

## Moral questions over the distribution of Covid vaccine to poorer countries

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

**A**s governments and international organisations work together to determine who will get the Covid-19 vaccine first and how quickly, several faith organisations and leaders have raised moral questions in policy discussions around vaccine distribution.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Jewish Congress (WJC) have released a joint paper asking for global equity in the distribution of available vaccines, ensuring those living in poorer countries are not excluded.

Maram Stern, executive vice-president WJC, said: "The document is drafted in a spirit of interfaith dialogue and co-operation, drawing inspiration from our respec-



**In the New Year, we light a candle of hope for a better world and better life for all**

tive Jewish and Christian traditions, which have helped to guide us through this life-changing time."

The paper urges reli-

gious leaders of all faiths to "consider confronting publicly the unsubstantiated rumours and conspiracy myths which undermine public trust in health authorities and services and in tested and approved vaccines themselves – and that thereby threaten an effective public health response to the pandemic.

"In some cases, such conspiracy myths have an explicitly anti-Semitic basis which should in any event be denounced," reads the paper.

Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, said: "We hope and anticipate that sooner rather than later, we shall be able to get the virus under control.

"Reflecting on the past 12 months' challenges, we must feel confident in the fact that despite our human failings, we have God-given inner strengths and fellow feelings as the most effective means to keep going."

## A grim year, but flashes of hope as we look for the way ahead

Written by

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Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

**E**piphany – a moment of revelation – is a Christian feast that marks the end of the 12 days of Christmas and commemorates the three wise men's (Magi's) visit to Jesus.

Popular Epiphany customs include singing, chalking the door, – having one's house blessed, consuming Three Kings Cake, removing Christmas decorations as well as attending church services, which is currently restricted for most due to the pandemic.

In an online event in Luton, Sr Maire Hayes, Inter Faith Coordinator for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, recalled that last month the planets Jupiter and Saturn had appeared closer and brighter than they



**The Rosca de Reyes (Three Kings sweet bread) decorated with candied fruit, popular in Hispanic countries**

have been in 800 years. It was called a “great conjunction”.

She reflected ‘The Star of Bethlehem’ that guided the Three Wise men may have been such “a great conjunction”.

Is this telling us something in 2020, which may have been a grim year, but we know there have been flashes of hope. Let us reflect on what stars have shone for us last year. Who has guided us? What has thrown light in our path? What vision or

values have held us steady, when we were not sure of the way ahead? What were our moments of Epiphany?

After visiting Jesus, the Wise Men were told to return by ‘another road’, for the old way was no longer safe or sustainable.

What will be ‘another road’ for us in 2021? We know it cannot be business as usual. It is not sustainable for us and our environment.

Animo! Bon Courage! Be steadfast!

## Important to promote understanding and peace between all religions

Written by

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**T**he aim of World Religion Day, held on the third Sunday in January every year, is to promote inter-faith understanding and harmony.

In Luton we endorse the World Religion Day ideals and encourage people to acknowledge the similarities that different faiths have. We however also view it equally important to assert and affirm our differences, which make us so unique and so different from one another, but we must do it in a way so that it does not breed conflict and confrontation; it rather enriches our learning and understanding of one another.

One of the Luton Council of Faiths' statements said: "Differences need not result in conflict alone. It can also



The different world religion symbols PHOTO: Getty Images

be used for mutual sharing, enrichment and enhancement. We seek unity in promoting diversity."

For Luton's faith communities it is more about reflecting, not just on our commonalities or differences, but also on the local-global issues affecting our lives and then discerning how do we respond to these issues, together.

In the present times, faith communities have been engaging locally with the coun-

cil, Public Health and all the other agencies in fighting the pandemic.

The realisation of this 'inter-connectedness' is crucial for our living together in solidarity with one another. The pandemic has reminded us of this loud and clear.

Leader of the council Cllr Hazel Simmons said: "We are mindful of the significant efforts made by places of worship to support and sustain the whole community throughout the pandemic."

# The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity moves online due to pandemic

Written by

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**T**he Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU) has been jointly organised by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church since 1968, from January 18-25 every year.

This year, due to the pandemic, Churches Together in Luton asked Christians to hold events online and show their support by adding the #wpcuwall to their Twitter posts.

The theme for this year's WPCU was "Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit".

It was based on the Bible passage from the book of John 15:1-17.

It called for reconcilia-



**Christians were called to pray and act for reconciliation and unity in the church, with our human family and with all of creation.**

tion and unity in the church and the worldwide human family.

As usual, Christian Aid provided the "Go & Do" action points for each of the WPCU daily reflections – backing up prayers with ac-

tions for the relief of poverty and advocacy of justice.

One such action point was getting informed about and taking action on refugee and asylum issues and campaigns, which are bound up with many other issues of conflict, climate change and coronavirus etc.

Bob Fyffe, the general secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, said: "The ancient rhythm of prayer is an important gift for the church today struggling with pandemics and lockdowns and more widely with other serious challenges of climate change, racism and poverty.

"Thank you for joining us in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and entering into a place of community and blessing."

## Be the light in the darkness

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

**T**he theme for Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) 2021 was "Be the light in the darkness".

In a statement, the HMD Trust said: "Increasing levels of denial, division and misinformation in today's world mean we must remain vigilant against hatred and identity-based hostility.

"We can all stand in solidarity. We can choose to be the light in the darkness in a variety of ways and places – at home, in public, and online."

Gerald Fox of Bedfordshire Progressive Synagogue, who convenes the Luton HMD planning group, said normally there are events held locally. This year everyone was encouraged to join the National HMD event online on January 27. This can be viewed at <https://www.hmd.org.uk/ceremony>.

At the end of this event, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis



**Sr Imam Qari Asim MBE of Leeds Makka Masjid joined by friends from other faiths in lighting a candle for the victims of the Holocaust and all the genocides that have occurred since.**

said: "Darkness can only endure when we fail to shine a light. We are the guardians of the fragile flame of our humanity. If each one of us will become that flame, this will be a different world – a world in which light will prevail."

People were invited to put a lighted candle in windows to commemorate all the victims of the Holocaust and all the genocides that have occurred since.

In the UK we enjoy our rights and freedoms. Yet we know there are individuals and communities facing hardships because of who they are. The pandemic and economic crisis have caused deep anxiety and frustrations and have even been exploited to spread division and misinformation. As we look ahead, we must be vigilant to protect the rights and freedoms of all.

# The International Day of Human Fraternity: A Pathway to the Future

Written by

**David Jonathan**

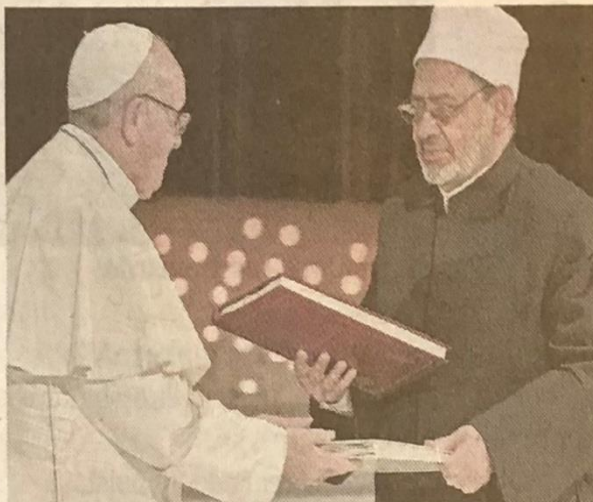
Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

**T**he United Nations (UN) General Assembly decided unanimously on December 21, 2019, that the International Day of Human Fraternity is to be observed on February 4 each year, starting in 2021.

On February 4, 2019, Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, had signed the historic 'Document on Human Fraternity' in Abu Dhabi.

The International Day of Human Fraternity specifically refers to this significant event in Christian-Muslim relations as the inspiration for the date.

The UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) organised an event titled 'A Pathway to the Future' to celebrate this international day for the very first time last week. (<https://>



Pope Francis and Egypt's Al-Azhar Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb after signing documents during the Human Fraternity meeting in Abu Dhabi in February 2019

(Photo: Vatican Media)

[www.unaoc.org/humanfraternityday/](http://www.unaoc.org/humanfraternityday/)). The event highlighted the principles and values included in the Document of Human Fraternity as a pathway to the future to rebuild a better world.

In Luton, Dr Nazia Khanum, chair of UNA Luton, and Prof Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, called upon religious and political leaders, locally as well as globally, to bring an end to wars, conflicts, hunger, poverty, injustice, oppression, environmental decay, and to work towards a more

equitable society, restoring the dignity of creation.

Monsignor Kevin McGinnell, Catholic Dean of Luton, said that religious hatred in the name of nationalism and identity politics is increasing globally, but locally, faith communities are confronting together the unprecedented crisis caused by the pandemic. This shows how dialogue and co-operation among different religions can fortify improved awareness and understanding of the common values shared by all humankind.

## 'It's about right versus wrong'

Written by

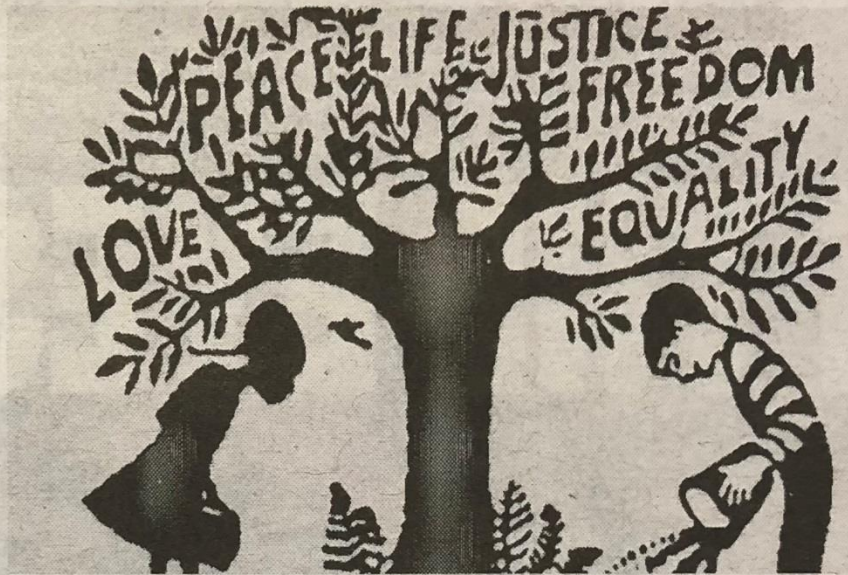
**David Jonathan**

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

Last year, 2020, marked the 25th anniversary of Racial Justice Sunday (RJS) in Britain and Ireland. Unfortunately, this significant anniversary had also coincided with the tragic killing of African-American George Floyd and the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement with its various protests worldwide.

