

What we have in common instead of what divides: Interfaith Harmony Week begins in Calgary

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Dr. Herjot Singh, Chair of the Calgary Interfaith Council, reads a passage of religious scripture alongside other faith leaders during the launch of the United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week in Calgary, at Calgary City Hall on Thursday, February 1, 2024. ARYN TOOMBS / FOR LIVEWIRE CALGARY

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Representatives of Calgary's major religions gathered at Calgary city hall on Feb. 1, to mark the start of the United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week and promote that which brings people together rather than what divides them.

The week, which began as an idea from King Abdullah II of Jordan as a way of promoting peace and mutual understanding, was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010.

For the past seven years, the Calgary Interfaith Council has held interfaith events between Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Bahá'í Faith, and other religious groups and denominations as part of the global effort to promote interfaith harmony.

"It's important because it's an opportunity for different faiths to come together. It's an opportunity to show that there are stories of connection and shared purpose as opposed to just stories where differences are accentuated," said Sarah Arthurs, Executive Director for the Calgary Interfaith Council.

"I think it's important because it's something that's

happening all over the planet.”

Celebrating this year’s theme of having the courage to connect with others, children from various faith groups performed a rendition of the classic folk story tale *Stone Soup*.

That story tells how travellers re-connect a fractured village by getting community members to contribute small amounts of ingredients like salt and pepper, or a few onions and carrots each, into what becomes a feast for all.

“What comes out in that story is the shared value of compassion, kindness, and interdependence. These are things that all the world’s faiths recognize as being important: That we do better when we care for one another, and when we share and support each other,” Arthurs said.

Dr. Harjot Singh, Chair for the Calgary Interfaith Council and a representative for the Calgary Sikh community, said that ultimately the things that bring people of faith together in commonality outweigh the things that divide them.

“If you look at the crux or the very heart of each religion, they all are praying for the same thing: For peace, for prosperity, for the wellbeing of humankind. So, that is really important to understand.”

“In the media, and in the past, there’s been a lot of focus on

differences, but not really a focus on understanding and then working together. So, when you have education about a different faith, then you have more likelihood of understanding it. When understand it, then you can actually work to have inclusion, and so changing that perspective from being strangers in faith to being actually neighbours in faith, that's really important."

During the evening, representatives of each faith group in the council read out portions of their faith's scriptures that connected to this year's theme.

Dr. Singh likened that communal act of prayer and sharing to throwing a pebble into a pond.

"That little pebble creates those vibratory ripples, and those vibratory ripples can permeate the city, but also the province, the country, and then the globe," he said.

"The more that we do this around the world, the more that we recognize that even though we are diverse faiths, we can work together, then we can actually foster that harmony and that unity and also foster more peace."

Need, more than ever, to recognize what we have in common

Mayor Jyoti Gondek, speaking at the event, said that the

Stone Soup story was emblematic of the kind of togetherness the city needed especially right now.

"It's really important that during really difficult times, such as the ones that we're experiencing in our city right now, that we understand the power of the Stone Soup story. There are a lot of people in Calgary right now who do not have a lot to give, and they still choose to give what they can. They will give that little pinch of salt, that little pinch of pepper, that carrot, those five onions because Calgary is an incredibly caring and compassionate city," the mayor said.

She said that it was important to recognize faith-based groups for what they do for the city and to recognize that there is a role for people of faith in a secular world—especially when they come together in one room to share that faith together.

"It's that art of conversation, and the ability to interact with each other that's so incredibly important. And that's not something you can do on social media," Mayor Gondek said.

"To actually be able to speak with someone and to ask a question and to challenge an idea and to have an actual conversation and dialogue is the thing that allows us to appreciate one another, and nights like this are important for that."

Mayor Gondek also addressed that same social media commentary that has painted her as being against faith-based groups in Calgary, by reiterating her belief that faith-based groups are at the heart of building community in Calgary.

"I have never shied away from faith-based organizations or faith-based events. There are times when there are issues that are created by the world events that we are in, but that is not a signal to any faith-based groups or communities that I don't support them or I don't stand with them," she said.

"I think faith-based groups are incredibly important to our city and our society, and I do everything I can to make sure that I support them, and to make sure that we are combating ideologies that try to divide us."

She pointed out the importance of Interfaith Harmony Week in Calgary, alongside other community-building events like Chinook Blast and YYC Hot Chocolate Festival.

The message, said Mayor Gondek, was to feel comfortable finding community.

"It's important to go out and find those groups and have those conversations and reflect on what makes us complete and whole as a society. I mean, we do this for other things that go on in the city... we go out and seek those

opportunities. Let's go out and seek some opportunities where we can have some meaningful dialogue with people who celebrate and believe in faiths that are different than ours," she said.

Calgary Interfaith Harmony Week events

- **February 2, 3 to 4:30 p.m.:** Chair of Christian Thought Lebel Lecture in Christian Ethics: From Strangers To Neighbours at the Calgary Central Library. Tickets are free, but registration is required at www.eventbrite.ca/e/an-afternoon-with-sarah-arthurs-and-howard-lawrence-tickets-789648609247.
- **February 3:** Working Together Brings Us Together connects individuals wishing to participate in helping at the Salvation Army's Centre for Hope.
- **February 4:** United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week Strangers to Neighbours Interfaith Potluck at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Registration can be done at www.eventbrite.ca/e/unwihw-strangers-to-neighbours-interfaith-potluck-tickets-773889102137.
- **February 8, 7 to 9 p.m:** Women of Faith Event: Recognizing Female Leaders at the FCJ Centre. Tickets are free, but registration is required at www.eventbrite.ca/e/women-of-faith-recognizing-female-leaders-tickets-798894875077.

- **February 11, 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.:** Songs for Peace Interfaith Concert at McDougall United Church. The event is free and no registration is required.

For more details on the United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week in Calgary, see

www.calgaryinterfaithcouncil.org/about-un-wihw.