

WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK 2022 - REPORT

Justice & Reconciliation: Listen, Learn, and Engage

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT AND ITS IMPACT

Justice & Reconciliation: Listen, Learn, and Engage

February 24, 2022

8:50 am – 10:30 am

The virtual event, “*Justice and Reconciliation: Listen, Learn, Engage*” promoted the mission and vision of WIHW , *Love of God and Love of the Neighbor*. A panel of five speakers from diverse spiritualities shared how their faith has shaped their work in promoting justice and reconciliation, particularly in supporting Indigenous communities. For program impact, the names of the collaborating partners who organized the event, as well as the outline of what took place, please see each section below.

A. Program Impact

The **impact of the program** can be seen through the:

- a) attendance of 551 joined us at the live event
- b) the audience was intergenerational (high school youth to elderly)
- c) audience spanning 4 school boards across the province of Ontario, Canada
- d) audience across diverse faith traditions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Indigenous spiritualities, Hinduism)
- e) resources provided for [post-event learning activities](#)
- f) requests to view the program recording after the event
- g) high school teachers are showing the video recording of the event to their classes and will continue to do so in the future as a learning resource (Note: “1 view” on the YouTube Channel might reflect “25-30 students” watching it)

B. Names of the Collaborating Partners

1. [The Office for Interreligious Dialogue, Archdiocese of Toronto](#)
2. [The Mary Ward Centre](#)

3. [The Toronto Catholic District School Board](#) (Nurturing Our Catholic Community Department; and Equity, Diversity, Indigenous Education and Community Relations Department)

Team Members

Archdiocese of Toronto, Office for Interreligious Dialogue

Fr. Prakash Lohale, OP; Daniel Niamat

The Mary Ward Centre

Kathy Murtha

Toronto Catholic District School Board

Michael Caccamo, Derek Chen, Audrey Ferrer, Lisa Malcolm, Michael Consul, Veronica Tuzi, Azniv Jorge, Frank Pio, Sonya Charal

C. Program Outline

We invited five panelists from the Anishnaabe (Indigenous Spirituality), Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Sikh traditions who are actively working within their communities to build bridges and friendships with Indigenous peoples.

Opening

The program opened with the Land Acknowledgement, followed by an Indigenous Smudging ceremony and Prayer to the Six Directions led by Elder John Robinson and Sr. Petite Lao. The Smudging ceremony is a way of purifying and clearing our minds and hearts so that we can be open and truly present to one another and the Creator. This was followed by Prayers to the Six Directions - which is a way of giving thanks to the Creator for all the gifts of this world. It also reminds us that justice and reconciliation are much needed actions for peace and harmony which can only be achieved when we are engaged and take initiatives to listen and learn from each other.

Panelists

1. **Que Rock** (Anishnaabe)

Que Rock is an artist from Nipissing First Nation. He started life learning teaching ceremonies through visual healing art forms. Painting, dancing, leatherwork, and

storytelling were taught through traditional Anishnaabe and Odawa ways. As a graffiti artist, Que Rock's work has matured from quick pieces into large street art projects and canvas work. Using Anishnaabe teachings and different methods, he focuses on unique painting styles and techniques to create smooth transitions of color, blending abstract form with realism and expressionism. (See [biography](#))

Que Rock introduced himself as "Spirit Dancing". He shared about his Art form and the positive messages he gives to his audiences. He talked about his family, culture, language, and Religious Ceremonies which hold a key place among the Indigenous Communities. He mentioned that he realizes that he is a spirit having a physical experience on Turtle Island and on Mother Earth. He elaborated that while he is on Mother Earth, he has roles and responsibilities towards others. He shared some of the key responsibilities like, walking gently, walking in prayer, showing gratitude, and acknowledging the gifts of God given to us. All lives are connected, he insisted. All things are his relatives and therefore part of his family

He talked about his experience and challenges when he moved to the city. Many things were against his values and the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Que Rock found a way to cope with the contrast between life on the reserve and the city through hip-hop culture and other art forms. Sharing and learning at least one new thing a day are key values of his culture. Que Rock proudly referred to his parents and their work towards the Truth and Reconciliation movement in Canada. He discussed his cultural and religious values and the role of men and women in the Indigenous community. Special attention was given to the significance of the four colors (red, yellow, black, and white) among the indigenous communities and his own personal life. His art has allowed him to become a voice for the voiceless and has enabled him to teach people about his spirituality and cultural values.

2. **Yacov Fruchter** (Jewish)

Yacov Fruchter works as Director of Community Building and Spiritual Engagement for Beth Tzedec Congregation, the largest Conservative Jewish Synagogue in Canada. He is actively involved in community building and inspiring young Jews and empowering them to take ownership over their Jewish experiences with a focus on community building and justice. He is committed to developing understanding and connection with people of different faiths, Indigenous people, and others.

