

Watford Interfaith Pilgrimage

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This is the fourth year that WIFA has organised an interfaith pilgrimage on the occasion of National Interfaith Week. Watford is a perfect town to hold a pilgrimage as all the major places of worship are within walking distance. This year once more we visited 5 places of worship: The Watford & District Synagogue, St Mary's Church (Church of England), the Watford Central Mosque, Holy Rood Roman Catholic Church and the Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha (Sikh Temple).

Our pilgrimage started in the afternoon at the Watford & District Synagogue where the members of the Synagogue warmly welcomed us with delicious kosher pastries and warm drinks. After an initial welcome from Jeff Bateman, Chair of WIFA, Di Roberts, Interfaith Coordinator for the Synagogue, introduced Rabbi Levine from the Jewish Orthodox tradition. The Rabbi told us that today is Mitzvah Day when the Jewish community reaches out to society with acts of kindness and good deeds. Doesn't it sound familiar? The idea of Mitzva resonates in all our faiths. It inspired us and was mentioned twice in different places we visited. After admiring the beautiful gilded torahs in the ark and listening to the young son of the Rabbi telling us about his faith, we moved to our next destination: St Mary's Church.



John Way, Churchwarden at St Mary's gave us a brief historical overview of this Anglican Church; the

oldest place of worship in Watford dating back to 1230. St Mary's was part of the Cassiobury Estate owned by the Earls of Essex. Due to the lack of time, John invited us to come back and look around the church and also recommended us to attend its midday concerts every Tuesday.

At the Mosque we were welcome by Imam Saleem. Before explaining the basics of the Islamic faith, Imam Saleem pointed out that we all come from different paths of faith but we are one under God. I was quite moved by this remark coming from the Imam and thought about how much the attitudes towards interfaith have changed over the years. People asked a lot of questions, some quite controversial, but the Imam answered with confidence and serenity. We had to cut our time short and hurry to Holy Rood RC Church but not before receiving some sweets and drinks prepared by the members of the Mosque.

At Holy Rood RC Church Deacon Neville Dyckhoff introduced us to the church as one of the loveliest Victorian churches in Britain whose architect, John Francis Bentley, also designed the Westminster Roman Catholic Cathedral in London. Deacon Dyckhoff explained to us how a very small Catholic congregation in 1861 grew to this beautiful and vibrant multi cultural church which today holds masses in English, Italian and Polish.

We ended our pilgrimage at the Gurdwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha. The term Gurdwara means: 'the doorway to the Guru'. We assembled in the main hall where the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh Holy Book, the eternal Guru, is on display and attended by a priest. Two young Sikh gave us an overview of the Sikh faith and answered our many questions. A warm meal welcomed us at the end of this long day.



Reflecting on the pilgrimage I must say that, since we started 4 years ago, we have seen a great change in people's attitudes towards interfaith. The suspicion and mistrust prevalent at the start with each faith was promoting their beliefs only has been transformed over the years by a greater openness, acceptance and appreciation of other faiths. As I mentioned earlier, the Imam said it so well: we come from different paths but we are one family under God. Once we all truly realise what it means it will surely be the first step towards a world of peace.

Many thanks to Rabbi Levine and the members of the Synagogue, John Way from St Mary's Church, Imam Saleem and the members at the Mosque, Deacon Dyckhoff and the members at the Gurdwara who welcome us all with such warm hospitality. Many thanks to the Blue Watch who follow us with their fire engine and all those who participated in the pilgrimage.