

A man of words and action - RIP Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Written by

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

Tributes and condolences poured in from around the world after the veteran anti-apartheid icon, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and the former Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, died recently.

He was one of the driving forces to end the policy of racial segregation and discrimination enforced in South Africa for over 40 years until 1991.

The Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said in his tribute: "Archbishop Desmond Tutu was a prophet and priest, a man of words and action - one who embodied the hope and joy that were the foundations of his life. Even in our profound sorrow we



Desmond Tutu

give thanks for a life so well lived. May he rest in peace and rise in glory."

The World Council of Churches said: "Desmond Tutu's unique and contagious sense of humour and laughter has helped to resolve many critical situations in South Africa's political and church life."

Pope Francis has credited Archbishop Desmond Tutu as an inspiration, saying he was always a firm

believer in the African philosophy of Ubuntu based on a culture of sharing, openness, mutual dependence, dialogue and interpersonal encounter.

Peter Adams of St Mary's Luton, also working with Churches Together in Luton, said: "We are so much poorer without him. We thank him for his lifelong commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation, and for pointing us to what it means to be the rainbow people of God."

In a joint statement, wishing for a better world in the New Year for all, Grassroots, Luton Council of Faiths and Near Neighbours Programme have expressed sadness on losing such a great religious leader and said: "May his wisdom shine on leaders of today and tomorrow. May his struggle for justice be a source of strength and inspiration for us all!"

Renewing a commitment to God and embracing his teachings

Written by

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At the start of the new year, Methodists hold an annual Covenant Service, to renew their commitment to love and serve God and God's creation.

It was started in 1755 by John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, to encourage all Methodists to renew their Christian discipleship and commitment to allowing God's grace and love to constantly transform us.

Commemorating this tradition, Rev Patrick Gbanie Kandeh, the newly arrived South Bedfordshire Methodist circuit superintendent minister with pastoral responsibility for Farley Hill, High Town and Strathmore Avenue Methodist Church-



Rev Patrick Kandeh presenting Margaret Oliver with Membership Commitment Cards for High Town Methodist Church members

es, held a special Covenant Service for all the three churches together.

He said: "It is at the heart of Methodists' devotion and discipleship, and our dedication to work for social justice."

The words of a hymn by Marty Haugen used in the service summed up the key message: "Let us build a house, where love can dwell, and all can safely live; a place

where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions, all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place."

May all those be blessed and encouraged who seek to make this world a better, fairer and a welcoming place for all.

Healing and solidarity are needed now more than ever

Written by

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Brexit, Black Lives Matter, climate change and the ongoing Covid and vaccination debates have all exposed the divisions that exist in our world. The need for solidarity therefore, is more than ever before.

Luton's different faith communities have always responded to the challenges in different ways.

In a Sunday service, Restoration Revival Fellowship in Dunstable Road chose to pray for the various challenges in our town in the presence of dignitaries.

In his message, Pas Lloyd Denny, DL and also the chair of Luton in Harmony, said that we must act and pray for the healing and restoration of our world. He mourned



Left to right: Pastor Lloyd Denny, HM Lord Lieutenant Helen Nellis and High Sheriff Eric Masih at Fellowship House

the deaths caused by Covid, but he also grieved for those killed by knife crimes. Condemning violence in any form, Pas Denny said that vengeance is evil. An eye for an eye is not the right way to go and will indeed make the whole world blind.

Applauding the role of the NHS and various other public and voluntary sector organisations in combating

the pandemic, High Sheriff Mr Masih hoped and prayed that the numbers of those dying of Covid may continue to fall.

HM Lord Lieutenant Helen Nellis encouraged all to look for 'joy' and 'hope'. She said even in the midst of dark and sad times, there's so much we take for granted, which needs to be acknowledged, valued and celebrated, including our families and communities, who have shown love for one another through multiple acts of kindness and practical help in the difficult times.

.....
“An eye for an eye is not the right way to go and will indeed make the whole world blind

Week of Prayer helps to confirm unity and strength among our churches

Written by
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Once a year, Christians come together to pray for their unity. With more than 100 years of history, this annual observance, called the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, lasts eight days and is celebrated internationally.

This year, resources for this week have been prepared by the churches of the Middle East.

Churches Together Britain & Ireland encouraged Christians to pray for church unity, and also for interfaith understanding in the Middle East and Holy Land, and in the UK.

In Luton, the Ecumenical Deans' Group organised an event for Christians reflecting on the Church post-Covid.



Luton Ecumenical Deans members with Rt Rev David J Oakley, Roman Catholic bishop (centre), at a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity event

The guest speaker, Rt Rev David J Oakley, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, said: "Our communion may not be perfect, but it is real. Our common witness and collaboration in the post-Covid context must include us talking together about the spiritual, social and ecological problems of our world."

Expressing concerns that there are many exploring

the meaning of life – many fear death, many are afflicted by poverty, mental health and isolation – he said communities need our pastoral care and encouraged all to share our buildings and resources in the service and care of those in need.

May the spirit of compassion, listening and learning together guide our thoughts and actions in establishing peace and goodwill on earth.

Commemoration calls for solidarity in stand against forms of prejudice

Written by

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For a second year, due to Covid, Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) Service 2022 was nationally commemorated online last week, in which survivors shared powerful stories of loss, grief, and resilience.

At the end of the online commemoration, as part of the 'Light the darkness' initiative, many households across the UK lit candles and safely put them in their windows to remember the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of others killed under Nazi persecution and in genocides that followed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

It was also about our collective commitment to stand against any form of preju-



dice and hatred and to stand in solidarity with people today who face persecution because of who they are and their religious beliefs.

The theme for this year was "One Day".

Talking about the One Day when everything changed, sometimes for the worse and sometimes for better, Iby Knill, a Holocaust survivor, said: "You didn't think about yesterday... and tomorrow may not happen. It was only today that you had to cope with and you got through it as best you could."

Gerald Fox, Luton's HMD Convener, added: "Working towards unity and increasing interfaith understanding feels even more urgent, and vitally important, in light of the deeply troubling anti-Semitic attack last month in Colleyville, Texas."

A special prayer by CCJ (Council for Christians and Jews) said: "Help us to remember and recognise the sanctity of each human life. 'One day' we pray that genocide and hatred will be no more, and that love will triumph over evil."

All cultures will unite to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee

Written by

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Sunday, February 6, marked the 70th anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth II. She has become the first British monarch to celebrate a platinum jubilee.

Churches and other faith communities offered special prayers for the Queen during the weekend to honour her sense of duty and her long reign.

At the age of 27, Princess Elizabeth immediately assumed the huge responsibilities of head of state, after her father, King George VI, had died on February 6, 1952.

In a special message last week, HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis said: "February 6 is generally a day Her Majesty chooses to spend quietly in memory of her late father.



Prayers of Thanksgiving for the first British monarch to celebrate a platinum jubilee

"This year, of course, will be extremely poignant as it will be the first accession anniversary that the Queen will spend without her beloved husband, Prince Philip, by her side."

As this year's date signalled the start of the platinum jubilee celebrations that will take place across the Commonwealth, Lord Lt Helen Nellis added: "In Bedfordshire the celebrations will include tree planting, services of thanksgiving, street parties to bring neighbours together, light-

ing of beacons, as well as a wealth of other events being planned in every single parish."

Churches Together in Britain & Ireland has announced that 9.45pm on June 2, 2022, will be an historic moment.

People of different cultures and races will join together to sing a specially commissioned song, 'A Life Lived With Grace', just as the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Beacons will be lit throughout the UK and Commonwealth.

Community comes together to help celebrate 'paradise on Earth'

Written by

David Jonathan

Luton's Sri Lankan Muslim organisation, Al Furqan, joined hands with the UK's National Council of Sri Lanka Muslim Organisations (COSMOS UK) in hosting an annual flagship event commemorating the 74th Sri Lanka Independence Day, in Luton.

The chief guest, H E Saroja Sirisena – The High Commissioner of Sri Lanka in UK – highlighted the past and present national achievements of Sri Lanka, and raised important issues confronting the nation today.

She said the island nation of Sri Lanka, a small but incredibly beautiful nation called 'the paradise on Earth', has gone through a lot of political and social troubles during the last 74 years.

Like most countries in



Sri Lankan national anthem sung by local children

the world, Sri Lanka withstood the devastating impact of the pandemic, but like many other countries, Sri Lanka is also going through severe economic crisis.

So, while heralding Sri Lanka's Independence Day as a great hope and scope for further development, she called upon everyone to eradicate separatism, challenge injustice, work for progression of all, everywhere in the world.

The Mayor of Luton, Cllr Mahmood Hussain, said: "As

a super diverse town, Luton is a welcoming place for all communities."

He thanked Luton Sri Lankan Muslims for their ongoing contributions in the town.

Jawzy Lebbe, the local Sri Lankan Muslim leader who has made significant voluntary contributions over the years in Luton, said: "We must come together as one human race, to create a shared prosperous future for us all in our beautiful world."

Faiths unite to plant trees in memory of those who lost lives in lockdown



Written by

Ryad Khodabocus

Luton Council of Faiths

About 60 volunteers across Christian, Muslim, Sikh and Buddhist faiths and secular joined forces over two days for the Peace Garden Initiative, led by Sujel Miah, from Luton Council of Mosques.

This is the second and third tree planting that has happened since last December.

The project is about planting a tree for every life lost because of Covid-19. Since the pandemic started, Luton has lost more than 700 lives to date.

Volunteers braved the rain, wind, cold and mud to put 140 trees into the ground with the help of Luton's Parks Services.

Varieties included deciduous trees such as beech, orchard trees such as apples, and evergreen trees such as pine.

Following the Wigmore Park planting last year, this time the town centre was covered and Luton North, namely Wardown Park, Pope's Meadow, People's Park and Maine Avenue in Hockwell Ring.

As it was half term, many young people joined us from a few high schools, including Challney Boys and Girls and Denbigh High, alongside their teachers.

The Luton Sixth Form principal and CEO, Altaf Hussain, also brought some muscle strength from his team to help.

Local charity connect4causes, working with young people to help various charitable causes, also joined in those two days' effort as well.

The project reached nearly half of its objective to plant trees in honour of those who passed away during the lockdown due to Covid and also linking with the Queen's Green Canopy Initiative for her platinum jubilee.

For more information about the project visit www.justgiving.com/campaign/Peacegarden

"Choose the World You Want - Climate, Fairtrade and You"

Written by

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Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

During this year's Fairtrade Fortnight February 21 – March 6, St Christopher's Church (Round Green), in partnership with Luton Fairtrade Steering Group, Grassroots, Luton Council of Faiths and Near Neighbours Programme, held its Annual Fairtrade Cake Baking Competition.

The cakes were presented with recipe and the packaging as evidence of fairtrade ingredients used. Prizes were given to the top three winners, voted in by the guests.

Vicar Rev Anne Crosby highlighted how Fairtrade helps to address issues of poverty, deprivation, unfairness and inequality across the world.



Some of the prize winners at Luton's Annual Fairtrade Cake Bake Competition 2022

A participant said when we do shopping we want fair or rather cheaper deals. We never think if it will be a fair deal for the farmers or for the producers too.

Martin Luther King had once said: "Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you have depended on more than half the world."

This 'inter-dependence'

on one another, is at the very heart of the Fairtrade message.

Fairtrade is not about doing charity to people; it is about doing justice by paying people what they deserve for their labour and for their sustenance.

We all can do our bit by choosing to buy products with Fairtrade logo on it.

This year's Fairtrade Fortnight theme "Choose the World You Want – Climate, Fairtrade and You" also highlights how farmers and workers are facing life threatening risks despite having done the least to contribute to climate change.

The Fairtrade Foundation UK and thousands of campaigners are working hard to promote trade and climate justice across the world.