Yacov shared a great phrase from Pirkei Avot, from the Jewish tradition, "The world stands on three things: 1. On *Torah*, source of our wisdom, 2. *Avodah* which is our worship or our actions, and 3. *G'milut chasadim* which is an act of kindness to others". According to the Jewish tradition, if you want to be a good person, one must do all three. A wise person is always open to learning from others. We don't know everything and we must be ready to learn from others.

Jewish history, his family and his own experience have taught him the importance of reconciliation and connection. He quoted from Torah where Abraham and Abimelech fought over land, wells and other natural resources. They agreed to sort out their dispute by performing a sacrifice at Beer-sheba or Sheva which refers to a treaty. Even today the reality is that as human beings we need to learn to share land and space and honor treaties because we break our covenants. This is the way to create peace and harmony in society. He quoted another famous story of Exodus from the Torah and shared it as a classic example which explains the meaning of the stranger and how to treat these strangers when one meets them. It is our prime responsibility as Jewish people not to oppress people nor the land and speak out against unjust structures and laws. He concluded that for the Jewish People connection to land and language is deeply central along with the process of reconciliation among communities. He also mentioned that there are two types of disagreements, disagreements for the sake of heaven and there are disagreements that are not. So, it is important that we learn to disagree with respect and dignity and still try to work for the well being of the members of our society.

3. **Benjamin Lujan** (Christian)

Benjamin Lujan is a lecturer at the University of St. Michael's College. Benjamin Luján is a Peruvian-Canadian who is currently completing a doctoral degree in theology at the University of St. Michael's College, focusing on the area of Christian-Indigenous relations. He is active in ecumenical and interfaith engagements in Canada, with special attention to issues of Indigenous justice and reconciliation. He is a member of a research project on Indigenous youth activism and spirituality at University of St. Michael's College.

Benjamin briefly explained that he came to Canada as an adult and due to his Peruvian heritage and features, people have thought that he is a member of an Indigenous community. He has found it hard over the years that he has not completely integrated in the Canadian Society because of his Peruvian heritage. He shared that because of our cultural and religious background integrating and making friendship with other communities can be very challenging and at the same it can be a very joyful experience when we learn to discuss things with others and exchange our views in a friendly environment. He mentioned that he grew up as Catholic and is still trying to learn the philosophy, theology and spirituality of his own religion and other religions because he has been exposed to other religions when he moved to Canada.

As an academic, Benjamin explained that he is continuously exploring spirituality which can be very difficult at certain times. He works closely with members of the Indigenous community and seeks to understand how he, as an immigrant, can relate to Indigenous peoples and their spirituality. As an immigrant what role can he and others play in the process of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada? He explained that part of his research is to foster ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and prevent spiritual violence committed by local communities towards each other but especially Indigenous communities. He quoted examples of residential schools and atrocities faced by Indigenous communities because Christian Churches tried to impose their culture and religion on these people and looked down at Indigenous cultural and religious ceremonies and values.

He mentioned that part of his work is to educate people in schools, parishes and church leaders and prepare the way for dialogue where people can reconcile and learn from each other in a friendly environment. These initiatives of listening, learning and engaging with each other will create a sense of friendship and respect and play a greater role in the process of reconciliation.

4. Imam Irshad Osman (Muslim)

Imam Irshad Osman is a “Khateeb” at the Danforth Islamic Centre and other mosques in the GTA. He volunteers his time with many Toronto-based organizations advocating for social justice, minority rights, true inclusion, anti-racism, and anti-hate, and supports interfaith collaboration to find solutions to common issues, e.g., poverty, homelessness, injustices. Recently Imam Osman initiated the first-ever Muslim-Indigenous Connection

program to train 25 Muslim youth to learn about indigenous spirituality and way of life and understand their past and present struggles due to settler-colonialism.

Imam briefly explained how the two-week Muslim-Indigenous program he initiated expanded into 5 months, and how he is very pleased with the outcome of this event. It was encouraging to see Muslim and Indigenous Youth interact with each other and develop some good understanding of two cultures and spiritual traditions. He highlighted different steps of the program. It was the news of the discovery of 215 unmarked graves of children at a residential school in British Columbia which sparked his original idea. After discussion with various partners, especially the Canadian Council of Imams, the foundations of this Muslim-Indigenous Youth program were established. The purpose was to explore the truth and bring peace, healing, justice, truth, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples as they have suffered in the name of religion and culture during the past few centuries.

