Church led by the Pope. Nuncio observes and reports to the Pope on the life of the Roman Catholic Church in the region.

The Mayor, Cllr Mohammed Yaqub Hanif warmly welcomed



the Nuncio to Luton. Several other faith and community representatives gave brief presentations on the work undertaken by them in the

super-diverse town of Luton. It included the Chairs of the Luton Council of Faiths, Churches Together in Luton, and the CEOs of Noah, Chums, Luton Irish Form,

L-R: Monsignor Kevin McGinnell VF of Holy Ghost Catholic Parish Church, Nuncio to Great Britain Archbishop Miguel Maury Buendia, The Mayor of Luton Cllr Mohammed Yaqub Hanif, and Chair of the Luton Council of Faiths, Prof Zafar Khan

and Grassroots.

Representatives from the Luton Deans Group, Cardinal Newman School, Kenyan Catholic Women's Association, and the DHS (Daughters of the Holy Spirit) as deanery religious were also present.

Archbishop Miguel presented himself as being the eyes and ears of the Pope. He showed keen interest in listening to people's hopes and aspirations for a better world and understood the life and engagement of the Catholic Church and Faith in the town. He also visited Asylum Seekers & Refugee Support Project at All Saints Anglican Church and Cen-

tral Mosque. Born in Madrid, Archbishop Miguel has served in Pope's diplomatic missions in several countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, Morocco, Nicaragua, Egypt, Slovenia and Ireland. He also served as Apostolic Nuncio to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Romania & Moldova.

Acknowledging his extensive experience, the Chair of the Luton Council of Faiths, Prof Zafar Khan invited the Archbishop to visit Luton again.

Applauding Pope's encyclical Laudato Si on caring for our common home — planet Earth, Sr Maire Hayes presented Archbishop with a book by Luton author Jeremy Williams - Climate Change Is Racist: Race, Privilege and the Struggle for Climate Justice. Archbishop Miguel responded saying we must respect and love one another and in doing so, we must together become a beacon of hope for justice, peace and reconciliation in our world.

OPINION

Date published
26th Jul'23



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Reconciliation and interfaith work leads to recognition

Canon Peter Adams, Director, St Mary's Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, working in Mediation, Peacebuilding and Community Relations as part of the team at St Mary's Luton has recently been awarded the Hubert Walter Award for Reconciliation and Interfaith Cooperation.

The award is in recognition of Peter's "leadership, inspiration and practical action in the field of reconciliation, interfaith cooperation and anti-extremism work in Luton, as well as nationally and internationally".

The Lambeth Awards, initiated in 1940, are a set of prestigious accolades presented annually by



the Archbishop of Canterbury to acknowledge exceptional contributions made to the Church of England, the broader Anglican Communion, and various other

faith communities.

Commenting on his award, Peter said: "The contrast between my life in Luton and my rural upbringing as a farmer's son in

Canon Peter Adams (L), with his wife Anne Adams (R) at Lambeth Palace with Archbishop Justin Welby after receiving the Hubert Walter Award for his contributions in the field of reconciliation, interfaith cooperation and anti-extremism work

Sussex grants me insight into the anxieties experienced by many regarding the evolving landscape of Britain. Embracing both perspectives, I hope to be a unifying voice in our national life."

As a community mediator and peacemaker, Peter has made outstanding contributions, ever since he settled in Luton in 2007.

Peter played a crucial role in opposing extremism from groups like al-Muhajiroun, the English Defence League, and Britain First. He has worked closely with Muslim friends to promote community cooperation and challenge the extremist narrative.

He has also initiated projects

like FACES (Faiths Against Children's Sexual Exploitation), and serves as a trustee for 'Hope Not Hate'. Recently, he contributed to a community dialogue hub during COP26 through a project led by Scottish Mediation.

All of Peter's work is rooted in his Christian faith, and he holds various positions of leadership within the church and community, including Lay Chair of St Albans Diocesan Synod, General Synod member, Vice-Chair of Luton Food Bank, and Lay Chair of Luton Desnery. Peter was made an honorary lay canon of St Albans Cathedral in 2014 for his work in the Luton community.

