

Ramadan, Iftar and beyond..

A WFWP and UPF report.

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The city of Birmingham's population is just over a million people, with the number of Muslims fast approaching 250,000, and with the number of mosques in the city now over 160! A large percentage of the Muslim community live in the inner city districts of Sparkbrook, Sparkhill and Small Heath. Interfaith and community relations, at all levels, are generally very good as a result of the considerable effort made by individuals, communities and enlightened faith leaders over many years. One iconic moment occurred in 2014 when the then Muslim Lord Mayor, Cllr Shafique Shah, standing next to the Anglican Bishop of Birmingham in the city centre, read publicly from the Bible Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount'. "Blessed are the peacemakers..." Indeed!



Each year, during the holy month of Ramadan, so many of our Muslim friends make the devotional offering of fasting from sunrise to sunset, as well as daily prayers and charitable deeds. The last few years have been particularly challenging because of the length of daylight hours which, this year, approached seventeen hours! It meant a severe disruption to sleeping

patterns and eating sometimes restricted to one meal a day, but with taxi drivers, doctors and nurses, and city councillors still maintaining their regular working lives.



For a number of years now, we have visited as many of our Muslim friends as possible, to pay our respects and to bring some food which they can use to break their fast at the evening meal (Iftar), anything from home-made soup to fruit, scones and lemon cakes. It is inevitably a wonderful, joyful experience of mutual respect, and quite often we return home with as many gifts from our friends as we set out with to visit them. Many times we will hear them quote that " Allah will give even more blessing to those who feed the ones who are fasting".

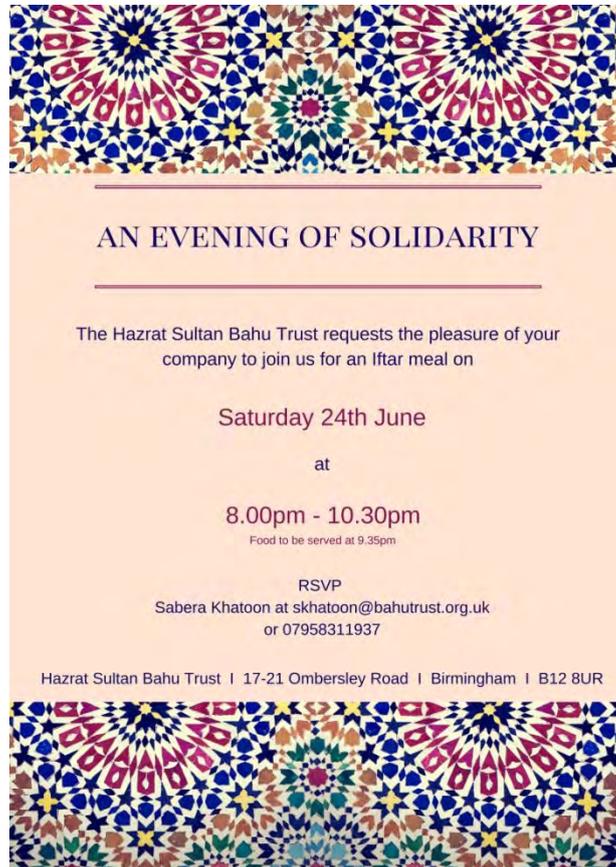


Somosas, various sweets and a beautiful screen.



Dates, pastries, fruit and more sweets!

This year, we had the meaningful experience of finding one Muslim friend out when we went to visit her, so we left some lemon cake in the porch of her house. She, meanwhile, had been at a meeting where she was looking enviously at someone eating.... lemon cake, after lunch, wishing so much that she could have some herself! She sent a text to Patricia late that night, saying how happy she was to arrive home and be able to eat the cake for her Iftar meal, feeling that it was God's hand at work in a miraculous way!



We were invited to help support about 10 different Iftar meals during Ramadan, in mosques, churches, community centres and peoples' homes. There was even an evening street party, organised close to one of Birmingham's Shia mosques, attended by well over 600 to 700 people from all faith backgrounds, and such a joyful experience with all kinds of food on offer, an ice-cream van, and a real family feeling to the occasion. It was a mosque where we have invested quite a bit to help them develop their interfaith activities, so it was really nice to see the fruits of all their efforts.



On another occasion, Patricia was invited to a Banqueting Suite in the city centre, where the meal was organised by Muslim friends mainly of Pakistani origin. The main person organising the event, Sumeira, asked Patricia to



say a few words about the Women's Federation for World Peace, and then to offer the prayer which ended that day's fast, and inviting God's blessing on the meal. Patricia felt very privileged, and moved, to do that and a number of women expressed their thanks to her afterwards.

How wonderful, also, to be inside one of Birmingham's Anglican churches, St Peters, where excellent Christian-Muslim relations have been built up in recent years, and where the Iftar meal was hosted by both Christian and Muslim members of the surrounding neighbourhood. The atmosphere was buzzing with different conversations as people shared food together and made new friends.



It reminded us of a 'Visit My Mosque' event earlier in the year. The same mosque we have been working together with opened their doors for a whole day, and the place was packed with people of all colours, ages and faiths, listening to talks, having a guided tour, enjoying all kinds of food, and never leaving the mosque empty-handed - carrying flowers, sweets, somosas, etc.



'Visit My Mosque' day.



Evening programme at the Al Mahdi Institute.

Another moving occasion was David being invited to speak on Friday June 23rd at a 'Big Iftar' just prior to the end of Ramadan. The event was held at the Al Mahdi Institute, where we are able to hold our Interfaith Worship Services in the beautiful 'chapel' there. He was asked to give a message in solidarity with all the families who had suffered in the recent terror attacks in London and Manchester, and also thanked all Muslim brothers and sisters for their amazing devotion during Ramadan, which surely is such a wonderful offering for our whole city, as well as each person's spiritual life.



All of this positive interaction has allowed us to build deep friendships and trust with many people in the Islamic community in our city, and they very naturally want to support and identify with our peace activities, be it the Middle East Peace Initiative, the Women's Peace Meeting, conferences, etc.



Many Muslim friends attended this year's Interfaith Peace Blessing.

And, of course, the Blessing and our Family Evenings to study Principles of Peace together. A number of close friends were also among those attending our eldest daughter, Theresa's, wedding celebration which was such an honour for us.



Sheik Arif speaking to Daniel and Theresa.



Four of Patricia's very close friends.

We are so grateful for WFWP and UPF, and the possibilities which they open up for us in our city. In this case, helping to bring Muslim and non-Muslim together, and creating a platform where people can share their common humanity, build friendships, take away fear and prejudice, and free their hearts to be able to genuinely feel that we are one family.

There is so much goodness and devotion 'out there' in society, including in the Muslim world, and we feel it is our responsibility to recognise and honour that, and join our hearts and hands in building a better society for all of us together.