

Inter-faith Week 2009 South East England Events Round Up



Foreword

Ingenuity, enthusiasm, energy and a real heart for people and community. These are some of the ways events of the first Inter-faith Week in England were described by onlookers, not claiming to be of a faith tradition. This round-up gives a flavour of the many events held across the South East in the three Sub-regional areas which South East England Faiths Forum (SEEFF) work to:



Thames Valley (Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes, West Berkshire, Reading, Wokingham, Bracknell Forest, Windsor & Maidenhead, Slough)

Central (Surrey, Hampshire, Isle of Wight)

Eastern (Kent, East & West Sussex, Brighton & Hove, Medway)

People of Faith are great contributors to communities across the UK. Rhetoric would suggest numbers are dropping and gatherings are ever more inward looking. These events dispel these charges as a myth when leveled generally. There were people of faith celebrating the diversity of faith, love for people and a wish to work for a vibrant, accepting and inclusive society.

I commend this round-up as a flavour of the vitality of Inter-faith work across the South East and would like to thank all those who organized events and the thousands that attended. I very much hope that Inter-faith week will become an annual event alongside the other events co-ordinated under the auspices of SEEFF, working with the network of Inter-faith forums and faith groups across the South East of England.

Chris Rich
Chair, South East England Faiths Forum

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Inter-faith Week was Generously supported by:



Eastern Area

The Brighton & Hove Interfaith Contact Group (IFCG), in collaboration with Brighton based World Sacred Music (WSM), hosted an event on 15 November at the Friends' Meeting House, Brighton with main speaker Michael Henderson, author of several books on reconciliation and forgiveness. The title of his talk was '**Forgiveness with Teeth**' and he told many moving stories of people who had managed to conquer feelings of hatred and enmity and begin to understand the perspective of the 'other'. There were additional contributions from Rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah, Brighton & Hove Progressive Synagogue, Rabbi Charles Wallach, Brighton & Hove Reform Synagogue and Linda Lee, Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University. Musical items were sung by Polina Shepherd and Rabbi Sarah. The event was attended by 80 – 100 people, including the Deputy Mayor of Brighton & Hove and the Lord Lieutenant. Members of many faith communities were present including Muslim, Bahai, various Christian denominations, Unitarian, Quaker, Interfaith Foundation.

IFCG and WSM also collaborated in a visit to Lewes New School (primary) to deliver an act of collective worship for Interfaith Week. Three musicians (Jewish, Christian and Muslim) performed for the children (about 60 aged 4 – 11) and commented on the meaning of each other's songs so that the children could witness dialogue through music taking place.

Charlotte Gravestock
Brighton & Hove Interfaith Contact Group

Interfaith Week was marked by Hastings and District Interfaith Forum's with two events, the first exploring Faith and Family on 17th November, which was attended by 25 people, including - Buddhist, Bahai, Christian and Muslim. Three talks were given during the event; Edward Hartley - Chair of Marriage and Family Committee of UPF UK, outlined statistics regarding family stability and breakdown and recommended resources that can be used to support the family: Character Education, Couple Relationship Education, Parenting Education. Allan and Barbra Wood talked about their 12 years of experience supporting couples to prepare for marriage. Also John Lynes of the Christian Peacemaker Team - shared about his years of experience working as a peacemaker in Palestine and his conviction that only faith hope and love can reduce fear, hatred and violence.

Young People's Culture and Faith Forum 25th November was a meeting with 10 Young People and 9 staff from community and faith groups, schools and allied



organisations met to hear about the proposed YPCFF project, building understanding, awareness and tolerance between young people of different cultural and faith/no-faith backgrounds. The project will seek to involve schools, community groups, families and the community to realise exchange between the host community and newer arrivals in Hastings/Rother.