The Bishop of Bedford, the Rt Revd Richard Atkinson, welcomed the award, saying: "I am delighted that Peter's substantial contribution to reconciliation and peace-making in Luton and beyond has been recognised by this award. Peter's witness to justice and peace, in the face of extremism and division, has been Christ-like, courageous and hopeful."

OPINION

Date published
9th Aug'23



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Final worship service is not the end for St Ninians Church

Founded in 1941, St Ninians URC (United Reformed Church) Villa Road, Luton, recently held its final worship service.

It is one of the five United Reformed Churches in Luton & Dunstable which are amalgamating into one church, Newland URC, with two buildings, one in Dunstable and one in Luton.

St Ninians URC is named after St Ninian, who is first mentioned in the 8th century as being an early missionary among the northern Britons and the Pictish peoples of what is now Scotland. Hence, St Ninians URC involved a large num-



ber of Scots who had arrived to work in Luton including many Doctors and Welfare Officers at the principal factories at that time.

By 1947, besides regular Church Services St Ninians was also offering activities such as Tuesday Fellowship Group, Scouts, Cubs, Guides, Brown-

Rev George Watt, URC Thames North Synod Moderator & Rev Heather Whyte, URC Minister in Luton & Dunstable jointly led the final service at St Ninians URC, as after 82 years of serving the community, the Church amalgamates into Newland URC

ies, Bazaars, Women's Guild, Drama Society, Play Groups etc.

The present Church building was designed by Mr Gordon Jackson, who emphasised simplicity in his building designs, getting away from Gothic designs. "But the Church is not just a building; it is the people who worship there", said Rona Harvey, St Ninians URC member since 1948.

She said: "When I came from Scotland, the people in Church were my family. It was a warm, welcoming place full of people who spoke in a familiar accent, wore a kilt on Sundays and made lovely scones. Over

the years, many families have played their part in keeping the Church alive, by baptising, confirming and marrying their children here; this fellowship of people is the real Church to which we all belong. I look forward to continuing that fellowship at Newland Church."

Ann Burgoyne, another longstanding church member, said, "St Ninians has seen many changes over its lifetime of 82 years. We give thanks for our ministers' hard work, encouragement, and leadership. Today we are celebrating what has gone before and saying goodbye to our building but not goodbye to our Church.

"For the Church is not the building, the church is the people who come to worship and share fellowship.

"We will still be church together; we will just meet somewhere new, alongside all our friends old and new from all the other URC Churches in Luton and Dunstable."

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9th Aug'23

COLUMN



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Newland Church is born as 'one church on two sites'

Following the amalgamation of five United Reformed Churches (URCs), which include Bury Park, St Ninians, Edward Street, St Katherine and Wigmore URCs, Newland Church is born as 'one church on two sites'.

These two sites are in Crawley Green Road (Wigmore), Luton and Katherine Drive, Dunstable.

At a recently held special inaugural service of commitment and commissioning of the Newland Church, Janette Canon shared a reflection, saying: "The world suffered much



throughout the pandemic – and churches were not exempt from that. Our five different United Reformed Churches (URCs) came through, but we

had lost so much in so many ways – friends, members, confidence, and skills. We were suddenly a little more vulnerable and fewer in number. We

Representatives of the five different United Reformed Churches (URCs) unite together and hold a unifying ribbon at the inaugural service of the Newland Church. It will be one Church on two sites in Luton, and in Dunstable

recognised that the care and upkeep of the Church buildings was becoming too much. Wouldn't we be stronger together, we thought."

"This followed much discussion, much doubt, much heart-seeking, and in the end, we knew we would enjoy being together in worship and fellowship, but letting go of all we held dear in our individual places of worship, with all the associated memories, would be no easy task."

"Nevertheless, a vision was presented – one church on two sites – an exciting prospect, but a huge challenge. How it will all

work, but the decision was taken to wrestle with the practicalities and step forward in faith to a new, unknown future."