Not only RJS or BLM protests, but the ongoing pandemic also continues to highlight the existing inequalities in our society; the poorer, more marginalised communities are disproportionately impacted by this pandemic. Sadly these are largely Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) in an online webinar last week



Daily Theology (dailytheology.org)

discussed what steps need to be put in place for significant action towards justice, equity and inclusion.

It featured some of the key voices from different church denominations, exploring what racial justice looks like in church and society.

It was shown in advance of Racial Justice Sunday on Sunday, February 14. It proclaimed that this day is for everyone to Remember, Reflect and Respond to racial justice matters through prayer and action.

Churches Together in Lu-

ton, in a statement, encouraged all individual churches in Luton to mark and highlight this day.

Resources can still be found at <https://ctbi.org.uk/rjs-2021-resources/>

Rev Al Sharpton, who had given a eulogy at George Floyd's funeral, had said in an interview: "This is not about black versus white, it's about right versus wrong.

"We are not saying black lives matter more, we are saying black lives matter as much, equally and should be treated the same."

## Pledges of support as a new vicar is warmly welcomed to Luton

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

**D**uring the pandemic, countless individuals have nurtured community care and compassion. Faith leaders have worked in effective partnership with others to respond to the needs in our town.

In such challenging times, it is exciting to welcome Rev Martyn Shea as the new vicar of St Hugh's Church in Lewsey Farm.

Prior to coming to St Hugh's, Martyn was vicar of St Mark's Church, St Helier on Jersey, having previously served in Stamford and London. He is married to Liz, herself a singer/songwriter and worship leader.

In the online Welcome and Licensing Service, talking of 'Hope' and 'Realism', Rev Dave Middlebrook, arch-



From L to R: Rt Rev Dr Alan Smith, bishop of St Albans Diocese, Rev Dave Middlebrook, archdeacon of Bedford, and Rev Martyn Shea, the new vicar of St Hugh's Church in Lewsey Farm.

deacon of Bedford, invited Martyn to journey along and bring alive the hope of the Christian Gospel, amidst the realism of the challenging life experiences in the world.

He expressed hope, excitement and anticipation in welcoming Martyn for a fruitful ministry in Luton and said: "Christian faith is sure hope not a blind optimism - we inhabit hope, we dwell in it, we are gifted with it."

The Rt Rev Dr Alan Smith, bishop of St Albans Diocese,

blessed Martyn's appointment and invited over 100 people present online to share the promise of supporting Martyn in his ministry in Luton.

For and on behalf of Luton's different faith communities, Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, said: "I pray Martyn will be able to lead the church with devotion, energy and love, and will also be able to contribute to the well-being of the wider community in Luton. We warmly welcome him."



## Near Neighbours supports those most at risk during the pandemic

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

**N**ear Neighbours (NN) programme has been helping voluntary organisations through its Community Covid Relief Grants to support those most at risk from the virus.

It has also been communicating public health information, encouraging vaccine take up and supporting communities to tackle the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on certain groups.

Last week, NN held an online event sharing "Stories of Hope" during the pandemic.

Over 25 organisations took part in it. It was inspirational to hear many positive stories.

NN also held an online event "Covid Cash Course". It covered general entitlements, rights, government



**Ulrike Hunt of 'The Feast' Programme speaking at a Near Neighbours event before lockdown.**

and charitable support, budgeting, help with bills, loans, debt and money strategies for people to get through these critical times.

In the following week, it will be hosting a "Diverting to Digital" event helping peo-

ple to become aware of the online platforms and showing how to use social media, setting up a website etc.

Through another youth leadership programme titled "Ripple Effect", NN will seek to resource young people to become agents of positive change, while also focusing on their well-being and resilience.

For more info or to join these events, please email [near.neighbours\\_luton@btconnect.com](mailto:near.neighbours_luton@btconnect.com) or text 07930601640.

Luton NN coordinator Kim Greig said: "Despite lockdown restrictions, so many organisations, community groups and faith institutions have continued to provide not only food and medicine distribution, but also human support and companionship to many people.

"We will continue to work with everyone to build stronger and united communities."

# Shopping choices and spreading the word can drive long-term change

Written by

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Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

**F**or two weeks each year at the end of February and start of March, thousands across the UK come together to share the stories of the people who grow our food, mine our gold and who grow the cotton in our clothes, people who are often exploited and underpaid.

Fairtrade Fortnight 2021 has ended just last weekend. It felt very different this year.

Thakor Morarji, member of Luton's multi-faith Fairtrade Steering Group, said: "We knew that physical campaigning and meeting people would not be possible, but we want to continue to support Fairtrade through this time.

"We have the power to drive long-term change, not only with our shopping



choices but also with our support in spreading the message.

"We just have to do this a little differently in 2021."

Prof Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, said: "The Covid-19 pandemic has shown us more than ever how interconnected we are globally.

"This interconnection is at the very heart of the Fairtrade message."

The Fairtrade Foundation UK announced the fortnight theme as "Choose the World You Want – Climate, Fairtrade & You".

It highlighted how climate change affects farmers and

workers in countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Honduras, who have done the least to contribute to climate change, but are disproportionately affected by it.

The climate crisis is an immediate and ever-increasing threat. With the emergence of the global pandemic, the challenges that farmers face now are bigger than ever before.

The focus therefore on "Climate, Fairtrade & You" is crucial. For more information please visit <https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/get-involved/current-campaigns/fairtrade-and-climate-justice>

# They came from 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow' to fulfil their dreams

Written by

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**P**recious Pearls was one of the many events commemorating International Women's Day last week in Luton.

Funded by Near Neighbours Programme, this event was held online by Ghar se Ghar (Hindi/Urdu words meaning 'Home to Home') – a Luton-based women's co-op group. The event theme was 'Women Somewhere Over The Rainbow'.

In the event, women shared stories about how they had come from 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow' (distant parts of the world) to Luton, to fulfil their hopes, dreams and aspirations and have made Luton their much-loved home now.

Rev Jo Burke of All Saints Church shared how different

"ANOTHER WORLD IS NOT ONLY POSSIBLE, SHE IS ON HER WAY. ON A QUIET DAY, I CAN HEAR HER BREATHING."

– ARUNDHATI ROY

INDIAN AUTHOR,  
BOKKER PRIZE WINNER



**Niru Kumari Morarji of Luton Sathya Sai Service Organisation at Precious Pearls event.**

faiths have come together to help the refugees in Luton, providing them with winter clothing and English lessons.

Jill Boyd of the Oasis Centre talked of helping women with drop-in sessions and homework clubs.

Faith Merriwether talked of LASE (Luton Against Sexual Exploitation) and the Azalea charity, which is concerned with women's sexual health in Luton.

Elizabeth Chapman of Signposts charity talked of helping the homeless in Luton. Pari Rashid shared how she had started 'Ghar se

Ghar' group in 1990s, which has served hundreds of women over the years. There were other presentations of poetry, singing, piano recital and dance movements using hands only.

Sr Maire Hayes concluded by saying: "Somewhere Over The rainbow, women from diverse cultures and faiths gathered together in Luton to share their experiences of maintaining hope in a world filled with fear and anxiety. Women have made a difference and continue to do so. We are never too small to make a difference."

## Holy day celebrates first day of spring for more than 300 million people

Written by

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Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths

**N**awruz is the Iranian New Year, celebrated by more than 300 million people all around the world, according to the United Nations.

It is a secular holiday for most celebrants that is enjoyed by people of several different faiths, but remains a holy day for Zoroastrian and Baha'i faith communities.

In Luton, the Baha'i faith community celebrates Nawruz with full fervour every year. Due to the lockdown restrictions, the celebrations have been called off this year.

Nawruz marks the first day of spring and is celebrated on the day of the astronomical vernal equinox, which usually occurs on March 21. However, the date can shift either a day



Children from Baha'i community at a previous Nawruz celebration

ahead or behind, based on the movement of the sun and planets. This year, it was on March 20.

In responding to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, Farzad Forghani, of Luton Baha'i community, said: "We all have seen a starting point of the transformation throughout the world.

"Everyone is seeking a better world for everyone and not just for some. The pandemic may have highlighted human suffering, but at the same time we have

also seen how people from diverse backgrounds have united to reach out to one another in the face of such an adversity."

Saluting this community spirit, Luton Council of Faiths thanks all those who have volunteered to help those in need and greets Luton's Baha'i community a new year in which all may have good health and prosperity.

For more information on Baha'i beliefs, please visit [www.bahaisofluton.org](http://www.bahaisofluton.org)

## Youth leadership training programme is changing communities

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

/// **Ripple Effect - Individual Action, Collective Change** is a youth leadership training programme, delivered last week by Near Neighbours Programme in Luton, which consisted of three learning modules delivered in one three-hour workshop online.

The first module covered prioritising personal care for young people and establishing effective wellbeing and resilience strategies that are appropriate to young people's contexts and create a shared language around mental health, and signposting to relevant resources for further support.

The second module was about understanding one's own identity and role in the world. Its aims were to devel-



Kim Greig, Luton Near Neighbours programme co-ordinator delivering one of the Youth Training events before the pandemic

op participants' confidence around personal identity and to learn together about the avenues through which they can make a positive social change for themselves and for others in the society.

The third module covered employment rights, applying for work during the pandemic and learning to work with financial frameworks and budgeting tools. This was to help young people develop skills for securing and succeeding in employment, build an understanding of and share information on how to manage money.

All young participants are

given an interactive workbook to continue over the next six weeks of self-working and self-learning. The workbook includes tools and resources, practical exercises, written guidance and checklists. Participants are encouraged to create 'mini pods' coming together regularly on Zoom with others, using the work book to explore progress.

Kim Greig, Luton Near Neighbours programme co-ordinator, said: "It was aimed at resourcing young people to become agents of change for themselves and their communities."

## We all have a part to play in changing our world for the better

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**E**aster is the most important Christian festival celebrating Jesus' resurrection, which reminds of the eternal hope that death does not have the last word on human destiny.

This message has a particular significance in times like these when so many are left bereaved for the loss of their loved ones due to the pandemic.

Reflecting on the Easter message of rebirth and renewal, Right Reverend Richard Atkinson, OBE, Bishop for Luton and Bedford, said: "The Easter promise is not that challenges go away, but we are able to see through them with hope and promise. There is light in the darkness, decay does give way to new life. The risen Jesus



**Bishop Richard Atkinson and Susan Lousada, High Sheriff of Bedfordshire (below) at the virtual Easter Service kindly produced by HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis (top).**

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

In the last 12 months, HM

Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis has been keeping in touch with the people of Bedfordshire virtually through her weekly online messages, periodic virtual services and via regular contact with voluntary organisations, businesses and faith, health and educational establishments.