For more information please visit <https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/choose-the-world-you-want/>

Ukraine in our thoughts as part of World Day of Prayer

Written by

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Grassroots & Luton Council of Faith

The World Day of Prayer (WDP) service was held at St Mary's Church, Luton, just after a Global Day of Prayer and Fasting was called by Pope Francis for the situation in Ukraine.

With its origins in the 19th century, WDP is an international ecumenical Christian laywomen's initiative. It is about "Informed Prayer and Prayerful Action" and is commemorated annually in more than 170 countries on the first Friday in March.

This year's WDP resources were prepared by women in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the overarching theme of which was hope – very appropriate for this time when the world



Theresa Rhodes (left) and Thelma Williams (right) showing a candle and seeds as WDP resources at St Mary's, Luton

is coming to terms with the ongoing effects of the pandemic, the looming climate crisis and the most recent war between Russia and Ukraine.

Hope was depicted in the service through the lighting of candles, the distribution of seeds and the exchange of messages worldwide via social media using the hashtag #WDP hope.

People reflected on finding hope in difficult situations and inspiration in the help we can give to each

other.

Bible verse (Jeremiah 29:11) was used as the focal point: "I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

May we all be comforted by this reading, but as we see millions of people displaced by war, persecution, hunger and climate crisis, may we also be inspired to act and help others for whom life seems to be a great struggle.

Women's group discusses the topical subject of how to remain safe

Written by

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In commemorating this year's International Women's Day, Luton-based group Ghar se Ghar (Hindi/Urdu words meaning 'Home to Home'), with the support from near neighbours Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths, held its annual Precious Pearls event online.

Concerned with women's safety and wellbeing, this year's event theme was "Women Keeping Safe".

Women contributed from different religious and professional perspectives, but some personal survival stories were tremendously powerful and inspirational.

Women's safety is an ongoing issue. To educate women about identifying the signs and threats, and



for signposting women to the right places, numerous organisations such as Women's Aid in Luton, Luton All Women's Centre, Luton Against Sex Trafficking (LAST), and Luton Samaritans shared valuable information.

Women also held in their thoughts, hearts and prayers all the Ukrainian women and girls whose safety is so much in jeopardy at this time.

Some words from a poem by Lesia Ukrainka – one of

Ukraine's foremost writers and a political, civil and feminist activist (1871–1913) – were used as a sign of hope and perseverance to appropriately conclude the event.

"On this poor, indigent ground, I shall sow flowers of flowing colours; I shall sow flowers even amidst the frost, and water them with my bitter tears. And from those burning tears will melt the frozen crust, so hard and strong, perhaps the flowers will bloom and bring about for me a joyous spring."

Guests join Sikh celebrations to mark philosopher's 645th birthday

Written by

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After the culmination of 'Akhand Path' (non-stop recitation of the Sikh holy scripture, Shri Guru Granth Sahib) over a period of 48 hours at Luton's Guru Ravidass Sangat in Cardigan Street, many dignitaries joined in the auspicious 645th birthday celebrations of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji.

He was a great saint, philosopher, poet, social reformer and a prominent religious visionary of social equality in north India during 14th and 15th centuries.

Through his spiritual devotion, Guru Ravidass Ji enhanced the cause of equality, social freedom and justice for all, particularly for those who were oppressed, exploited and marginalised.



Guests receive a gift of Siropa

The princely courts were among his supporters, many of whom eventually became his disciples. Forty of his 'shabads' (sacred sayings) are included in the Sikh holy scripture. The 'Kirtan' (devotional singing) was all about loving and serving all.

Dignitaries, in their speeches, appreciated Luton's Ravidassia community's efforts to outreach and serve the wider community.

Honouring some guests with Siropa (a length of cloth bestowed on someone as a mark of honour) General

Secretary Sanjiv Kumar said: "Two years of Covid has affected all our faith communities so much and in ways we never had imagined. During this time, Gurudwara's services to the community were massively supported by many of our external partners and organisations.

"The Siropa was a very small token of appreciation and a way of thanking all of those extraordinary people, who supported, acknowledged and guided us through our journey of supporting others."

Peace is as important outside the church as it is within

Written by
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Grassroots & Luton Council Of Faiths

Churches Together in Luton (CTL) recently gathered a group of over 40 church leaders from different churches, different racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds over breakfast. It was to nurture and foster the ideals of peace and unity in our town.

CTL chair Michael Singleton said: "Peace is as important outside the church as it is within. It grows when we serve together in peace and encourage one another to work for the common good."

The keynote speaker pastor, Alan West of Luton Christian Fellowship, focusing upon the Bible verse (Matthew 6:33), talked about seeking first



Keynote speaker Alan West and CTL chair Michael Singleton at the Christian faith and community leaders' Breakfast Gathering

the kingdom of God and said every-thing else will fall in its place. He invited all to think and reflect on what can we do together to advance God's kingdom, and not ours. He encouraged all by saying where there's oneness and unity, there's the blessing of God.

He acknowledged that as a diverse group, theologically and doctrinally, we are never going to agree on everything, but this shouldn't stop us from discovering what we can agree upon.

Sharing several past experiences in which Christians in Luton prayed together, co-hosted town-wide events and fundraised for the well-being of our town, Alan said: "We are walking in the footsteps of so many others who have walked before us, in prayer and in action, concerned with the well-being and prosperity of this town. We must continue our journey."

Several other Christian leaders also shared positive stories and examples from their experiences. A wide range of Christian charity groups and organisations, working for the good of our town, were also acknowledged and acclaimed.

NEWS

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Supporting members of other faith communities

By David Jonathan
Diocese of St Albans Council Of Parishes
Faith Matters

A CofE Reader is a Licensed Lay Minister (LLM) authorised by a bishop to assist vicars in leading worship services and in carrying out other pastoral duties.

Talking about her experiences of working with Muslim neighbours, Sandra Millier, the All Saints Parish Church Reader, said: "It is about seeking opportunities rather than to feel overwhelmed by the challenges; opportunities to learn more about different human beings around us, especially those sincerely engaged in seeking God.

"It is also about seeking opportunities to present our Christian understandings of God by the lives we live and the words we speak, and to contribute to the common



CofE St Albans Diocesan Readers on a friendly visit to Madinah Mosque in Luton

good, together with others." Later, the group of Readers also observed a Refugee

Support Drop-In Service at All Saints Church Hall. Highlighting the impor-

tance of such educational tours and visits, Rev David Kesterton, vicar of All Saints

Church, who also plays the role of a Diocesan Inter Faith Advisor, said: "Engagement with people from different faiths can help us understand better, not just others' faith, but also our own faith and beliefs."

"We all must engage with interfaith issues and contribute together for the common good."

- Do you have a story for the Luton News?
- Send an email to joanna.gravett@jpimedia.co.uk. If you have a photo, please attach a high-res jpeg.

The Diocese of St Albans is a diverse diocese. It includes a significant number of parishes in towns such as Luton, where there are large numbers of different faith communities.

In furthering Diocesan efforts of engaging and partnering with members of other faith communities for the common good, Luton's All Saints Parish Church invited Church of England (CofE) 'Readers' from different parishes across the diocese to come and see how the church must remain present in diverse areas, and engage positively with different faiths.

Our attitudes must change to have a better environment

David Jonathan

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@lutonnews

Although living in Mt. Abu, Rajasthan, India, environmentalist Shantanu calls the entire planet his home.

He is a member of a socio-spiritual organisation called Brahma Kumaris (<https://brahmakumaris.uk>).

After two bachelor's degrees in Fashion Design and Fine Arts, his environmental inclination has led him to design special courses focusing on upcycling, recycling, deconstruction and reconstruction.

During his recent visit to Luton, he learnt with great interest how Luton's different faith communities have been participating in the Faith Woodlands Communities Project, in devel-

oping Peace Gardens across the town on derelict pieces of land, in nurturing and caring for green spaces in the streets and neighbourhoods.

He commended Luton's Peace Garden Initiative in which trees are being planted for those who died of Covid in the town.

Shantanu's personal journey with the environment had started in 2015 when he became vegan.

A few months after that, he found himself engaged in climate activities.

He was one of the seven young people to be funded by UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) for COP 25 in Madrid in 2019.

At present he is a mentor in the Climate Ambassadors Programme and a facilitator for environment and faith on the steering committee of the United Nations'

Environment Programme (UNEP) Major Group of Children and Youth (MGCY).

One of his strongest beliefs is reflected in the statement, "Simplicity is kindness".

After his meeting with Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths, while speaking at a Rotary club event in Luton, he said: "The triple crisis that our world is facing currently is normally said to be of debt, climate change and biodiversity loss, but the actual triple crisis is greed, apathy and selfishness.

"Science doesn't have the answers for these; our attitudes must change."

'Within months he was engaged in climate activities'

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Faith Matters

By David Jonathan
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Death does not have the last word

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

"This is a poignant message and a reminder to many who have lost their loved ones due to the Covid-19 pandemic and have experienced trauma, separation, isolation," said Michael Singleton, chair of Churches Together in Luton.

He added: "Easter reminds us that the first experience of Jesus' disciples with the risen Lord Jesus also occurred in

similar circumstances. Out of fear and to protect their lives, Jesus' disciples had gathered in a room, behind closed doors, when the risen Christ appeared, bringing his peace to them. May his peace now be with us all in Luton and beyond."

C of E Archdeacon of Bedford, Rev Dave Middlebrook, said: "Easter brings a powerful, liberating message of courage and hope overcoming the fear of death and life's uncertainty. After two years of Covid lockdowns, it was a delight to see the usual Walks of Witness and street processions led by church clusters across Luton."

"Forgive them father, for they know not what they do," said Jesus on the cross. May such words of Jesus inspire and

guide everyone in this world to live in peace and harmony, not just with friends and family, but also with those who despise, hate and persecute others in the name of race, religion or ethnicity. May the miracle of Easter bring us all renewed hope, faith, love and joy!

'Easter brings a powerful, liberating message of courage and hope overcoming the fear of death and life's uncertainty'



Good Friday Walk of Witness led by Bury Park Beech Hill Council of Churches in Luton



Sikh communities come together for Vaisakhi event

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths
@lutonnews

Vaisakhi' is an historical and religious festival for Sikhs worldwide. It is celebrated in mid-April. It commemorates the birth and formation of the Khalsa Panth (the body of fully initiated Sikhs) following a sacrificial sword ritual ceremony in 1699 by the last of the 10 Sikh human gurus, Guru Gobind Singh Ji. It was about transforming Sikhs into soldier saints.

Five men who took the test of offering their lives on Guru's call became known as the Panj Piare ('Beloved Five') – each one embodying the virtues of compassion, righteousness, courage, commitment and oneness. They were then baptised into the 'Khalsa' by the Guru sprinkling on them Amrit ('immortalising nectar': the

Sikh term for holy water).

The Khalsa is therefore a collective of committed Sikhs (male and female) who are mandated to fight oppression and uphold freedom, and work to provide basic needs of all people – serving everyone, regardless of their background, recognising humanity's oneness.

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

This year in Luton, hundreds of men, women and youths came out in a street procession, led by beautifully decorated vehicles, religious and community leaders, demonstrating their devotion and community spirit as throughout the procession, at various points, devotees shared free food. Even before and

after the procession, 'Langar' (free meal) was served and prayers were offered for the whole of humanity at Guru Nanak Gurudwara on Dallow Road. A minute's silence was also observed for the people in Ukraine.

As the procession had passed through Bury Park, the president, head imam, committee members from the central mosque and several others from the Muslim community greeted the Sikh leaders with garlands and distributed hot snacks and tea to hundreds of Sikhs walking in the procession. This was a real testament of how Luton's communities live in harmony with one another.

'An historical and religious festival celebrated in mid-April'



Faith Matters

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David Jonathan

Eid Mubarak to all Muslim friends

Eid celebrations returned with a big bash in Lewsey Park after a gap of two years due to Covid lockdowns.