"Groups met to consider constitutions, finance, and property matters. Reports were compiled, recommendations presented, doubts and difficulties tackled if not immediately resolved."

Finally, in January this year, all five Churches voted to step forward together in faith towards an exciting new future of one church on two sites.

The Rev Heather Whyte, the local URC Minister, said: "There are still many things to resolve, but we celebrate a new beginning – the inauguration of Newland Church. Together in love and faith, we shall now set forth in our journeying forward. We will build new relationships and will learn how to be Church in this time and place."

Heartiest Congratulations to the Newland Church!

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Faith leaders discuss 'Protect All Spiritual Scriptures' initiative

action in response to the burning of the Holy Scriptures, an act that strikes at the core of religious tolerance, respect, and compassion.

"We were moved and humbled by the presence of so many different faith leaders who had given at a very short notice, their valuable time, presence, and input which is highly appreciated and very encouraging", stated Ifraz Iqbal, General Secretary of Luton Central Mosque. "This meeting has certainly fostered interfaith dialogue, and strengthened community bonds."

There is a need for robust international laws and treaties to prevent acts of religious desecration and to safeguard the rights and beliefs of religious communities worldwide.

LCoF Chair Prof Zafar Khan stated, "We are a town where the majority of people have faith, and those of no faith also want the best for our town. Let nothing distract us from walking together in solidarity and in mutual respect for one another."

Aspate of Quran burning in Sweden, and Denmark and the rise of Finland's far-right party True Finns has highlighted how globally, there appears to be a growing intolerance of both immigrants and Islam, particularly in the right-wing political discourses.

Majoritarianism backed by nationalism is becoming a threat to minorities everywhere globally. It is therefore worth reviewing how and why the sacredness of freedom of speech of few, has come to take precedence over the sanctity of human dignity and the sacredness of religious



texts. How and why the freedom of speech is allowed to propagate hate and desecrate what is held sacred and revered by millions and billions around the world?

At a meeting held recently at Central Mosque, Luton Council, Councillors, and different faith leaders discussed the initiative to 'Protect All Spiritual Scriptures'

Joined by the Luton Council and Councillors, Luton's faith leaders discussed the initiative 'Protect All Spiritual Scriptures' (PASS). They called for laws to prevent acts of religious desecration and to safeguard the beliefs of religious communities worldwide.

(PASS).

The meeting acknowledged that the deliberate burning of any sacred Scripture is an egregious violation of human rights, freedom of religion, and fundamental principles for the diversity of faiths. We live in an interconnected world. It is essential that we work collectively to foster an environment of understanding and mutual respect for all religious and non-religious, beliefs and values.

The meeting requested Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) write to the UK's Prime Minister and to the Deputy Secretary General of the UN, to appeal for immediate

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23rd Aug'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots and Luton
Council of Faiths

Condemnation of the attacks on churches in Pakistan

We are shocked and extremely saddened at the recent reports of the attacks on churches in the Punjab Province of Pakistan.

Muslim leaders, Mosques, and Inspire FM Radio in Luton, unequivocally condemned the actions of the mob and those who instigated them.

The Luton Council of Faiths Chair Prof Zafar Khan said: "These attacks stand out as an offence against God and humankind. Any attack on a place of worship is an attack on all. Hatred targeting any community because of its faith and belief is a scourge that mustn't be and cannot be tolerated."



In a letter to the UK High Commission of Pakistan, Prof Zafar Khan urged the Government of Pakistan to take strong and firm action against those responsi-

ble for these acts of violence and ensure the safety and well-being of not only Christians but all religious minorities in Pakistan.

In a statement, denouncing

"May we all work together to build a society based on tolerance, acceptance, and unity", stated Allama Qazi Abdul Aziz Chishti MBE in his Friday Sermon at Luton's Jamia Islamia Ghouseia Mosque

the heinous attacks on Churches in Pakistan, the Masjid-e- President Ali Syed Rahat Gilani said: "As Muslims, we firmly uphold the principle of equal rights for all, regardless of creed, faith, belief or religion."

