



**University of Surrey's Inter Faith Education Programme
Summary and Highlights
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In our shrinking world we have to learn to live together in harmony... We have to have understanding. When we do not know about each other's faith, then we fear each other, fear creates tensions, and tensions create violence, and so forth. We have to learn to live together in a society that respects the rights and aspirations of all, not one to the exclusion of the other.

-Al-Haaj Ghazi Khanhan, Director of Interfaith Affairs, Islamic Center, NY



Photo taken at Inaugural Inter Faith Meeting, Oct. 11th, 2006

I. Objectives of the Inter Faith Education Programme

- ❖ To bring together students of diverse religious and spiritual (or secular) identities who share a common interest to learn and grow together while developing relationships based on openness, trust, and mutual respect;
- ❖ To become an active and conscious presence on campus, through inter faith dialogue, educational workshops, collaborative activities and inter-cultural exchange;
- ❖ To make a connection to the wider community outside of campus, by organizing visits to sites of religious significance in the area and participating in social action;
- ❖ To raise awareness and visibility of the religious and spiritual diversity on campus, and to encourage people to deepen their roots in their own religious traditions while learning about the traditions of others.

Through the work of fulfilling these objectives and establishing a lively and varied Inter Faith Education Programme on campus, it is hoped and expected that the Inter Faith Education Officer and Chaplaincy team will have seeded the formation of a multi-faith student council on campus,



dedicated to working in an ongoing capacity to foster a spirit of inter faith cooperation and collaboration on campus and to continue to build relations of openness, respect and trust across the faith communities.

II. Thoughtful, Committed Students

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." -Margaret Mead

On October 11th, 2006, a diverse group of 20 students and staff from 11 different traditions met in the Oak Suite for the inaugural inter faith meeting on campus. They came from Greek Orthodox, Buddhist, Muslim, Anglican, Christian Science, Baha'i, Hare Krishna, Hindu, Jewish Traditional, Jewish Orthodox, and atheist backgrounds, and from various religious, spiritual and cultural student societies.

Most had never met before; others were familiar with each other through student society meetings or classes. What they all shared in common was a curiosity about "the other" and a commitment to coming together to find out more and share their stories.

Using a methodology called Appreciative Inquiry, participants were invited to turn to their neighbor - someone from a different background than their own - and to ask each other a series of questions, to elicit personal stories and reflection on their own and their partners' faith journeys. The questions used were:

Please tell me a little bit about your background. Would you call yourself religious? Spiritual? Neither? What is it that particularly called to you or interested you about this inter faith meeting? What does "inter faith" mean to you?

Also at this meeting, participants had an opportunity to contribute their ideas and creative vision to the formulation of an inter faith education programme on campus. They were asked what they would personally like to see happen in terms of inter faith activities on campus or in the larger community (e.g. inter faith dialogue, organized visits to religious sites, educational workshops or lectures on campus, social action projects in the community, etc.), and how this program might link in with activities they were already involved in. The brainstorming elicited a varied, ambitious program for the next two semesters.

This core group of students along with new people continued to meet throughout the Autumn semester, attending three inter faith meetings for inter faith discussion on different themes, three Faith to Faith visits to sites of religious significance in the area, and various other inter faith activities (see highlights below). The mailing list for publicizing Inter Faith activities now goes out to more than 80 students and staff at the university.

III. The Case for Inter Faith Collaboration on Campus:

At the third inter faith meeting of the semester, attended by representatives from Muslim, Baha'i, Hindu/Hare Krishna, Christian, and Buddhist faiths, the group discussed whether or not inter faith dialogue and collaboration was needed on campus. The group unanimously consented it was very necessary, providing the following reasons for why:

- ❖ There is a need for discussion about our faith traditions related to current issues in the media; otherwise, misunderstandings or ignorance can develop about certain faiths and traditions which can lead to stereotypes, prejudice and tension (especially in relation to current media focus on "Muslim extremism" on campus);



- ❖ To encourage people to be proud of their culture and their faith;
- ❖ To create a warmer sense of multi-cultural, multi-faith community on campus (it was noted by most that the campus is not the easiest environment for making friends, especially for those not used to British culture and customs; this is also evidenced in the low score UniS received in last year's National Student Survey in the area of "personal development");
- ❖ To connect with and bring in international students who are not well integrated, or who do not feel well connected on campus;
- ❖ According to the Vedic tradition (and as made evident in the daily news!), we are living in the "Age of Quarrel and Destruction," thus anything we do to create peace and facilitate understanding is very important.

