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# Interfaith Stories

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Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of Aberdeen Interfaith Group

November, 2023



## **Interfaith Stories**

(A collection of personal spiritual journeys and reflections)

Celebrating the Launch of Scottish Interfaith Week

&

The 30th Anniversary of Aberdeen Interfaith Group

on

Monday 13th November 2023

### **Venue:**

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Editors:

Patricia Findlay

S.M. Sujano

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As Lord Provost of Aberdeen I am delighted that for 30 years now there has been an Interfaith Group in the City of Aberdeen. Interfaith dialogue is so important as we navigate the multi-faith world we all live in. The Aberdeen Interfaith Group helps to make our city a safer and more welcoming place to live. This booklet captures the interfaith stories of members of the Aberdeen Interfaith Group and is a fitting tribute to the work the group has done over many years. Congratulations on your 30th Anniversary.

Councillor David Cameron  
The Lord Provost of Aberdeen





## Foreword

We may have different religions, beliefs, faith, languages, and cultures, but despite those differences, we are all human and interconnected. The occasion of the Scottish Interfaith Week Launch as well as the celebration of the 30th anniversary of Aberdeen Interfaith Group are testimony to the fact that we can all get along.

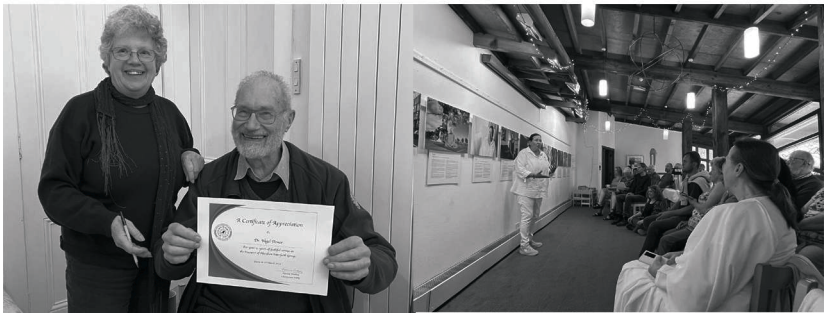
This booklet is a collection of personal stories demonstrating how interfaith can bring us closer together to work for the welfare, happiness, and benefit of all beings. There are 39 stories reflecting the religion, faith and beliefs, of different people who are directly or indirectly related to or who have benefited from association with Aberdeen Interfaith Group. The stories are in alphabetical order of the author's name. Mean while, we had to edit some essays for clarity and space. Please accept our apologies for cutting your story short!

If you are looking for historical information about how Aberdeen Interfaith Group formed, please go to Audrey and Keith Mellard page as well as Kathryn Hendry and Astrid. Frances Hume's message illustrates AIFG's activities and its contribution.

On behalf of AIFG, I would like to extend special acknowledgments to Patricia Findlay, chair of AIFG for her hard work that has brought many successes for AIFG. Also, may I extend my appreciation to Interfaith Scotland, especially Maureen Sier, the director of IFS, for all her support and contributions including her preface for this booklet. Along with this I would like to thank you all for your great stories; without these this booklet would not have been possible. Lastly, I also would like to thank Suresh Nakarmi who kindly designed this booklet despite his busy life. I take full responsibility for any errors- please forgive me if there are any!

May Aberdeen Interfaith and Interfaith Scotland continue to be a force for good in our community.

Ven. S.M. Sujano



## Preface

As I pondered the stories in this beautiful booklet, I was often moved to tears and found myself thinking what a testament to the power of interfaith to build community, to create friendships and to assist people on their spiritual journeys - thank you Aberdeen Interfaith Group for all that you do.

My own interfaith journey began at 17 when I became a Baha'i in the NE town of Elgin. The teachings of the Baha'i faith recognise the spirituality that lies at the core of all the world religions and so, from a young age, I was interested in learning about other faiths and spiritual traditions.

However, my real interfaith encounter began coincidentally in Aberdeen in the 1990s. I was a mature student studying Cultural History, Anthropology and World Religions at Aberdeen University when someone mentioned to me that there was an interfaith group starting up at the Chaplaincy Centre at the University and so I went along and was overjoyed to meet people from diverse faiths and beliefs. From the moment I entered the Chaplaincy Centre and engaged with members of the Aberdeen Interfaith Group I knew that I had found a home. Aberdeen Interfaith Group was in its infancy but from the very beginning it was inclusive and welcoming and has remained so to this day.