Tim Miller
Hastings and District Interfaith Forum

Central Area

Southampton Council of Faiths had an extremely busy but very successful week, with many people in the secular world joining members of the local faith communities to have dialogue and share ideas. David Vane from SCOF woke up early on the 15th Nov to be interviewed on Local Radio Solent with Tim Daykin to talk about the ideas behind the interfaith week and the activities that were happening in the area. Later that evening, 45 people from different faiths met for prayers and inspiration at St Marys church, Southampton. Many people have commented how moved they were by the combination of the words from the different faiths. The event was organised by Rev. Steve Hall and supported by other members of Southampton Council of Faiths, Southampton Interfaith Link and people from different faith communities.

On the 19th Southampton Council of Faiths hosted a Conference; **Faith Matters - “One city many faiths –bringing the differences together”** over 140 people attended the conference from various organisations in the city including the City council. Hampshire Police, Hampshire Fire Authority, Maritime Agency, local schools, local faith communities and a wide variety of local businesses. The event was hosted at the Vedic Temple with lunch provided by the Hindu Community.

Cllr Elizabeth Mizon, Mayor of Southampton opened the meeting with contributions from Cllr Parvin Damani, an active interfaith champion in the area and one of the founders of the interfaith movement in the city, Alex Marshall, Chief Constable of Hampshire Police and the main speaker, Rt. Hon. John Denham, 'MP for Southampton Itchen and Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government who has strong links with Southampton council of Faiths and many of the faith communities in the city.



Following the conference Radio Solent broadcast an “Any questions “ style discussion with a panel of four members from different faiths. A group from SCOF visited the studio of Unity Radio 101 on Nov 19th and held an hour long discussion about the conference and some of the ideas that came up with the speeches.

In addition local Graffiti artist Will Rosie ran a Graffiti workshop on the Saturday for children from local faith communities at the Abu Bakr Mosque. Over 15 children took part and there are plans to run some more workshops next year.

Throughout the week members from the different faiths were involved with “Morning Thoughts” on Radio Solent and Julian Clegg’s morning programme





The Guildford branch of the Council of Christians and Jews were joined by the Guildford Inter-faith group and had over 30 people present at an excellent meeting on the subject of 'The Power of Apology'. It was lead by Simon Keyes from St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation; who challenged those present to consider what makes a genuine apology, and the following discussion ranged over all sorts of topics from President Clinton to War orphans in Australia.

Rev. Norman Evans

The impression from Godalming Bahai's was that Inter-faith Week was greeted with a lot of enthusiasm and the hope that this will become an annual event. In Guildford and Godalming several groups adapted meetings already in the pipeline to fit in with the extended week. These included the annual Interfaith commemoration of United Nations Day at St. Nicolas, Guildford, the Council of Christians & Jews, Godalming Bahá'ís, Unitarians and Churches Together. Rev. Jan Moore, the Surrey Police Inter-faith Chaplain, attended the Bahá'í meeting and reported on other meetings she had attended.

Carolyn Neogi

Woking People of Faith staged two events during the week. A meal together at a restaurant attended by a mix of people (faith, gender, age, occupation) getting to know one another better and building friendship as a basis for the work they do together.



Also an extremely interesting initiative '**Coffee-house Conversations**', a public event, held in the town centre at participating coffee-shops. Members of churches, mosques and other faith groups were invited to invite friends to meet people of other faiths in an informal setting, over a free cup of something hot, to discuss faith, culture and living in UK as a person of faith. Woking People of Faith provided a number of 'hosts' who welcomed people, bought them a hot drink and facilitated conversations. There was a stand or 'meeting point' in the town centre near the coffee shops where folk met by hosts who then introduced them to others already gathered in coffee shops. We think that 40 - 50 people joined in these conversations during the space of 1.5hrs on Saturday 21st November. There was quite a buzz across two men's tables outside Esquires, and amongst women and between the youth in Starbucks. Some of the youth exchanged contact details and plan to meet again. Many asked when we could do this again. The aim was to 'facilitate understanding of faith and culture' and also to celebrate the contribution of faith groups in the community.

Pippa Ross-McCabe
Woking People of Faith

Two events were organised by the Horsham Interfaith Forum. A multi-faith Spiritual Reflection on the theme of “love”, with music and readings from Thirukkural, Bible, Rumi and Baha’i Writings.