The key event organiser, Inspire FM operations manager Mohammad Tariq, said: "It was an affordable, accessible and inclusive festival. We are grateful to many community volunteers for their help and support, and to the Luton Sixth

'The festival was attended by thousands – the largest in the region'

Form College and Barnfield College for being our chief event partners this year."

The festival was attended by thousands and is the largest Eid festival in the region.

Eid al-Fitr is celebrated by Muslims worldwide and marks the end of the dawn-to-sunset fasting month of Ramadan.

Ramadan is the month in which the prophet Muhammad received the teachings of the Quran, the Islamic holy book.

During Ramadan, at numerous Iftar (communal fast-breaking) gatherings in Luton, Muslims and mosques invited neighbours and friends to join in sharing the fast-breaking meal.

Nationally, UK's Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, also hosted an Iftar gathering, at which he



UK Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis is presented with a Fairtrade gift from Luton

said: "In addition to the climate crisis, the refugee crisis and ever-deepening global, political and social polarisation, we must now prepare to contend with the aftermath of a pandemic, which has created extreme economic disadvantage, significant mental health challenges and yet further political and social upheaval."

He added: "Jews, Christians, Muslims are from the same

family and occasions such as tonight's Iftar gathering are important to reinforce our relationship with one another.

"Together, we can adapt and respond to the emerging landscape, which is full of challenges.

"Every one of us can help by giving of ourselves to the community in some way."

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

Luton's Discover Islam Centre, since started in 2011, has initiated and supported various projects of community care and well-being. In the last month alone it has served thousands of hot meals and provided support to the most vulnerable in our community, including

refugees.

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

*Written by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton Council
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'Every one of us can help by giving of ourselves to the community in some way'



Singing and embracing songs from different cultures

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths
@lutonnews

United Reformed Churches (URCs) in and around Luton gathered together to reflect and explore songs in the 21st century, with Rev John Bell, a Scottish hymn writer, Church of Scotland minister and a member of the Iona Community. John Bell is a broadcaster and a former student activist. He lectures in theological colleges and leads workshops for the renewal of congregational worship throughout the world. In the UK, he has been associated with the Christian arts festival Greenbelt for many years.

Employed full-time in the areas of music and worship with the Wild Goose Resource Group, John Bell has produced many collec-

tions of original hymns and songs and two collections of songs of the World Church. These are published by the Iona Community in Scotland and by G.I.A. Publications (Chicago) in North America. Several collections of his work have been published in translation in Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Danish, Dutch, Frisian, Japanese and German.

He often presents programmes on the BBC, majoring on contemporary religious songs from various parts of the world. He is quite a regular contributor to "Thought for the Day", part of Radio 4's Today programme.

Rev Heather Whyte, URC minister in Luton, said: "It has been good to encourage, enable and equip our congregations with liturgy and songs that are relevant, contextual and representative of the world we live in."

When asked why other world cultures have been so important to him, Rev Bell said: "We have exported a large number of hymns to different parts of the world – especially the developing world; I feel it is important to listen to what they have to offer and therefore, whenever possible, I do think it's helpful to sing the songs from different cultures. So we can stand together in deeper intercession with one another. And through that experience our understanding of the world and God is enlarged."

Commenting on Luton's multi-faith multicultural context, he said: "People from different racial, religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds can be seen as a gift or a threat. I see them as gifts. They have enriched and broadened my understanding of whom I worship as the creator God."



Churches are united in fight against racism and injustice

By David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths
@lutonnews

At its Annual General Meeting last week, Churches Together in Luton (CTL) reflected, reviewed and renewed its commitment to the cause of racial reconciliation and justice.

The Black Lives Matter movement – which began in 2013 but gained global prominence after George Floyd was killed in the United States in May 2020 – encourages everyone to work for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted and where their humanity, contributions to society and resilience in the face of deadly oppression are recognised, acknowl-

edged, valued and affirmed.

In order to achieve these goals, Churches Together in Luton (CTL) launched an Ecumenical Interdenominational Commission on Racial Justice and urged church leaders to talk honestly about their experiences of racism, their hopes for the future and their regrets for the past.

Conveners Tony Thompson and Vincent Cox said: “Our talking together has helped in building deep, meaningful, honest relationships, something that has been repeatedly mentioned as the key to racial reconciliation.

“Our conversations have helped us to identify how we can look at history, even the painful parts, so that we can build together a new future, through forgiveness

and defeating strongholds that have existed for generations.”

Mr Cox added: “We are mindful of the fact that real change may bring pain and we are ready to confront it.

“We are looking to discern, define, explain and understand, what does it mean to be black in the UK and in Luton?”

CTL chair Michael Singleton said: “It is important we advance our knowledge of racism, its history and its consequences.

“We must break the silence and work towards the change that is needed. And change costs.

“Some will have to lose power in order for some to gain power; only then can we justifiably establish the ideal of just peace, equality and equity.”

Lady Clifford praises support of our local religious groups

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths
@LutonNews

The High Sheriff of Bedfordshire for the year until April 2023 is Lady Jane Clifford.

Although largely ceremonial now, the High Sheriff still remains the Sovereign's representative in the county for all matters relating to the judiciary and the maintenance of Law and Order. Keeping these links with our judiciary and Police forces remains pivotal to the role today, ensuring these services have both the support and respect of the communities that they help and protect.

A High Sheriff fulfils the ancient role supporting the Shire, upholding its peace, encouraging loyalty to the Crown and stimulating its communities in voluntary

societies to work for the common good.

It is admirable that Lady Clifford made an effort to visit parts of Luton for the first time, soon after taking over the role. She visited the Madinah Mosque in Oak Road; Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in Dunstable Road; Discover Islam Centre in Upper George Street; and Guru Ravidass Sangat in Cardigan Street.

The warmth and hospitality she received at each of these places of worship humbled and moved her. She praised Luton's diverse religious communities for their generosity and concern for those in need and the less privileged.

Lady Clifford said: "My visit has proven to be an excellent chance for networking and building relationships. The number of groups and individuals making a difference in Lu-

ton is inspiring. Religious leaders, faith-based organisations, and faith groups provide vital support, comfort and guidance to the communities they serve."

"My heartfelt gratitude goes to all who volunteer in our county. Their daily acts of kindness and giving are a living testament."

Commending the role played by Grassroots, Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) and Near Neighbours Programme, Lady Clifford Added: "By bringing people together from different communities, you are indeed promoting social action and transformation."

"I'm delighted that your efforts have been recognised, and that LCoF has received The Queen's Award for Voluntary Services last year.

"My heartiest congratulations to LCoF and all involved in it."

OPINION

Date published
1st June 2022



Faith Matters

David Jonathan
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Commemorating this special Jubilee

HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis hosted a very special and historic event and thanksgiving service at St Mary's Church, Luton, over the weekend to commemorate HM the Queen's Platinum Jubilee and the services of voluntary organisations across Bedfordshire. The church was packed with representatives of Bedfordshire voluntary organisations.

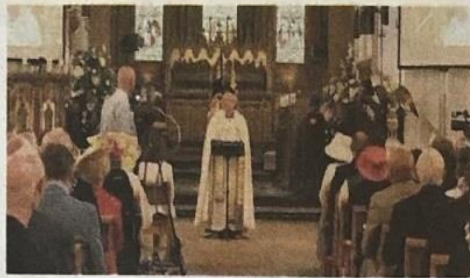
During prayers and the bishop's address at the ceremonial service, the topics of 'service' and 'servanthood' were shared and reflected upon.

Here are some words used in the service - "We give thanks for all who work in our voluntary and charitable organisations, for the inspiration and

commitment of our young people and especially for those groups and initiatives represented here; for all who unselfishly and unstintingly give of their time, talents and skills for the benefit of others and for the common good. Bless, we pray, all who strive to serve, that they may be given wisdom and zeal, compassion and the gift of humility in their service."

Complementing the theme 'service', Professor Rebecca Bunting, vice-chancellor of the university of Bedfordshire, read out an extract from HM the Queen's accession message.

Here are few words from it: "As we mark the 70th anniversary, it gives me great pleasure to renew to you the pledge I gave in 1947 that my life will always be devoted to your



service.

"As I look ahead with a sense of hope and optimism to the year of my Platinum Jubilee, I am reminded of how much we can be thankful for.

"These last seven decades have seen extraordinary progress socially, technologically and culturally that have benefited us all; and I am confident that the future will offer similar opportunities to us and espe-

CofE Bishop Richard Atkinson speaking at the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Thanksgiving Service held at St Mary's, Luton

cially to the younger generations in the United Kingdom and throughout the Commonwealth.

"This anniversary also affords me a time to reflect on the goodwill shown to me by people of all nationalities, faiths and ages in this country and around the world over these years.

"I would like to express my thanks to you all for your support. I remain eternally grateful for, and humbled by, the loyalty and affection that you continue to give me.

"And so as I look forward to continuing to serve you with all my heart, I hope this Jubilee will bring together families and friends, neighbours and communities - after some difficult times for so many of us - in order to enjoy the celebrations

and to reflect on the positive developments in our day-to-day lives that have so happily coincided with my reign."

'The topics of service and servanthood were shared and reflected upon'



Faith Matters

Date published
8th June 2022

The Queen has achieved a great milestone in her life

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths
@lutonnews

With more than 10 million people said to have attended numerous Jubilee parties, it has been impossible to avoid our attention and the media focus on HM the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations held in the last week.

Many people have been heard saying they are not royalists and yet they cannot elude admiring the Queen, whose grace, relational skills and determination over the years and decades, have contributed significantly to the global image of Great Britain.

HM The Queen Elizabeth II has a strong faith that has been evident throughout her life, in her words and actions. She has acknowledged that her faith inspires her, guides her and empowers her with

the strength, courage and resilience whenever she has needed it most. This makes her even more likeable in a town like Luton, where nearly 80% of people are religious.

Therefore, in Luton, besides the carnival and numerous street parties, the celebrations have also been held at a number of schools, colleges, public sector institutions, voluntary, community and faith organisations, and at different places of worship too.

For once, republicans or monarchists or even those who are indifferent, all seem to have expressed their joy and gladness for the Queen's remarkable innings.

Having taken her responsibilities as the Queen at the age of 25, she makes not just a perfect role model for our young people, but she also stands tall as an iconic symbol of women in leadership.

It is said that in over 50 of her 70 Christmas addresses,

the Queen has called upon everyone to proactively love and care for our neighbours, particularly for those who are marginalised, excluded and grieving. She has spent a huge amount of time visiting hospitals, shelters, youth initiatives, care homes and the 600 charities she supports. This aspect of her life is not just a strong witness of her Christian faith and love for humankind, but it also complements the core teachings and beliefs of most of the world's religions and therefore she inspires people of all religious and cultural backgrounds.

The chair, vice-chair and a staff of the Luton Council of Faiths were privileged to be invited to attend the Royal Garden Party.

As we face many challenges, may the life of the Queen inspire us all to continue striving to make Britain even greater, where equality, peace, justice and equity help all to live their lives in all its abundance.



Shavuot and Pentecost were observed in the community

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths
@lutonnews

Millions of people participated in the Queen's Platinum Jubilee events, parties and street lunches in towns and cities across the UK over the bank holiday weekend earlier this month. The nation celebrated 70 years of leadership from Her Majesty the Queen, the longest of any British monarch.

For Christians and Jews however, there were also religious commemorations during these royal celebrations. The Jewish festival of Shavuot and the Christian festival of Pentecost coincided with the royal celebrations.

Both these festivals share a

heritage. Shavuot is one of the three major Jewish pilgrimage festivals, marking the gift of the Torah (Jewish scripture). For Christians, the New Testament records that the followers of Jesus, who were Jewish, were gathered in Jerusalem for Shavuot, when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in different languages. This laid the foundation of the Christian festival of Pentecost.

