

Issue 1 - January 2010

News - Views - Events - Policy - Practice

# FaithShare

the newsletter of **West Midlands Faiths Forum**



**INTER FAITH WEEK SPECIAL**

**IN THIS ISSUE**

Coventry Multi Faith Forum

Jubilee Debt Campaign

Lichfield Inter Faith Forum

Plus Much More

# CONTENTS

## PAGE 3

What's the BIG idea?

## PAGE 4

Inter Faith Week Personal Reflection

## PAGE 5

Inter Faith Week in Coventry

## PAGE 6

Launch Event

## PAGE 7

Lichfield Inter Faith Forum  
Faith and Climate Change

## PAGE 8

Faiths on Global Poverty

## CONTACT

**Office:** 138 Digbeth, Birmingham B5 6DR

**Telephone:** 0121 678 8840

**Website:** [www.wmfaithsforum.org.uk](http://www.wmfaithsforum.org.uk)

**Jane Gallagher:** P/T Development Manager

Email: [j.gallagher@wmfaithsforum.org.uk](mailto:j.gallagher@wmfaithsforum.org.uk)

**Gareth Jones:** Inter-Faith Development Officer

Email: [g.jones@wmfaithsforum.org.uk](mailto:g.jones@wmfaithsforum.org.uk)

**Selina Brown:** Executive Communications Officer

Email: [s.brown@wmfaithsforum.org.uk](mailto:s.brown@wmfaithsforum.org.uk)

**Barry Keegan:** Communications Volunteer

Email: [b.keegan@wmfaithsforum.org.uk](mailto:b.keegan@wmfaithsforum.org.uk)

## CONTRIBUTIONS

We are very keen for WMFF members and associate organisations to use this publication to share experiences and raise awareness of faith issues in the region; we would particularly like to invite local Inter Faith Groups to take this opportunity to contribute views and information on events and activities. As always, it is understood that opinions expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily shared by WMFF Executive.

FaithShare will be published three times a year during 2010. Send contributions to Selina Brown at the email above.

**Deadline for next edition 3rd May 2010**

## Chair's Summary



The first ever national Inter Faith Week (which was held at the same time as Islam Awareness Week) provided a tremendous boost to inter-faith dialogue and activity across the West Midlands region. It lifted the profile of inter-faith activity to new heights and drove those involved in making things

happen to new levels of exhaustion! For WMFF the week meant a regional launch event in Birmingham Council House at which Dr Atallah Siddiqui spoke powerfully at an excellently well attended occasion when musicians and dancers from different faith communities offered music and dance. Visual displays and shared refreshments added to the warm and friendly atmosphere. I think it was in looking around at everyone gathered there that I realised just how many friends we have made across the faiths in just a few years. During the week which followed a wide variety of events took place. I particularly appreciated chairing an event on women and faith held at the University of Worcester the following Sunday at which women speakers from Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths shared their faith experience and told of the issues they faced as women of faith.

There was much common ground uncovered and much sharing together, not least in learning to sing together. Our regional week was brought to a close in Wolverhampton when we had a focus on faiths and creation. Let us hope government decides to promote this initiative every year, but next time with a little more preparation time and a lot more money!

Rev'd Dr John Hall



# What's the BIG idea?

**F**or what was supposed to be only a one-off event, Inter Faith Week 2009 had a long history behind it. Back in 2007 there was a Commission on Integration and Cohesion that finally recommended to the Government that if means were found to get people to talk to each other more, everybody might get on better. This was hardly remarkable, but serving on the Commission was the Director of the Inter Faith Network, who went further and suggested that an Inter Faith Week would be a good means of overcoming the distrust and misconceptions that people with different beliefs have of each other.

While it was sympathetic to the idea, the Government's first response was to announce *'a new interfaith strategy that will focus on what more needs to be done to promote interaction and dialogue between faiths and the recognition of shared values.'* Soon afterwards they released a consultation document around which the West Midlands Faiths Forum (among many other bodies) organised an event and then sent in a response. Its outcome was an interfaith framework titled *Face to Face and Side by Side*, published in the summer of 2008. Drawn up with great care, it included a Government commitment to *'work with the Inter Faith Network for the UK to organise an inter faith week'* during 2009.