Also a meeting on ‘**Interfaith: From Tolerance to Trust**’ which was opened by the chairman of Horsham District Council; Councillor Keith Wilkins, who talked about the importance of such interfaith groups and the support of HDC for us. Mehrdad Kalani, moderator of the Forum a local Baha’i, also said a few words on the importance of “unity in diversity”. This was followed by a talk by Dr Richard Boeke who talked about ‘**From Holocaust & Hiroshima To Hope**’ which was followed by Multi-faith panel, who expressed their views on the importance of interfaith and Faith and in summary, these were their key points:

- The Unity of God, His Religions and Mankind
- Once all the man-made things introduced to Faiths are removed, the spiritual foundation of all religions are the same and we should not be afraid to learn about other faiths as this strengthens our beliefs.
- Transformation of the heart which is at the heart of all faiths should lead us to become better people.
- Our world is changing and we all need to respond to that.
- We should work hard towards peace, to avoid any more worldwide catastrophe happening.

These two quotes were also shared:

“The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men. Suffer it not to become a source of dissension and discord, of hate and enmity.” – Baha’u’llah

“Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand ...” – Matthew 12:25



Mehrdad Kalani
Horsham Interfaith Forum

From left: Dr Iyad Daoud (Muslim), Rev. Michael West (Christian), Mr Sukumar Sivaraman (Hindu), Councillor Keith Wilkins and his wife, Dr Richard Boeke (Unitarian) and Mehrdad Kalani (Baha’i).

The Annual Gala evening of Elmbridge Multi-Faith Forum was held at Claremont Fan Court School, Esher on Sat 14th Nov. The evening was honoured by the presence of Mayor James Vickers and Mrs Vickers. Over 100 participants, achieved a broad ethnic representation, with couples and families of various ages.



The programme started with song and the entertainment continued with a delightful, almost "angelic" dancing by Chinese girls, and then a Bahá'í family singing as a group some Bahá'í songs speaking of world love, unity and peace. The next item was a traditional Persian musical instrument called the "Santur". This is an instrument reportedly used since the ancient Mesopotamian times (3500 years ago), but currently used in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, India and neighbouring people. Finally, there was a Jewish choir, although choir does not convey the correct meaning; more a spirit lifting singing and dancing tunes that got everyone to his/her feet dancing, clapping and waving. It was a befitting finale to an entertainment programme that again reflected multi-ethnic backgrounds, and all from within our community or friends of our community, and all

unpaid.

The final word from Mayor Vickers was very encouraging, and he wished Elmbridge Multi-Faith Forum (EMF) ever more success its achievements within the Borough. EMF would like to thank the "Surrey Advertiser" for their support.



Nabil M Mustapha
Elmbridge Multifaith Forum

We are always eager to have new members, and our details are available on our website: www.elmbridgemultifaith.org.uk or by contacted Dr. Nabil Mustapha on 07956 545811 or Mr Geoff. Morris (Secretary) on 01932 868545.

Open Days organised by the Jain Community at its places of worship during Interfaith Week proved to be an enormous success. The week provided an excellent opportunity for the Jain Community to share with the wider community the richness of Jain philosophy and the relevance of the Jain way of life today as well, warmly welcoming them to our beautiful places of worship.

The Oshwal Association of the UK, the largest Jain organisation in the UK was delighted to be actively involved during Inter-Faith week and organised two 'Open Days'. One Sunday 15th Nov at the Jinalay (Jain Temple) as the Oshwal Centre. During the day, Vijaybhai, the resident Pujari gave two talks and guided tours, each lasting nearly two hours to visitors which included crews of local firemen as well as Westminster Inter-faith Group and 20 people of different faiths. During the tours, the visitors learned that the Jinalay is Europe's first traditional Shikardandi Jain Temple, built of Pink sandstone and Indian marble, consisting in all of 5759 carved pieces, including an amazingly intricate ceiling. Many questions were asked showing genuine interest and desire to learn more about the Jain Faith

Kishor Shah
Oshwal Association of the UK



Bringing together faith groups in the 21st century was the subject of the guest speech by Rabbi Lionel Blue at Hampshire's third annual Interfaith Lecture held during National Interfaith Week.

