

7 Sacred Days in Cape Town

*In celebration of
UN World Interfaith Harmony Week*

01 – 07 February 2020

Presented by Cape Town Interfaith Initiative



An Interfaith, Intercultural pilgrimage

Arrival Friday 31 January

We were so excited to greet our very special guests, Dr Bhadra Shah, Vice Chair of the Parliament of the World's Religions, and Dr Jayana Clerk, a distinguished author and lecturer in comparative religion, when they arrived at Cape Town International Airport shortly after 5pm. They were transferred directly to their accommodation in the leafy suburb of Rondebosch. Little Scotia Urban Hotel was comfortable – but our guests learned on their first night about load-shedding, a curious South African phenomena that involves our electricity being switched off by the service provider for about 2.5 hours per day. We set our intention for an enriching, enlightening and spiritually nurturing week of community building across the geographic divides that are still so entrenched in our city.



These photos are from the website <https://www.scotia.co.za/>

Most other photos in this report were taken by [Laura Pohl](#) and [Abdul-Karriem Adams](#)

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Day 1: Saturday 1 February 2020

About 30 of us went to meet the Swami's at Ananda Kutir Ashrama. There were Baha'i, Christian, Muslim, Unitarians, Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist participants. We shared a delicious vegetarian meal lovingly prepared by the Ashram community, then settled to learn from Swami Vindyananda about the Integral Yoga practiced at the Ashram. We also heard about the Children of Light School which was started by Ashram members to assist the children of a traumatised informal settlement nearby. Legendary Mother Yogeshwari, 93, led us in meditation, then sang us some of the songs she has written.



Comment on *7 Sacred Days in Cape Town*:

"I am most grateful to the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative for organising the 7 Sacred Days in Cape Town, World Interfaith Harmony Week.

Not only South Africa, but globally, we are facing a moral crisis where money has become more important than God. Jesus tells us we cannot serve God and wealth (mammon).

The faith communities of the world need to reaffirm and uphold moral principles and ethical values which are held by all faiths.

It was excellent that the CTII could bring faith communities together, and that the Parliament of the World's Religions is giving a global lead."

- Bishop Geoff Davies – Green Anglicans

Day 2: Sunday 2 February 2020

Elsie's River is an impoverished community in the heart of the Cape Flats, an area that was born out of the trauma of forced removals and the pain of South Africa's infamous apartheid era. Crime, violence and gangsterism are the legacy of the unhealed wounds of the past, but many citizens are fighting back and working hard to build a safer community. As we did in 2019, we joined grassroots organisation Faith Hope Love Communities to take our Prayers for our City to the people of Elsie's River. Again, our sharing of prayers and hope was profound and inclusive, starting off with the Muslim Call to Prayer at the Siddique Mosque. Prayers, song, dance, poetry – all Sacred Expressions presented by Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Unitarian, African Traditional, Muslim, and others. Our Deputy Mayor, Alderman Ian Neilson, honoured us with his presence and an encouraging address detailing projects by the City of Cape Town to support and uplift the economically challenged residents of Cape Town. The Chair of the Western Cape Religious Leaders' Forum, Rev Mark Long and the founder of the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute, Bishop Geoff Davies brought equally encouraging messages. In her address, Dr Shah acknowledged the deep daily trauma of the people of Elsie's River and other Cape Flats areas. She spoke about how interfaith action can help to bring healing to people, and said she would be looking for opportunities to collaborate with local organisations to encourage the work of building peace in communities.



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Comment on *7 Sacred Days in Cape Town*:

"It was wonderful to participate in Prayers for our City and experience the diversity of the interfaith space and the ability to focus that diversity on the needs of our city. For me personally, it was a great opportunity to make new friends and to extend my participation in the interfaith community."

- Rev Mark Long, Chairperson, Western Cape Religious Leaders Forum

Day 3: Monday 3 February

Over the sea we went, to Robben Island, the famous island prison home of the political leadership of the anti apartheid movement. This is an important context for our work because Nelson Mandela believed in the power and importance of interfaith harmony which he first understood during his prison years. It was profound to visit Robben Island in the company of two local activists who had never before had the opportunity to experience first hand this important part of their history because the cost of the boat ride to the island is prohibitive for many locals. Our guides on the island were former prisoners, whose harrowing account of their experiences always ended with an inspiring message of forgiveness. This message went to our hearts as our theme for WIHW, The Healing Power of Interfaith, was being experienced in ways we never imagined.



