



Interfaith Harmony Halifax



2021
Interfaith
Harmony
Week
Report



Sharing Common Ground in Uncommon Times

Interfaith Harmony Halifax (IHH) proudly ploughed through what was a very challenging year for people around the world. As happened everywhere else, there was a clear need to respond to a global pandemic and to adapt to the reality that COVID-19 imposed on all of us.

Proud, however, is the right sentiment. The steering committee for Interfaith Harmony Halifax rose to the challenge and embraced each other to put together an exceptional program for Haligonians, Nova Scotians, and, also, some Nova Scotians at heart who were able to attend to several events at a distance. As was the case with the virtual realm on which public life has been held around the world, one of the greatest advantages that IHH had was the possibility of opening most of its events to people who would have not otherwise had been able to attend them.

In this context, the IHH team agreed that this year's theme, *Sharing Common Ground in Uncommon Times*, captured the spirit of our challenges as well as of our will to face them. The team unanimously agreed on the fact that, even though physical connection was curtailed by the reality that the pandemic brought upon us, our will to share and to connect remained untouched. If anything, COVID-19 helped to show the lengths to which we all travel to connect and share with our neighbors and with our communities.

Although the sense of togetherness that we all experienced during Interfaith Harmony Week, as well as in our planning sessions, was compromised by the reality we had upon us, we found different ways to be together and to feel a part of something larger than all of us. That, we feel, is the spirit that keeps bringing us together. That was definitely the spirit that got us through this year – our eight consecutive year celebrating Interfaith Harmony Week.

We put this report forward with all the gratitude and joy that was put by every single member of this beautiful group of people who makes the IHH team – a group of committed, resourceful, creative, and life-affirming persons who love their community as much as they care for each other.



This year's program:

1. Sacred Spaces: An opportunity to meet our neighbors at their places of faith and share with them in prayer, friendship, hospitality and refreshments.
2. Interfaith Engagement Program: An intensive experiential learning opportunity for participants to engage deeper into the interfaith dialogue.
3. Interfaith Public Conversations: A series of conversations amongst leaders from different faiths and traditions to dig deeper into the experience of sharing common ground in these uncommon times
4. Interfaith Community Celebration: A celebration of the interfaith spirit in Halifax open to the public to join in prayer, song, music, poetry and dancing
5. Barho Family Interfaith Youth Award: In the Spring of 2019, in response to the tragic events lived in Halifax during that Winter, IHH established an annual award to be presented to a youth who has shown commitment to interfaith during the year
6. Proclamation of Interfaith Peace and Friendship from Halifax's Mayor: A public statement from the Mayor of Halifax acknowledging the significance of World Interfaith Harmony Week and stating the city's commitment to interfaith efforts
7. **[NEW in 2021]** Youth Engagement Program: In response of an increasing participation of youth during Interfaith Harmony Week, IHH partnered with leaders from faith-based schools and youth groups to explore creative outlets to address questions regarding their faith and their connection to the Earth

Sacred Spaces

There were adjustments made in light of the restrictions put by Nova Scotia to host people at the Sacred Spaces.

A self-assessment regarding the risk of visiting places in person was encouraged in the IHH's website, making it clear that all people who chose to do in-person visits would have to adhere to the restrictions of their host.

These restrictions, as outlined by each host, were also included in the Guide for Guests that was both published on the website and distributed in all our promotional material. online 'visits' were encouraged in this material, as well as important information about 'Netiquette'. A number of faith communities made themselves available online via Zoom.

On the evening of Monday, February 1st, the Brahma Kumaris opened both an in-person and a virtual space for meditation to promote a more peaceful world – "one thought at a time".

On the evening of Tuesday, February 2nd, Mi'kmaw knowledge carrier George Doyle-Bedwell hosted a virtual gathering to talk about ceremony in the Mi'kmaw tradition.

The evening of Wednesday, February 3rd, was hosted by the Shaar Shalom Congregation, which gathered virtually to go over sacred texts, fulfilling the Jewish mandate of Talmud Torah, religious study.