In her virtual Easter service, she said: "In this moment of our history as we stand at the gateway to a new beginning, and at Easter, which brings the message of renewal, may we all reflect on the possibilities of changing our world for the better and the part that each of us can play. My thanks to all who have pointed the way to a better place. Happy Easter."

# First ever British Indian Christian appointed to prestigious office

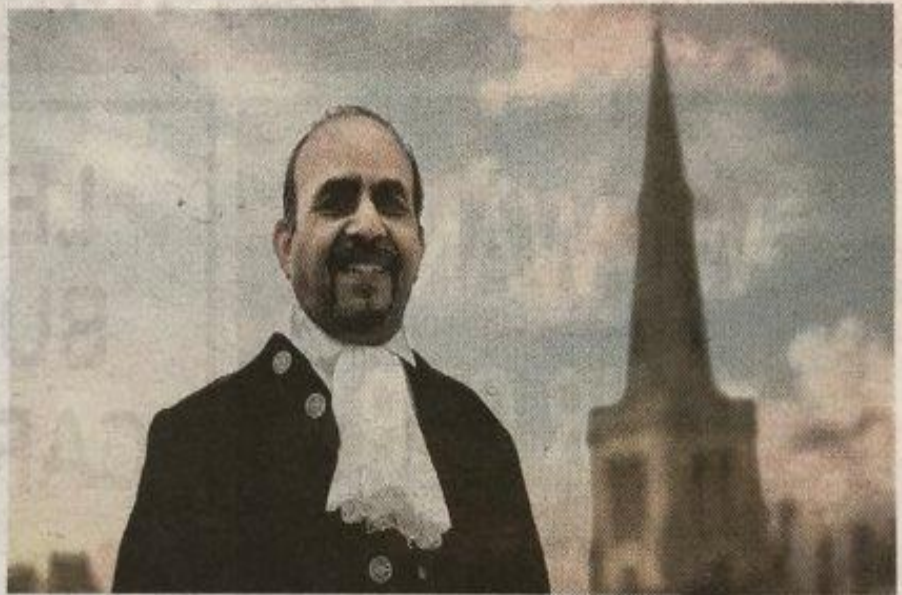
Written by

**David Jonathan**

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

Last week, Mr Eric Masih was sworn in as the High Sheriff of Bedfordshire 2021-2022 at a virtual service of reading and prayers during which he was blessed by the Bishop of Bedford. He is the first ever British Indian Christian to hold one of the most ancient, honorary and ceremonial positions in this county.

Congratulating and wishing him well, the outgoing High Sheriff Susan Lousada, whose entire year has been in the lockdown, said that we have faced one of the darkest times in the recent history, but this year is also a reminder of just how generous and caring the people and communities of Bedfordshire are, who have helped her distribute more than 1,800



Mr Eric Masih, newly appointed High Sheriff of Bedfordshire 2021-2022

digital devices as part of her campaign to combat digital poverty. She said: "I leave with my heart bursting with pride and gratitude."

Thanking Susan Lousada for her contributions, the newly appointed High Sheriff Eric Masih said: "I will promote the peace, wellbeing and prosperity of the county and all its people. The unforeseen effects of the Covid-19 have brought to the surface financial, social

and emotional hardships faced by many throughout the county. The focus of my year will evolve around tackling poverty, promoting youth work and community cohesion. I passionately feel through the work of our local voluntary groups we can start to move towards the recovery phase."

Luton Council of Faiths congratulates and wishes him well in his commitment to serve with integrity.

## Meals and vaccinations bring the community closer together

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**B**aisakhi or Vaisakhi is the harvest festival of Punjab (north-west India), which people across religions celebrate.

In Bangladesh it is known as 'Boishakhi' and is celebrated vibrantly as a social and cultural festival.

For Sikhs, the day is also associated with the laying down of the foundation of the Khalsa community (the body of fully initiated Sikhs) by the Sikh Tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. The Khalsa was created with the 'Panj Pyare' – the five beloved ones – each one embodying the virtues of compassion, righteousness, courage, commitment and oneness.

In normal times, devotees wear new attire and visit Gurudwaras (Sikh temples)



Left to right: Mr Baljit Singh, president Guru Nanak Gurdwara being vaccinated (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali) and Mr Sanjeev Kumar MBE delivering hot meals at Mary Seacole Housing Association

to offer prayers. However, owing to the pandemic, half a million British Sikhs marked the Vaisakhi festival under coronavirus lockdown restrictions for the second year running.

Sanjeev Kumar MBE, General Secretary Guru Ravidass Sangat Luton, has been distributing hot meals, food parcels and personal protective equipment. He said: "During the pandemic, Sikhs have shown their compassion and commitment by serving their local communities with langar – free kitchens – serv-

ing everyone, regardless of their background, recognising humanity's oneness."

Guru Nanak Gurudwara Luton decided the best way to celebrate Vaisakhi was by holding a vaccination clinic. A Sikh volunteer, Gurch Randhawa, professor of diversity in public health at the University of Bedfordshire, said: "What better service than opening up a pop-up clinic that reaches out to anybody of any religion. We have had Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, all coming in to be vaccinated."



## Youth council reach out to help support the well-being of their peers

Written by

**Ryad Khodabocus**

Luton Council of Faiths

**A** group of young people from the Luton Youth Council recently engaged in a project called 'Mental Health Well-being Bags'.

Data shows that young people's mental health has worsened substantially during the pandemic. The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey that has been monitoring the social impact of Covid-19, has found that young people are more likely than other age groups to report that lockdown has made their mental health worse.

Young people's well-being was already a concern in the UK before Covid, with a rise in numbers reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression, not enjoying day-to-day activities and a significant



Mental Health Well-being Bags being prepared

increase in the number reporting an inability to concentrate.

With that report in mind, this group of young people was keen to find a way to support as many peers as possible.

They came up with a care package, filled with things known to aid mental health, such as positive aspirations, recipe cards, therapeutic colouring, card for origami or other craft purposes, and modelling clay for those who

like to fiddle or mould.

These young people from the Youth Council reached out to all 13 high schools in the Luton area and eight engaged with them, wanting to support their students.

Luton Youth Council is proud that a total of 546 Mental Health Well-being Bags have been distributed.

The project has been funded by the Near Neighbours programme and supported by Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths.

## Faith and religion has seen us through

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**L**uton Sathya Sai Service organisation invited people of all faiths and none to join in its national online event to mark Human Values Day on Saturday, April 24 - [www.humanvaluesday.org](http://www.humanvaluesday.org)

Speakers and contributors from different faiths, community organisations and charity initiatives highlighted how during the pandemic, the true character of our society has been revealed; people have looked out for each other and significant contributions have been made by faith communities.

An estimated 63% of people aged 65+ in England and Wales, who are considered elderly and vulnerable, say they have a religion. In a year



Image from an earlier Human Values Day event before the pandemic

where human connections and support systems people usually rely on have been fractured by lockdowns and social distancing, the role of faith communities and places of worship has remained vital in sustaining individuals, communities and also public and voluntary sector institutions and organisations, particularly in places like Luton where 78% of people are religiously affiliated.

Commending people's faith in action, Thakor Morarji, a member of Luton

Sathya Sai Service organisation, who is also one of the most active and founding members of Luton Food Bank, said: "Every year we mark April 24 as a day to celebrate and raise awareness about the values within each of us, values that are the very core of our human nature.

"We hope that by bringing to attention the need to practice human values in our lives, each one of us can become a beacon of hope and bring positive change in our families, communities, and the world at large."

## Eid Mubarak to all Muslims

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

**E**id al-Fitr, also called the Festival of Breaking the Fast is a religious holiday celebrated by Muslims worldwide that marks the end of the month-long dawn-to-sunset fasting of Ramadan.

Throughout the month of Ramadan, Muslims donate to charities and contribute to the community's well-being.

Luton's Discover Islam Centre, since it started in 2011, has been initiating and supporting various projects of community care and well-being. Despite being financially impacted by Covid-19 with many of its donors unable to support as much as they previously have, it has managed to carry out

and support some amazing projects in response to the pandemic; providing support to the most vulnerable in our community.

In just the first 10 days of Ramadan it had provided 1,370 meals to those in need, welcomed 118 visitors to the centre and provided 69 families with food parcels.

Last week, it organised Fastathon - Go Hungry Challenge inviting people of all backgrounds to fast for a day and donate the money towards breakfast provisions for children in need during the summer.

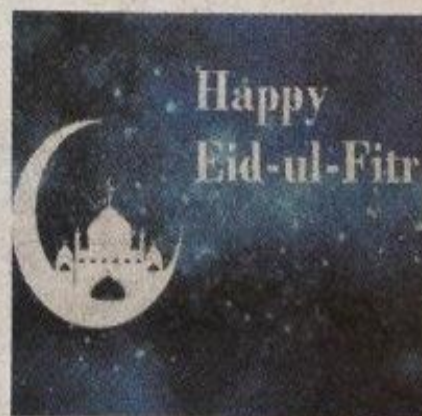
Many Muslims donated to Human Relief Foundation as part of the campaign 'Leave a legacy of faith during this Ramadan'.

Teaming up with Families Relief, Crisis Aid and to help feed the hungry in town, Inspire FM or-

ganised the socially distanced Walk at Wardown, requesting people to get sponsorships for their walk to raise money for charities.

Several other organisations have been supported by Luton's Muslim communities, including Lantern, Luton Food Bank, Diverse FM, Luton Learning Link, Courtney Foundation and Mitalee Youth Association to help those in need in our town.

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



## We must stand together in the face of world atrocities

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

It is with sadness we watch the situation in Israel and Palestine escalating and the suffering of citizens throughout the region.

"You don't need to be a Muslim to stand up for Gaza, you just need to be human" was one of the poignant slogans in the Luton solidarity demonstration, held outside the town hall last week. Several other demonstrations have started worldwide, after the attack on east Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest place for Muslims, as the Palestinians opposed the planned evictions of the Sheikh Jarrah area.

The Luton demonstration saw hundreds of people and several faith leaders raise their concerns and offer prayers for the peace in the



Freedom for Palestine

region. Two of Luton's MPs urged the UK government to take immediate action in demanding an end to the flagrant violation of human rights and international law in Palestine.

Speakers expressed concerns that the situation in Palestine now is not a matter of religion. It is a matter of apartheid, ethnic cleansing, oppression and violence against the Palestinians.

Jews, Christians and Muslims with shared Abrahamic heritage were called to unite against oppression and injustice. It is a matter of human rights. The right

to live freely and worship freely. The right to live in a house you built. A house you worked hard to turn into a home.