After graduating I went to live on the Pacific Island of Samoa and was able to engage with the diverse communities of the Pacific which was also a life-changing experience. On returning to Scotland in 2002 I was prayerfully considering what the next stage of our family's journey should be when I saw an advert for a National Development Officer for Interfaith Scotland. Ever since, Interfaith has become my passion, my work, my joy in life and the root of so many friendships and I know that everyone reading this booklet will see such threads running through all the interfaith encounters.

May I take this opportunity to wish the Aberdeen Interfaith Group good wishes for the future and to offer them sincere congratulations on their 30th Anniversary – may you continue to go from strength to strength.

Dr. Maureen Sier,  
Director, Interfaith Scotland

## **A message from the Chair of AIFG**

It is my pleasure to have a space for a few words at the beginning of this beautiful collection of stories of people connected to Aberdeen Interfaith- some like Astrid, Kathryn, Ruth and Audrey and Keith who have been involved since its inception 30 years ago and others who have joined us while they were studying or staying in Aberdeen even briefly and have returned to their own country such as Nisa and Sofala. Thank you to everyone who has shared their story with us to show us just how important Interfaith is in their lives and to us as a community.

As a RMPS teacher I am so grateful for the contributions made to my department, especially at Albyn School between 2005 and 2017. They made the learning and teaching of the subject so much livelier, richer, and more meaningful for students and teachers alike- lively discussions on the Existence of God with an atheist, humanist and Christian; mindfulness for staff and pupils after a study in Buddhism; the favourite lesson with speakers of many faiths on Moral Issues; The Forgiveness project exhibition and involvement with Holocaust Memorial Day after a visit with pupils to Auschwitz. Because of these positive experiences and relationships, I took on the role of chairperson of Aberdeen Interfaith. This committee is made up of a few very committed people who have served faithfully over many years and others who have newly joined us (2 Interfaith Chaplains no less.)

Since I was first involved, we have moved from discussions to worship together to a more proactive group of friends reaching out to our community- by cooking for the homeless, organising events to bring local people together with refugees and asylum seekers of all faith and none who are new to our city. You, Me and Cup of Tea has been the success story of our 30th year with over 350 people taking part in these events around Aberdeen City and Shire. May such ideas and events flourish in the name of Interfaith.

Patricia Findlay,  
Chair, Aberdeen Interfaith Group

## **A message from Interfaith Scotland**

As the National Development Officer at Interfaith Scotland, it has been a joy working with members of Aberdeen Interfaith Group. I have been in this post for 16 years and the group has always been active during this time and welcomed me to their planning meetings and events. One of my tasks is collating and editing our biannual magazine and it is a joy to share all the events that the group has been running throughout the year. Sometimes a double-page spread is required to do the events justice!

The Aberdeen Interfaith Group has thrived through all circumstances, and I was touched by all the work that the group undertook during the pandemic helping those in need in practical ways while continuing to host events online supporting people's spiritual, mental and emotional wellbeing. They continue to support those in need, for example running events welcoming refugees and asylum seekers across the north of Scotland and working together each week preparing food for the homeless. The group is also deeply committed to caring for our environment, for example planting trees together.

Aberdeen Interfaith Group was instrumental in setting up a local interfaith group for young people, the only one of its kind in Scotland. One of those young people now sits on Interfaith Scotland's National Interfaith Youth Advisory Board. It is so important for young people to take forward this work and be a beacon of hope for future generations.

One memorable occasion for me was an invitation to speak at the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations held at the Varapunya Meditation Centre, a delightful occasion involving walking meditation, tree planting, talks from children and adults, a Buddhist ceremony, certificates thanking long standing members of the Aberdeen Interfaith Group, and of course, wonderful food and conversation! As always, I was made to feel very welcome.

It was wonderful to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Aberdeen Interfaith Group at the launch of Scottish Interfaith Week in the Town House in November 2018, a truly vibrant occasion, and it is an honour to also play a part in their 30th anniversary celebrations at the launch of Scottish Interfaith Week once again in the Town House in 2023. May the group continue to grow from strength to strength!

Frances Hume



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## **1. The early days of Interfaith in Aberdeen.**

We first met the Interfaith organization when we came to Aberdeen in the early nineteen nineties.

It was a time when Agnes and Ainsley Walton, Stuart and Helen Kinnersley, Nigel Dower, Ruth Payne and Christopher Scott Paul, also known as Hassan Scott, Stewart Proctor and others, were stalwarts of the Aberdeen group.