Scotland had had such an event for some years, co-ordinated by the Scottish Inter Faith Council; now the experiment was to be extended. But it was not until after more discussion that a November date for the event was announced in March 2009. Inter Faith Week would, it was hoped, *'strengthen good inter faith relations at all levels; increase awareness of the different and distinct faith communities in the UK, in particular celebrating and building on the contribution which their members make to their neighbourhoods and to wider society; and increase understanding between people of religious and non-religious belief.'*

Rather than being delivered from above, the Week was to be community-led, with local people and



groups organising their own events. The part of Regional Faiths Forums was to help co-ordinate and publicise what was being planned in their area. Individual towns of some size had their own committees encouraging participation and providing local publicity. On these could be found representatives from the various public services interested in cross-faith co-operation, as well as engaged organisations with a similar aim such as Friends of the Earth and Jubilee Debt Campaign, side by side with those from interfaith bodies. Also there were organisers of Islam Awareness Week, which had welcomed the proposal that the two events should run in tandem with complementary themes.

Officially the Week was to be held between 15-21 November, but the national launch took place in London on the Thursday before. WMFF had its own stall there along with the other forums and a host of different organisations – single faith, interfaith, multi faith, educational. WMFF also jumped the gun by holding its launch on the Saturday. As a city committed to bridge-building and celebrating diversity, Birmingham even managed to turn it into a month-long event by holding three public seminars on interfaith themes at the university in the weeks both immediately before and following.

What happens in future will depend on assessment of the Week's success. Going by the positive response, and with Coventry already announcing that it is making plans for next November, there is little doubt that the idea has caught on in the West Midlands.

# Inter Faith Week

## A Personal Reflection

Rev'd Gareth Jones  
Inter-Faith Development Officer



A multi-faith panel organised by a local Baha'i group, an Islam Awareness Week celebration dinner, a Hindu Yoga Camp, a talk on inter-faith relations from a police perspective – these were just some of the events I attended during a packed and inspiring Inter Faith Week in the West Midlands.

My abiding impression is of the imagination and creativity with which people grasped the opportunity the week provided. This was a week of new ventures and themes explored in depth. No one who attended “Women of Faith”, for example, jointly organised by Dudley Interfaith Network and Worcestershire Inter Faith Forum, will forget the moving and thought-provoking presentations.

Some groups chose the week to introduce new initiatives. The Jubilee Debt Campaign inaugurated its national multi-faith project with an inspiring and well-supported event in Birmingham. Warwick District Faiths Forum launched “Meeting Point”, an impressively produced booklet introducing each of the faiths represented in the district.

At a city-wide level, Inter Faith Week helped to consolidate partnerships. Coventry and Birmingham both formed planning groups which brought together inter-faith groups, Islam Awareness Week organisers, members of individual faith communities and other agencies. Coventry City Council's Faith Link

Officer played a key role throughout the process.

And of course the launch and closing events, in Birmingham and Wolverhampton, brought people together from around the West Midlands to celebrate, reflect, and commit themselves to continue working together.

So, many events in different parts of the region, and many others I'd love to have gone to had time permitted. Reports were still coming in of events around the region as the week drew to a close – from Burton-upon-Trent and South Shropshire, for example. The award for the bravest event must go to Lichfield InterFaith Forum, for organising an open air Speakers Corner in the town centre amid the wind and rain of the final Saturday.



Yasus Afari Jamaican dub poet and an Ambassador for the Parliament of World Religions; this photo was taken at the Inter Faith Week closing event in Wolverhampton.

# Inter Faith Week in COVENTRY

Surindar Nagra  
Equality & Diversity Officer

Mehru Fitter  
Coventry Multi Faith Forum



The songs of the children from the Sathya Sai Baba centre reflected world faiths and beliefs.

Coventry's first-ever 'Inter Faith Week' programme provided a wonderful focus for increasing understanding between people of faith and those people without any religious affiliation to work jointly to build bridges. Coventry's Multi-Faith Forum worked with the Council, schools, faith organisations and others to enable this to take place.