IV. Highlights of Inter Faith Education Programme, Autumn 2006:

Following the inaugural inter faith meeting, the core inter faith group and other interested students and staff continued to meet and participate in a variety of inter faith activities throughout the Autumn semester. The education programme offered a wide range of inter faith encounters, educational study visits and inter faith discussions, in the following areas:

Themed Inter Faith Debates / Lectures: Presentations and debates offered on different topics, bringing in different speakers to present on a theme as it relates to their religion or tradition. An important component of these debates is the opportunity for the audience to ask questions to understand each faith tradition better and dispel misconceptions or stereotypes. For example, during the Autumn 2006 semester, the Interfaith Society with assistance from the Inter Faith Education Officer organized a public debate on "the nature of God" in the lecture theatre, with presentations by Muslim, Hare Krishna and Baha'i speakers, followed by a lively Q & A session with the audience. Also, the Jewish chaplain Alex Goldberg gave a talk on Judaism in the Lady's Chapel of Guildford Cathedral, and a visiting Muslim scholar gave a talk on Islam.

During the Spring semester, there will be a Festival of Faiths organized in the Lecture Theatre, which will include an information exhibition with stalls on the different faith traditions represented on campus, and talks and panel discussions in the evening with presentations from different faith speakers on themed topics. These topics will include: AIDS ministry and prevention - what role religion can play; religion and the environment; women's roles in and contributions to their traditions; religion and science.

Visits to Religious Sites in the Area: A series of *Faith to Faith* visits to sites of religious significance in the area took place during the Autumn semester and is planned for Spring 2007 as well, with trips to the Buddhapadipa (Buddhist) Temple in Wimbledon (Nov. 8th) and the Guildford Synagogue (Nov. 11th), and Shah Jahan Mosque (Nov. 22nd). More detailed information about these visits follows in the following section entitled *Faith to Faith*.

Planning is underway for inter faith visits to Bhaktivedanta Manor, a Sikh Gurdwara, the Neasden Hindu mandir, the Benedictine community in Worth, St. Mary's Cathedral, and a Baha'i temple in London next semester.

Inter Faith Collaboration / Inter Cultural Exchange: Opportunities to collaborate and show solidarity with different faith and cultural communities on campus during their religious festivals and holy days. During the Autumn semester, the following events sponsored by one or more faith communities were publicized to students of different faiths who were warmly welcomed to attend:

- International Day of Fasting for Ramadan (Oct. 19th) - the Islamic Society welcomed members of the student community and inter faith group to fast if they wished and /or come to the Iftar (breaking of the fast) with the Muslim community that evening in the Quiet Centre;
- Celebration of Diwali (Nov. 8th) - the Indian Students Association invited students to an evening of traditional Indian music and dance for the "Festival of Lights" in the Indian / Hindu tradition;



- Birthday celebration of Baha'ullah (Nov. 15th) - Baha'i students invited members of the inter faith group to attend the birthday celebration of Baha'ullah, their prophet, with other members of the Baha'i community in Hersham;
- Shabbat dinner (Nov. 24th) - the Jewish Society invited members of the inter faith group to attend this special Shabbat dinner with a guest speaker, Elkan Levy, to talk about 350 years of Jewish history in Britain;
- Carol Service (Dec. 6th) - this ecumenical Christian service was widely publicized to people of all faiths, who were invited to come and hear the Christmas story told through music and readings, over 700 people attending.

Social Action Projects:

It was noted at the inaugural meeting that, as well as honouring the differences among all faith traditions, we should also try to find the common ground that all people of faith (and no faith) share, such as a commitment to social action and working for the benefit of all mankind. To this end, during the term there was collaboration between the Inter Faith core group and the Fairtrade Forum, to support the forum's efforts to bring an awareness of ethical consumption on campus and UniS becoming a Fairtrade University.

In April 2007, the inter faith group will participate in an inter faith volunteering project in the wider community, as a collaboration with the International Days of Interfaith Youth Service project, in partnership with the Interfaith Youth Core, and various voluntary organizations such as Habitat for Humanity.

