

Prayers for the City 2021



“Today, Cape Town, you are every city. You are our global village.”

This was the opening statement for Prayers for the City 2021, the annual event hosted by Cape Town Interfaith Initiative in honour of World Interfaith Harmony Week and the winning event of the 2019 HM King Abdullah II prize. Traditionally held on the first Sunday in February, this year it took place on 7 February, online for the first time. Our chosen theme was **Celebrating the Hope, the Healing and the Harmony.**

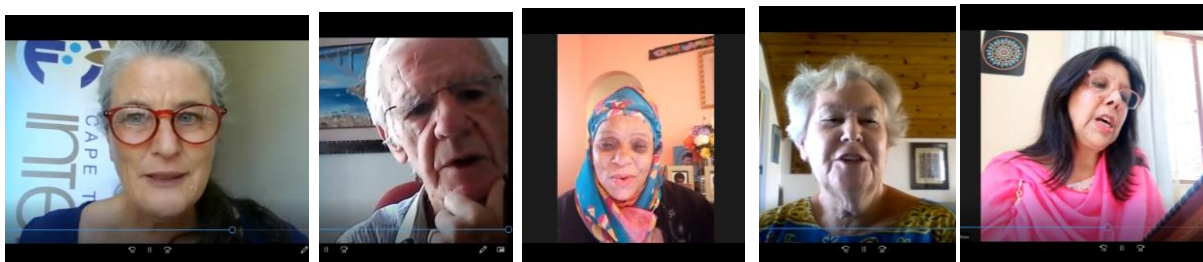
Prayers for the City was the brainchild of former CTII Chairperson, Rev Gordon Oliver, who, as Mayor of Cape Town from 1989 – 1991, had wanted to take a delegation into Parliament to pray for the governing process and those engaged in it. However, logistical issues prevented the Prayers for Parliament so Mayor Oliver decided to create the event, Prayers for City, instead, and to get leaders of many faiths to pray for this diverse city that is so loved, and that we call The Mother City. Originally, Prayers for the City took place at the start of the year, in January. However, after we started observing WIHW, Rev Oliver decided to move the event to the first Sunday in February.

Traditionally, Prayers for the City was held in the centre of town. However, in 2019 (the year of our unexpected blessing of first prize) we chose to change the format and acknowledge people who could not reach the centre of town due to lack of access to transport, and we took our prayers to the people in areas that struggle with economic issues, crime and violence.

This year, we changed the format again: but not out of choice. We moved to an online platform, acknowledging that the Covid19 pandemic is a threat to everyone. The challenge in South Africa is that access to internet connection is not simple – especially for the economically stressed people in sub-economic areas. Data is an expensive commodity. It has become an expression of privilege. Covid19 has resulted in many job losses and increased poverty, economic stress and even homelessness, so our big question was how to make our online event inclusive and accessible to all our brothers and sisters, bringing all the voices of our beautiful city into harmony with each other.

Harnessing the energy, momentum, excitement, collaboration and relationship of interfaith engagement in Cape Town is one of our strengths. We approached our member organisation, the Cape SA Jewish Board of Deputies, with the problem. They did not hesitate to offer a generous sponsorship for the data for those who needed it. We owe them a special vote of thanks.

Recently, it was pointed out in public forum by interfaith brother Imam Dr Rashied Omar of Cape Town that more than 50% of the world do not have access to data connection. “Our privilege blinds us to this issue of opportunity loss,” he said, and encouraged us not take our ability to connect online for granted but instead to see it as an opportunity to share resources. This is one way of expressing love for our neighbours, and love for God.



Although electricity issues and technical gremlins definitely played a role during this online event, the challenges could not diminish the joy of shared prayers. Bahai, Christian, Hindu, Khoi, Muslim, Buddhist, Unitarian, Jewish, Interfaith and Brahma Kumaris representatives made up our interfaith online family as we prayed into our chosen theme: Celebrating the Hope, the Healing and the Harmony. The video is currently being edited and will be published on [our website](#) soon – the technical gremlins are still playing with us!

Being able to make our circle bigger and bring in our extended family from other parts of the country and of the globe was a special treat. We realised that the power of Loving the Neighbour extends far further than our own street, and is a global phenomenon that has been highlighted by the pandemic. Our national and international neighbours were represented by Ela Gandhi of Religions for Peace, Mu-aalima Amyna Fakude of the National Interfaith Council of South Africa, Dr Bhadra Shah who is President of the Sathi Foundation and Mr Yusuph Masanja of the Goldin Institute.

Our theme, Celebrating the Hope, the Healing and Harmony was represented by different aspects of the event.

The Hope was represented by our youth. Sarah Oliver is lead facilitator of our schools programme, the Marlene Silbert Youth Interfaith Intercultural Programme, as well as the Global Youth Co-ordinator for United Religions Initiative. She delivered a moving message of inspiration, and was backed up by Akiba Kassey, a current participant in the youth programme who chose to bring us a meaningful Bible reading.

There was healing and harmony in the diversity of the voices that prayed together for our city, for every city. There was special healing in the Jewish Memorial Prayer for the Dead that was sung by Cantor Ivor Joffe of the Marais Road Shul. There was special harmony in the Call to Prayer provided by Sheikh Ismail Keraan of the Al-Azhar Mosque in District Six. Music offerings from diverse Cape Town artists also added to the beauty of our interfaith harmony.