He shared that they have learned from Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) that whenever someone goes to a new land, they must give great respect and honor to the local people and local culture. Therefore, it is our prime duty as Muslims to give great respect to Indigenous people, their culture and spirituality. He quoted that their Prophet has taught them to stand with the oppressed and speak for justice for the marginalized sections of the community. He said, being the followers of Islam, they are stewards of the earth and have a great responsibility to protect it from all types of dangers. He shared that he has always felt the absence of Indigenous spiritual leaders during interfaith dialogue programs. The majority of interfaith dialogue programs consist of a heavy emphasis on representatives from the Abrahamic Religions. Consequently, he very consciously developed this program for the Muslim and Indigenous Youth to develop friendship and trust between the future leaders.

5. Harpreet Neelam (Sikh)

Harpreet Kaur Neelam is pursuing her doctorate in Social Justice Education while on maternity leave with her two children 5 and 2 years old. She is an educator and has had the opportunity to work with the Peel District School Board as a teacher, resource teacher, curriculum coordinator, and at the Ministry of Ontario in the Inclusive Education Branch. She is currently an advisory board member of the World Sikh Organization and was on the founding board for the Sikh Feminist Research Institute. Her passion is

singing kirtan (Sikh Spiritual Music), which she has been performing on stages at Gurdwaras and events since she was 5 years old.

Harpreet in her opening remarks thanked all the panelists and shared that she is privileged to be part of this land and therefore has a great responsibility towards Indigenous peoples, their rights, culture, and spirituality. This is especially so because she is an immigrant who has a contract with the Canadian Government and has rights and privileges that have not been given to the Indigenous peoples of this country. — As an immigrant Harpreet shared that she had the privilege of learning about her own religion, culture and language and felt sad that the Indigenous Children did not enjoy this right and they were sent to residential schools where they were mistreated. Residential schools were more of an internment and torture center, Harpreet insisted. Here, Indigenous children were killed, and their culture, language, religion, and families taken away. They were forced to learn a new language and culture and forced to convert to a new religion. She is saddened to learn that leaders of Indigenous communities have found thousands of graves on these sites where their children were sent to learn new ways.

Harpreet was shocked that our Prime Minister recognized the rights of farmers in India when they were protesting and allowed the white truckers to protest in Ottawa and other parts of Canada but when Indigenous groups speak for their rights, they are treated very harshly and are not allowed to speak for their legitimate rights. In fact they are shunned by the government. She emphasized that it is very important to listen and learn about Indigenous peoples' concerns and atrocities they've faced in the past and even today. She highlighted that Indigenous people still don't have clean water to drink, decent schools and hospitals in their reserves and neighborhoods, while as an immigrant she is enjoying all these benefits. Isn't it sad?

She stressed that immigrant communities and the government of Canada must listen, learn, and engage with Indigenous people and efficiently work for the ways to bring harmony and peace among these communities. The process of Truth and Reconciliation must be expedited and the needs of these communities must be looked after in a decent manner. This is where our municipal, provincial and federal government must play their role positively and all treaties must be honoured in a timely fashion. She elaborated that Indigenous people are the true stewards of this land and we immigrants need to stand with them against the injustices that exist in our society. We should stand up for what is right, and out of love. Harpreet quoted from the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* (Sikh sacred

scripture), “fear none and frighten none” meaning, raise your voice for justice. There is a special force in us which demands that we speak for the oppressed and fight against injustice.

Question & Answer Session

At the end of the presentations, participants and the panelists had a very informed and detailed question/ answer session.

Closing & Prayer

Closing Song:

1. “Aio ki te Aorangi – Peace, Love and Joy to the Universe”

Song and Actions by Sr. Petite Lao

This is a Maori children’s folk song composed by Dr. Rose Piri, a Maori Elder, who has taught this song to people all over the world. It was especially highlighted in the closing of the Parliament of World Religions in Utah, 2015, and in Toronto in 2018. Dr. Rose sadly passed away at the age of 83 in Dec. of 2020, but her song lives on.

2. Closing Prayer:

The program concluded with the following prayer, said by Kathy Murtha.

Gracious Creator God, we give thanks and praise for this wondrous world in which we live.

Beauty and diversity surround us. All of creation beholds amazing wonder.

You, O God, gave life to all peoples, animals, plants, and the earth.

We are all so closely related and connected.

Lead us to a deeper understanding of the indigenous peoples who have shared their wisdom and understanding of this connectedness.

Help us to heal the fractured relationships of the past so that honor, reverence and dignity can bind us together.

The indigenous people believe deeply “we are all related.”

May we strive to believe and live in that spirit.

Amen.

(Written by the Notre Dame Sisters)