At the Council of Christians and Jews, which has benefited from the Queen's patronage since 1952, the overlap between Shavuot and Pentecost this year was observed amicably and two Christian theological educators were invited to reflect on the significance of the Torah, or the law from a Christian perspective.

Lucy Dallas, who trains Anglicans for ministry in Cam-

bridge and has been part of a UK-Swedish Clergy Exchange Programme led by Grassroots Luton, noted the centrality of the law for Christians. She said: "The Jesus whom we meet in the gospels is the very embodiment of the law.

"In Jesus, we see all that the law is and always has been: wise, subversive, redemptive; challenging, healing, forgiving, loving and life-giving."

The discussion also highlighted that sometimes a Christian construct of Torah as being over-scrupulous and legalistic has wrongfully projected legalism on to Judaism, whereas the scriptures affirm that 'your law is a lantern for my feet and a light upon my path'. The law therefore must be understood like this, so that it becomes a joyful vocation rather than a set of forbidding demands.



Let's overcome division and commemorate Refugee Week

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths
@lutonnews

Refugee Week takes place every year across the world in the week around World Refugee Day on June 20. In the UK, Refugee Week is a nationwide programme of arts, cultural and educational events that celebrate the contribution of refugees to the UK, acknowledge the creativity and resilience of people seeking sanctuary and encourage a better understanding between communities.

Refugee Week started in 1998 as a direct reaction to hostility in the media and society in general towards refugees and asylum seekers. Refugee



The Peace Walk for Ukraine

Week is now one of the leading national initiatives working to counter this negative climate, defending the importance of sanctuary and the benefits it can bring to both refugees and host communities.

Lately, we have been receiving Ukrainian refugees due to the ongoing war on Ukraine. It was heartening that ahead of

Refugee Week, last Saturday, the Luton branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain invited all to join in a Peace Walk in Wardown Park as a sign of solidarity.

This year's Refugee Week theme is 'Healing'. Sr Maire Hayes, Spirituality of Justice partner at Grassroots Programme, said: "Healing means recovering from a painful experience or situation; no-one understands this better than those who have lost their homes and had to build new lives from scratch. We have much to learn from refugees about holding on to hope when going on seems impossible. Those going through the asylum system know that healing is an ongoing process, made harder by poverty, housing difficulties and the threat of being detained or deported."



Faith Matters

Date published
29th June 2022

Windrush – the stories of yesterday still impact us now

David Jonathan

Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths
@lutonnews

Why Windrush Matters Today – an online event held nationally by an organisation called ‘British Future’, brought together expert voices of champions like Patrick Vernon, cultural historian and Windrush campaigner, on race, history and social cohesion to mark the 74th anniversary of the Windrush and examine its ongoing importance and relevance.

As we head towards an important 75th anniversary of Windrush next year, the event focused on how we are connecting our younger generations with the Windrush story – and how to broaden the reach of this historic event to help deepen understanding of

multi-ethnic Britain.

Also on June 22, at Luton Town Hall, United Luton Caribbean and African Committee (ULCAC) held its third annual civic ceremony in honour of Luton Windrush generation. This event highlighted the importance and significance of Windrush Day and what it means for everyone. Tamar Lovindeer, co-chair ULCAC, said: “We started in 2021. Besides shouldering responsibility of organising this civic event, we also seek to assist Luton Council in monitoring its resolution to improve black lives in the town. Recognising this town wants to be built on fairness, we support the equality, diversity and inclusion across Luton’s public sector agencies.”

There was a general consensus that all the setbacks must be turned into leaps forward. Individual and

personal stories of people we do not normally hear about can be impactful. This is what Luton-based ‘You Are Able’, a community interest company (CIC) is trying to do. Funded by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), one of its projects will deliver a documentary in Luton about the Windrush generation through the eyes of young people, learning a legacy through the accounts of descendants who had varying ambitions to either settle or envisage returning to the Caribbean after a period of time. Project director Bilal Thompson said: “The documentary aims to archive the connections as many of these individuals have since passed away but have left in many cases a verbal history with their children. This intent is to leave a record that can educate.”

OPINION

Date published
6th July 2022



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Together our communities can make a real difference

CWM Europe is one of six regions of the Council for World Mission (CWM), a worldwide partnership of churches in mission made up of over 21 million Christians in 40 countries of the world.

The Europe Region is made up of five member churches. CWM works globally, regionally, cross-regionally and ecumenically.

At its 2022 Regional Assembly, the CWM Europe held a participative residential gathering which included worship, group work, interactive exercises and discussions and a day-long immersion visit to Luton during



which the Assembly delegates visited different places of worship and engaged with members from faith communities, asking what inspires and motivates

them to serve people of all backgrounds selflessly.

How do they work together with one another? Almost everyone from different faith commu-

**CWM Europe
Regional
Assembly visit to
Luton**

nities in Luton said they cannot do it alone and that together we are able to make a difference.

Delegates also took interest in how GRASSROOTS & LUTON COUNCIL OF FAITHS have sustained over the years, its work of building good community relations in Luton.

Introducing the overall theme and framework of the Regional Assembly, Revd Dr Michael Jagessar, Secretary for CWM Europe, in a statement said: "Europe's history, taste and tendency for war and violence is once more revealed, as Ukraine resists the Russian invasion and occupation. After the Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued its warning on impacts of climate breakdown earlier this year, we know that climate breakdown is accelerating rapidly, many of the impacts will be more severe than predicted.

"And all this has to be addressed as we try to emerge from our shelters from the tempest Covid. The Europe Regional Assembly therefore offered us an opportunity to reflect on what it means to 'Rise up' and what power, privilege, policy, anxieties, grief, guilt, control do we need to 'let go' to help us rise up.

"As Christian Churches and all faith communities, we must continually review how we want to prepare ourselves for action. What are the treasures and gifts we can share to inaugurate a new world, in which life in all its fullness, life in all its abundance can be shared equally by all and not just by few. And watching different faith communities working together in Luton have provided us hope – hope in action."

OPINION

Date published
13th July 2022



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan
Luton Council of Faiths
& GRASSROOTS

More in common than divides us

The Right Reverend David James Oakley, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, made his first visit to the GRASSROOTS Programme, and it was a great blessing, according to The Revd Canon David Lawson, Chair of GRASSROOTS Luton.

Referring to the Second Vatican Council, which was the 21st ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, Bishop David reminded that it had produced resources to direct the life of the Church in the 20th century and beyond.

The purpose of the Council was the "modernization of the Church after 20 centuries of life". He reinforced the Council's call for the Church's renewal in almost every aspect:

from the Church's language and theology to the Church's role in the world, especially its relationship with other religions.

Bishop David concurred that interfaith cooperation is not about trying to blend all religions and cultures into one, as if we are all the same and our differences don't really matter.

It is not about negotiating away our differences. It is about realising that we have more in common than what divides us, and that must motivate us to cooperate for the common good and the flourishing of all people.

Bishop David gave GRASSROOTS and the Luton Council of Faiths credit for their efforts to bring communities



together. "It's wonderful to see that Luton's inter faith work involves action as well as dialogue", he said. "The actions of Luton's faith communities speak louder than words and it is great to see their actions are inspired by their respective beliefs.

"Long may such partnership and networking continue, which is so clearly not about competing against one

Bishop David Oakley and Rev David Lawson (Chair, GRASSROOTS) at Guru Nanak Gurudwara in Luton

another, but complimenting one another."

After visiting different places of worship in Luton, including the Central Mosque, Discover Islam Center, and the Sikh Temple – Guru Nanak Gurudwara, Bishop David remarked: "This has been one of the best and the happiest days since I took over as the Bishop."

He offered to continue blessing and assisting GRASSROOTS as it works to advance the causes of justice, peace, and reconciliation in a hurting world.

At the Central Mosque, Bishop David extended Eid Greetings to all the Muslim friends and communities in Luton. He said: "I take this opportunity to wish you peace-

ful and fruitful Eid-al-Adha celebrations. Our meeting together testifies that our religions invite us to remain rooted in the values of peace; to defend the values of mutual understanding, human fraternity, and harmonious coexistence."

President of Luton's Central Mosque Mohammad Shafait reciprocated the sentiments saying: "We Muslims and Christians are called to open ourselves to others, knowing and recognizing each other as brothers and sisters. In this way, we can tear down walls raised out of fear and ignorance and seek together to build bridges of friendship that are fundamental for the good of all humanity."



Faith Matters

Date published
20th July 2022

People of different faiths invited to inclusive Eid parade

by David Jonathan
Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths

Several Eid al-Adha celebrations and outdoor prayers have been held in the different parts of Luton town, eg. at CYCD, Central Mosque, Wardown Park, Lewsey Park and Stockwood Park.

However, last weekend's Colours of Eid festive celebrations at St George's Square were unique as people from different faiths were invited to join in an inclusive Eid parade. There was so much more amusement added to the parade, as members and leaders from different faiths were asked to hold the cloud props, made up of white balloons, while walking down from Barclays Bank to St George's Square led by the drummers with many other



Colours of Eid festive celebrations at St George's Square

people of all ages dressed up in beautiful costumes.

Eid al-Adha has been the second of the two Eid festivities Muslims celebrate worldwide.

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

Eid al-Adha, known as the "Festival of the Sacrifice", honours the famous story of

the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham for Christians and Jews) willing to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God's command. However, before Ibrahim did it, God produced a lamb for him to sacrifice instead.

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



Faith Matters

Date published
27th July 2022

by David Jonathan

Stories can be so transformative

How long you think it will take to count up to 1 million? At the outdoor storytelling event hosted by Edible High Town at High Town's Peace Garden, next to High Town Methodist Church, this was one of the many questions posed by the Luton-based professional artists to keep kids and adults interested, engaged, and amused.

The storybook "Max counts to a Million" was narrated and performed by the artists. Written by Luton based author Jeremy Williams, this book is a light hearted read.

It is about 8 year old young boy Max Cromwell, who like other children, tries to get along in the best way he can despite having to deal with the impact of Covid 19, the Lockdown

and isolation and therefore decides to count to a million during the Covid 19 Lockdown in the global pandemic.

Children and adults were invited to meet with the book's author, Jeremy Williams, once the storytelling session was over.

They questioned him on the length of time it took him to write this book, the release date of his upcoming book, his favourite book, and other topics.

A young girl stated that she enjoys writing stories as well since it enables her to write about anything and to develop ideas that are not constrained by the confines of the real world.

Thanking the funder Luton Rising who made this event possible and free to attend, the



event organiser Konni Deppe, co-ordinator of the Edible High Town - Community Garden-

Konni Deppe with Jeremy Williams

ing Project, said, "We grow fruit and vegetable in the pocket garden in the High Town area. We also look after this Peace Garden, which was originally launched as the Peace Garden by Luton Council Faiths, together with Edible High Town, GRASSROOTS & Near Neighbours Programme. It is such a joy to see so many coming out and enjoying the Peace Garden and our event today."

Luton town has younger than average population.

in fact, it is estimated that over 30% of Luton's population is aged 19 and under, which is highest in the East of England.

Considering Luton's diversity and recognising the fact that stories are powerful and have a lasting impact on people, GRASSROOTS & Luton

Council of Faiths are exploring the possibilities to nurture the 'lost art' of story-telling, which can effectively speak to Luton's growing younger population of diverse cultural heritage.

Storytelling can also help to build bridges and generate a more palatable understanding of issues.

Stories reinforce human goodwill, human values and positive messaging for us all to work together for the common good.

Stories are magical. They can reach out and speak out much more powerfully and in a transformative way, just as it happened in last week's first ever outdoor storytelling event held in the High Town Peace Garden by the Edible High Town.

Date published
3rd Aug 2022



Faith Matters

Together we can and must find peaceful solutions

David Jonathan
Grassroots & Luton Council of Faiths

A representative team from the Bedfordshire Army Base visited the UK Centre for Carnival Arts (UKCCA) in Luton as well as the town's various places of worship and faith-based organisations.