Luton Council of Faiths has always unequivocally condemned attacks on any place of worship. Such attacks are to be condemned in the strongest terms. Hatred targeting any community because of its faith and belief is a scourge that mustn't be and cannot be tolerated.

Together, we must strengthen our resolve to continue working together for peace and unity in our world.

## Making a difference in the lives of young people

Written by

**Ryad Khodabocus**

Luton Council of Faiths

**T**he topic of mental health has been discussed far and wide, especially in relation to the lasting effects of the coronavirus pandemic on young people. The Luton Youth Council, in partnership with Luton Council of Faiths, Grassroots and Our Minds Matter, set out to work on a project that would actively make a difference in the lives of young people in Luton.

After six months of working through countless setbacks due to lockdown restrictions, the first session of the mental health peer support project took place last weekend. Young people from five different high schools came together to receive accredited Mental Health First Aid training, lasting seven



hours. The 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 an individual who you may be concerned for, which were the key learning objectives for those who participated. More sessions are planned as part of the project, increasing its outreach to approximately 33 young people in Luton. They will be encouraged to use their acquired skills to help others in their respective schools.

Nitin Verma, leading the project and who was one of

those young people in Luton who had the privilege to meet their Royal Highnesses Prince William and Duchess Kate Middleton a few years ago during their mental health tour in Luton, said that: "With the current climate we find our communities in – it has never been more important to educate ourselves on how best to support those around us with mental health-related issues. Running this project gave me a way to actively support young people like myself in Luton, which in turn is helping the same young people to help others. It's a chain reaction which keeps on giving."

## Black Lives Matter - one year on

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

It is one year since George Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis (US).

To commemorate this and to refresh our commitment to the racial justice and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) held a George Floyd Service of Reflection at 7pm on May 25.

Several eminent church leaders from across different Christian denominations contributed in the service.

In a symbolic act of remembrance, school pupils placed candles beneath the cross at the church altar followed by a minute's silence.

Highlighting that we are people of equal worth and



From top left to right: Rev Les Isaac OBE, CEO Ascension Trust, His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos of Coptic Orthodox Church, The Rt Rev Dr John Perumbalath, Bishop of Bradwell and other contributors at the George Floyd Service of Reflection

value and repenting that we have not been fair, just and equitable, Bob Fyffe, general secretary, CTBI, wrote and ushered prayers asking God's help and grace to loosen our institutions from the

grip of institutional racism, to rid us of our biases and prejudices.

In Luton, a special meeting of faith leaders was convened by Luton Council of Faiths in which Pas Vincent Cox of Luton-based New Testament Church of God, shared about an Interdenominational Commission on Racial Justice of Christian faith leaders launched by Churches Together in Luton. He said this is to discern, define and understand how and why black communities often end up at the bottom of the upside down pyramid of the so-called BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) communities. This is about identifying and articulating disadvantages that black communities face.

He said: "We need to be mindful of the fact that real change may bring pain and we must be ready to confront it."

## Farewell to Andrew Prasad

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

In a recently held farewell service, it was time to celebrate and thank Rev Dr Andrew Prasad for his services as he retires after almost 13 years as moderator of the Thames North Synod of the United Reformed Church (URC).

Thames North Synod covers Luton & Dunstable URC pastorate and for over two decades has been supporting the peace and reconciliation work of Grassroots, in partnership with Luton Council of Faiths.

During the service, people described Andrew as being the 'Best Boss'. He has a listening ear, reflecting mind, visionary and strategic thinking. He was also described as a good shepherd, guiding light and the



Thank you Rev Dr Andrew Prasad and URC Thames North Synod for your support to Grassroots Luton

best pastor, with patience kindness, humility, passion for justice, perseverance, endurance and, above all, simplicity.

In his 43 years of his Christian ministry and service, Rev Dr Andrew Prasad

had previously served the Church of North India from 1978-89 and the Council for World Mission (CWM) from 1989-99. During 1999-2008, he had served local churches and was then appointed as the first ever URC Thames North Synod moderator from ethnic minority background – a north Indian Christian.

Rev Canon David Lawson, chair of Grassroots Programme, said: "We have much to thank Andrew for, but also for the ongoing support from the URC Thames North Synod. As one of our partners, their support has been critical to building a more cohesive and peaceful community in Luton."

He added: "Retirement for a Christian minister is only a transition from one form of ministry to another. We wish Andrew a long, happy and fulfilling retirement."

For all that has been, thanks. To all that shall be, yes!

# Interfaith event brought people together and focused on building a better world after the pandemic

Written by

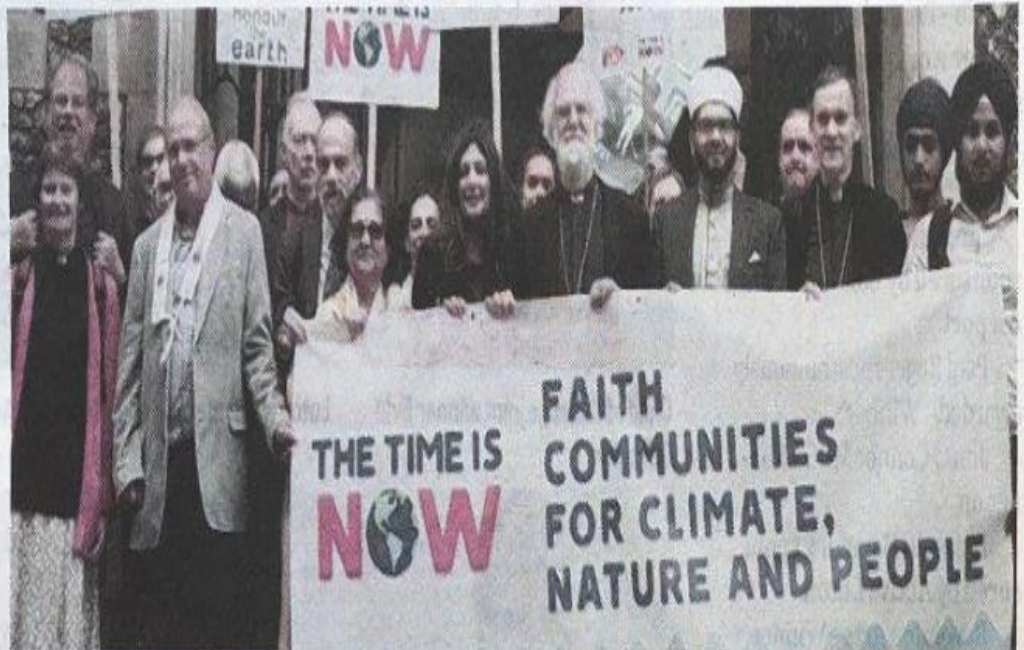
**David Jonathan**

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

**C**AFOD-led G7 interfaith event on the theme of "Building a better world after the pandemic" brought people of all faiths together in an act of witness, at an event streamed live from Truro Cathedral (Cornwall), to send messages and prayers to the G7 leaders that we expect green, sustainable and fair recovery plans from the crisis, which leave no one behind.

More than 75 of Britain's biggest charities - through 'Crack the Crisis Coalition' <https://crackthecrisis.org/#join> - have mobilised over 80,000 people to join in the #waveofhope campaign to showcase that through collective action hope arises.

Joining these national efforts, Luton also played its



Faith Communities for Climate, Nature and People, before the pandemic

part. In an ecumenical event of Grassroots, reflecting on the Catholic Encyclical Laudato Si, Sr Maire outlined Pope Francis's vision for an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, protecting nature and fostering sustainable development. Explaining 'affective conversion', she said we must move away from thinking too much and feeling too little. To pro-

tect the earth we must love the earth. We must create an economy that no longer idolises profit but the integrity of creation and the well-being of all the people.

Luton Council of Faiths brought together over 30 different faith leaders, to reflect on how can climate change be racist. Jeremy Williams, Luton based writer-campaigner and award-winning blogger - [report/ - in his presentation shared how the world's richest countries with the highest carbon footprints will be least affected and the poorest countries with the least carbon footprints are facing the greatest risks. This is a major social and racial justice issue.](https://earthbound.</a></p>
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His book "Climate Change Is Racist: Race, Privilege and the Struggle for Climate Justice" is available online.



## The mental health of our young people matters

Written by

**Ryad Khodabocus**

Luton Council of Faiths

**A** group of young people from Luton Sixth Form College, Challenge Girls, Lealands High and the Luton Youth Council recently were featured on BBC Look East in a project around youth mental health.

The project involved a partnership between Luton Council of Faiths, Grassroots Programme, Luton Youth Council and Our Minds Matter to pull things together to make this project happen. The project was led by young Nitin Verma who was mentored by Luton Council of Faiths.

The BBC took an interest in our local young people's views on mental health and why they were doing the Mental Health First Aid Programme. Many explained



Nitin Verma on BBC camera

how the lockdown has had a bigger impact on their mental health, the feeling of isolation, exams pressure and uncertainties.

The project has trained 33 young people as mental health ambassadors with an accredited Mental Health First Aid qualification. The aim is for our young people to offer peer to peer support

in schools while many joined also to understand their own mental health and help people in their immediate environment. This project have been made possible with the support of the Near Neighbours Programme supporting a variety of projects across faiths communities.

## Praise for the Windrush generation who have built a legacy in UK

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**W**indrush Day took place on June 22 - a special day to remember when about 500 migrants from the Caribbean arrived at Tilbury Docks in Essex in 1948.

It's been more than 70 years since the Empire Windrush ship sailed to Britain, and now an estimated 500,000 people live in the UK who arrived between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries.

Many of them have experienced racism and discrimination. Still, their positive contributions are a testament to their resilience and fortitude.

Luton councillor Jacqui Burnett said: "It is worth remembering that our NHS would not have survived



without the Windrush generation and its descendants."

Luton North MP Sarah Owen said: "This year more than ever we've rightly paid tribute to NHS workers from home and abroad. I've applied for a parliamentary debate on the fantastic contribution of overseas workers to the NHS and will continue pushing this government to stop penalising people who come to this country to care for our sick, elderly and vulnerable."

After raising the Windrush flag over the town hall

on June 22, in the annual civic ceremony organised by African Caribbean Community Development Forum (ACCDF) on Windrush Day, Pas Vincent Cox, of The New Testament Church of God, said: "Thirteen days after that first Windrush arrival, the NHS was founded. My own parents worked in the NHS and London transport for over 40 years each. I am a legacy of Windrush. Despite facing overt and covert racism, oppression and stereotyping, the Windrush legacy has become an integral part of British society, from culture to politics, commerce to sport and religion and the sciences."

He concluded: "Here in Luton, I want to encourage us to build on the Windrush legacy by developing our community bond, educational, economic and political strength and our civic duties. We are great; we are leaders. Let us lead."