Rabbi Blue, journalist, writer and long-standing contributor on BBC Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day' programme, was invited as the guest speaker for the event at Hampshire County Council's Elizabeth II Court in Winchester on 18 November, where he delivered his message of diversity and equality while highlighting the importance of community among all of Hampshire's faith groups.

Organised by the Hampshire Interfaith Network, the Interfaith Lecture aims to establish a greater understanding of faith groups in Hampshire. Around 120 people attended last year's address by Dr Indarjit Singh OBE, Director of the Network of Sikh Organisations. This year, County & District councillors, members of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), local faith group representatives and young people from Youth Inter Faith were among the 150 people who attended.



Following the lecture, Co-Chairman of the Hampshire Interfaith Network and Deputy Leader of Hampshire County Council Councillor Roy Perry, said:

“I would like to thank Rabbi Lionel Blue for joining us in Hampshire to share his wisdom, insight, humanity and humour during what has been an eagerly anticipated lecture. Hampshire County Council is happy to support events like this because we know how important it is to strive toward creating greater understanding between people of different faiths and cultures. I am sure that everyone attending the lecture will take away with them not only a greater insight into what it means to live in a diverse community but an appreciation of what an inspirational speaker Rabbi Blue is.”

To find out more about the Hampshire Interfaith Network, its goals, local news and events linked to the Network go to www.hants-interfaith.org.

On 5th November representatives from faith communities met for the first dedicated event in the County aimed at ‘bringing together faith based organisations and the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)’ organised by Mole Valley Council.

The purpose of the event was to celebrate and recognise the immense contribution made by faith groups and identify new ways of working together to make Mole Valley an even better place to live, work and visit.

A lively and interactive day began with keynote speeches from Darren Mephram, Chief Executive of Mole Valley District Council, and Canon Chris Rich, Director of Social Responsibility at the Diocese of Guildford and Chair of the South East England Faiths Forum (SEEFF). Both speeches placed great emphasis on the importance of partnership working in addressing some of the big issues facing the district at the moment. With well over 100 delegates in attendance there were many opportunities to network, showcase projects and build relationships between the diverse groups of people and organisations present.

The day was rounded off with a moving and inspirational speech from Jenny Moore who, alongside Ruth Shepard and a team of volunteers, runs the community shop B@titude in Kingston Rd, Leatherhead. Jenny spoke about the generosity she has experienced from local people, the community spirit they have built up in the shop and how lives have been transformed through a shared sense of hope and unity.



There are now a wide range of projects both the LSP and faith groups plan to work on together and this was the main objective for the day.

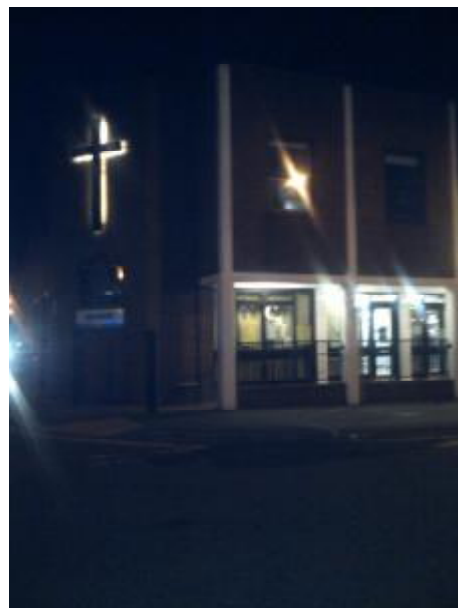
Jean Pearson, Leader of the Council, said “The event was a great success and it was wonderful to see so many people from different faiths keen to work in partnership with each other.”

Thames Valley Area

Slough Faith Partnership organised a week's Exhibition at Kingsway United Reform Church on Slough High Street. Each day one Faith members of the partnership presented something from their Faith. At the same time events happened at other places of slough as well like worship places, community halls and Walks. We had also invited a religious scholar AR from Scotland who talked about common Misconceptions about Islam and Muslims specially regarding Women's and Non Muslim's position and the Truth about these issues.