It was obvious to us that this should be the very best way to get all religions co-operating together, and acknowledging that all humanity has the same concerns, wherever fate has placed them in the universe. We all want to feed, clothe and educate our children, get them medical attention when necessary, and bring them up in peace and security.

We had some very lively meetings in those days, with talks, discussions and exhibitions all aiming to show the diversity of the group, but also to demonstrate the concerns that hold us together as one humanity. Some of us were given the opportunity at this time to contribute to the TV programme “Thought for the day” from the old Grampian studios near Queens Cross. This demanded very precise, concise writing to convey any message at all, but we rose to the occasion.

We hope that the work of Interfaith will long continue and we are happy to still be involved today 30 years later.

Audrey and Keith Mellard.

## **2. Abdullah Jabban**

My interfaith journey began with contact with the Chairperson of Aberdeen Interfaith. It was during my stay at an asylum seekers hotel in Aberdeen, where I, along with the first group of arrivals, found ourselves in a city where we knew no one.

Faced with this challenging situation, I reached out to numerous organizations and charities. Amidst this discouraging backdrop, her email reached out to me, offering practical help and a genuine willingness to assist. Over time, my mental health deteriorated, leading me to hospital visits. During one such instance, she was by my side, providing support and helping me escape the toxic environment of the hotel for a day(invited to her home - I could not imagine myself as a worthy person to be invited or welcomed in someone's home at the time).

Another critical moment followed when my health took a serious turn, and I realized that relocating from that hotel was imperative. Those initial days in Glasgow, fresh from the hospital, were some of the most challenging in my life. I was a stranger in a new city, battling depression, and utterly lost. In this trying time, she remained in daily contact, guiding me through the difficulties and offering practical assistance, such as providing a bicycle, introducing me to individuals and organizations, and supplying essential kitchen equipment. One of the most memorable moments was when I celebrated my first birthday she made a considerable effort, travelling all the way from Aberdeen to Glasgow. Furthermore, she extended an invitation to share in the festivities of Christmas at her home, where we cooked meals for those in need, explored the city, and visited the castle. She, in every sense, became a motherly figure in my life.

In essence, she embodies the very essence of interfaith engagement. Her unwavering support, compassion, and selflessness demonstrate the power of interfaith connections in fostering understanding, empathy, and positive change in our communities. Her actions speak volumes, illustrating that when we describe interfaith, we describe individuals like her who bridge divides and exemplify the essence of unity and compassion among diverse faiths and backgrounds.

### 3. Alexandria Nora

I grew up in America's Bible Belt. From my pre-teen years, I became disillusioned with concepts that were being taught in many churches, which were often discriminatory and not based on peace or love.

Naturally, I was conflicted - growing up in a deeply religious area but having very different beliefs from many people that I knew. I decided to explore the topic of religion further when I went to university. I wanted to believe in something, but I also did not want to follow a religion just because I had been born into it. I wanted to make up my own mind. One of the degrees I pursued and graduated with was a BA in World Religions. It changed my spiritual life and outlook completely. I studied/became acquainted with nearly every religious/spiritual outlook, from the Abrahamic religions to Vodou, Paganism to Zoroastrianism, Satanism to Animism.

I left Christianity in 2018 and decided to search for those values that were common denominators found within "higher powers" in many, if not most, religions. Now, I would describe myself as spiritual. I don't fit into any box that society has created for itself. I believe in Spirit, which would be similar to the Chinese concept of Chi and the Native American concept of Animism - a permeating, calming force that can be found deep within every living organism. A still, small voice or intuition. I strongly believe in the concept of "As within, so without." Your inner self will determine your outer experience. I also strongly believe in the power of prayer.

Regardless of religion, I believe that we should each strive to be the best version of ourselves that we can be within any situation that we find ourselves in. Life is situational, so it is difficult to set hard, fast rules. I believe in practising self-reflection (the earlier an individual begins, the better), determining what it is you want from life, and then working hard to achieve it. I believe in being kind to yourself and others and I believe in finding reverence in simplicity. Most importantly, I believe in the importance of finding balance. Overall, my spiritual journey is that of seeker and mystic, of finding deep truths and living by them.

## 4. Ananda

When I was asked to write this essay, I found it difficult. I did not know where to start. I was born in the UK. When I first encountered Buddhism as a Christian aged 16, it was in the context of a broader counter- cultural movement that had peaked in the 1960s. Buddhism was not mainstream. It was cool and more hippy culture. The truth is that my understanding was seriously deficient.