The Army visitors, which also included the Army Chaplain, were accompanied by Cllr Hazel Simmons, the leader of the Luton Council, and Sandra Hayes, the service manager for policy, community, and engagement for the Luton Council. The Army visitors showed a strong interest in exploring and learning



At Luton's central mosque

about the many houses of worship in Luton as well as its diverse neighbourhoods.

They were amazed to learn that Luton, the town with the highest density of people in the East of England, has a religious affiliation rate of over 78% and that over 140 languages are spoken here.

The guests thought it was amazing how the many different faith communities in Luton had come together to overcome the obstacles and challenges, when protests by extremist organisations had caused conflict, social upheaval, and had disrupted life in the town.

President of Luton Central Mosque Mohammad Shafait said: "The pace of change we are currently experiencing has never been this fast, nor will it ever be as slow again. There are challenges, which can be overwhelming, but we have no doubt that with the support and cooperation of others in our town, we can meet those challenges. Together we can and we must find out peaceful and sustainable solutions."

Date published
10th Aug 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan of
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Mosque and church meet again over tea and scones

Months before any of us had heard the word 'Covid' - Madinah Masjid (Mosque) on Oak Road in Luton had visited St Leonard's Church, Flamstead for afternoon tea. How little they knew, Covid will make another meeting impossible. But recently, mosque and church met again. Welcoming the visitors, Vicar Revd Jo Burke, said: "It felt like a meeting of old friends".

While training as a curate in Luton, Jo had been impressed by the generous work done by the Madinah Masjid with the homeless, refugees and for the environment. She wanted that work to be



Friends from Madinah Masjid on Oak Road in Luton visited St Leonard's Church, Flamstead for afternoon tea

widely known. It was important she said to 'burst bubbles' so that we can form friendships outside our own communities.

Flamstead is a village of about

1,300 people just 15 minutes from Luton. In past generations many from its population headed to Luton to work in the hat trade and car factories. But it is still a quiet

rural community with country habits, including its annual Scarecrow Festival.

Flamstead feels a world away from the vibrancy of Luton. And the two faiths of Islam and Christianity can seem so different from each other. But over tea, strawberries, jam and scones (made with halal clotted cream), Muslim friends asked perceptive questions about the 900-year history of the church, the 15th century wall paintings, the ancient rood screen, the tombs and the bats.

On behalf of Madinah Mosque, Abdul Ghafoor said: "Thank you from the depths of

our hearts. It is a great pleasure to listen to the stories and the great history. It has really warmed my heart. Our shared heritage, our shared history is preserved by communities like you and relationships are being developed by organising afternoon tea like today. Community is all about COME UNITY - coming together and uniting around what makes us human."

Inviting all to the Madinah Mosque Open Day on September 4, Maqsood Anwar said: "This is our second visit to the 900-year-old church in this small village which hasn't seen many Muslims. It is good to break down barriers and build bridges of understanding and relationship."

Miranda Motley, St Leonard's verger, said: "Although faith is exceedingly important to both communities, this gathering was much more about good human relationships and extending the warm hand of friendship. We are all eagerly anticipating our return visit to the mosque."

Date published
17th Aug 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan of
Grassroots and Luton
Council of Faiths

Creating opportunities to bring people together is key

Despite an Amber extreme heat warning, issued last week by the Met Office, a group of Chaplains from different ethnic and national backgrounds, serving at the Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust carried out their plans to visit different places of worship in Luton.



Bedfordshire Hospitals Chaplains were warmly received at Madinah Mosque on Oak Road, Luton.

Nelson Mandela is quoted as saying, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that gets to his head; if you talk to him in his own language that goes to his heart". Trust Chaplain Vanessa Bradley, stated when we visit different places of worship and learn a word or two from another language or when we learn even

something as simple as how to greet someone from another culture, it gives chaplains more confidence to connect with people from various cultural, religious,

ethnic, or national backgrounds, not only with their heads but also with their hearts.

She added: "If we want to love our neighbour, we must know

who they are; and it is much better we meet with people and let them tell us who they are and what their beliefs are, rather than we learning about them from the books or the media or the widespread stereotypes in our world."

One of the barriers in the work of bringing people together is often understood to be the formal nature of the British society. People prefer to be introduced first, before they can talk or communicate with one another. That may well be true, but we all are getting busier, lonelier, and more stressed out due to misinformation and disinformation, spread widely by the uncontrollable

social medial platforms. In such a hostile environment of mistrust and fear, it is easy to view all those who are different from us, as a threat or enemy.

It is therefore essential that programmes like GRASSROOTS, Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) & Near Neighbours, continue to create opportunities to bring people together so that we can understand why people are the way they are; and people can discover those different from us are not our 'enemies'; they are our 'allies', because they share the same aspirations as we do and that is to be loved, to be acknowledged, to be valued and to be affirmed and to pray and work together for the peace and prosperity of all.

In our divided and wounded world, where peace and unity is threatened by the rising political fundamentalism, majoritarianism and general intolerance, if we are to be the hope, then as Martin Luther King puts it, we have no other option but to learn to live together as brothers and sisters.

Date published
24th Aug 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna

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

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

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

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

as an adult, playing flute.

Krishna gave the vital message of 'Bhagwad Gita' (literally translated as 'The Song of the Lord'), which is a 700-verse Hindu scripture dated to the 2nd Century BCE and is a guiding principle for Hindus.

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

Mr Kanti Lad, President of Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Luton Hindu Mandir, said: "Lord Krishna's message of Karmayoga is a call to focus on our responsibilities rather than caring for our rewards.

"This spirit of working for the common good has been evident in the way all our community champions have



been serving those in need, during and even after the pandemic."

Mr Dhansukh Panchal, Vice President of Hindu Mandir said: "After Covid lockdowns, we are delighted to be able to congregate and celebrate Lord Krishna's birth in reasonable numbers, but we must not forget to spend time in reflecting on Lord Krishna's message and teachings

Mr & Mrs Pravin and Nalini Shah offering prayers at Lord Krishna's birth celebrations at Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Hindu Mandir (Temple), Lewsey Farm.

about the purpose and meaning of our life on this planet Earth."

Luton Hindu Community Ambassador and also the General Secretary of the Hindu Mandir, Mr Yogesh Mistry said: "Our 'Dharma' (religious obligations) are to carry out the 'Karma' – the duties without the desire for reward."

He quoted Lord Krishna saying to his devotee, Arjuna: "Thy business is with action only, never with its fruits: so let not fruit of action be thy motive, nor be thou to inaction attached." (II.47)

This clearly means that not acting in favour of justice and righteousness, is not even an option.

Mr Mistry added: "People may have slight differences in

understanding or interpreting the meaning or use of the terms – Dharma & Karma, but it thrives off the same basic concept which is to help create a world order that is in harmony with the cosmos, a world order that is built on justice, fairness, equality and equity, a world order that is built by causing no harm to 'anyone' or 'anything' – whether animals or even environment & ecology."

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

Date published
31st Aug 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Inspiring next generation to succeed

Calvary Church of God in Christ (COGIC), one of Britain's oldest Black Pentecostal Churches in the UK, celebrated its 70th anniversary at their annual Holy Convocation which took place from Friday 26th August to Monday 29th August at COGIC UK headquarters on Dunstable Road in Luton.

The church is currently under the leadership of Bishop Dr Alvin Blake, who has presided over the jurisdiction since 1998.

He has had this to say: "Our forefathers have left a great legacy of tirelessly working in the community with both young and old, promoting the saving grace of the Gospel to all people. We want to celebrate our heritage this year

by looking at where God has brought us from, to inspire the next generation to exceed our achievements and to push towards their dreams and goals ensuring that their faith in God remains central to all they do."

Leading hundreds of its members in Luton and across the UK, he added: "To usher us into the next chapter of our faith, it was our privilege that our recently elected International Presiding Bishop and Chief Apostle, Bishop John Drew Sheard was able to come and bless us all with his presence and message during the Convocation."

Marcia Dixon gave a brief account of COGIC's history in her online article. She said: "COGIC UK has a rich histo-



ry. It was founded in 1948 by Mother Mary E. McLachlan. The Church was officially incorporated into COGIC in 1952 by Bishop Charles H Mason, who founded the international church in 1918, (and was the first International Leader of COGIC) when he visited the UK for the World Pentecostal Conference. Later, under the leadership of Bishop Bell, COGIC UK

Host Bishop Alvin Blake and Presiding Bishop JDrew Sheard at COGIC Luton on 70th anniversary celebrations

became prominent not only within the Black Pentecostal community but across all Christian denominations.

"The COGIC Choir played a significant part in introducing UK audiences to the Black Church and the power, and spirituality of gospel music.

"They were the first black gospel choir to be featured on the BBC TV Songs of Praise programme with the viewing amongst the highest in the programme's history."

This year's Convocation featured live worship services, a gospel concert, video presentations, and contributions from special guests from the UK and overseas.

There were educational workshops, extravagant praise, and empowering

preaching over the period of 4 days.

The concert held on Friday 26th August included singing from well-known artists such as Volney Morgan and New-Ye, Muiywa and Riversongs, Becca Folkes, Revelation Choir direct from Denmark, Sarah Watson, and Samuel Bella.

Bishop Dr Alvin Blake said it was a wonderful celebration of thanksgiving for COGIC UK's impact on spiritual and community life thus far.

"We look forward to continue making our contributions in helping those within and beyond our congregations in discovering and sustaining their respective spiritual journeys," he said.

Date published
7th Sep 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots and Luton
Council of Faiths

Memorial to Covid victims now features 776 flowers

Sadly the Luton Covid memorial now contains 776 flowers - each one representing a loved one who has died of the virus in the town.

First erected in November 2020, it can still be viewed on the outside wall of the Wigmore Church at the north end of Crawley Green Road. Instigators Gail Bennett and Jenny Spouge continue to add flowers when needed, though rejoicing in the weeks when there are no further losses. As the flowers begin to fade, both Jenny and Gail are grateful for the trees being planted around the town as a more lasting and greener memorial as part of Luton's Peace Garden Initiative, but they will continue to



keep creating these textile memories as well.

A panel has been created to represent the memorial and submitted for inclusion in the National

Covid Quilt being produced by Bernina and the Quilters' Guild. Such has been the response to the initiative that there were three quilts, put on display for the first

Gail Bennett and Jenny Spouge keep adding to the Covid Memorial at Wigmore Church saying each flower represents a life lost to Covid

time at the Festival of Quilts at the NEC, Birmingham, in the month of August.

All different faith communities and places of worship across Britain have tried to find ways to acknowledge and reflect on the effects of the pandemic on communities and this prompted Luton's Wigmore Church to mount a Covid Memorial on the front of the church, crocheting and knitting a flower each for every person who died of Covid-19 in Luton.

Rev'd Heather Whyte, the United Reformed Church (URC) Minister, said: "This memorial of flowers is a reminder that the numbers of deaths we hear aren't just statistics

but people, people with families, people who are loved. We hope and pray that not many more flowers will need to be added, but we know the pandemic is still very prevalent in Luton."

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

Many families and friends could not say goodbye to their loved one which has made the grieving process even more difficult. Initiatives like these are about supporting families and individuals in the bereavement process and doing something positive for all.

Luton's Peace Garden Initiative led by Sujel Miah of Luton Council of Mosques is also progressing well. The project is about planting a tree for every life lost because of Covid-19. Following tree planting in Wigmore Park last year, this year trees have been planted in Wardown Park, Pope's Meadow, People's Park and Mayne Avenue in Hockwell Ring.

Date published
14th Sep 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Religious groups mourn The Queen

As the longest-reigning monarch in British history, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II passed away peacefully on Thursday. GRASSROOTS & Luton Council of Faiths offer its deepest sympathies.

The various religious groups in Luton are mourning the passing of our beloved Queen alongside the country, the Commonwealth, and the rest of the world.