Comment on *7 Sacred Days in Cape Town*:

"The opportunity to share our common humanity with members of faith communities happens all too rarely in our frenetic and fractured society. The marking of 7 Sacred Days during World Interfaith Harmony Week in Cape Town, was one such affirming encounter. Our shared worship, reflections and celebrations were a reminder of our rich but often painful history, our collective presence and our common future. As we face climate disruption, ecosystem collapse and worsening poverty in an increasingly unequal world, we must nurture this human and earth community of reconciliation and hope. Thank you to the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative team for organising and marking this inspiring week."

- Kate Davies, Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute

Day 4: Tuesday 4 February

A history of slavery, separation and suffering revisited at the District Six Museum where Noor Ebrahim, who experienced forced removals first hand, was our guide. Again, his message of forgiveness is the healing balm which touched all our hearts. Some other visitors joined our group for the trip up to the Bo Kaap, where we visited the historic Auwal Mosque and Tana Baru – the first Muslim burial site officially acknowledged in 1804 after religious freedom was granted to Cape Muslims. Master historian and struggle veteran Mohammad Groenewald was our learned guide.

The day ended at a Muslim radio station, Voice of the Cape, where our guests of honour Dr Shah and Dr Clerk participated in a radio show hosted by religion journalist Yazeed Kamaldien.



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Comment on *7 Sacred Days in Cape Town*:

"Well done, Cape Town Interfaith Initiative. You are showing up, doing interfaith, and by facilitating such glorious diversity, taking Initiative in the deepest sense of the word."

- Nic Paton

Please read Nic's full report on his blog [at this link](#).

Day 5: Wednesday 5 February

A highlight in a week of highlights! There was no mistaking the reverence as we were greeted at St Mary's Cathedral (The Church of Our Lady of the Flight into Egypt) by His Grace Archbishop Stephen Brislin, who spoke of the importance of including those who are often forgotten such as refugees and other marginalised groups. Very Reverend Father Rohan Smuts told us how Catholicism was initially banned in the Cape, and visiting priests had to revert to the ships to celebrate mass.

We processed the morning's events during a picnic in the nearby Company's Gardens, then wandered over to the equally historic Groote Kerk for Open Hearts Open Minds, "an interfaith café" engagement on The Healing Power of Interfaith. It was moving to have this discussion in the church that is associated with upholding and justifying the apartheid system, and to acknowledge the work of the Church's current leadership in working to heal the deep wounding of that time in previously excluded communities. Our speakers brought personal experience into the conversation, and we were moved and inspired.

The afternoon of deep conversation was over too soon, and our next stop was Temple Israel Green Point. The Interfaith concert for WIHW was hosted by the Progressive Jewish Community and organised by the SA Cape Jewish Board of Deputies. Dr Bhadra Shah presented a Hindu prayer, the 25 member Herzlia School choir conducted by Ivor Joffe thrilled the audience and we loved the exotic element introduced by the refugee community.



Comment on *7 Sacred Days in Cape Town*:

"It provided a lovely opportunity to reflect and become more aware of the potential that faith organisations hold, individually and collectively, in providing hope and bringing in positivity and unity. It reflected unlimited possibilities in practical ways."

- Sr Nita Makanjee, Brahma Kumaris Cape Town

Day 6: Thursday 6 February

As a Ramakrishna devotee, Dr Shah was delighted with a surprise visit to a recently opened Ramakrishna Centre on the other side of town. We shared beautiful moments as we participated in the morning devotional prayer.

Later, we managed a visit to the famous Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens where we enjoyed a fresh vegetarian lunch featuring specialities of many countries! It was a day to appreciate the wonders of nature, and after a walk around the Gardens we took a drive over Chapman's Peak giving thanks all the time for the transcendent creation that is our world.

The day ended with a dialogue on creating harmony hosted by the Brahma Kumaris.