## We need to change the way we do things to help save the planet

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots

**T**he UK will host the UN Climate Change COP26 Conference in Glasgow from November 1-12.

People are therefore (<https://faithfortheclimate.org.uk>) called to acknowledge our sacred responsibility to care for and protect the earth's climate for future generations.

The United Reformed Church (URC) is also committed to caring for God's creation. In Luton and Dunstable members from five different URCs took part in an online Climate Sunday service (<https://www.climatesunday.org/>) led by URC minister Rev Heather Whyte.

The service was creative, engaging, very well presented and thought provoking.

Using colourful videos



**Rev Heather Whyte, United Reformed Church (URC) minister in Luton and Dunstable**

depicting creation's beauty, Heather said: "Our actions have already set in motion the end of creation. Yet, it does not have to be that way. We need to change the way we do things."

Highlighting 'what can we do?' Heather pointed out we can change how we eat and produce food.

We must manage our oceans better, re-establish wildlife and biodiversity, reduce dependence on cars, stop paving gardens, use few-

er pesticides, create our own compost and grow our own food. Choose local produce and travel less to cut our carbon footprint.

Use LED lightbulbs and sustainable energy providers, and, where possible, turn down the heating by one degree.

Buy less and repair, reuse, recycle more.

"All these suggestions may seem prohibitive," she said, "but we must remember that our way of life is changing the planet's ability to sustain life.

"As people of faith, not only do we have a message of hope, but we must be the hope," she concluded.

Heather urged all to sign up to 'The Time is Now' campaign (<https://thetimeisnow.uk>). It urges government to take steps for environmental sustenance for the sake of those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change at home and abroad.

## Voices from Srebrenica: Online book event

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

In July 1995, when the town Srebrenica, in the hills of eastern Bosnia, fell to Serbian forces, 12,000 Muslim men and boys fled seeking safe territory. Hunted for six days, more than 8,000 were captured, killed at execution sites and later buried in mass graves.

With such harrowing personal narratives by survivors, a book (available on Amazon) titled "Voices from Srebrenica: Survivor Narratives of the Bosnian Genocide" provides eyewitness accounts of the Bosnian genocide, which is called the worst atrocity on European soil since World War 2.

In commemorating UK National Srebrenica Memorial Day (<https://srebrenica.org.uk/>), the University of



From left to right: Professor Helen Connolly, Hasan Hasanovic (survivor), professor Ann Petrilu (author) and Allan Little (BBC war correspondent)

Bedfordshire hosted an online event with the authors of this book, Professor Ann Petrilu and Hasan Hasanovic. In writing this book, they have revealed stories of individual trauma, loss and resilience.

Professors Jon Silverman and Helen Connolly co-chaired the event. Dr Emir Suljagic, director of the Srebrenica Memorial Centre, and Allan Little, BBC war correspondent added enriching perspectives to the Bosnian genocide.

Srebrenica has become a world symbol of the horrific consequences that can result from inaction. The collective failure of the international community to intervene and prevent the genocide has been acknowledged by the late Kofi Annan, the former secretary-general of the United Nations.

This is also echoed by the late Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, who said: "We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the centre of the universe."

## Leadership was showing the courage to step forward in the first place

Written by

**Ryad Khodabocus**

Luton Council of Faiths

**T**he Euro 2020 final aftermath shame requires us as a nation to do some deep soul searching, where we are going as a country and how we want to shape our future. At his age, a young man like Bukayo Saka would probably be hanging out with his mates or doing what a young 19-year-old would do. Yet he took an entire nation's responsibility. That's leadership. Why don't we see his strength of courage? Today we need leadership on valuing character strengths. We can all have our views, but we were not in the hot seat and it doesn't mandate bad behaviour or hate, especially in a civilised society.

Just writing statements won't cure such a disease as racism in our society. Eng-



England's Bukayo Saka with manager Gareth Southgate after the Euro 2020 final Photo: Reuters/Laurence Griffiths

land has a history of empire, and we cannot disregard that! But we can make it right. Show the right leadership from the top. Until England has serious leadership and education on humanity, ethnicity, race, religion, cultures and no tolerance for racism, the vile racist messages and acts

will carry on, poisoning the next generation. Integration is two-way traffic. But most importantly, we lost the most important thing – good manners, correct behaviour and the right courtesies in our society across communities. Guess what! It starts at home. So, let's bring it home.

Imagine if we help to nurture people and help them to build that resilience through setbacks through love and adding hearts, what would we be able to achieve? Why don't we see love as an investment? The science is even strong on that! This will take us a long way. Peace and performance will only happen when love cures the heart.

In love there is always winning and mutual aid. We might lose the game but that doesn't stop us from winning hearts! Well done the Three Lions and thank you especially Gareth Southgate for your leadership. Let's add and win hearts.

## Retired Methodist leader has left a lasting legacy and will be missed

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths

**G**oodbyes and farewells are never easy and yet they are integral part of human life. It is about moving on and evolving with newer situations, newer circumstances.

After 12 years of her dedicated service, Rev Julie Bradshaw retired as a High Town Methodist Church minister and as the circuit superintendent of the South Bedfordshire Methodist Circuit.

At her last church service she thanked the High Town Methodist Church for a generous gift and for sharing the journey with her. She said: "It's been a difficult year-and-a-half for us all and in many ways it's a strange time to be taking my leave. I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to know people in the churches



Rev Julie Bradshaw, Methodist minister at one of the online church events

and in the other faith communities of Luton. I will take fond memories of Luton with me in my next phase of life."

At an online event with Luton's different faith leaders and representatives, Julie said time has flown by for her. She came to Luton Council of Faiths expecting opportunities to discuss faith issues. However, she has been pleasantly surprised during her tenure, spanning over a decade in Luton, that talking just about our faith was not the primary focus. It has always been about being good neighbours to one another and responding to-

gether, to the challenges and other difficult circumstances as and when they arise. On a lighter note, she said she loved the good food we enjoyed together from different cultures at different events. She acknowledged the work of Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots as an integral part of her journey in Luton.

Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, thanked her on everyone's behalf for all her support and encouragement over the years to LCoF and Grassroots. Luton's faith communities wish her well in her future endeavours.

## Developing positive relationships in specific multi-faith areas

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

One of the reasons why the decade of 2011-2021 may just be an important decade in British history is because of the success of the Near Neighbours Programme, which was created by the Church Urban Fund (CUF) and the Church of England Archbishops' Council following the award of £5 million by the Department for Communities and Local Government in February 2011.

Since then, Near Neighbours has established 11 hubs across England, helping to develop positive relationships in specific multi-faith areas through small grants of £250-£5,000, whilst also supporting and resourcing

the growth of new 'social action' and 'social interaction' projects.

In a recently held tenth anniversary celebration in Luton, Kim Greig, Near Neighbour co-ordinator in Luton, shared that during the last 10 years, Luton has seen 287 projects undertaking activities e.g. community gardening, litter picking, music for dementia, horse angels, arts and sports, mental health, first aid training programmes, tackling human trafficking and child sexual exploitation, international women and inter faith week activities, and several other projects involving people from diverse backgrounds, promoting cultural and racial understanding and integration.

Kim said the Near Neighbours Programme, through the Ministry of Housing, Communities

and Local Government, has contributed £728,157 worth of grants to support Luton communities, also during the pandemic and lockdowns.

Elizabeth Carnelley, director, Near Neighbours Programme, said she is proud that the programme, nationally as well as locally, has been at the forefront of confronting the rumours and myths undermining public trust in health authorities and in tested and approved vaccines.

More than 25 Luton organisations, present at the tenth anniversary celebrations held locally, shared their outstanding work of helping people and communities in this town supported by the Near Neighbours Programme. They all unequivocally expressed their gratitude and shouted aloud - thank you Near Neighbours!

## Praise for continuing to keep Luton's diverse faith communities together

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

In 2021, Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) completes 25 years since founded as Inter Faith Forum, and 20 years since registered as independent charity.

It is so well timed to be receiving the Queen's Award for voluntary services in this year.

HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis while presenting the award, said: "It is a great honour for me to present this award on behalf of Her Majesty the Queen. This is the highest award given to volunteer groups in the UK. To win this award is a tremendous achievement and shows the highest recognition of all the volunteers and staff of Luton Council of Faiths.

"With volunteers at the



**HM Lord-Lieutenant Helen Nellis presents the Queen's Award to Luton Council of Faiths**

heart of its activities, Luton Council of Faiths is an exceptionally well-run, high quality organisation and represents the very best example of how well co-ordinated and dedicated volunteers can make a genuine impact on everyone."

High Sheriff of Bedfordshire Eric Masih said the greatest legacy anyone can leave behind is to positively impact the lives of others and LCoF has done exactly that.

Mayor of Luton Cllr Mahmood Hussain thanked LCoF for making Luton stronger and more resilient by keeping Luton's diverse faith communities together.

Cllr Hazel Simmons applauded LCoF for being one of the most stable institutional partners Luton Council has worked with.

LCoF's chair, Zafar Khan, and vice-chair, Gulie Butcher, thanked all for their support, encouragement and goodwill, particularly its progenitor Grassroots Programme, Luton Borough Council and now the support from Bedfordshire and Luton Community Foundation (BLCF) and the London Luton Airport Ltd (LLAL) Community Investment Fund programme.

Thanking God for LCoF's services, using the famous quote, Bishop Richard Atkinson said: "For all that has been, thanks. For all that is to come, Yes!"



## Fun, food and dialogue are helping to channel young people's beliefs

Written by

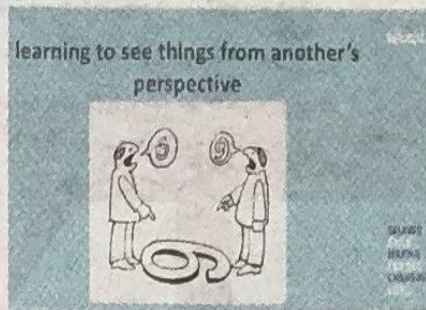
**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**T**he Feast is a youth organisation that brings together young people from different backgrounds for fun, food and dialogue.

At a recently held open evening in Luton talking about community cohesion, Feast Luton development manager Ulrike Hunt 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 co-operation.

"We believe it is possible to create spaces for interaction where we don't end up watering down our own beliefs, yet are able to appreciate and value someone else's



### The Feast's Guidelines for Dialogue and Approach

beliefs, even if we don't own those for ourselves.

"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.

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

Ulrike said: "It was a real privilege to be able to share our passion at our open evening; to talk together about community cohesion in Luton. Our aim is to enable more young people in Luton to meet with others from a different background to be peacemakers and change-makers in our town."