He too called upon the Pakistani Government to take action against those responsible for these appalling and un-Islamic deeds and said: "In this time of adversity, we stand in solidarity with our Christian brothers, sisters, and their families."

In his Friday Sermon at Luton's Jamia Islamia Ghouseia Mosque, Allama Qazi Abdul Aziz Chishti MBE called it a deplora-

ble incident that goes against the Islamic principles and teachings of peace, harmony, and coexistence among all religions. He said: "Islam teaches its followers to respect and honour religious and cultural diversity."

He too urged the Pakistan Government to take immediate action against the perpetrators and called for strict measures to prevent any form of religious intolerance and violence in the future.

He emphasised: "Our Christian brothers and sisters, just like any other religious community, have the right to live and practice their faith freely within the wider Pakistani community. Their rights and freedoms must be protected, ensuring that they can flourish alongside their fellow citizens. We stand united with our Christian brothers and sisters, reaffirming our commitment to living in peace and harmony with one another and creating an inclusive society for all."

Date published
30th Aug'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Rev Larner arrives with passion for justice and solidarity

Recently Luton has welcomed a new Church of England Vicar Rev Luke Larner joining at St Andrew's Church in the Biscot area on Blenheim Crescent Road. Luke is ordained in the Church of England, and prior to Luton, he was based in St Paul's Church located on St Paul's Square in the centre of Bedford.

Passionate about Jesus and Justice, particularly in the areas of homelessness, peace-making, and interfaith collaboration, Luke is currently studying for a doctorate in Practical Theology, researching with Christians involved in Community Organising.

Luke is also involved with the



At his Licensing Service held at St Andrew's Church (Biscot, Luton), Revd Luke Larner (L) was joined by The Archdeacon of Bedford The Venerable Dave Middlebrook (R), and The Bishop of Bedford The Right Reverend Richard Atkinson, OBE.

international ecumenical social justice network Red Letter Christians and has trained in Community Organising through Citizens UK. A big fan of Saint Francis

and lover of nature, Luke is often found riding his chopper bicycle along the banks of the River Great Ouse.

Luke is keen to support the

work of Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths.

At a recently held meeting of Luton's different faith leaders about protecting the desecration of religious scriptures across Europe, Luke stated: "Hatred is taught. History is evident how genocide and mass atrocities begin with words of hate. This underscores our collective responsibility to address hate today to prevent potential harm tomorrow. But countering hate effectively requires a holistic approach that goes beyond legislation. It must also focus on education."

He added: "Education must include facilitating uncomfort-

able conversations about social inequality and power dynamics, decoding and debunking stereotypes and prejudice, and addressing the trauma and stigmatization caused by violent pasts."

Prof Zafar Khan, Chair of the Luton Council of Faiths, complemented Luke and emphasised that tackling hate from an educational perspective must involve programmes like the School Assemblies we deliver on the theme of how to make our town more respectful led by the panel of Luton's multi-faith leaders.

It is indeed our privilege to welcome Rev Luke Larner into Luton. We look forward to his services and contributions.

At Luke's welcome service, Rev Grace Sentamu Baverstock shared a powerful message about unity. She said: "It is our job to remove the obstacles which hinder our unity. And we can do this by our 'true listening', which requires not only 'humility' but also 'vulnerability'. May our love for one another be our primary aim."

Date published
6th Sep'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots and Luton
Council of Faiths

50+ entries for the first ever Luton in Bloom competition

Luton in Bloom is a community-driven initiative aimed at uplifting Luton's spirits through the power and shared interest of gardening. Ever since its launch in May, the project has been encouraging communities to grow items, learn life skills and meet new people.

At a recent briefing to Luton's different faith and community leaders, project manager Shana Iqbal said: "It is also aiming to improve the overall look and feel of the town."

Shana shared some powerful and moving stories of how some very lonely and isolated people benefitted from this project and



felt part of a community in a useful and meaningful way.