Further details can be found on the SFP website www.sloughfaithpartnership.org.uk

Dr.Henna Khan
VC SFP
Chair Renaissance Readers Club UK





Both High Wycombe Library and Wycombe Sharing of Faiths were delighted with the success of the two Living Library events that took place on the afternoons of 15th and 22nd November.

Overall there were 37 individuals from the community participating as 'living books' in our varied catalogue. In total, 108 members of the public registered to borrow 'books' and there were a total of 143 loans over the two afternoons to people aged 6 to 73!

This confirmed our hope that those who took part would find it a unique and interesting experience and subsequently talk about it with others in the community. We modestly estimate that each participant will have talked about the event with at least half a dozen friends and family, meaning the direct reach of the event was to as many as 900 people across the town.

Readers reflected a good cross-section of the local community, in particular in terms of the wide age range and the excellent turn-out from the Muslim community. Some people attended as families, with parents allowing their children to select the 'Book' and lead the conversation. 'Books' waited in a separate room and seemed to enjoy and value their conversations and encounters with each other. The most popular 'Books' included the gay pagan, the army officer, the Lord, the Sikh and the Jewish person. The area where the conversations took place had a wonderful buzz about it, and often people who had dropped in to take out one particular 'Book', stayed on to borrow others.

In summary, the Living Library surpassed our expectations. We are in no doubt that our original objective of helping to promote tolerance and understanding in the community through providing a safe and neutral space for dialogue and learning between those of different backgrounds was met. Most importantly, the Living Library meant that 143 meaningful conversations exploring difference and diversity took place that would not have otherwise happened. This has to be a good thing.

Wycombe Sharing of Faiths

The Faith Communities of the City of Oxford joined together the Jewish Community of Oxford who were celebrating Mitzvah Day by the planting of 6,000 trees at Cumnor Hurst Community Woodland



'Fear, Friendship and Faith' was a one day conference attended by over 50 people held on 17 Nov at The Avenue Methodist Church in High Wycombe.

The event was a true collaboration between some of the key groups in the area; Oxford Diocesan Committee for Inter-faith Concerns (ODCIC), Wycombe Sharing of Faiths (WSOF), with financial support from Churches Together in Buckinghamshire and Wycombe Islamic Mission and Mosque Trust



The conference was for people actively engaged in inter-faith relations and adopted the aims of inter-faith week to:

- promote good inter-faith relations
- highlight the contribution of faiths to building community and
- increase understanding between faiths and wider society



Fear, Friendship and Faith followed a seminar of the same title in Oxford in May 08. Both events aimed to be grounded in local realities, this time to focus on experience in High Wycombe and to try to address difficult issues encountered in inter faith engagement without idealising the situation.

The Programme for the day included discussion sessions and a variety of presentations:

Muslim/Christian Engagement: Theory and Practice

Dr Musharraf Hussain OBE, Chair of the Christian Muslim Forum

Dialogue and Witness

Dr Nicholas Wood, President of the Christian-Muslim Forum

Experience in High Wycombe

Imam SG Jeelani and Anne Bowker

Friendship Dialogue

4 local Muslims and Christians



What an evening of delight it proved to be! Oxford Council of Faiths set out to provide an evening of entertainment from the people of faith in our city. Representing the Church of Latter Day Saints, Sikhs, a Moslem, a Hindu, the Jewish Congregation, Baha'is, Orthodox and Pentecostal Christians and a mixed faith youth group, brought together eleven different items: choirs, a quartet, poetry readers and a flautist, a guitar player, martial arts, youth group drama, and soloists. Oxford's lovely Town Hall proved a welcoming and versatile venue for their contributions, coping with levels of sound ranging from G-Generation's Gospel dance to almost complete silence, combined with a space which gave us the opportunity to have simple refreshments and meet and talk.



Lord Mayor Cllr Mary Clarkson was able to attend, and acknowledging the contribution made by people of faith to the vitality of Oxford, and gave our city's seal of approval with the hope that our musical evening would be back next year. She confirmed that the evening demonstrated to her more cynical colleagues that the faith groups in the city could and did work effectively together.

