

RIPPLES OF KINDNESS: AN INTERFAITH COMMUNITY MEAL

In honour of 2019 World Interfaith Harmony Week

A SHORT REPORT

Our Event: *Ripples of Kindness - An Interfaith Community Meal*

Held Saturday, February 16, 2019 at 12:00 pm at the Sacre-Coeur Church, run by the Dominican friars at 381 Sherbourne Street NE corner of Sherbourne and Carlton, Toronto, ON Canada. Hosted by the Sikh Sangat of Canada and The Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto's, Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs Office.

A Short Summary of World Interfaith Harmony Week

It was during a Plenary Session in 2010 at the 65th General Assembly of the United Nations held in New York that H.M. King Abdullah II proposed World Interfaith Harmony Week to help address, he said "forces of division that spread misunderstanding and mistrust especially among people of different religions".

King Abdullah remarked, "What we are proposing is a special week, during which the world's people, in their own place of worship, could express the teachings of their own faith about tolerance, respect for the other and peace".

Thus, World Interfaith Harmony week challenges us to respect each other without regard to race, religion or ethnicity, and reminds us that it is not our differences that bring us together but our similarities. King Abdullah further commented, "The fact is, humanity everywhere is bound together, not only by mutual interests, but by shared commandments to love God and neighbour; to love the good and neighbour".

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Canada is viewed internationally as a beacon of tolerance and multiculturalism, and its system of healthcare is envied worldwide. As such, nearly half of the population of Toronto are immigrants or foreign-born, and the city itself is widely known for its ethnically diverse neighborhoods. It is into such an environment that "Ripples of Kindness: An Interfaith Community Meal" was born.

Unfortunately, as is the case with any large metropolis, there exists a section of society who for a variety of reasons face social problems such as poverty, homelessness, stigmatism, marginalization, mental health, and addictions. In the midst of this, the Ripples of Kindness program offers a sense of hospitality by inviting the public each Saturday to share an Interfaith Community Meal in a spirit of friendship and camaraderie.

As an interfaith group we have asked ourselves, "What does hospitality look like? How can we practice it together? How we can live together in friendship?" From a faith-based perspective, hospitality not only refers to dignity, and respect, but also to delivering hot meals or clothing as an act of selfless love with no expectation of reward, or "Seva" as the Sikh community call it. This for us is a hospitality which encourages us to think globally and act locally, while providing a sense of living in peace and tranquility with our neighbours. The Interfaith Community Meal can be described as a faith-filled movement for hospitality, and has been initiated as our response to the call of the World Interfaith Harmony Week.

How has the Spirit Spoken to Us?

We have observed the importance of hospitality in coming together as an Interfaith community and realize that we sometimes have little in common with a stranger, yet we come together as neighbours and friends, each with our individual stories. Our Community Meal gives us an opportunity to listen to our guests. It is about listening and being open and allowing the Spirit to teach us through our guests and strangers. As Pope Francis often reminds us, "We have to respect truth wherever it is found." Hospitality therefore has a special meaning for our Interfaith Community Meal as it is a celebration of how we receive our guests, including those of other faiths and those of no faith. In our view, guests must be honoured by welcoming them.

Through our Ripples of Kindness Community Meal, I myself have found hope for the future when I see our group of dedicated volunteers welcoming a stranger, preparing and serving food, aiding the disabled and elderly, speaking to the homeless and listening to their stories. When we help each other in this way, I see opportunities for greater change in the future, and I believe that we can achieve great things through our individual and collective hospitality. Ripples of Kindness is about the human connection and the bonds that are formed through our ability to listen and learn from one another.

To enrich our community meal, we have added Arts and Crafts, and offered chess games designed to foster team work, fair play, and improved overall self-esteem. We want to create those moments where we can say, "*We enjoy being with you.*" Music is a form of prayer, and it is in this spirit that we offer the haunting sound of an Aboriginal flute played throughout the meal by one of our volunteers.

Our Ripples of Kindness Community Meal allows us to reaffirm the idea that hospitality is an attitude, a part of everything that we do. It is an act of opening doors for people; it is in us, and we are a part of it as we live it and we continue to grow by living each day. Hospitality therefore moves through us and towards others. It promotes mutual understanding, cooperation and unity among our volunteers and guests. This notion of hospitality is about honoring the guest or stranger in our midst while sharing a hot meal on some of the coldest days of the year. We welcome everyone; rich and poor, young and old, and believe that through hospitality a more tolerant society can emerge.

Bishop Desmond Tutu once remarked, "We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for togetherness. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family."

Our Community Meal is made possible by the dedication and commitment of an amazing core group of volunteers, people of various faiths and cultural backgrounds who believe in a sense of oneness that comes from the movement of the spirit in our hearts, and from our respect for mother earth.