Prof Zafar Khan, Chair, Luton Council of Faiths stated that Her Majesty the Queen was a wonderful monarch and a fine person as well. She will be sorely missed.

He added: "The Queen is admired by the faith communities for her gentleness, humility, grace, astuteness, diligence and

the dignified way in which she has carried out her duties as head of state, defender of faith and ambassador to the rest of the world.

"We join in mourning the passing of the Queen with all people of all faith origins and with those of no religious persuasion.

"We are grateful for her life, her faith, and her selfless commitment to our country. God bless our country, and may we all continue to be inspired by the life of our Queen. May her soul rest in peace."

Revd Canon David Lawson, Chair of GRASSROOTS Luton, said Queen Elizabeth's Christian faith was what underpinned her lifetime of service, but she also acknowledged and celebrated the huge contribu-



tion other faiths have made to the United Kingdom. May the Queen's example inspire us to build stronger and more cohesive communities!

Expressing their condolences, Luton's Muslim communities stated British Muslims stand in unity with British people in this time of deep sorrow.

Her Majesty was a pillar of hope, unity and stability in our ever changing and challenging

HM Queen Elizabeth II was a pillar of hope, unity and stability. Her reassuring presence will be greatly missed.

world. Her reassuring presence will be greatly missed.

Luton's Jewish communities along with the Board of Deputies of British Jews stated no words can fully describe the extent of our nation's loss; Her Majesty's wisdom, benevolence and dedication to duty will be an inspiration for the generations to come.

Luton's Sikh community leaders have said the Queen truly epitomised the quality of 'Seva' – a central concept of selfless service performed without any expectation of result or award in the Sikh faith.

At a special prayer ceremony, President of the Hindu Mandir in Luton, Mr Kanti Lad highlighted the contributions and influence the Queen's life has had over her record-break-

ing reign.

Prayers were offered for the queen's soul and for the peace of all those who mourn her and the whole world.

Luton Buddhist, Jain & Bahai communities stated her life shines as the light throughout our world.

She devoted her life to the service of the people and remains a guiding light to us all.

Churches Together in Luton reminded the Queen was no stranger to Luton. She stayed at Luton Hoo and attended worship at St Mary's Church in the town centre.

A service of thanksgiving for the life and service of Queen Elizabeth will be held at St Marys Church on Wednesday, September 14 at 6pm. All are welcome.

Date published
21st Sep 2022



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Outpouring of emotion for the Queen

The death of HM The Queen Elizabeth II at the age of 96 has prompted an outpouring of emotion — in the county of Bedfordshire, across the country and around the world.

The newly appointed HM Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Susan Lousada held a special service of thanksgiving at St Paul's Church, Bedford.

Several other events and services have also been held by the local authorities across the county.

Luton Council joined the national 'Moment of Reflection' on Sunday and held a short ceremony in front of Town Hall.

Mayor of Luton Cllr Sa-meera Saleem opened the cer-

emony by thanking the Queen for inspiring her and all the women in leadership.

Chair of Luton Council of Faiths, Prof Zafar Khan, stated Her Majesty's subtle and sublime role is central in making British society tolerant and confident about its diversity.

He hoped as citizens of this wonderful country, we all will strive to make Britain even stronger.

Deputy Lieutenant Vinod Tailor recited a Sanskrit prayer (with English translation) for the world peace and for the peace of the departed soul of our beloved Queen.

Cllr Maria Lovell MBE said: "As a Ghanaian British, I join with others in mourning the passing of a deep revered



Queen.

"We have lost the matriarch of our nation. She was a cherished sovereign who had embodied stability and a beacon in the face of many changes. Her legacy as a Queen and stateswoman is of unmatched dignity."

She stated her late mother would often share the cherished memories of meeting the Queen during her state

Representatives from different faiths and communities were invited to light candles in a Thanksgiving Service for the Queen at St Mary's Luton.

visit to Ghana.

At a special thanksgiving service held at St Mary's Church Luton, C of E Bishop of St Albans Diocese The Rt Revd Dr Alan Smith said: "We have lost the mother of our nation and we mourn.

"The Queen is no longer with us and we grieve. Quietly, patiently, persistently sticking to the promise she made on her 21st birthday; nothing has ever diverted her from her avowed commitment to serve - 'A promise made and kept for life'.

Reflecting on the last photograph taken of Her Majesty at Balmoral, when the new Prime Minister, Liz Truss, had visited her, Bishop Alan said: "We see our Queen standing alone, slightly

stooped with age and yet her face is alight with a beaming smile. It teaches us a great lesson — how to grow old gracefully.

"In that moment, perhaps above all other moments in her life, her humanity shines through. This was someone who wore her faith in her heart, not on her sleeve.

"She revealed a new beauty, flowing out of a long, fruitful life lived to the full, a duty well discharged and a lifelong vow of service which was finally complete."

Committing Her Majesty into the hands of Almighty God, Bishop Alan said: "In faith we celebrate that she has now returned home. May she rest in peace and rise in glory."

Date published
28th Sep 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Walk brought communities together

We have seen communal tensions fueled by the social media across many areas in the country recently. Luton has stayed calm and mature, and Luton's faith communities have remained focused on working together for peace and human flourishing, locally as well as globally.

The evidence of this was seen at Luton's Annual Peace Walk held last Saturday. People from different faiths and those with no particular faith affiliation came together for the 26th Annual Peace Walk.

It is one of the most popular events led by Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) in partnership with GRASSROOTS and support from Near Neighbours Programme and Luton's differ-

ent faith communities.

It was an opportunity to be together in our solidarity and walk and talk with one another, while visiting different places of worship too.

It was inspiring to hear the amazing refugees and asylum seekers support work carried out by Madinah Mosque and All Saints Church in partnership with one another in Bury Park Beech Hill area of Luton.

A few teachers and pupils from Chantry, Southfield and Whitefield Primary Schools gave away their week-end to join in this noble initiative.

Children recited poetry on the theme of Peace. A teacher said events like these help nurture young minds positively. We must leave a legacy for our young people to latch on to this



belief that peace and harmony are not abstract theories; instead they are practical and life fulfilling possibilities, provided we work to turn these possibilities into living realities.

The Peace Walk started at High Town Methodist Church, where people's donations for Luton Food Bank were collected. People were then led to visit areas where trees have been planted in memory of those

During Luton's Annual Peace Walk people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds gathered in the High Town Peace Garden

who passed away due to Covid.

At the Ukrainian Chapel, people expressed solidarity with Ukrainians and all those who are suffering because of wars and conflicts in different parts of the world. The Peace Walk concluded at the newly built Guru Nanak Gurudwara on Dallow Road, where the Sikh hospitality known as 'Langar Seva' (a Sikh religious obligation) was, as always, outstanding and admirable.

Faith and community leaders in our town have worked very hard over the years to create a culture of dialogue and cooperation resulting in respect, tolerance and harmony across Luton's diverse communities.

We felt so proud that one of our young volunteers Nitin

Verma, a Hindu, studying in Cambridge, came with a Muslim friend to join the Peace Walk, to give a clear message that as young people we want to create an environment where people from all diverse backgrounds can flourish, so that together we can make our world a better place for everyone. He strongly condemned Hindu-Muslim hostility recently shown in the media across the country.

LCoF Chair Prof Zafar Khan and Vice Chair Gulie Butcher thanking all for their participation and engagement in the peace walk, encouraged all to continue energising ourselves with what is good in us all and said "May there be peace in the world and let it begin with me"!

OPINION

Date published
5th Oct 2022



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Joy and peace of religious festivities

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. Despite it requires continuous fasting for 25 hours it is the most celebrated of all Jewish festivals.

Five days after Yom Kippur is Sukkot, another Jewish festival, which 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 modern luxuries into

perspective.

Just when Jewish festivities were on, colorful costumes and live music got hundreds of Hindu friends to dance together, creating a large family and community dance floor at Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Hindu Mandir (Temple) in Lewsey Farm. This was for Hindu festival called 'Navratri' (literally translates as nine-nights) celebrations. It involves the folk dances called 'Rasa' & 'Garba' (also called Dandiya), performed using decorative short sticks.

Hindus from northern India will also be celebrating a festival called 'Dussehra' - a word derived from Sanskrit by combining the words 'dasha' (ten) and 'hara' (defeat). This marks the triumph of Lord Rama over the 10-headed demon king Ravana.



'Dussehra' celebrations are featured in UNESCO's 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. During these celebrations, Lord Rama's life story is re-enacted through theatrical performances. It culminates in setting alight huge effigies of Ravana to signify the destruction of evil.

Also Hindus from east of India, and from Bangladesh, celebrate Hindu Mother Goddess Durga's victory over a demon

Gujarathi Language schoolchildren learning to perform the folk dance called Dandiya - using decorative short sticks

and therefore host ceremonial processions carrying clay statues of Ma (Mother) Durga. In India and Bangladesh, these clay statues are ceremonially immersed into river or ocean, signifying the return of Ma Durga to be one with the Almighty.

It just shows no single religious or ethnic group or community is homogenous. Diversity has multiple layers, which makes it complex and yet beautiful, dynamic and exciting. Yogesh Mistry, General Secretary Hindu Temple, said: "May the good conquering evil inspire us all to serve selflessly for the common good."

Zafar Khan, Chair of Luton Council of Faiths said: "We are delighted to share the joy of all our Jewish and Hindu friends, who have spent a wonderful and

meaningful time celebrating their religious festivities. In the light of some communal tensions we have seen last month in different parts of the country, it has been reassuring to hear from the police and the Luton Council that there was no footprint of unrest here in Bedfordshire.

"We celebrate the fact that Luton's different communities live together side by side and work together to address humanitarian crises. As faith communities we are concerned with poverty, cost of living crisis and other natural calamities threatening people's lives globally. We hope, wish and pray that the blessings, joy and peace of our different religious festivities, will enrich lives of all our fellow citizens."

Date published
12th Oct 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

A story of rebuilding broken lives

British Ugandan Asians are marking 50 years since their arrival in the UK. In 1972, President Idi Amin of Uganda had announced that all Ugandan Asians must leave the country within 90 days. Over 60,000 Ugandan Asians were forced out. Around 27,000 with British passports came to the UK.

Marking the 50th anniversary of this exodus, a special British Ugandan Asians at 50 exhibition, funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, has been brought to Luton at Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Hindu Mandir Hall in Lewsey Farm.

The Mandir President Mr Kanti Lad said: "This exhibition celebrates the significant contributions the South Asian communities have made to

British culture and community over the last half a century. It is a story of re-building broken lives of several families and communities and of giving back to the country that is now our home."

The Mandir Vice President Mr Dhansukh Panchal said: "When we arrived, we were all together; Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs. We all supported one another. We have progressed together since then. We hope our harmonious relationships can continue to contribute to the growth and prosperity of the British society."

Mr Vinod Tailor, former High Sheriff and a Deputy Lieutenant in Bedfordshire recalled key highlights from his life's journey saying it has been an



British Ugandan Asians at 50 exhibition: High Sheriff Lady Jane Clifford with Vinod Tailor

incredibly rewarding and gratifying journey from refugee to becoming High Sheriff of Bedfordshire in 2017-18. He said: "No one becomes a refugee by choice; it is political and economic circumstances which displace people."

Referring to the song by Ganda Boys, The Forgotten People, Mr Tailor said: "It has become the national anthem of refugees. It is a global humani-

tarian anthem by and for displaced people throughout the world."

Stradishall Refugee Camp was the first home for many Ugandan Asian refugees in 1972 and 1973. Many past residents and local people who volunteered or worked at the camp at the time, including one refugee family who has lived in this area ever since, have been interviewed in preparing for this exhibition.

"Capturing these stories, for us, and for future generations is at the heart of our project and we're so grateful to everyone who took part in it", stated one of the exhibition curators Lata Desai.