V. Faith to Faith Visits

Inter Faith Visit to Wat Buddhapadipa November 8th, 1-4 PM



On Wednesday afternoon, 16 students and staff journeyed to Wat Buddhapadipa ("Buddha-light Temple"), the first Thai Buddhist temple ever built in the UK, located in Wimbledon. The visitors toured the temple grounds and learned from Dhammacaro bikkhu, one of the senior monks, about the history, basic beliefs and practices of Buddhism.

He spoke about Buddhism as a way of life, rather than a religion, its teachings open to anyone. In the shrine room, visitors learned the life story of the Buddha as it is depicted in beautiful mural paintings on the walls. Visitors also viewed the meditation hall where Buddhist adherents and spiritual seekers come to meditate regularly and took a walk through the peaceful gardens that are cared for by resident monks and volunteers.

Afterwards over tea, the visitors had an opportunity to ask questions of both Dhammacaro bikkhu and Geoff Hunt, the Buddhist Chaplain at UniS, exploring the intersections and divergences between Christianity, Buddhism and other faiths. They also tried out a Buddhist practice called the Metta Bhavana or loving-kindness meditation. From the evaluation sheets filled out by participants, 100% of respondents said that the visit increased their knowledge of Buddhism, 80% said it dispelled misconceptions they had about Buddhism, and 80% thought it strengthened relations between people of different faiths.

Inter Faith Visit to Guildford Synagogue Saturday, November 11th, 3-5 PM

On Saturday afternoon, a group of about 15 people from the University of Surrey and Guildford Cathedral (from Muslim, Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, Christian





Science and Buddhist backgrounds) made their way to the Guildford Synagogue for a special Shabbat service, where they were joined by another 15 people from the Jewish community in Guildford.

After the Shabbat prayer, led by Alex Goldberg - the Jewish Chaplain, a section of the Torah was recited from the scrolls by a member of the community. Over the course of a year, the Torah is recited in 50 parts, 1 part read out on every Shabbat. The portion that was recited this week was about the death of Sarah followed by the search for a wife for Isaac. (Photo taken from inter faith meeting 11/10/06).

After the recitation, two members of the community asked questions of those gathered about the significance of the passage, to encourage greater understanding and engagement with the story. There was an interesting exchange of views, with those gathered offering their theories as to why Sarah's death was never fully explained in the Torah. It was also mentioned that following her death, the Jews initiated a process that has continued to this day (and mandated by one of the 613 mitzvot that make up Jewish law or "halakha") of setting up a portion of any land they settle in as a burial ground. It was suggested that the importance of this might have to do with setting down roots, as the Jewish people have migrated (and been moved) from place to place from the beginning of their history.

The service was concluded with the prayer for the closure of Shabbat, followed by an informal time for people to mix and talk to one another over tea and cake.

From the respondents who took time to fill out a questionnaire about the visit, 88% felt the visit had increased their knowledge of Judaism, 63% felt it help them dispel misconceptions they might have had, and 100% felt the visit both strengthened relations between people of different faiths and deepened their resolve to learn more about different religions and faiths.

Inter Faith Visit to Shah Jahan Mosque Wednesday, November 22nd, 1-4 PM



On November 22nd, a group of 11 students and staff from 6 different faith traditions visited the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking, learning about the history and traditions of the oldest mosque in northern Europe, built in 1889. Mufti Ali Ahmad gave them a guided tour of the mosque and the grounds and explained the history of its founding. The visitors had a chance to observe members of the community during their afternoon prayers and to ask questions of the Mufti (one of the Imams of the mosque) about the practices of Islam and the messages of the Qur'an.

The Mufti explained the importance of the postures during prayer - the prostration being a humbling of one's self before Allah (God), the dynamic nature of the prayer, and the translation of the Arabic words

in the Call to Prayer. He spoke of the rhythm of praying 5 times a day as a kind of discipline that strengthens one's character. He also shared about the similarities between Islam, Christianity and Judaism, monotheistic faiths that share a lineage of prophets and forefathers. There was also an interesting discussion about some of the cultural customs outlined in the Qur'an and how they translate in this day and age, related to marriage and gender relations. The Mufti also explained about the importance of the Hajj, the pilgrimage that Muslims make to Mecca, and the experience of bliss and inner peace he has taken away from his time spent in Mecca.

From the respondents' evaluation of the visit, 83% felt that the visit had increased their knowledge of Islam, and 100% felt the visit both strengthened relations between people of different faiths and deepened their resolve to learn more about different religions and faiths.