The Universalist Unitarian Service was open for an in-person and virtual gathering on the evening of Thursday, February 4th, where people of diverse religious faith, or none, can unite in community and support each other in the quest of giving meaning to life.



On the afternoon of Friday, February 5th, the Muslim Jummah Prayer was hosted by the Ummah Masjid and opened virtually for guests to share the rich history and tradition of Muslims in the Halifax-Dartmouth regions in prayer and peace.

That Friday evening, the Shambhala Centre opened for a virtual celebration of the Buddhist Tradition with Bob Gailey to practice meditation and gather with the intention of developing a global culture that cultivates dignity and sanity.



On the Saturday afternoon, February 6th, the Baha'I Community hosted a virtual devotional to welcome guests and share their vision of a unified world in which the diversity of people is respected while we acknowledge we are all members of one, big family.

On Saturday evening, a Celebration of Imbolc, a celebration at the midway point to Spring, was hosted by the Earth Spirit Society in a time of reawakening both of the Earth and ourselves.



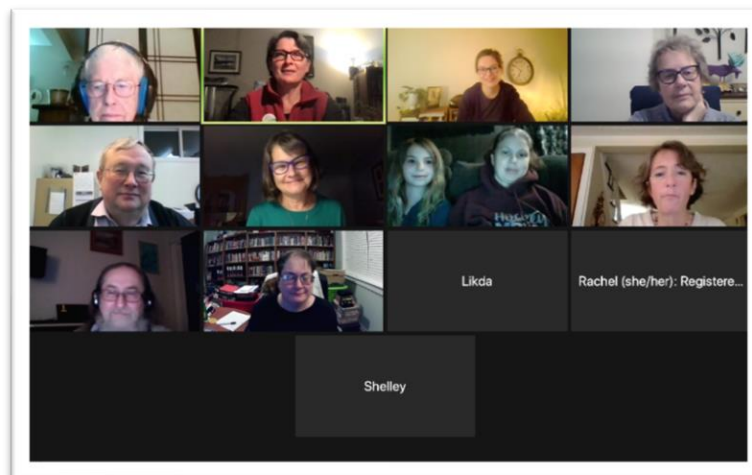
On the morning of Sunday, February 7th, the Presbyterian Church of Saint David opened for both an in-person and a livestreamed service where they welcomed their guests to share its long tradition of evangelical preaching and the public worship of God in spirit and truth.

Interfaith Engagement Program

The Interfaith Engagement Program supplements the events of IHH Week by providing participants with the opportunity to develop a sense of community and to intentionally reflect on their experiences together.

Registrants commit to:

1. attend a two-hour Introductory session before and Wrap-Up session after Interfaith Harmony Week,
2. attend at least 3 of the week's events and the Interfaith Closing Celebration,
3. record their experiences during the week and share their learnings with other IEP participants.



Covid19 public health guidelines restrictions changed the format of IEP in 2021. On one hand, trying to develop a sense of community via Zoom meetings was not as effective as in-person gatherings have been in years past. On the other hand, the use of Zoom enabled a number of people to join in from a distance. Eleven people were actively involved (plus the IEP Team) in the program through the week and eight people received their IEP Certificate of Participation. IEP participants were present at every event, conversation, celebration and Sacred Space during the week.

Comments from 2021 participants:

"The Interfaith Week was an amazing opportunity for me to experience numerous, local Faith Communities. In some cases, their mere existence was learning for me."

"A reminder to all of us that our varied faiths are anchored in peace, love, and truth, whether church or temple, live or zoom."

"I was not sure what to expect from this program; nervous this may not be a safe place for me and wondering if I had the background necessary to participate. These concerns were quickly laid to rest by the welcoming, engaging, non-judgmental approach immediately evident."