The programme included 22 activities reflecting the different faith communities of Coventry to increase awareness and understanding of each others faith. The city of Coventry bucked the national trend and turned the National Inter Faith Week into a lengthy Inter Faith season, marked by a variety of events.

The week started with its annual Peace Walk, attended by more than a hundred participants, including the Lord Mayor of Coventry, Councillor Jack Harrison MBE, JP, and the Deputy Leader of the Council, Councillor Kevin Foster. The walk which took in visits to different places of worship was an excellent example of learning on the move.

A brilliant presentation by Osman Sheikh on Islam and its relations with Judaism and Christianity was extremely well-received by attendees.

And the list continues: two evenings of Singing for World Peace, arranged by the Sathya Sai Baba Centre of Coventry; soothing and relaxing Guided meditation, arranged by the Hindu Council; an

opportunity to Meet the Bahá'ís; a Celebration of faiths and sharing of values at the monthly meeting of Coventry Ethnic Minority Action Partnerships; an Inter Faith Yoga Camp; a Multi-Faith gathering at BBC Coventry and Warwickshire; daily talks during Islam Awareness Week; Rhythms of the Divine – an illuminating session on meditative traditions in the world's faiths, and much more....

Messages of hope and peace were included in the programme from the different faiths communities. The message from the Bishop of Coventry, The Right Reverend Dr Christopher John Cocksworth, read: *"It is vital to show authentic religious faith is part of the solution to the world's problems. People of faith can begin to do that by learning to understand each other. The National Inter Faith week is a great opportunity to do just that."*

A spokesperson for Coventry Multi-Faith Forum said, "The support of Coventry City Council has been simply incredible and exemplary. Faith and community organisations too rallied behind us. But what has made the experience rewarding is the receipt of complimentary messages such as – We enjoyed the experience of attending the Peace walk so much that we would like to be involved in future events.

Coventry will build on this approach for Inter Faith Week 2010.

# Accommodating Diversity

## Inter Faith Week Launch Event

Yann Lovelock



In planning the regional launch, WMFF's co-ordinating team set itself the aim of being as inclusive as possible of the region's diversity.

The 6.00 p.m. start for the main event was set with Jews in mind. Sabbath was over by that time so at least those living locally (of which there are less even than Buddhists) were not excluded. Birmingham was chosen as venue since it is the region's transport hub. We booked the Council House, just a five minute walk from the city's two main stations. Although some grumbled at having to thread their way through the Frankfurt Market to get there, it was a timely reminder that the West Midlands is not just an English but a European region.

Filling the main room in the Banqueting Suite with stalls for the one hour networking event before the launch was so welcome that some groups had to share tables. There was a full range of public agencies demonstrating their commitment to faith inclusion as well as inter faith groups and a few individual faiths, displaying photographs, artefacts, power point presentations - and also, even more important, just being pally with all who dropped by.

Faith isn't just expressed verbally, so music was highlighted both before and during the launch with drummers, instrumentalists, choirs and dance. The verbal part of the launch was equally diverse. For me two points stood out especially. One was the presentation to the winner and runner-up in the Birmingham schools competition to design a logo for Inter Faith Week. Schools across the region did a lot to celebrate the Week but their contribution went largely unacknowledged.

The other high point was our keynote speaker, Dr Ataullah Siddiqui from the East Midlands. He reminded us of the important fact that interfaith dialogue has to advance beyond the simplistic tea and samosas stage to frank discussion of the issues that keep us apart if it is to make any significant social change. It was a good message for the large and enthusiastic audience to take back home.

# Open Forum On Climate Change

Anthony Wilson, Lichfield InterFaith Forum

Inter Faith witness in Lichfield has focused more on common concerns for action than exploring beliefs and doctrines: this partly reflects our population, which lacks the diversity that characterises other towns and cities in the area. This past autumn, we have tried to reflect the shared concern for countering climate change expressed by world faiths, and our contribution to Interfaith Week reflected this.

Drawing on the city's comparatively new Speakers Corner, we decided to hold a speak-in between 11 am and 12.30 on Saturday 21 November, on the theme of "A Matter of Life and Faith - Creation, Climate Change and Copenhagen". We judged it to have been successful, in terms of the numbers of people who paused to see what was going on as they passed, and we are prepared to commend this to others who may be considering a similar venture.