The lesson I learnt is that meditation cannot be compartmentalised. Practice must have an ethical framework to be effective spiritually. Another important realisation was that we need support and encouragement on the path. I tended to be a lone-wolf keeping others at arm's length. How foolish this was.

Personal contact with experienced practitioners is invaluable and can save us from many mistakes. Sometimes I look at my practice and convince myself that I am getting nowhere. I read about the lives of great Buddhists and by comparison I seem hopeless and feel like throwing in the towel. According to Buddhist philosophy this is the wrong way of looking at it, wrong view.

Travelling a spiritual path is a step-by-step process. It involves learning, training, and cultivation. It's hard but it's harder not to do it. Each step that we take brings to closer. I have great interest in all world religion, faith and belief systems and their culture and practices. I enjoy participating them whenever I have an opportunity that support to refine my spiritual journey.

Best wishes to all at Varapunya Buddhist Centre, a beautiful centre and is doing wonderful work helping people finding their peace and thank you very much to Ajahn Sujana who has encouraged me so much over the years, whatever faith I professed and wherever I was on my spiritual path.

May all be happy and attain freedom.

## **5. Ananth Subramaniam**

Since my childhood, Hinduism has shaped my life. From regular temple trips with my grandparents in India to learning shlokas from my mother, Hindu culture has played a key role.

However, it was only as I grew older, that I understood the inner significance behind our practices. Every Hindu ritual has a symbolic meaning that helps purify our mind and overcome obstacles in our spiritual journey.

While religion and science are often shown opposing each other, Hindu philosophy has had a trailblazing impact in intertwining the two since ancient times. The 6th century mathematician, Aryabhata, introduced the concept of 0 and provided the earliest approximation of  $\pi$  whilst Bhaskaracharya's theory of gravity was proposed 500 years prior to Newton.

Furthermore, learning the Vedas and other divine scriptures has enlightened me and continues to provide relevant information about our modern world. It contains information from a variety of subjects, from the original proof for Pythagoras' Theorem to how to realise the eternal truth.

My desire to pursue engineering in my future has been further kindled through my admiration for Hindu architecture. The intricate and precise details on our 1000-year-old temples is something I am amazed by and they fuel my interest in engineering as a possible profession.

Over time, I have begun to understand that Hinduism is not merely a religion, but a way of life. Its pluralistic acceptance of all beliefs provides me with a complete picture of the world and allows me to form my views accordingly. It is incredible that the world's oldest religion is flexible to modern day situations and understands that there are many equal paths to the supreme truth.

## 6. Astrid

My interfaith journey started by default. Dadi Janki inspired an Interfaith Group in Aberdeen 30 years ago and committee meetings would happen at the Brahma Kumaris Centre. I joined the Brahma Kumaris 25 years ago and initially participated as an observer. Later after moving into the meditation centre, I regularly met my interfaith companions at the Centre. The interactions were caring and supportive and I realised that by self-selection my interfaith companions were open minded, inclusive, kind, loving, humble, respectful, willing to cooperate and see beyond religious and faith boundaries. In time they have become friends.

There is a common thread that connects us all. Understanding that we all breathe the same air, drink the same water, have the same hope for love and safety. In a world where religion and spirituality are used to discriminate and to divide, meeting and sharing a vision of unity, friendship and celebrating common values is a powerful force for positive change.

There is no space for the division, conflict, and violence we are seeing unfolding in today's world. The aim of interfaith communities is to transcend prejudice and misconceptions through dialogue, share light where there is darkness by understanding that our shared values outweigh our differences.

The Vigil and Multi-Faith Declaration for COP 26 in Glasgow was a transformative experience restoring hope in humanity.

We organise lectures and events, participate in Scottish Interfaith Week, engage in interfaith dialogue, the Holocaust Memorial Day, share traditions, food, celebrate common values and enjoy coming together such as in our annual mindfulness day, our Christmas event, we visit places of worship, community gardens, we have a book and new film club.

It has been a wonderful experience appreciating human spirituality and connections. Regardless of our faith and background we all have a role to play in promoting peace, understanding, and a sustainable future for generations to come.

## **7. Carina Duarte**

Once someone told me that I had a strong spirituality, and I should start to do something with that. At the time that sentence didn't make any sense to me because I was associating spirituality with religion, and I don't follow a specific religion, but I do have faith.