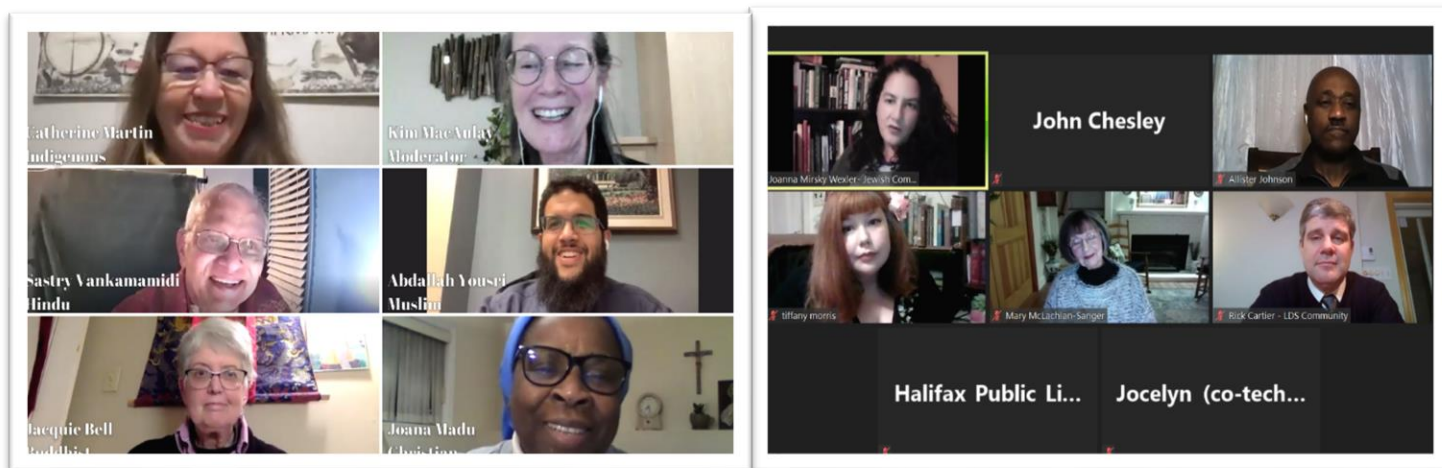
"Since COVID came to town the whole world is on Uncommon 'Common' Ground. The new 'Common' Ground is called ZOOM. In this way we stay connected with events locally, but we can participate in events worldwide and not leave the house."

"I enjoyed the variety: readings, songs, visuals, icons and discussions, each help deepen the experience and my understanding of the various faiths. The week made me more conscious of how little I know about these members of the community and kindled a desire to learn more."

Interfaith Conversations Program

This year, in addition to the partnership developed with the Halifax Public Libraries in 2019, IHH entered into a new partnership with Hospice Halifax. Like with the Public Libraries, the partnership with the Hospice was fruitful and welcomed by both sides and will likely continue for 2022.

Two panel conversations were held this year, both of them virtually. The virtual format was an excellent vehicle for increased participation, as it allowed people from all over Canada to join the conversation. Also, given that location, weather, and traffic were not a deterrent for people who wanted to attend, there was an increase in local attendees, some of whom expressed their hope that this format will continue to be offered next year. A mixed format has been discussed for 2022 if in-person events are allowed by that time.



The first conversation was offered in partnership with Hospice Halifax, using their Zoom platform. The title was: “Rituals for Death and Dying”, and it took place on January 30 from 7-9pm.

At its peak, 93 people (panelists included) were connected. There were five panelists representing five faith groups, and one moderator.

Panelists:

Muslim – Abdallah Yousri, Imam, Ummah Mosque

Buddhist – Jackie Bell, retired medical social worker with end-of-life care

Indigenous – Catherine Martin, Director, Indigenous Community Relations, Dalhousie University

Christian – Sr. Joana Madu, spiritual care practitioner with Nova Scotia Health Authority

Hindu – Sastry Vankamamidi, Hindu priest, Vedanta Ashram Society

Moderator – Kim MacAulay, Spiritual Care Intern, Hospice Halifax

The panelists addressed the rituals that their traditions offer or suggest to those persons who are near the end of their life, are actively dying, have died as well as to those who are grieving loved ones and community.