Will you support The Feast in that aim? If you would like to find out more about The Feast, please look at their website [www.thefeast.org.uk](http://www.thefeast.org.uk) or email [ulrike@thefeast.org.uk](mailto:ulrike@thefeast.org.uk)

## Programme gave Umera the confidence to follow her dreams

Written by

**Ryad Khodabocus**

Luton Council of Faiths

**U**mera Fatima, a young talented artist who was a beneficiary of the Near Neighbours Catalyst Youth leadership scheme, in partnership with Luton Council of Faiths and Grassroots programme, was recently commissioned by Revolution Arts to create a public artwork for Bury Park.

This was part of the Date to Share project produced by Shemiza Rashid.

There were many elements to the project, but essentially 50 packs were sent to 50 households across Luton with dates and painting supplies.

The dates were used in a recipe competition while the date stones were washed, painted and sent back to me



**Umera Fatima**

to include in the painting, which is called Covid Blues: an artwork reflecting on the tranquillity and human spirit found amidst the chaos of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Umera also incorporated things the residents of Luton had to say about the pandemic in the face of the portrait.

It was exhibited in Chai

and Chapati in July.

Umera created a hand-made guestbook for diners and guests to write their thoughts about the painting or pandemic.

Umera said: "I never had the confidence to pursue art and was initially studying to become a dietitian. It was my involvement in amazing projects and opportunities across Luton, from the age 17, which gave me the confidence that there was a place for me in the art scene; from being able to perform my spoken word, to being commissioned for poetry and performance, networking with older people who were willing to take me on board or teach me a few things, such as in the leadership programme Catalyst.

"I took a massive leap, and it paid off as I landed a place at the UK's number one art school for undergraduate studies, and am now being paid to do what I love".

## Foundation is creating opportunity and helping the futures of young people

Written by

**Ryad Khodabocus**

Luton Council of Faiths

**T**he Raise Up Foundation is a Luton-based charity, bringing together the knowledge and expertise of grassroots organisations, local stakeholders and relevant partners to support young people and their families in our town.

Luton is a super-diverse, vibrant town with the third youngest population in the country. Our young people are hugely aspirational, though the foundation recognises that many are growing up with significant challenges – 46% of the children in our town are living in poverty and 26% of families are living in relative poverty, impacting on the health, well-being and educational outcomes of our young people. This disadvantage is often compounded



Trustees of The Raise Up Foundation

for those from minoritised communities, who may face additional barriers.

Having launched the charity in July, the foundation has been busy working with local partners to deliver a number of initiatives. This summer the foundation has been buzzing with young people from across Luton's communities. This has included a four-week holiday club for young people, engaging them in a number of fun activities to help develop key transferable skills. These have included interactive workshops around debating, journalism, creative writing and techniques to help trans-

form stress and regulate their emotions. These workshops have run alongside a range of exciting sporting activities, from archery, boxing, fitness and football.

But that's not all! On A-Level results day, the centre opened the door to students, to both celebrate successes and provide advice and guidance to those young people who didn't get the results they were anticipating. In line with the foundation's ambitions to enable aspirations, they have also worked with local GPs and medics to deliver a four-week programme supporting young people in Luton who want to pursue a medical career.

The Raise Up Foundation is committed to ensuring that young people are able to realise their potential with targeted support, guidance and training programmes to equip them with the tools to help overcome these disadvantages.

## Reimagining perceptions and conventions with Kantha-Khatak-k

Written by

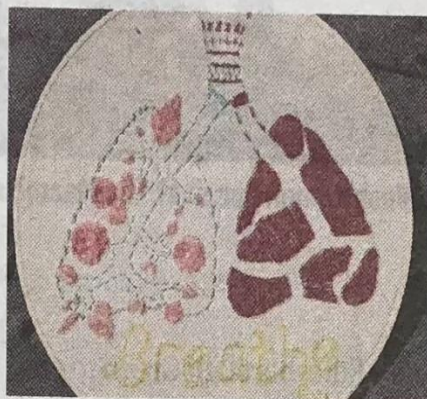
**Ryad Khodabocus**

Luton Council of Faiths

**A** unique performance/installation of kanthas (a south Asian, Bangladeshi form of embroidery) and kathak (south Asian, Indian dance) is narrating local stories originated during covid lockdown.

Kantha-Khatak-k is an installation taking over local community spaces, reimagining perceptions and conventions of the performance stage.

During Covid lockdowns, Amina Khayyam Dance Company (AKDC) continued to engage local people with creative activity by reaching out digitally. The picture (above) shows a traditional kantha/embroidery used by participants to tell their experiences and stories. In this final part of the project the



kanthas were kinetically progressed to kathak dance to a live music score of Borodin's Nocturne, specially adapted to Indian instrumentation.

After its recent site-specific work, Hum in the Heart, AKDC is continuing its development to take highly acclaimed artists in spaces in the heart of communities to experience a better engagement and involvement for local people with what matters and is relevant to them.

With Kantha Katha-k, it will be transforming the space at Dalloway Centre into an experience for audiences where they can walk through the kanthas as they choose

what and how they see the performance.

Artistic director, Amina Khayyam, said: "We're continually exploring and evaluating our relationship with our audiences since the work we make is derived from them. I like to include it into the storytelling and sometimes, performing in the proscenium theatre stages in a venue, you can feel a bit remote, especially as Kathak is a highly audience engaging form where the improvisational aspect works best when you interact with your audiences."

Kantha Katha-k will feature a number of movement vignettes expressing the spectrum of experience of Covid lockdown by local people, told by a creative team featuring internationally-acclaimed artists.

For more information visit [www.aminakhayyam-dance.co.uk](http://www.aminakhayyam-dance.co.uk) or call 07984 656971/07973 718419.

## Creating cohesion and inter-faith relationships for young people

Written by

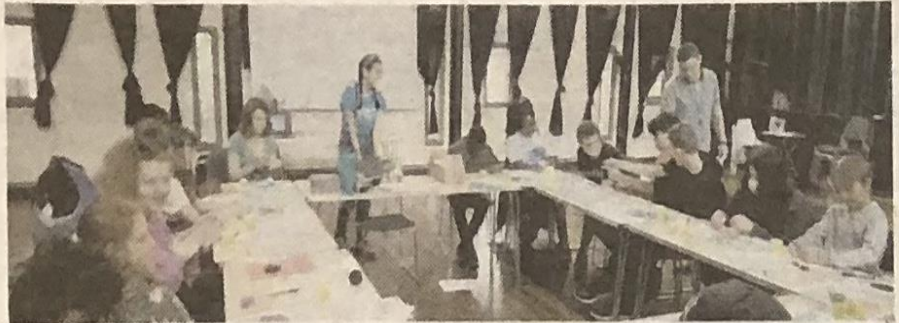
**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

In a recent Summer Day Camp by The Feast Programme, 17 teenagers (Years 7 -11) enjoyed three days of fun activities, team challenges, and dialogue – talking about identity, surmounting challenges and also being change makers in the community.

The Feast's Guidelines for Dialogue (<https://thefeast.org.uk/resources>) created safe and confidential space for young people to discuss and gave them the required confidence to say what they believe, knowing they will be listened to, because it is about learning to listen to one another's opinions with openness and respect.

At the end of the programme, young people presented ideas for a com-



Young participants at The FEAST Summer Programme

munity activity to a panel, rather like in Dragon's Den. Watch this space for an autumn project, where we put into action the winning ideas – a car wash, a bake sale and a talent auction to raise money for local charities, in recognition of the good work they do for our town.

Besides knowing and understanding each other better and learning to discuss their thoughts, opinions, ideas and beliefs, the young people also had lots of fun playing games and doing activities such as the climbing wall at Tokko Youth Centre.

On one of the days, Sophie Gresswell, a local artist,

came in to run an art workshop exploring identity.

The feedback from the young people showed they had lots of fun, but it also helped them to be more confident in expressing their own beliefs, whilst being more open to listen to someone else's ideas.

"Thank you for putting this on," one young person commented. Another said: "I would come again!"

If you would like to find out more about The Feast, please look at their website [www.thefeast.org.uk](http://www.thefeast.org.uk) or email Luton programme coordinator [ulrike@thefeast.org.uk](mailto:ulrike@thefeast.org.uk)

# A time of celebration for our Jewish friends across the community

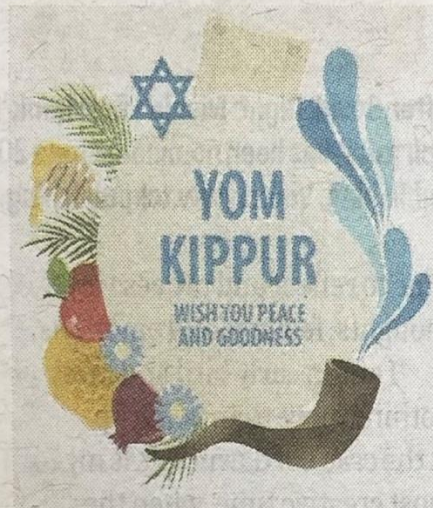
Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

Last week, Jewish friends celebrated 'Rosh Hashanah', the Jewish New Year, followed by 'Yom Kippur', the Day of Atonement, which is the holiest time of the year in Judaism. Its central themes are atonement and repentance through a process of conscientious self-assessment of our behaviour and relationships. The person who fails to secure the forgiveness of others cannot enter into forgiveness from God.

Traditionally, there are five prayers on Yom Kippur and continuous fasting for 25 hours, yet it is the most celebrated of all festivals. The fast is broken with a feast signalled by the sounding of a shofar – a



Yom Kippur decorative symbol

Photo: Getty Images/iStockphoto

ram's-horn trumpet used in Jewish religious ceremonies.

Most of the day is spent in synagogue, but due to huge uncertainties over Covid infections, not everyone is able to go to the synagogue.

Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, said: "We hope for all our Jewish friends, fasting and praying

has been a meaningful time at synagogue or at home. In the light of rapidly increasing Covid-19 infection rates, we hope, wish and pray that all remain safe during and after these holy days and that blessings, joy and peace be upon all our Jewish friends and everyone else."

Five days after Yom Kippur is Sukkot which is more an upbeat, week-long celebration as compared to Yom Kippur, which is more sombre. The word Sukkot commonly translates as feast of Tabernacles or harvest festival and refers to the 40-year period when the children of Israel wandered the desert and lived in temporary shelters. Jewish friends build their own sukkah (a hut-like structure) in their yards as they celebrate with family and friends, enjoying life's simple pleasures and putting luxury into perspective.