We secured a small grapefruit-sized globe which was passed to speakers ('holding the world in your hand') amongst the crowd, and then handed on to the next person: this encouraged friendly participation and kept the function flowing.



We are grateful to people of world faiths who came specially to Lichfield for the event, and contributed to the debate: their participation was important in a place where faiths other than Christianity are not commonly seen to be taking an active part in civic life.

## Faith and Climate Change

Maud Grainger  
Faith and Climate Change Project Manager

### Faith and Climate Change

All faiths have a sense of caring for the environment, it is the exploration of what this means to our day to day lives that is the focus for the Faith and Climate Change programme in Birmingham. For the first interfaith week we wanted to celebrate the good work of faith communities.

### Sustainability Forum

We held an event with Birmingham City Council where people of all faiths were welcome to come and hear a variety of speakers talk about their work and passions. From a Peace Garden planning group and Women's Interfaith group we heard from a number of exciting projects. We hope that by celebrating work we can inspire and motivate others to make changes in their lives, to explore these issues with their faith community and at their place of worship. One participant said; 'Great, very inspiring evening to know how many people and groups are working – there is inspiration in sharing'.

### Noah's Ark

Following the Sustainability Forum we took a short walk to St Philip's Cathedral where they had created an installation of the Ark and displays on the Islamic, Christian and Jewish traditions of this story.

Launched by the Faith Leaders Group the installation was open to the public. Whilst at the Cathedral we had an opportunity to form our own paper Arks to send to Gordon Brown. We ended the night reminding ourselves of the Multi Faith Declaration on Climate Change produced 4 years previously at our first Multi Faith conference on Climate Change.

For more information on the Faith and Climate Change project, please visit our website:

[www.faithandclimatechange.org](http://www.faithandclimatechange.org)



# JUBILEE DEBT CAMPAIGN



## Faiths on Global Poverty

**O**n the 18th November 2009 in the Bordesley Centre, Birmingham was the setting for a gathering of over a hundred people from the six major faith groups - Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh. Each gave a unique presentation of how their faith inspires them to seek justice and take action on global poverty.

An informative talk by Rabbi Yossi Jacobs of Birmingham Hebrew Congregation on the meaning of the Biblical Jubilee was followed by three lively songs from a Christian choir led by Rev Jo Mason.

Four young people from Al-Hijrah school made a heartfelt presentation, using the words of the Qur'an to show how Muslims view unbearable debt burdens on either individuals or nations. A Hindu, Dr Bhavana Chawda, then shared examples from the ancient scriptures of India calling for wealth to be distributed fairly, and quoted the words of Mahatma Gandhi:

**'Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed.'**

A Buddhist choir sang most movingly of the need for loving kindness and reaching out to 'all beings'. The evening ended with a passionate plea from Bhai Sahib Dr Mohinder Singh to work harder to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and a call for all to work together.

The evening led to deeper understanding of shared values in the six faith groups. This will help take forward the plan to develop the multi-faith project GLOBAL POVERTY, SEEKING JUSTICE: PEOPLE OF FAITH IN ACTION that was launched at the event by the co-chair of JDC, Stephen Rand.

**Audrey Miller**  
Convenor of the JDC Global Poverty

The event deepened our understanding of each other and raised awareness of our shared values and desire to promote the common good of all. It was exciting to have so many young people taking part alongside over one hundred older members of the very diverse faith groups.

The growth and expansion of the project offers a dynamic opportunity for all who want to work together on global poverty and especially the issue of International debt, a new way forward for Interfaith awareness not just for a week but for many years of positive action.

We would welcome your offers of support and sharing ways that your group may become engaged as we seek to expand the co operation and understanding that has come about from this very first event.

**The Jubilee Debt Campaign's "Global Poverty, Seeking Justice" conference is taking place on Sunday, 7 March 2010, 1pm-5pm, at West Midlands Fire Service HQ, 99 Vauxhall Road, Birmingham, B7 4HW. If you are interested in attending, please BOOK NOW or call 020 7324 4722.**