Dr Shah addressed us on the role of the Parliament in creating harmony and spoke about the importance of recognising that although we express ourselves differently, we are in fact all One and all part of the Whole Creation. Dr Shah said the PoWR was eager to work with organisations such as CTII to support the work,

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and she would like to speak with us about Partner City Initiatives which would be collaborative interfaith activities. Cape Town, she said, was an important place for these initiatives because it was the first city outside of Chicago to host the PoWR. Cape Town's interfaith community had also shown the power of interfaith as a force for healing between the divides of the past and also the divisions between people of diverse economic, geographic and educational backgrounds. She encouraged us to consider deepening our connections to PoWR through official membership, which would give us access to more possibilities of enhancing our network and working together. The power of unity and right action cannot be underestimated.



Comment on *7 Sacred Days in Cape Town*:

"Thank you for everything you did to make the week such a wonderful experience. Our country and our world need more of this. Let us proclaim the joy of interfaith as far and wide as possible."

- Cecil Plaatjies, Buddhist

Day 7: Friday 7 February

We could not believe that the last day had arrived already, as we set out to meet a gathering of grandmothers and grandfathers who believe that although their bodies are old, their minds are young, and so they call themselves the Yelders. We prayed with them and heard their stories, the small joys and sadnesses that make up our lives and that bring community in their sharing.

Our day took us next to the Claremont Main Road Mosque, yet another historical place of worship which, in days past, was controversial because it served a non-white community in the midst of a proclaimed "white" haven. It's a progressive Mosque and Rev Berry had been invited to present the Friday sermon, speaking about World Interfaith Harmony Week, and all it means to us in Cape Town.

It seemed that our engagement at the Mosque had no sooner started than it was all over, and we had time to refresh our minds and bodies with light refreshment in one of Cape Town's many charming garden cafés. Our 7 Sacred Days was a blessed and beautiful experience. We made many friends, we got to know others better, we built community and we emerged even more committed to the Sacred Activism that springs from a mind and heart aligned with all that is Good and Holy and True. Our work is holy work, our work is ordinary work. Our work is about hope for a better world for everyone.

It seemed perfect and fitting to close our beautiful 7 Sacred Days with Friday night Shabbat with the Progressive Jewish Community at Temple Israel Wynberg. As the celebratory music of the joyful service filled our hearts, we were overwhelmed with love of our neighbours. Our week ended as it began, with an intentional power cut - "load shedding". But we were not in darkness. We lit candles, and we shared a meal.



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Comment on 7 Sacred Days in Cape Town:

"I was so delighted by the whole event. Well done!"

- Rev Nima Taylor, Unitarian Church of Cape Town

Comment on 7 Sacred Days in Cape Town:

"I was very impressed by the participation of a cross-section of faith communities; Baha'i, Hindu, Buddhist, Catholic and Protestant Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Unitarian, Khoisan and African Tradition. For dignitaries such as the Deputy Mayor, the Vice Chairperson of the Parliament of the World's Religions and others to join and feel the "often much ignored" soil of the Township, and equally enjoy the sun and fresh air from our Host from Above, was heart-warming to say the least. The conversations were indeed inspiring and filled me with hope of a much better future for all. Thank you for inviting me and allowing me to say a few words."

- Ebrahim Mohamed, President: Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam

Gallery



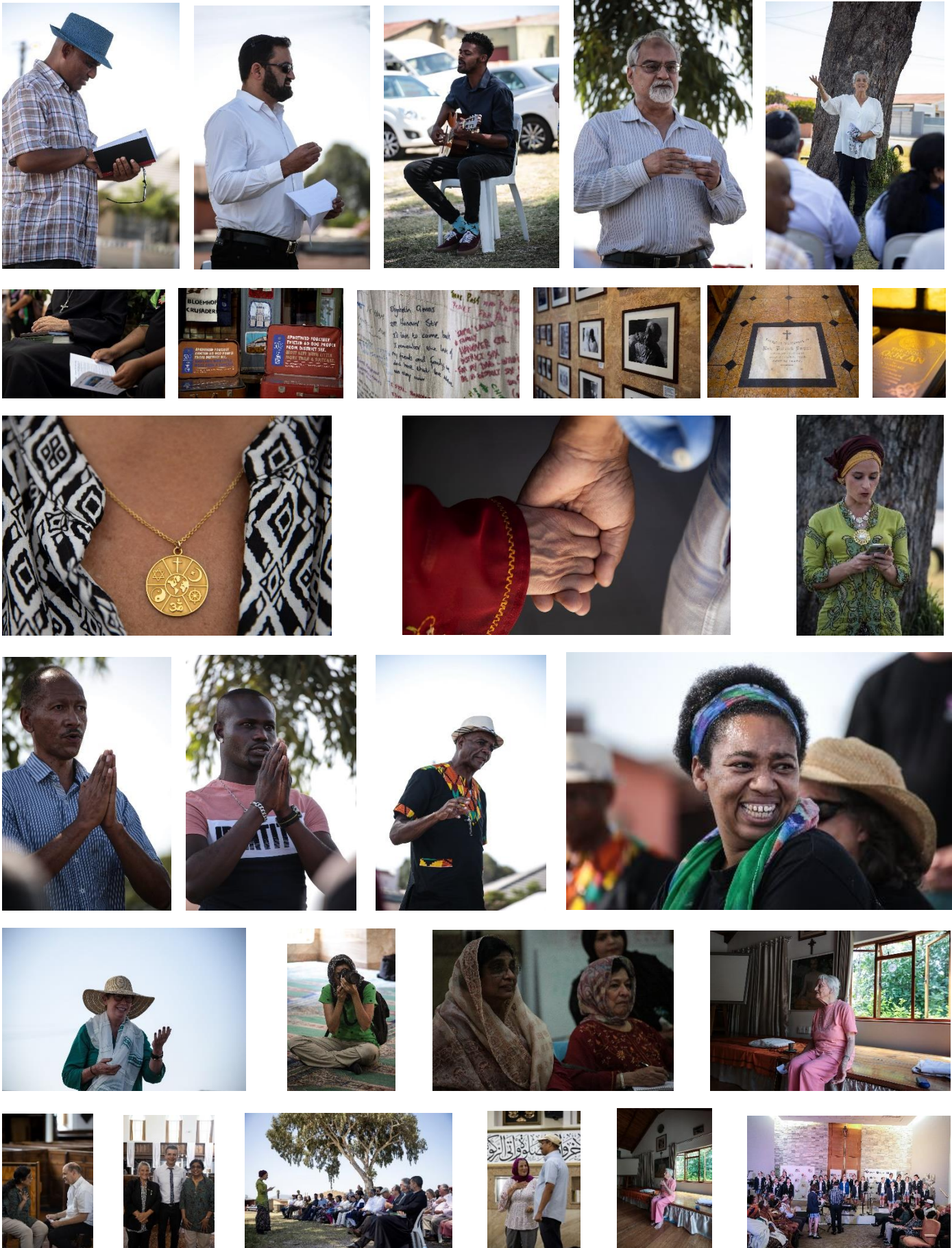
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10th Anniversary

WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK

The Official UN Observance in the 1st Week of February



7 Sacred Days in Cape Town was designed and offered in alignment with the principles of Compassion, Respect and promoting understanding between people of diverse beliefs.

Borne out of the 1999 Parliament of World Religions, the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative was established in 2000 and has been successful in bringing the interfaith agenda into the mainstream of religious and political consciousness.

As the coordinating body for the interfaith movement in the Western Cape, it is seen as the driving force in the pursuit of inter-religious understanding and dialogue. Since its inception, the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative has broadened the scope of interfaith activities at local, City and Provincial levels, with a view to building a model for other Provinces.

VISION

We envision and embrace a country and peoples unified by interreligious and spiritual understanding and respect.

MISSION

The Mission of the Cape Town Interfaith Initiative is to celebrate and share the richness of the religious and spiritual diversity in the Western Cape, and to promote community interfaith understanding, harmony and co-operation, through both an awareness of universal spirituality and an honouring of the dignity of difference.

OBJECTIVES

- To facilitate and stimulate interfaith dialogue, and interreligious theological engagement;
- To support opportunities for interreligious involvement in ceremonies and rituals of remembrance and commitment;
- To support programmes of interfaith understanding in schools, businesses and the community;
- To support faith based organisations with interreligious involvement and insight;
- To coordinate, strengthen and support existing interfaith programmes;
- To promote interfaith activities including prayer and meditation, faith sharing.
- To generate good coexistence values in our province.
- To support the religious leadership structure (Western Cape Religious Leaders Forum) in its interaction with government and other sectors of civil society around the critical issues of our time.

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