## Luton Council of Faiths has come a long way in 25 years

Written by

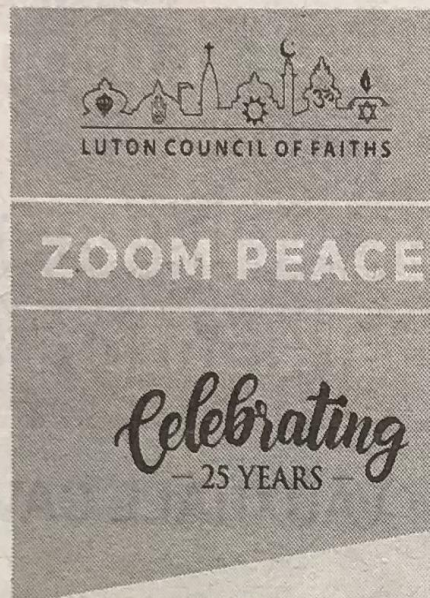
**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

“The tiny mustard seed has grown into a big safe and secure tree,” said Sr Teresa and Sr Margaret of Holy Ghost Catholic Church after watching a colourful presentation by Ryad Khodabocus, commemorating 25 years of Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) at the ‘Zoom Peace’ event held last week on International Day of Peace. Due to Covid-19, this year’s 25th Annual Peace Walk was held virtually as the Zoom Peace event for the second year.

Welcoming all and acknowledging The Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service given to LCoF this year, chair Zafar Khan said: “This award belongs to the people of Luton”.

Lord-Lieutenant of Bed-



**Zoom Peace event Sept 21**

fordshire Helen Nellis congratulated LCoF for all the wonderful work it does.

Later in the programme, a three-minute recorded presentation by a local beekeeper, Colin Hall from Luton Quakers, reminded us that climate change is the biggest challenge facing our world today.

A climate activist, Pushpanath Krishnamurthy, shared he will be walking from London to Glasgow

ahead of COP26 to raise awareness of climate emergencies.

Sujel Miah of Luton Council of Mosques movingly talked of a Peace Garden initiative, planting hundreds of trees across Luton in memory of those died of Covid-19.

Joined by Sam Taylor and Farzad Forghani of Luton Bahai community, Sr Maire Hayes of Grassroots highlighted that environmental issues have a spiritual dimension.

Sandra Miller shared how All Saints Church has been working alongside many others in the town to help refugees.

A young volunteer, Nitin Verma, talked of a Mental Health Peer Support Project he initiated for the benefit of the local young people.

“We were inspired and enriched by the presentations, inputs and reflections shared at this event,” said an event participant.

# Ending racism with a strategy that values and embraces diversity

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

“Diversity is even more diverse now. We are called to be one but not the same”, said the former president of the Methodist Church of Great Britain Rev Dr Inderjit Bhogal OBE who is also the founder of “City of Sanctuary” initiative <https://cityofsanctuary.org/>

Speaking at the recent launch of South Bedfordshire Methodist Circuit Racial Justice Strategy, he said, human beings are wondrously complex and diverse. What makes people different needn't be reduced to certain labels e.g. BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities.

The initialism and the acronym BAME has been growing in prominence, but critiques say it does lump a



**Revs Arlington Trotman (left) and Patrick Kandeh (right) launching South Beds Methodist Circuit Racial Justice Strategy**

lot of minorities together and is used to tick a box.

Considering life isn't black and white, discussions about valuing and embracing diversity in all its shades are important so that we grow in the way we view, perceive and understand the world.

Rev Bhogal said: “Racism is not mere prejudice;

it is prejudice plus power. The only way to tackle is to end it.”

Rev Arlington Trotman and Terence Ilott, members of the South Bedfordshire Methodist Circuit Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee, commended all the committee members as being ‘towers of strength’.

They said working together on the strategy has enabled us all to hear God from our different perspectives. “The value of this document now will not be assessed on the basis of how and what it looks like but how we respond to it in action.”

The strategy document titled All Together was formally presented to the newly appointed circuit superintendent Rev Patrick Kandeh.

Patrick said: “We are making history tonight. It's not the end; not even the beginning. It is the ongoing journey which must continue to progress.”



# Confronting climate change for a better future

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**C**limate change is the biggest challenge facing our world today.

Ahead of COP26, British south Indian climate activist Pushpanath Krishnamurthy (called Push), who is nearly 70 years old, is completing an epic walk for climate justice (400 miles or one million steps) from London to Glasgow. He started on October 2 and hopes to finish on November 2.

Many faith leaders and community members gathered at the footsteps of the Luton Town Hall to cheer him, saying 'Go Push Go'.

Mayor of Luton Cllr Mahmood Hussain said: "With its declaration of a climate emergency, the Luton Council is confronting climate change as a priority and has



**Protesting climate change**

pledged Luton as a carbon neutral town by 2040."

Chair of Luton Council of Faiths Prof Zafar Khan said: "Our gathering today signifies unity of purpose and unity of action for climate justice."

Thanking Push for his efforts, Zafar said: "You represent Luton and we are united in our collective quest for climate justice."

Many other faith leaders contributed what climate justice means in their respective faith communi-

ties and what are they doing about it.

David Jonathan (Johny), working with Grassroots, Near Neighbours and Luton Council of Faiths, said: "As people of faith, we believe God created us as caretakers of the world. Sadly, we have polluted the earth to an extent that it is (in Pope Francis' words) beginning to look like an immense pile of filth.

Push said: "I am overwhelmed by Luton's hospitality. I am encouraged by the immense sense of fraternity shown by Luton.

"Climate change is already happening. It is the poorest people who have done the least to create the problem are suffering its worst impacts. Hence our collective quest for climate justice is much needed."

To support Push, please visit <https://uk.virginmoneygiving.com/GoPushGo>

# Celebrating the autumn Hindu festival that spans nine nights and ten days

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**C**olourful costumes and live music got hundreds of people to dance together, creating a large family and community dance floor for Hindu festival 'Navratri' (literally translates as nine nights) celebrations at Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Hindu Mandir (Temple).

Hindus from different parts of India celebrate it differently.

Those mainly in the east of India celebrate Hindu Mother Goddess Durga's victory over a demon and therefore host ceremonial processions, carrying clay statues of Ma (Mother) Durga to a river, or ocean, while music and prayers are chanted, before statues are immersed and dissolved in the water, signifying the return



**Navratri (Nine-nights) Dance Festival**

of Ma Durga to be one with the Almighty. But for those particularly from Gujarat state in western India, the most characteristic of 'Navratri' celebrations are the folk dances called 'Rasa' and 'Garba' (also called Dandiya), performed using decorative short sticks.

In northern India, it is popular to mark the triumph of Lord Rama over the 10-headed demon king Ravana, who had abducted Rama's wife, Sita. Hence it is called 'Dussehra' which is derived from Sanskrit

words 'dasha' (ten) and 'hara' (defeat). 'Dussehra' celebrations, having been featured in UNESCO's 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity', are focussed significantly around 'Ramleela' – meaning a theatrical re-enactment of Lord Rama's life. It culminates in setting alight huge effigies of Ravana to signify the destruction of evil.

Yogesh Mistry, General Secretary Hindu Temple, said: "May the good conquering evil inspire us all to serve selflessly for the common good".

## A time for celebration for Muslims in the community

Written by

**Ryad Khodabocus**

Luton Council of Faiths

**M**uslims in the world celebrated the Mawlid/Milad or Eid Milad-un-Nabi. Eid means celebration, Milad means birth and Nabi means prophet.

Eid Milad-un-Nabi in this context is an annual celebration to commemorate the birth anniversary of prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and is observed in the month of Rabi-ul-Awwal, the third month of the Islamic lunar calendar on the 12th day, which commences with the sighting of the moon. The occasion also marks the death anniversary of the prophet.

The history of Mawlid goes back to the early days of Islam when people gathered to read poetry and sang



**Mosques procession in Bury Park**

verses to honour prophet Muhammad, his life, noble character, sacrifices and teachings.

Public gatherings customarily take place to mark this day according to various cultures in the Islamic world. In Luton there is a yearly procession in Bury Park, which took place

last week led by the local mosques and joined by local councillors and Rachel Hopkins, Luton South MP.

There are thousands of teachings and sayings of the prophet Muhammad and one of his most famous teachings is: "The best among you is the one who serves humanity".

## It's time to play a part in changing the world for the better

Written by

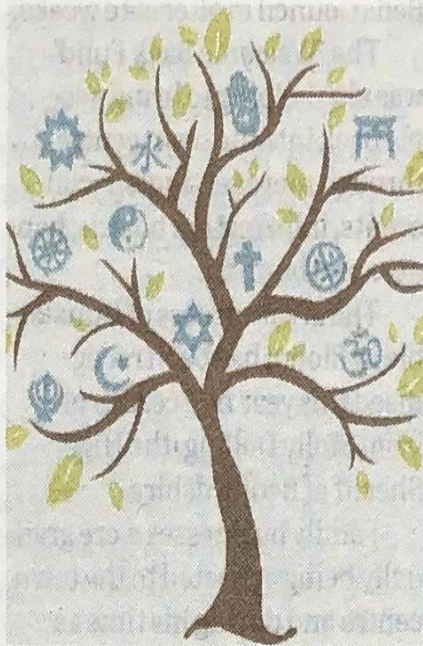
**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**A**s global leaders are in Glasgow this week for the crucial UN Conference on Climate Change, COP26, even a dinosaur is shown talking about climate change.

UNDP's 'Don't Choose Extinction' film shows a dinosaur talking to the UN General Assembly saying: "Listen up people. I know a thing or two about extinction. Going extinct is a bad thing. And driving yourselves extinct is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.

"You've got a huge opportunity right now as you rebuild your economies and bounce back from this pandemic. Don't choose extinction. It's time for you humans to stop making



**Tree with religious symbols**

excuses and start making changes."

In a virtual event "Climate Crisis: Faith in the Environment", jointly organised by United Nations Association-Luton, Luton Council of Faiths, Grassroots and Near Neighbours, nearly a dozen speakers from different faith and belief backgrounds shared the importance of actively preserving the creation and

living in harmony with the environment.

Quoting a UNDP research figure of \$423 billion spent globally every year to subsidise fossil fuels, UNA Luton chair Dr Nazia Khanum, OBE, DL, said: "This could pay for three times the annual amount needed to eradicate global extreme poverty."

Professor Zafar Khan, chair of Luton Council of Faiths, said: "Climate change is much bigger than any of us, but the importance of our actions cannot be underestimated. Faith communities have much to contribute."

As a facilitator and event co-organiser, David Jonathan, also the Near Neighbours programme co-ordinator in Luton, said: "As co-creators, we are all called to be in harmony with nature. Let us give it a chance to reincarnate a greener world."