High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, Lady Jane Clifford, visited the exhibition and said:

"Credit to all those who have come up with such a fantastic exhibition telling a terrifying tale of human displacement. It is an excellent presentation of life before and after the exodus of Ugandan Asians. It is remarkable to find out how Ugandan Asians set up a new life in the UK; how so many past residents of the resettlement camps and local people volunteered and worked to support refugees in these camps during the early 1970s.

"It just restores our faith in humanity that together we can face any adversity. It is a good example of how by supporting one another we can rebuild the broken lives to flourishing communities. It is educational as well as inspirational, particularly for the future generations."

Date published
19th Oct 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Try to learn from past experiences

Black History Month in October is about celebrating the achievements and acknowledging the struggles of Black people throughout history, right up to the present today.

In Luton, several events are being held to commemorate Black History Month. One such event was the Black Culture Market at which there was a variety of stalls offering a range of creative and interesting products and materials.

Dee Bailey, the key organizer, said: "Black History Month is a time for education and reflection, but it is also about supporting and celebrating the contributions of black businesses and social entrepreneurs who add colour, vigour and spice to the British cultural

landscape."

Talking about an interesting exhibition, commemorating the African experience of the Second World War, Cllr Maria Lovell said: "It is a photographic illustration of the contributions and sacrifices made by the African soldiers as part of the British Empire World War II."

This exhibition will be open from 20th October to 25th November from 11am – 5pm at the Church Street windows in The Mall Shopping Centre.

A ticketed event 'The Hope Gala Ball' on 22nd October at Venue 360 is bringing the community back together through an evening of comedy, entertainment, music, food and fellowship, while also paying tribute to those who died dur-



ing the Covid.

Award-winning multi-disciplinary professional practitioner Rev Dr Trevor Adams spoke recently at Hat Factory on Being Black in Luton.

Although Windrush Day is commemorated in the month of June, a special event celebrating the Windrush generation was held at All Saints Church Luton, during Black History Month.

Bishop Richard Atkinson at All Saints Church Windrush Event (Left) and Dee Bailey at Hat Factory Black Culture Market (Right)

At this event, Right Reverend Richard Atkinson Bishop of Bedford, emphasised on three 'L's - Lamentation, Longing & Learning. Lamenting all the hurt and damage caused by the systemic injustices, lamenting all those centuries of wasted human talent, lamenting all those lives that weren't allowed to flourish, Bishop Richard said we must now move to long for what can be achieved in terms of justice and inclusion by learning from the Windrush events and the injustices that have followed since then.

"We will learn from this' is an often repeated phrase by our political and even religious leaders and institutions and yet Bishop Richard said we often do not learn; instead we repeat the sins and we redo the

wrongs. He wished and prayed that we will learn together and grow as people, as communities, as nations, as the one precious united human family that God created and cherished. He said: "We must learn and execute what it is to be God's rainbow people. We must learn and long for a society where poor are treated better and people are cared for well and human rights and dignity isn't trampled any more."

Vicar Rev David Kesterton ushered these words in his prayer: "As we give thanks for the courage of the Windrush generation, we celebrate their legacy and look forward to that time when all people will be equally valued as they are in your sight, Lord God, our protector and redeemer. AMEN."

Date published
26th Oct 2022



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Believing the world is one family

Djembe – the name of a rope-tuned skin-covered goblet African drum played with bare hands - comes from the African phrase 'Anke djé, anke bé', which means "everyone gather together in peace".

That's what happened last week in The Mall. The djembe playing gathered people for the inauguration of an interesting exhibition, commemorating the African contributions to the World War II in the Black History Month.

The organiser Cllr Maria Lovell said: "This photographic illustration will remain open for a month at the Church Street windows in The Mall. Our vision is to build an African Museum & Community Centre in Luton where we can display

such contributions of Africans, Caribbeans and others in the making of Great Britain."

As the African drummers were drumming in The Mall, outside in St George's Square, South Asian drummers were beating the Indian and Pakistani traditional Dhol Drums to galvanize the mood for the Indian festival Diwali celebrations.

The Dhol drums originated in the region of Punjab in India & Pakistan. It is integral part of Bhangra music and dance and is used at south Asian weddings and other celebrations. Even with the Afro-Cuban bongos, the Dhol provides the backbone to a musical ensemble that creates an almost irresistible urge to move with the rhythm.

The Dhol playing was part of the two-day Diwali celebra-



tions put together by "Diwali in Luton" initiative in partnership with OM Group, Lyca Radio & The Mall. The event featured live performances from some local and top Indian/Bhangra artists and performers, as well as some amazing stalls, tasty food places and workshops. The event finished off in style with spectacular fireworks finale.

Diwali, the festival of lights,

On Diwali festival, Luton's Hindu Mandir in Lewsey Farm raised £1,100 for the Pakistan flood appeal.

is the most popular of all South Asian celebrations and is celebrated by Jains and Sikhs as well as Hindus. The word Diwali comes from the Sanskrit word 'Deepavali', meaning rows of lighted lamps. For Hindus, it marks the triumphant return of Lord Rama and Sita to their home after defeating a Demon King. 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.

Attend by thousands and co-organised by Muslims, Hindus and people from many different backgrounds, last weekend's "Diwali in Luton" proclaimed nothing can divide us - we are

one human race. This was significant in defying the recent Hindu-Muslim communal tensions incited by a few miscreants in a few parts in the UK.

Thanking Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) for bringing different communities of Luton together, a Hindu Temple committee member said: "In Hinduism, we have a belief called 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' that the whole world is one family. LCoF is the very personification of that principle."

On this Diwali festival of light, the Shree Sanatan Seva Samaj Mandir in Lewsey Farm raised £1,100 for the Pakistan flood appeal. Luton's amazing community cohesion continues to transcend borders and barriers, globally and locally, and long may it continue.

Date published
2nd Nov 2022



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

May New Year bring health, wealth and happiness to all

The Annakut festival is one of the important Hindu festivals. It occurs a day after the Hindu festival of lights called Diwali, which lasts for five consecutive days – each day with a significance derived from various episodes of Hindu legends.

Depending on the region of India, these legends will vary. However, the essence behind each story is the abolishment and conquering of evil and darkness, replaced by the goodness and light.

The Annakut festival essentially culminates the Diwali celebrations and marks the first



day of the New Year for Hindus. In agrarian India, the new crop that had been planted after the monsoon season would have grown, and would now be

ready. This crop is harvested and first offered to the Lord on the first day of the year. This is the origin of "Annakut Utsav", which is translated as "moun-

At BAPS Swami Narayan Hindu Temple Luton, the vast array of elaborate dishes presented for God's blessings

tain of food festival".

At both the Hindu Temples in Luton, this festival is celebrated in a grand manner with great vigor and enthusiasm.

Mr Rajesh Pancholi at BAPS Swami Narayan Hindu Temple on Crescent Road said, "This auspicious day is filled with happiness and joy. It is said that he who remains joyous on this first day will also remain so for the rest of the year. For priests and disciples, the sentiments can be slightly different. They would spend the day at the Mandir (temple), take part in the 'kirtans' (devotional singing), and perform other devo-

tional practices. That way, the rest of the year would also be filled with the same divinity for them."

Mr Kanti Lad, President at Shree Sanatan Sewa Samaj Mandir (Temple) in Lewsey Farm pointed out that traditionally the entire business community would begin its new accounts by opening new books on this day.

Lauding the congregation & committee members for their efforts to arrange, not just hundreds of food items all prepared carefully, but also feeding hundreds of people in the evening, he said, "Amidst chanting of hymns, blowing of conches and beating of drums, the community celebrated the annual 'Annakut Utsav'. A lot of care and attention was paid by devotees in preparing the sumptuous dishes, both sweet and savoury."

May the New Year bring health, wealth and happiness to all.

Date published
9th Nov 2022

OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Linking the past and present through the eyes of the young

Next year is the 75th anniversary of the HMT Empire Windrush arriving in Britain on June 22, 1948. To make this a year of national celebrations of our shared history, numerous community organisations nationally as well as locally have been preparing to remember the leading role the Windrush Generation and their descendants have played in making Britain stronger, culturally richer and more inclusive.

Luton based You Are Able CIC, just before the Black History Month, took a big coach



load of young and old, men and women, an intergenerational group for a free community trip to the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool.

Nuritu Thompson, a 15-year-old young girl shares her experience of the trip saying, "Being at the International Slavery Museum has left me beyond words.

Luton based You Are Able CIC led an inter-generational group to visit Liverpool Slavery Museum

Visualising the pain and agony my ancestors have experienced since the 15th Century without having a choice to live their life freely, hurts to say the least.

"It helped to comprehend the hardships my ancestors faced. From the kidnapping of many black children to the building up of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), who had one million members confirmed in 1932 that brutally abused them, life for black people was hard."

Bilal Thompson, Director of Luton's You Are Able CIC stated this visit to the Museum could be possible because of the funding received from the

Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

He said: "We are preparing a documentary in Luton, which aims to archive the stories of the Windrush generation through the eyes of young people. In the making of this documentary, young people are learning about the legacies of slavery and the experiences of the Windrush generation, many of whom have since passed away and have left a verbal history with their children. Our intent is to capture these stories and create a record that can educate future generations."

You Are Able CIC sees it as essential that the legacy of and importance of the contribution of migrants has a place in both Luton and national life. They believe that linking the past and present especially through the eyes of the young will ensure that Luton remains a cohesive town with a shared history, understanding and respect for diverse communities.

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Guru birthday celebrated with vigor and devotion by Sikhs

The festivities in the Sikh religion revolve around the anniversaries of the 10 Sikh Gurus. These Gurus were responsible for shaping the Sikh beliefs.

Their birthdays, known as 'Gurpurab' are the occasions for celebration and prayer among the Sikhs.

Last week Guru Nanak Dev Ji's 553rd birth anniversary was celebrated with vigor and devotion in Luton.

He is the first of the 10 Sikh gurus, so as the founder of Sikhism, he is one of the most celebrated and highly revered Sikh gurus.



The new three-storey £5m Sikh temple building on Dallow Road is named after him and hence called Guru Nanak Gurudwara - Gurudwara meaning

Door to the Guru.

At the Gurpurab celebrations, it was heartening to see, not just priests and adults, but also young children beautifully

Young children beautifully dressed in traditional religious clothes took an active part in the 'Kirtan' (meaning devotional singing)

dressed in traditional clothes, taking an active part in the 'Kirtan' (meaning devotional singing) and also serving food to all.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji talked of universal solidarity.

His concept of 'Ek Omkar' talks of the oneness of humanity and of the oneness of God.

A very popular verse from the Sikh Holy Scriptures called 'Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji' (considered as the living word & the living Guru by the Sikhs) says that God created light - of which all the beings were born and from the same light, our universe is also born; so that

no-one is better than the other and no-one is worse than the other.

Welcoming a visiting Scouts group, Jasbir Singh and Parmjit Kaur, Sikh volunteers explained that Guru Nanak Dev Ji welcomed the needy and the poor.

This shows that his priority was not in religious doctrines but in the dignity of all creation and all human beings.

That is why Sikhs, wherever they are, as part of their faith, they serve 'Langar' - a free communal meal served at the Sikh Temple where everyone sits on the floor to eat, regardless of their social status.

Even the great emperor Akbar in India is said to have sat on the floor and eaten the same food as others before he met with the Sikh Guru Amar Das Ji in the 16th century.

This is one of the many ways in which the Sikh religion observes universal brotherhood and sisterhood.

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroot & Luton
Council of Faiths

Enjoying a special evening of fellowship and togetherness

Church of England St Albans Diocese, in partnership with Grassroots Luton, organised Inter Faith Week Event at St Albans Abbey.

Over 125 people from different faiths and no religious background were welcomed from Beds, Herts and parts of the London borough of Barnet, covered by St Albans Diocese.