Finally, there was joyful celebration at the end where we asked our founding elders, Rev Gordon Oliver, Mickey Glass, Joan Shippey and Mary Frost to share some of their thoughts and memories over the past 21 years. They each shared vivid memories and a wish for CTII going forward. We were reminded that even in the difficult times, there really is always something to celebrate. This year is the 21st birthday of Cape Town Interfaith Initiative, and we celebrated by asking the event’s founder, Rev Gordon Oliver, to light a candle and cut our birthday cake during the online event, which he did most graciously, with a moving prayer of dedication for our City.

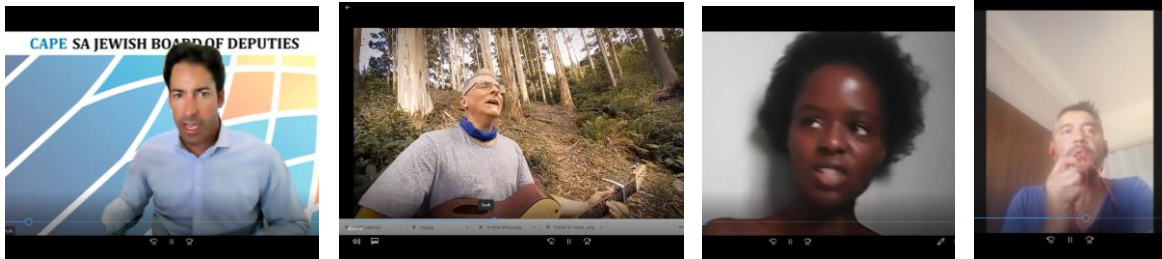
Speaking of everyone who helped to build Cape Town Interfaith Initiative over the past 21 years, Reverend Oliver said: “We all carried the flame. We struggled, celebrated, persisted together.”

He reminded us that this work is not always easy. It gets complicated, messy, gritty sometimes – but the rewards are great.

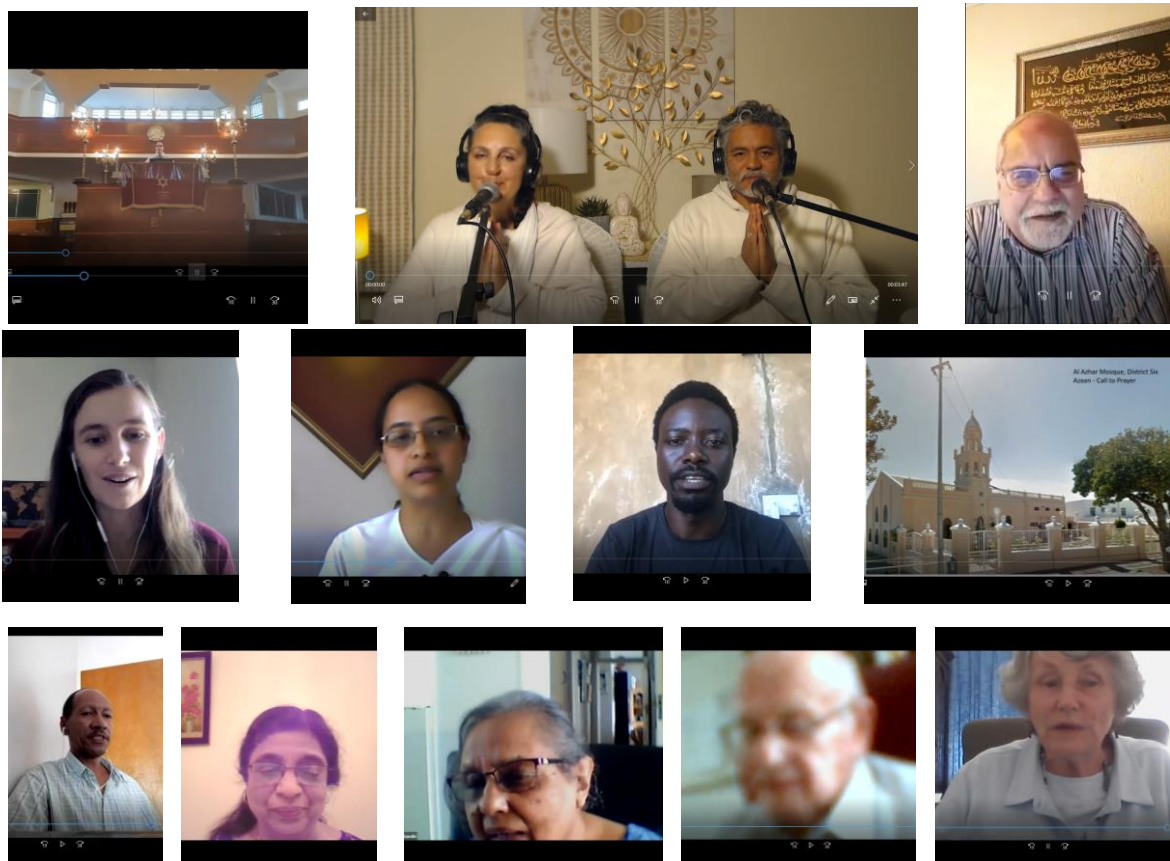


As he lit the candle taking us into the end of the event, the end of our World Interfaith Harmony Week celebration of 2021 and the 21st anniversary of our organisation, Rev Oliver managed to encapsulate interfaith harmony and love of the neighbour in just a few words:

“We don’t have to think alike, to love alike.



Report compiled by Rev Berry Behr, Chairperson of Cape Town Interfaith Initiative in collaboration with members and friends of Cape Town Interfaith Initiative.



Each contributor received a personal certificate like this



God bless us all, every one.