The project founder Sujel Miah, who is also a local activist and a key community champion

said: "It is about transforming communities through connecting people and plants, especially those from most deprived parts of our town. It is also about sup-

In the first ever 'Luton in Bloom' gardening competition, Lullington Neighbours won the Best Community Garden Prize at the Community Farmers Market held last Sunday at the town centre.

porting people's physical and mental wellbeing and creating a sense of pride in communities, neighbourhoods and the town. It is about residents contributing to the way their street and neighbourhood looks and feel, through fun and healthy competition."

Gulie Butcher, Vice Chair of the Luton Council of Faiths was one of the Garden Competition Judges. She said: "It is giving residents an opportunity to learn and explore gardening but more importantly create a sense of pride and ownership in the areas and the town. It is also about connecting with others in our communities around a shared goal."

Over 50 entries for a gardening competition were submitted in 4 different categories. Loana Frigura won the Best Residential Front Display, Lullington Neighbours won the Best Community Garden, Tahmina Ajmal won the Best Fruit and Veg patch and Woodlands Secondary School Best School Garden.

Cash prizes were awarded to winners and runners-up at the community farmers market held last Sunday in the town centre where many community members could showcase what they had grown. The project has been very much supported by Luton Rising, Community Interest Luton, Inspire FM, The Peace Garden Project, Luton Council of Faiths, and Luton Council. The garden competition, farmers market and gardening workshops will also support the council's objectives on community development, cohesion, economic skills, public health outcomes and Luton Rising's improving the environment commitment.

OPINION

**Date published
13th Sep'23**



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Hindu festival celebrated the birth of Lord Krishna

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 the midnight when Krishna was born, 'upavasa' (fasting), and a 'Mahotsav' (festival) on 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 play-



ful joyous child enjoying butter churned at home and as an adult, playing flute.

Krishna gave the vital message of 'Bhagwad Gita' (liter-

ally translated as 'The Song of the Lord'), which is a 700-verse Hindu scripture dated to the 2nd Century BCE and is a guiding principle for Hindus. Its

Mr Praful Dave, the priest, and Mr Pravin Bhai Mistry, the Office Manager at the Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Luton Hindu Mandir (Temple) in Lewsey Farm leading Janmashtami (the birth of Lord Krishna) celebrations

core message has 3 themes – 'jnana' (knowledge), 'karma' (action) and 'bhakti' (devotion).

Mr Praful Dave, the priest at the Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Luton Hindu Mandir (Temple) in Lewsey Farm, said: "Lord Krishna's message of Karmayoga is a call to focus on our responsibilities rather than caring for our rewards."

Mr Pravin Bhai Mistry, the Lewsey Hindu Temple office manager, said: "We are delighted to be able to celebrate Lord Krishna's birth in large numbers, but we must not forget to spend time in reflecting on Lord Krishna's message and

teachings about the purpose and meaning of our life on this planet earth. Having faith must provide an outlook on how to live our life."

Prof Zafar Khan, Chair of Luton Council of Faiths said: "On behalf of Luton's faith communities, I am delighted to send our best wishes to everyone at Luton's two Hindu Temples. We are grateful to the members of Luton Hindu communities for supporting the work of Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths over the years."

"I am delighted to see festivities on such a scale take place, reminding us of the great number of people from diverse backgrounds living in Luton and making Luton such a vibrant and dynamic town."

At the evening prayers in the Temple, the words echoed – "Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah" – These are Sanskrit words from a Hindu prayer meaning – May all the living beings be happy, prosperous and at peace!

OPINION

Date published
20th Sep'23



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

East Fest brought our diverse communities together

Last weekend, Lutonians were welcomed at East-Fest 2023. The entry was free and there was something for everyone, including plenty of children's activities; so hundreds of people joined in this wonderful multi-artform celebration of Central and Eastern European cultures.

"Over the last decade, the composition of Luton town's population has changed, with the additions of new Central and Eastern European communities: Polish, Romanian, Hungarian, Ukrainian and many more", said the key event organiser Sebastian Dolinski of Luton Polish



community.

He added: "The aim of the East-Fest is to bring all Luton communities closer together and celebrate our unique cul-

tures. After a successful 'Polonia Festival 2019' and 'East-Fest 2022', we decided to extend it into a multicultural event, involving even more people."