Also, the panelists talked at length about the meaning that these rituals offer to those who want them, for the dying or dead person, for their loved ones, and for their community.

The second conversation was offered with the partnership cultivated with the Halifax Public Libraries for the past two years. This panel conversation was offered via the Library's Zoom platform and it took place on January 31st, from 7-9pm.

At its peak, there were 53 attendees, panelists included, who joined the conversation. There were four panelists, representing four faith groups, plus one moderator and a musician who offered their gifts with participants.

Panelists:

Jewish – Joanna Wexler
Taoist – Mary McLachlan-Sanger
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints – Richard Cartier
Baptist – Rev. Allister Johnson

Moderator – Tiffany Morris

Music – Saeed Foroughi



Panelists framed their discussion around the theme for this year, Sharing common ground in uncommon times. The discussion centered on the way in which faith, spirituality and/or secular beliefs were integrated to provide direction during a moment in which, globally, society was left at a loss; did these beliefs, did the faith and/or spiritual path of each of the panelists helped to address these challenges, to reconnect with their community and to recreate a sense of belonging.

A Link to the Conversations video can be found [here](#).

Media Coverage



The Signal, the University of King's College journalism program newspaper, covered Interfaith Harmony Week and the Interfaith Conversations prior to the events.

A Link to this article can be found [here](#).



Halifax MP Andy Fillmore provided reflection and extended greetings on the commencement of Interfaith Harmony Week 2021.

A link to this video can be found [here](#).



Interfaith Community Celebration

This year, the celebration took place on Sunday, February 7, from 2-3pm. The program was offered virtually via livestream through the IHH Facebook page. The virtual format proved convenient for the 240 attendees who were able to join the livestream from other parts of Nova Scotia and from other places in Canada.

Although, in this case, there was not a great difference between number of people who joined the celebration in-person in previous years and the number of people who joined the livestream, it was agreed that the possibility of offering a mix between in-person and virtual for 2022 when, if, restrictions for large gatherings are lifted.

A Link to the Celebration Video can be found [here](#).

The Celebration included a welcoming message from the IHH co-chairs that also provided context about Interfaith Harmony Week and Halifax's involvement.

Various knowledge holders from different faith groups joined to share messages of hope from the perspective of their spirituality as we face the challenges of the pandemic. Music and poetry were also part of this celebration, all pieces complementing these messages of hope, love and deep connection to each other.

Some quotes from the live chat:

"May the world realize how important it is for all of us to honour, respect, and celebrate each other and are varying beliefs. Thanks to everyone in HRM who put this together for us."

"My thanks to all the communities of faith who enabled me to join from Moncton, NB and join you in worship in Halifax. The greatest contribution of this week has been to demonstrate that there is far more things that we have in common than what separates us in faith. We may be separated by a pandemic, but we are joined in the love and caring for all people, regardless of what faith tradition we may come from."

Barho Family Interfaith Youth Award

In the Spring of 2019, responding to the tragic events that took place during the Winter, IHH established an annual award to be presented to a young person, 14 years old or younger, who showed appreciation, commitment and initiative during Interfaith Harmony Week. This award is given in memory of the children of the Barho family, who arrived in Halifax as refugees from Syria and who tragically lost their lives in a house fire in February of 2019.

This award is meant to honour the compassion, gratitude and inclusivity of the Barho children: 4-month-old Abdullah; 2-year-old Rana; 3-year-old Hala; 8-year-old Ola; 9-year-old Mohamad; 12-year-old Rola; and 14-year-old Ahmed. It is presented at the end of the school year.

For 2020, the IHH committee chose Boaz Wexler as the recipient of this award. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the award could not be presented to him at his school. The award will be presented to him, however, at his Bar Mitzvah, which will take place after the pandemic related restrictions on gatherings are lifted.