We had asked each of our faith traditions to share something of their culture and worship experience – so that we could begin to learn more of each other's faiths. Some of the more vigorous parts of our programme came from G-Generation's Gospel dance, showing us young people's joy in being part of their faith family, and, utilising the space at the back of the hall, a lively Sikh martial arts group (some members coming from as far away as Luton and Hatfield), brilliantly throwing their spinning, weighted hoops high in the air. Possible reactions to less able people were brought forcibly home by the 'Young Steps' project enacted a telling tale of hardship and distress, and the joyful response to the care and compassion which it could elicit.

1400-year old Arabic chant from Sufi singer Haji Zahoor Ahmed, the memorable setting of text from King Solomon's 'Song of Songs' given to us by the Jewish Congre-



gation's choir 'OxfordShir' (*shir* meaning *song*), along with 'Oseh Shalom' (May he who makes peace...), and Chinta Kallie's Hindu 'Hymn of Peace: each brought us ancient faiths' appreciation of beauty and yearning for peace and tranquillity. The spare Byzantine chant of 'Behold the light of evening', a hymn sung as a lit candle is brought into the Orthodox Christian evening service, contrasted with four-part settings from their Russian tradition, while Anglican Christians brought us words and music composed by Hildegard of Bingen, and modern poetry about man's ravage of the world and the need to care for what we have been given to share with all creation – both their pieces accompanied by a haunting flute refrain and slide presentation. American pioneer melodies from the Latter Day Saints choir took us to their persecuted first believers' western trail blazing days, and Baha'i believers, suffering – as seemed to be the lot of each of our faith communities, either in the past or very much in the present – grave physical persecution, left us with a prayer for healing, accompanied by the soft playing of a guitar.



For many, a surprisingly powerful part of our programme proved to be the short silence offered by the Buddhists and Quakers, offering time to reflect on all we that had been offered to us, all we were able to share. This led to everyone, participants and audience alike, being able to join in the finale: 'Dona nobis pacem' (grant us peace). Woven into our city's population, our Council of Faiths offered an evening of peace to all who live, work or worship in it.

We showed effectively that faith – of whatever tradition – can bring people together to really enjoy themselves as well as to have a serious purpose. The evening genuinely demonstrated that we were at home together.

Bede Gerrard
Oxford Council of Faiths



As a part of Slough Faith Partnership a showcase day called 'Sikhs in the Square' was held which was situated in Slough High Street by the local cinema, and attracted a truly diverse audience of the Saturday afternoon, taking the Sikh Faith out to the wider community.

Despite the rain and wind it attracted over 500 people (Sikhs, wider community, people of faith and no faith). The programme was started with a dramatic performance by 10 Dhol players from the Ministry Of Dhol playing to attract the shoppers! Prayers and Keertan (Sikh hymns) were led by members of all ages from the Sikh community. After which were speeches from faith leaders, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu followed.

One of the highlights was the spectacular Gatka performed by BabaFfateh Singh Gatka Akahara Spiritual martial arts, accompanied by the Ministry of Dhol musicians.

Through out the event Langar (free community kitchen) - over 1600 somosas, 600 bread pakoras, 350 cups of tea, crisps, chocolates, soft drinks and fruit was distributed. All food and drink were donated by the Sikh community.

The event has been televised by the Sikh Channel, in addition to this Asian Star a local community radio station had live feeds during the event local papers also covered the event, also embracing technology we had a Facebook event page! Also had leaflets printed and a generic leaflet and website by Slough Faith Partnership.

There were also three other events from the Sikh faith during the week. Two 'Lets do Lunch' events Singh Sabha Gurdwara and Ramgarhia Gurdwara The Gurdwaras are open to all regardless of caste, colour or creed and food (langar) is available through out the day. Finally on 18th November there was a screening of 'Turbanology' an award winning documentary regarding the history of the turban.

Ranjit Bilkhu
Slough Faith Partnership