Promethidion, the British Polish Integration Centre's (BPIC's) children's traditional Polish singing and dance group performed songs in both Polish and English languages while dressed in lovely Polish traditional costumes, and they unquestionably won everyone's hearts.

At the opening ceremony, the Mayor of Luton Cllr Mohammed Yaqub Hanif welcomed everyone and thanked the sponsors and organisers for bringing yet another fantastic multicultural event to our town, where over 140 languages are spoken and people from many different religious, cultural, and racial backgrounds coexist peacefully.

Young Bows, a quartet of violinists from Polish and Slovakian backgrounds, enchanted the crowd with their melodious instrumental renditions of cultural and folk tunes as their opening performance.

Promethidion, a children's

traditional Polish singing and dance group, was introduced by the British Polish Integration Centre. This small group of children performed songs in both Polish and English while dressed in lovely Polish traditional costumes, and they unquestionably won everyone's hearts.

Next Generation Youth Theatre (NGYT) creates dance and arts opportunities for all young people aged 0 to 25, encouraging ambition and supporting well-being. It was wonderful to see some of the NGYT youth do some incredible dance and street theatre. Ukrainian, Hungarian, and Romanian songs and music were equally astounding.

Dhols Royce, a group of Pakistani drummers is starting to show up regularly and is a hit at all the town's multicultural events.

May Luton continue to celebrate its diverse multicultural and religious communities, as well as its intangible heritage and social history!

OPINION

Date published
27th Sep'23



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Annual Peace Walk creates hope for a better world

In its 27th year, Luton's Annual Peace Walk continued to be one of the most popular multi-faith events in the town. While also commemorating the UN's International Day of Peace (IDP), it attracted people of all ages from Luton's diverse communities.

People visited a Catholic Our Lady Help of Christians Church, Luton Christian Fellowship, Turkish Mosque & Community Centre, and Guru Ravidass Sangat Luton. They were treated with cakes, biscuits, Turkish delights, samosas and pakoras. Several dignitaries included the Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada, Mayor of Luton Cllr Yaqub Hanif,



Luton MPs Sarah Owen and Rachel Hopkins, Bishop of Bedford Rt Rev Richard Atkinson and Cllrs Javeria Hussain and Maria Lovell. Peace is needed today more

than ever. War and conflict are unleashing devastation, poverty, and hunger, and displacing millions of people from their homes. Therefore, we need to work

Rev'd Charmaine Mhlanga of Sundon Park Baptist Church, and also part of Churches Together in Luton, was one of the many volunteers, marshalling Luton's Annual Peace Walk held last week on Saturday, September 23

and act for Peace. And that is exactly what Luton's Peace Walk on Saturday was all about.

It was indeed a public demonstration of community solidarity and yet another step towards building a stronger Luton, when in view of the Churches burnt in Pakistan and Quran burning incidents in Scandinavian countries, Luton's different faith leaders called for stronger legislation to prevent such acts provoking communal discord.

Calling upon the UK Prime Minister, the Deputy Secretary General of the UN, and also the UK High Commission of Pakistan, faith leaders demanded robust

international laws and treaties to safeguard the rights and beliefs of the religious communities worldwide. In a statement, they also reaffirmed their commitment to living in peace and harmony with one another and creating an inclusive society for all.

Later, students and teachers from Ramridge, Chantry, Southfield, and Whitefield Primary Schools gave presentations about their work on climate change and environmental issues. They shared their commitment to being an Eco-School, litter picking and planting trees.

Young individuals who had completed the CATALYST Youth Leadership & Mental Health Training Programs, sponsored by Near Neighbors, were awarded certificates. They shared their aspirations for a better world and their resolve to combat poverty, deprivation, and other current problems in our town.

May all these hopes, aspirations, and commitments for a better world bear fruits!

Date published
4th Oct'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Break down walls for a world of acceptance and peace

Established on September 1st, 1968, the organisation of Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) initially focused on educating its growing membership of South Asian descent about Islam, but later ICNA became an inclusive and diverse organisation.