## Lighting up November with Diwali celebrations in the community

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**D**iwali is a festival of lights. It is celebrated by Hindus, Jains and Sikhs. The word Diwali comes from the Sanskrit word 'Deepavali', meaning "rows of lighted lamps". It marks Lord Rama and Sita's triumphant return to their home after defeating the Demon King Ravana.

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

Jains celebrate it because their founder, Lord Mahavira, had attained 'Moksha', meaning eternal bliss, during Diwali.

In its Diwali greetings, Rajesh Pancholi of BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir (Crescent Road), said: "Diwali is the most vibrant



Mayor of Luton Cllr Mahmood Hussain with Rachel Hopkins, MP Luton South, during Diwali at Luton's fireworks display

festival for millions around the world. The dispelling of darkness with light symbolises the triumph of good over evil.

"As the world continues to grapple with the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic, Diwali's enlightening messages of faith, hope, goodness and community are needed more than ever.

"And so I take this opportunity on this auspicious occasion to reaffirm our bonds of friendship and co-operation in serving the community of Luton, and thank you

Luton Council of Faiths once again for your continuing support and goodwill."

Luton's Near Neighbours Programme said: "May the spirit of Diwali enlighten our body, mind and spirit and enable us to make this world a better place for all."

Prime minister Boris Johnson thanked Britain's Hindus, Sikhs and Jains for their support to the vulnerable over the past 18 months, and said: "Britain would be a lesser country without your contribution." Shubh Diwali!

## Respecting and accepting all religions for Inter Faith Week

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

Inter Faith Week 2021 began on Sunday, November 14. It highlights the contribution of faith groups to society; encourages greater inter faith understanding and cooperation and also dialogue between those of religious and non-religious beliefs.

The government's minister for faith, Kemi Badenoch MP, said: "I am proud to live in a country that recognises and respects the rich history of diverse communities in Britain."

Inter Faith Week is timed to begin each year on Remembrance Sunday to encourage remembering together of the service of those of different faiths and beliefs from the UK and the Commonwealth.



Gurpal Singh Binning, vice president Guru Nanak Gurudwara Luton at Lord Lieutenant's Annual Service of Thanksgiving and Remembrance

Over five million Muslims (including 10,000 Palestinians) had participated on the allied side of the war during WWII and nearly 1.5 million Muslims were killed in action.

Nearly two million Sikh soldiers had sacrificed their lives in the two world wars. In fact Sikhs represented more than 60% of the total Indian force that had fought against the Japanese."

This is why it is important to acknowledge the tremendous contributions that

people of different faiths and ethnicities have made in the making of Great Britain.

However, it is worth stressing they did not sacrifice their lives for the kind of 'nationalism', 'hate' and 'racism' we see all over the world.

Let us hope we will not recreate the mistakes from the past and that we can learn to appreciate the importance of co-existence.

We need one another for the well-being of all and that of our common home, the planet earth.

## Communal kitchen serving up a promise to look after Lutonians

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**O**n the auspicious occasion of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's 552 and birth anniversary, Guru Nanak Gurudwara at Dallow Road has launched a soup kitchen to support the homeless and needy, in partnership with Luton Food Bank.

It started on November 21 and will provide a free hot meal service to all those in need every Sunday 5pm-6pm, in Luton town centre, outside the Central Library.

'Langar' is a communal free meal served at every Gurudwara to everyone, regardless of religion, caste, colour, creed, age, gender or social status. Sikhs donate money or food for the Gurdwara's kitchen. 'Sewa' (service) in cooking and washing up afterwards is an important and



Cllrs Aslam Khan and Javeria Hussain packing away food parcels with Sikh volunteers

integral part of worship for Sikh men and women.

Mr Balwinder Singh Basra, president of Guru Nanak Gurudwara, said: "We see poverty and homelessness increasing in our town, so we decided to serve 'Langar' even outside the Gurudwara."

Mr Baljinder Ahir, soup kitchen coordinator, said: "We are glad to contribute to everyone's efforts, particularly supporting Luton Food Bank, in battling poverty and hunger in our town. We are here not to compete, but to complement others."

Cllrs Aslam Khan and Javeria Hussain said it is heartening to see so many in our town caring for fellow Lutonians.

The Sikh religion and the concept of 'Langar' as a symbol of charity and equality, was founded in Northern India (state of Punjab) in the 15th century by Guru Nanak Dev Ji. Today, over 25 million Sikhs worldwide constitute the fifth largest religion in the world.

For more info or to donate to Luton Sikh Soup Kitchen, please contact [gurdwaraluton@gmail.com](mailto:gurdwaraluton@gmail.com)

## Time to come together to celebrate Chanukah and Advent

Written by

**David Jonathan**

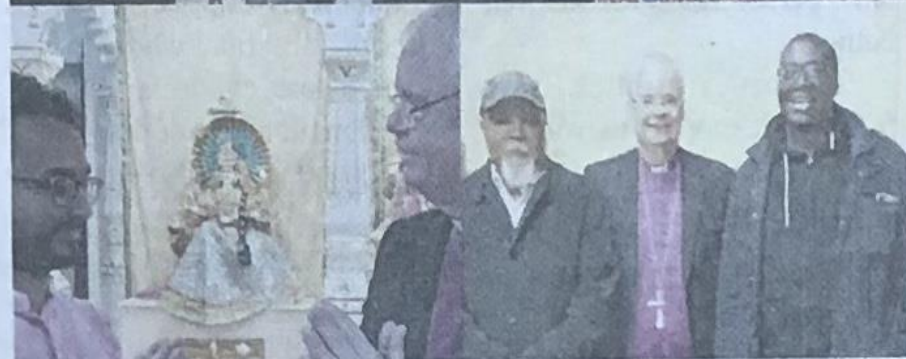
Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**C**hurch of England St Albans Diocese Bishop for Luton Rt Rev Richard Atkinson stays connected with different faith communities in Luton.

During Inter Faith Week he visited a few places of worship, including Central Mosque, United Synagogue, Restoration Revival Fellowship House and Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Hindu Mandir.

These visits were facilitated jointly by Grassroots, Near Neighbours and Luton Council of Faiths, to sustain good community relations in Luton.

Bishop Richard said: "All of us from diverse backgrounds have similar experiences and life struggles and have common shared aspira-



Left to right: Bishop Richard meeting Imam Hafiz Ejaz Ahmed, Rabbi Joseph Schwei, Pujari Utsavbhai Khambholja and pastors Lloyd Denny and Vincent Cox

tions for a better world. We must therefore continue to strive to work together for the common good."

As the Jewish festival Chanukah and Christian Advent season begin, Bishop Richard encourages all to share

the light with one another. He supports the campaign to share a picture of your Chanukah or Advent candles on social media, using the hashtags #sharethelight #happychanukah #happy-advent.



# Luton Council of Faiths founder members honoured at their doorsteps

Date published  
8<sup>th</sup> Dec 2021

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**A**fter HM Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis presented the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service to Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF), an event was held during Inter Faith Week this year to celebrate this success and many of our volunteers, faith and community leaders were presented with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service badges.

Since two founding members of LCoF were unable to join due to mobility issues, LCoF chair Professor Zafar Khan and vice-chair Gulie Butcher visited Mary Salvage (Christian) and Barbara Felson (Jewish), and presented them the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service Badges on their doorsteps in



Left to right: Mrs Tara Solanki wife of the late Mr Natu Bhai Solanki (Hindu), two founding members of LCoF Barbara Felson (Jewish) and Mary Salvage (Christian) presented with LCoF QAVS Badges on their doorsteps

a Covid-safe way.

They also presented a Queen's Award for Voluntary Service Badge to Mrs Tara Solanki, wife of the late Mr Natu Bhai Solanki (Hindu), whose immense contribu-

tions to LCoF over the years are fondly remembered.

Thank you to all our wonderful volunteers, well-wishers and partners for supporting the work of Luton Council of Faiths.

## Christmas carols are a way of rejoicing and returning to God

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**W**hen we think of Christmas, there are many things that come to mind – delicious food, mince pies, and opening presents. One thing that many people look forward to is singing Christmas carols.

After Storm Arwen disrupted this year's Christmas lights switch on at the end of November, it was much safer for Churches Together in Luton to hold its annual event 'Carols in The Mall' in partnership with the Luton Town Centre Chaplaincy and The Mall.

Christians from different churches came together to sing Christmas carols and to launch the Prayer Tree, which is located by H Samuel in The Mall.



**Carols in The Mall**

People of all faiths and none are welcome to choose a prayer bauble or write a prayer request and add it to the Prayer Tree. These messages and prayers will form part of the Midnight Mass service in St Mary's Church, Luton, on Christmas Eve.

Explaining the reason for the season, Pastor Vincent Cox, said: "The carols and the prayers are to Jesus Christ. Christmas is the opportunity to return to God by accepting the gift of his son Jesus, whom God sent to save the world."

## Scheme plants a tree for each life that has been lost during Covid

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

Since the pandemic started, 646 lives have been lost in Luton. Several families could not say goodbye to their loved ones in their final moments.

The Peace Garden initiative is about planting a tree for a life in Luton. A funding target of £30k has been set to plant 646 trees.

Different places of worship and faith organisations in Luton are helping with fundraising.

A £50 donation will help plant one tree for one life. Online donations can be made at [www.justgiving.com/campaign/Peacegarden](http://www.justgiving.com/campaign/Peacegarden)

More than 70 people from different racial and religious backgrounds joined in for planting 200 trees last weekend at Wigmore Park.



200 trees were planted at Wigmore Park last weekend

Several faith leaders joined too.

Sujel Miah, the mastermind behind the project, said: "While planting trees, people have buried their grief.

"What will grow now will help sustain our common home, the planet Earth for

the coming generations. What a wonderful legacy to leave in memory of our loved ones.

"May all those bereaved find peace and comfort and all those supporting this project be blessed abundantly!"

David Jonathan

## Peace with the planet and one another - Happy New Year!

Written by

**David Jonathan**

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

**F**or more than 20 years, local Scouts, civic guests and friends from other faith communities have gathered in December for the Peace Light service at All Saints Church in Luton. A flame is brought from Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ which Christians mark as Christmas.

Despite the fact the Bethlehem Peace Light couldn't be brought this year, All Saints Church welcomed its own Peace Light.

The theme of this year's service was "peace with the planet and one another", which echoed the Christmas proclamation "peace on earth and goodwill among men and women".

During the service, after



Peace Light service held at All Saints Church Luton

the Creation Story from the Jewish and Christian traditions was read out, different faith leaders contributed how their faith inspires them to establish good stewardship of the planet.

A closing prayer said: "May we see the world, our common home, not as a resource to dominate and

exploit, but as a gift to be cherished by all generations."

At Christmas and other religious and cultural festivities, it is good to remember our collective responsibility as custodians of God's creation.

Wishing everyone a very Happy New Year!