Talking of this first-of-its-kind event, the Diocesan Inter Faith Advisers Rev David Kesterton (Luton) and Rev Tony Rindl (Watford) said: "It was indeed a good opportunity to share inspiration from different faith per-



spectives and to welcome, meet and network with friends and invited guests from different faiths, cultures, and ethnicities."

They added: "The evening cer-

tainly exceeded our expectations and we were again struck by the connections in the language used by the different faith representatives on the topics addressed."

Over 125 people from different faiths and no religious backgrounds were welcomed at St Albans Abbey for the Diocesan Inter Faith Week Event held recently.

The themes covered by speakers from different faiths included Climate Change, Racial Justice, Refugees and Asylum Seekers, Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation.

The Very Reverend Jo Kelly-Moore (Dean of St Albans Abbey), the official host of the event, stated: "It was a very special evening. It was particularly good to meet and talk with lots of women who were in the room. Those I was sitting with all commented on the unity of language and purpose."

The St Albans School students' heartwarming performances enthralled everyone. The students recited poetry and sang

a moving acapella version of "You Raise Me Up".

It was wonderful that in addition to input from different faiths, musicians from St Albans Abbey also performed instrumental music to make guests feel welcomed at the Abbey. In the end, a short guided tour of the St Alban shrine was also offered to guests.

High Sheriff of Bedfordshire Lady Jane Clifford said: "We are grateful to The Venerable Jo Kelly-Moore, Dean of St Albans Abbey, and Rev Canon Tim Lomax Director of Mission & Ministry, Abbey Musicians and Abbey Social Justice Team for their welcome and support. It was an inspirational evening of fellowship and togetherness."

Rabbi Jeff Berger from Herts Inter Faith Forum and also one of the event speakers, said: "There was an excitement and spiritual uplift at this event. May the good work of all our communities, be blessed and bring blessing to those around us."

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Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Developing and strengthening cooperation for common good

In commemorating this year's Inter Faith Week, over 50 faith and community leaders, from diverse religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, attended a special meeting with Luton North MP Sarah Owen.

This meeting was convened by Luton Council of Faiths, with support from GRASSROOTS and Near Neighbours Programmes in Luton.

Prof Zafar Khan, Chair of Luton Council of Faiths said: "Inter Faith Week is indeed a time when the spotlight is on all the organisations like ours who work tirelessly for inter faith



understanding and cooperation in Luton and across the UK.

"Our work to build connections between people of

different faiths and beliefs is enormously important, and in the aftermath of COVID-19, finding new ways to make connections and renewing our

Sarah Owen, MP Luton North, at a special meeting of Luton's faith leaders during Inter Faith Week 2022.

friendships is vital.

"Developing and strengthening patterns of cooperation for the common good is needed more than ever before as we tackle the devastating impact of the cost of living crisis, which is hitting us all far more than expected.

"Nearly 400 new refugees have also been moved into Luton, which also puts additional responsibility upon us, as to how we look after them while they are here in Luton."

Ms Owen is also the Shadow Minister for Faith and she is spearheading with Stephen Timms MP, the Labour Party's

new work on Faith Champions. At this special meeting, she said: "Other parts of the UK do not have as active inter faith engagement as in Luton, so one of my tasks is to shout about good things happening in Luton."

She stated: "Tackling deprivation levels in one of the richest nations is unimaginable as faith communities are expected to give and do more and more."

In the aftermath of Covid-19, it is often heard we are finally going back to normal, but she said: Going back to normal isn't good enough because normal wasn't good for many people."

Faith leaders highlighted that it is not just politicians but we all are responsible to make our nation and our world a better place for all. Applauding this sentiment, Ms Owen responded: "I came to politics to make a difference, to make a positive change; and I remain committed and determined to do as much as I can."



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

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7th Dec 2022

Building a fairer, kinder, respectful county where all can flourish

Mrs Susan Lousada, who recently took over as the HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire, asked GRASSROOTS, Near Neighbours and Luton Council of Faiths to arrange for her to visit Luton's different faith communities at Luton Central Mosque, Luton United Synagogue, and Shree Sanatan Seva Samaj Hindu Mandir (Temple) in Lewsey Farm.

Through stories and real-world examples of neighbours from all racial and religious backgrounds coexisting peacefully, these visits aimed at forging connections, establishing bonds, and encouraging one another.

Sharing one another's concerns and aspirations during such visits helps to maintain strong community ties in Luton, according to Mr Mohammad

Shafait, President of the Central Mosque.

In addition to the refugee and climate crises, Mr Dhansukh Panchal, Vice President of the Hindu Temple, stated that "we must also get ready to deal with the cost of living crisis, substantial mental health issues, and the additional political and social turmoil".

The Right Reverend Richard Atkinson, Bishop of the Church of England's St. Albans Diocese for Bedfordshire, also joined the Lord Lieutenant during these visits. He stated: "In facing the crises of our contemporary times, all of us from diverse backgrounds have similar experiences and life struggles and have common shared aspirations for a better world. Therefore, it is crucial that



we continue to strive to work together for the common good."

The Lord Lieutenant expressed her delight saying it has been an honour to have been cho-

sen for the prestigious position of His Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire and it was a joy to host and plan this week, the Royal Visit of HM King Charles

HM Lord
Lieutenant of
Bedfordshire
Mrs Susan
Lousada and
Bishop Richard
Atkinson
welcomed by
the Luton United
Synagogue
President Mr
Brian Green (R)
and a member
Mr Charles Ballin
(L)

visit to Luton for the first time as a monarch.

"I look forward to serving all people in Bedfordshire and representing our monarchy," she stated. "I will continue to help and shine a light upon all the organisations and individuals that work tirelessly in building a fairer, kinder, respectful county where all can flourish and feel welcome."

The Synagogue President Mr Brian Green made the observation that Christmas Day this year occurs within the week-long Jewish festival of Chanukah. So as we begin the Season of Advent we should celebrate together the four traditional Advent themes - Hope, Love, Joy, and Peace, which are so much needed in our world today.

OPINION

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Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

The spirit of Christmas with a feeling of togetherness

Christmas is here and people are getting pre-occupied with thoughts of food, parties, family visits and of course gifts.

But why gifts? It is because just over 2,000 ago, Jesus Christ was the best gift in the world given to us by God, stated Pastor Vincent Cox of the New Testament Church of God (NTCG), while launching the Christmas Prayer Tree at the Church Street Windows in The Mall Shopping Centre.

He said: "Mankind beset by sin and separated from God cannot make its way back to Him. God made the way for us to



get back to Him through Jesus Christ."

Every year in the Christmas season, besides mince pies and presents, one more thing people

look forward to, and that is, singing Christmas Carols.

At the annual 'Carols in The Mall' event by Churches Together in Luton in partnership with the

Churches Together in Luton join Luton Town Centre Chaplaincy for "Carols in The Mall" and Christmas Prayer Tree Launch event

Luton Town Centre Chaplaincy and The Mall, NTCG band of musicians and singers led Christians from different Churches to sing Christmas Carols,

While serving mince pies to shoppers, the Churches Together in Luton Chair Michael Singleton said: "It is this feeling of togetherness and being part of a collective endeavour that complements the spirit of Christmas."

Launching the Prayer Tree, Jessica Rowlands, the Town Centre Chaplain, said: "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 be included in the St Mary's Church Christmas Eve Midnight Service."

At another Carols by Candlelight event by the University of Bedfordshire Chaplaincy called 'Treehouse', Luton Youth Cantores Choir provided an exciting high quality Christmas Carols musical experience.

University Chaplain Antoinette Mutabazi said: "It is easy to get upset about political or personal circumstances but being upset makes no difference to the issues that we face. I expect this evening gives you great joy, hope and excitement as we celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas."

Over the last weekend, St Mary's Church also held its Carol Service and Word of Faith Centre held its 'Christmas in St George's Square' event, at which the passer-by and shoppers were also invited and encouraged to join in the mass choir singing Christmas Carols.

OPINION

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Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

Be kind to strangers and to people who need asylum

Border crossing is a crucial contemporary issue. No one chooses to be a refugee. No one wants to leave home. The vast majority of people don't want to move to another country. However, dangers to life force people to move.

Each year up to one billion people cross a border. Every two seconds, a person is forced to flee for safety. Every day 44,000 more people are driven from their homes. The evidence of this is seen in the high number of refugees and asylum seekers abruptly relocated to Luton, whose safety and well-



The Revd Canon David Kesterton (left), Vicar, Parish of All Saints with St Peter and C of E Area Dean of Luton, Sandra Miller, Reader at All Saints (right), sharing the Peace Light with Mayor of Luton Cllr Sameera Saleem

being is put at risk due to their placement in entirely unsuitable housing.

It is commendable that despite hostility and division

pushed by politicians and the press, thousands of ordinary people around the country are stepping up to support people seeking sanctuary in our com-

munities. At the start of this year, Luton also received a 'City of Sanctuary' status.

Bearing these factors in mind, this year Luton's Annual Peace Light service theme was "Sanctuary".

For over 20 years, local scouts, civic guests and friends from other faith communities have gathered in December for the Annual 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.

Although the Bethlehem Peace Light could not be car-

ried this year in time for the service due to the terrible weather, All Saints Church welcomed its own Peace Light.

During the service, the Revd Canon David Kesterton, Vicar, Parish of All Saints with St Peter and C of E Area Dean of Luton said: "By sharing the Peace Light we participate in an expression of peace and goodwill to all peoples transcending national, ethnic, political and religious barriers."

In her talk, Reader at All Saints Church, Sandra Miller reminded us of our responsibilities, not just to our neighbours but also to the strangers.

Members from different faith communities also echoed these sentiments and called for collective responsibility and refugee protection.

Mayor of Luton, cllr Sameera Saleem concluded the service saying "May this light be a sign of the peace and understanding that we all long for in our town and beyond."

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OPINION



Faith Matters

by David Jonathan,
Grassroots & Luton
Council of Faiths

A range of resources for those finding Christmas hard

Christmas can be difficult for many people. Whether facing bereavement, loneliness or another struggle, and therefore, most churches and denominations provide a range of resources for those finding Christmas hard.

To make people feel they are not alone this Christmas, this year's Church of England Christmas campaign, 'Follow the Star: The Great Invitation' aimed at supporting, equipping and inspiring people and churches to join together via free to download app, offering features such as daily Advent reflections, 12 days of



All are welcome to see the Crochet Christmas Tree made by the Craft Group at St Anne's Church on Crawley Green Road. (Pic courtesy of Revd Anne Crosby, Vicar St Anne's Church)

Christmas reflections and even lighting a virtual candle on the website in memory of a loved one.

Locally, a wonderful crochet Christmas tree has been made

by the St Anne's Church Craft Group, which welcomes all who enjoy being creative and socialising.

The group meets every Tues-

day morning during the term time at St Anne's and crafts a lot, frequently producing items to meet the needs of others in the community. The tree has been on display in the grounds of St Anne's Church on Crawley Green Road.

"It is a real celebration of people's sense of community, and of working together on a common project," said Revd Anne Crosby, Vicar of the Parish of St Anne with St Christopher, Luton.

At another local Christmas event, Ulrike Hunt, who also runs The Feast Programme that brings together teenagers from different faiths and cultures to

explore faith and build friendships, said in reference to the Church of England's The Great Invitation theme... "At the heart of the Christian faith is the conviction that Jesus who lived an ordinary human life, was sentenced to death, but following resurrection Jesus is gloriously alive.

"Jesus not only defeated death but also defeated all evil in the world. Christmas is the invitation to know this person of Jesus, who is bigger than the darkness in our lives - who is bigger than our depression, or anxiety, our fears and our despair."

Ulrike remarked that if we make the first honest move toward Jesus at this Christmas, He will embrace us, just like the father in the Bible tale who ran and welcomed his prodigal son home.

May the peace and hope that the birth of Jesus promises, be ours, now and in the New Year to come!

Happy Christmas and a very Happy New Year to everyone!