Last week, Luton hosted the visit of Dr Sabeel Ahmed, who is the Executive Director of the Gain Peace Project, an outreach project of ICNA. With friends from Luton's Madinah Mosque, he visited the offices of Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths to learn about the excellent inter-faith work carried out in Luton.

Appreciating a wide array of



interfaith activities in Luton, he said: "My aim is also to bring out the commonalities and build bridges between people of various faiths, races, and nationalities and

share the peaceful message of Islam with everyone."

He admired the partnership and collaboration of Luton's different faith communities in tack-

Ulrike Hunt at St Mary's Church co-hosted Muslim friends from Madinah Mosque, and Dr Sabeel Ahmed (2nd from the left), one of the Executive Directors of US based organisation called ICNA as part of his visit to the UK

ling food, fuel and digital poverty, and people coming together to combat the challenges of racism, climate change, drugs, and knife crime. He shared: "ICNA also works closely with many inter-faith organizations for the betterment of society. By focusing on self-development, education, outreach, and social services, ICNA has cemented its place as a leading grassroots organization."

Dr Sabeel identified many areas of common interest and intervention in Luton such as addressing issues around freedom of speech, tackling Islamophobia and far right extremism, fostering youth and women empowerment,

etc. Later, Dr Sabeel took great interest in visiting St Mary's Church in Luton and St Leonard's Church in Flamstead. Both churches are over 900 years old.

At St Mary's Church, Ulrike Hunt introduced The Feast Programme, which is all about bringing together teenagers from different faiths and cultures to build friendships, explore faith and change lives. She explained how young people are learning to discuss beliefs and if needed disagree respectfully on challenging issues, but stay committed to living well together as neighbours and as peacemakers.

At St Leonard's Church, Dr Sabeel and Muslim friends admired the medieval artwork displayed on the Church walls. With the Vicar Revd Jo Burke, they exchanged information on many Christian and Muslim beliefs. In the end, everyone acknowledged that with love and friendship, we can indeed break down the walls, and build a world of acceptance and peace.

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11th Oct'23



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Hundreds gathered to pray for the safety of young people

After three teenage boys have been arrested on suspicion of stabbing a 16-year-old boy to death in Luton, the Bedfordshire Police, Luton's many schools, Luton Council, and Luton's diverse communities and faith groups in Luton came together last week to express their deep shock and sadness at the tragic events and to send their thoughts and prayers to the family of the young man who has died and all those whose lives have been affected. It was a moving occasion when hundreds gathered in Wardown Park to pray togeth-



er in their own ways for the safety of children and young people in Luton, for the peace in our community, and for the strength to effect positive

change. People were invited to bring a candle in a jar, so together all could light their candles as a symbol of hope and love. Those

It was a moving occasion, when hundreds gathered in the Wardown Park last week to pray together in their own ways for the safety of children and young people in Luton, and for the peace in our community.

without candles were invited to light up their phone torches to illuminate the solemn gathering.

People acknowledged the urgent crisis that affects us all deeply – the rise in knife crime and violence, leading to the tragic loss of our young ones.

People expressed how their hearts ache for those who have suffered, and that everyone yearns for a safer, more peaceful future for our children and young people.

Mothers, sisters, and grandmothers were specially called on to come together and stand united by their love for

their children, and to make a stand against this wave of violence.

It was indeed a powerful moment of unity and prayer for the protection and well-being of our beloved sons and daughters. Regardless of faith, cultural or ethnic background people joined hands and hearts in this powerful act of solidarity, hoping and praying that together, we can make a difference, and together, we can create a safer, more peaceful future for our children.

Prof Zafar Khan, Chair Luton Council of Faiths, said: "We are extremely saddened by this tragic event. Luton's faith communities stand together in solidarity with the families of those bereaved by the untimely loss of their loved one and offer sincere sympathies to those who survived the life-threatening attack and injuries. We pray that young people can live fulfilling lives, without fear and enhance their future prospects."