Boaz's contributions during World Interfaith Harmony Week in Halifax were greatly appreciated. Moreover, his engagement and commitment with IHH continued for 2021, as he became an esteemed volunteer for the IHH Team, more particularly for his work on this year's Youth Engagement Project.

The IHH Team will decide upon the recipient for the 2021 Barho Family Memorial Award, which will go to a participant of the IHH Youth Engagement Program.



Proclamation of Interfaith Peace and Friendship from Halifax's Mayor

As has happened since the first IHH, the Mayor of the Halifax Regional Municipality, Mike Savage, issued a proclamation on February 1st to officially open Interfaith Harmony Week in Halifax.

This statement represents the continuous commitment from the municipality to promote harmony, dialogue and understanding amongst people from various different faith traditions, or from none. It also recognizes an increasingly diverse population in Halifax and acknowledges the importance of community efforts, such as IHH, to keep fostering this diversity.





NEW

Youth Engagement Program

Given the increasing number of youth participants that enrolled in the IEP since 2018, a group of committed leaders from the IHH Team took into putting a program that would only involve youth to dig deeper into their experience and into the meaning of interfaith.

More than 100 youth from 8 different spiritual tradition took part in the project. This was made possible through a partnership with leaders from faith-based schools and youth groups for a project that connected several moving pieces. To make the program more relevant to its participants, the question ‘How does my faith or spiritual tradition connect me with the Earth?’ was formulated as a common thread to connect these pieces together. This question was open enough to allow for various forms of expression and to varied ways of responding.

Participating communities were: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Saints, Hindu, Islam, Jewish, Protestant, Pagan, Universalist Unitarian, and United Church.

Each school and/or youth group got to determine the most appropriate age group and setting for participation. While some chose online learning, others were welcoming to classroom participation or in-person youth group.



The first part of the project took the shape of a discussion where participants workshopped their ideas regarding **how their faith interacts with sustaining the Earth.**

This question brought other reflections related to beliefs around creation, around our role in the Earth and in its sustainability, as well as the way in which natural elements help to shape our stories or symbols of faith.

Every community submitted a slide that summarized their traditions, views and practices that connected them to the Earth. An online discussion on Zoom was organized to present slides, meet and greet. There were 24 youth of the call, for a total of 33 participants.

During the first 30 minutes of the call, a series of youth presented to the group. After the presentations, participants were separated into breakout rooms where a more in-depth discussion was facilitated with smaller groups. Each community provided one or two facilitators (youth leaders and community educators) helped to guide the conversations. These conversations brought to the surface not only an ecological stress in the world, but also social problems that these faiths and traditions needed to address together.

After this guided conversation, the third and final part of the project was put together: A Mosaic Painting.



A youth artist, Calla Quist, developed the concept of the relationship between faith and Earth into a single image, incorporating both natural and religious symbols of the participating communities. Each community received between 12 and 24 mini-canvases that were outlined as part of a grid. The selection was random and, with the exception of some guidance for colour, they were given total freedom to paint in them anything they wished. The students did not get to see the whole image until the project was revealed.

The canvases were distributed to each community leader and painted in the way that worked best for each of them adhering to public health guidelines.

The final project was assembled by the artist and volunteers at Studio 14, owned by Jennifer Jacobson, who provided materials for the project at cost and assembled the squares together. Calla did the final touch-ups for the art piece.

Each community sent in photographs of their workshops and painting along with signed media release forms. One of the youth of the IHH team, Boaz Wexler, compiled the photos into a short slideshow of the experience.

A link to the Youth Engagement Slideshow can be found [here](#).

The final mosaic painting will be displayed at a local public library so that the result can be appreciated by all the youth who participated in the project, by their families and by the general public with the intention of inviting people to learn more about IHH and about World Interfaith Harmony.

The experience was extremely positive for the participants as well as for the communities involved, and incredibly meaningful for the team that helped to put it together. The faith communities, specifically, expressed their interest in collaborating in another project, which will hopefully take place in-person for 2022.