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18th Oct'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

New minister called to build up a body of hope and love

Clergy are formal leaders within established religions. Their roles and functions vary in different religious traditions, but usually involve pastoral care, presiding over rituals, and teaching their religion's doctrines and practices.

In a town like Luton where over 76% of people are religiously affiliated, the need and the role of the clergy is crucial. During Covid-19 lockdowns, faith leaders were 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.

The Olive Tree Church,



in the Biscot area of Luton, is therefore pleased to welcome its new minister Rev Michael Anokey.

In Rev Anokey's Induction

service, which was held recently, church member Elaine Sharpe shared that the Olive Tree Church is made up of St Margaret's Methodist and Blenheim

Rev Michael Anokey is the newly inducted Minister at The Olive Tree Church, in the Biscot area of Luton. The Olive Tree Church is made up of St Margaret's Methodist & Blenheim Baptist Churches.

Baptist Churches. She said that due to the church membership decline, three members from each church formed a steering group in 2014 with a view to merging. The journey since then has been exciting and sometimes challenging too. There were buildings, two different Church structures, and the financial implications to consider. The pandemic caused quite a challenge too.

Elaine said: "The road has been long. Our patience has been tried, but God's timing is not our timing. We have had to learn that for everything there is a season. We have been

and are richly blessed by God's amazing love."

Elaine thanked all the clergy who have walked this journey with us and said: "Without all of their commitment, understanding, and most importantly, commitment to prayer we would not be where we are today.

"Thank you also to the whole fellowship of the Olive Tree Church, their commitment, love, faith and most importantly – holding on to the vision that God has for us – to be salt and light in our local community."

Rev Dr David Chapman, Chair of the Methodist District of Beds, Essex & Herts, called it a landmark occasion. Referring to the future, he said: "May it be a combination of prayer, preparation, and expectation."

He encouraged the newly arrived Minister, Rev Anokey, to work together with people, and to build up a body of hope and love because he said, "We are in a world that needs hope".

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25th Oct'23

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Praying for those whose lives have been devastated

The world appears to have changed once again, as we all have been horrified by the sudden escalation of violence across Israel and Palestine in the last few weeks.

The Holy Land for Jews, Christians and Muslims is witnessing the deadliest and bloodiest days in recent history.

All places of worship and people of faith worldwide are praying for the thousands of people who have been killed, injured, displaced, and those whose lives have been devastated.

In the midst of heightened anxieties, grief, bereavement, anger, and frustration on all sides,



it is commendable that Luton's faith communities have demonstrated their concern for justice and peaceful co-existence, locally as well as globally.

Last week, led by the Councils of Mosques & Luton Palestine Solidarity Campaign, hundreds of Muslims, Christians, and those of different or secular beliefs, joined

Led by the Councils of Mosques, and Luton Palestine Solidarity Campaign, hundreds gathered outside Luton Town Hall on Friday to express their grief, pain, and solidarity with all the victims in the Holy Land. They prayed that reconciliation, peace, and justice prevail for everyone.

together outside Luton Town Hall to express their grief and pain. They shared prayers for the loss of life in Israel and Palestine.

One life taken whether Jewish, Muslim, Christian or anyone in humanity is too much, speakers voiced out from their respective faiths and beliefs.

Leaders condemned both Islamophobia and Antisemitism and called upon shared human values and heritage among the children of Abraham.

As the Church of Saint Porphyrius giving refuge to Muslims and Christians is bombed and many mosques and homes annihilated, leaders deplored such vile acts of

terror showing no respect for the sanctity of life and the places of worship.

Condemning terrorism and the disproportionate killing of innocent families, the defenseless, and the vulnerable, and the bombing of hospitals with mostly children dead, mourners demanded of local and national leaders across all political spectrums to call for an immediate ceasefire and safe passage for the humanitarian aid for the victims. As demonstrations are happening across the towns and cities, organisers asked everyone to stay within the framework of the law.

In a statement, the Luton Council of Faiths offered condolences and prayers for those who have faced death, and injury and are suffering in other ways, and called everyone to unite in humanity and pray that reconciliation, peace, and justice prevail for everyone. Let us continue striving to create a better world. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.