I'm originally from Portugal, but I have lived in different countries, Spain, Mexico until I arrived in Scotland. It was in Aberdeen where I had my son and I lived as a single mother. It was a difficult time for me, but I think I was in the right place at the right time.

I started attending mindfulness sessions offered by Varapunya Meditation Centre in Aberdeen that helped me start discovering my spiritual journey, a journey of personal growth and understanding of myself.

We live our lives at full speed, work, family to take care of, you name it. When I started to meditate, I was not ready at all, just one minute meditating looked like an eternity to me. But then, 1 minute passed to 5 minutes and then to 30 minutes and bit by bit my mind started to be tamed without me realising it. The good reward is that slowly I started to be more aware of what surrounds me and aware of how I respond to situations. I started to feel more alert, to prioritise thoughts, to be more prepared to face difficulties. I was starting a journey of discovery of my spirituality, of my inner self.

I know that this is just the beginning of a long and hard journey, but it is a beautiful one and I want to continue it because I have faith, I have faith in myself and getting to understand myself helps me to better understand and be more empathetic to others.

I'll always be grateful to all good friends at the Buddhist Centre in Aberdeen who have helped me in starting this beautiful path.

## **8. Caroline Cormack**

About twenty-five years ago, after the birth of my first daughter, I was given my first overtly spiritual book. It was called ‘Anam Cara’ by John O Donohue and its rich, poetic spiritual exploration stirred something within me. Over the next few years, I started reading about different spiritual practices and meditations with a great zest to learn more.

This led me to trying out some meditation sessions at the Brahma Kumaris Centre in Aberdeen and as I was leaving there one day, I spotted a leaflet by their door with the word “Interfaith” on it. That word jumped out at me, and I wanted to find out more, so I began attending meetings of Aberdeen Interfaith Group and was deeply heartened to observe people from different faith backgrounds coming together to talk and share in such a friendly and open way.

Soon after this I read about a woman who had completed an Interfaith Ministry course and her story inspired me to apply for this course, which fortunately was being run in Edinburgh in 2008. The course involved exploring some of the major faith traditions often in an experiential way. I visited the Hindu Temple in Glasgow, the Aberdeen Mosque and Synagogue as well as numerous churches, taking part in their worship and trying various forms of meditation and prayer. I was particularly enriched by studying the Earth Traditions and have continued to find that in nature I feel closest to the Divine.

In 2010 I was ordained as an Interfaith Minister and have since held many weddings and funerals in this role as well as having the privilege of being a volunteer chaplain in different settings and leading the Unitarian Church in Aberdeen for four years.

I wholeheartedly support interfaith dialogue and friendship between people from different faiths, and personally feel deeply enriched by an interfaith spiritual path, as I respect, cherish, and gain inspiration from the beauty and wisdom at the heart of all loving faiths.



## 9. David Briggs.

I once wrote an essay at school. It described how humans, from another planet, came and left a small population on earth with freedom to choose. It was an experiment, to see how settling here might work out, over many millennia, before they settled permanently. Of course, over the years, that freedom did not work out so well for the planet, as we wanted or craved for more & more in a largely material world. That was to be my early spiritual journey!

I went to a Christian school, sang in the school & church choir every week. Like many it was expected by family and a sort of 'habit'. University would come next, a first job, marriage into a Catholic family & work promotion. The reward - nice house, car, successful children, and holidays. My mother & father had given me the good start in life but, looking back, I was more than selfish & failed to 'honour' or show gratitude for all that they had done. That there was a different path never occurred to me in that first fifty years. I had achieved what was expected of me and what I had expected of myself. I was, as they say, 'well off'!

Yet in the latter of those first fifty years I knew deep down something was missing. Very early one morning, after taking a new job & buying an even bigger house, I literally 'woke up' to how little meaning this had for me.

Fast forward a few years. I met someone who would help me 'see' more clearly the very different, more spiritual (not religious) way 'to be'. That was no coincidence of course. We met a teacher (Ajahn Sujana) who could bring focus and with it the energy to 'see even more clearly'. I investigated other spiritual teachings & observed life too, as the Buddha had told us to. All that energy brought increasing focus on accepting suffering in all its forms, to truly understand the antidotes, to become masters of the imprints of our own mind. It's so simple, so logical, so rational, yet even with a 'scientific mind' I failed to 'see' it because of all the 'dust & dirt' that had clouded the window of my mind! And so the journey continues still..

## **10. Deethya**

From a very young age I was exposed to the idea of religion and faith. One of my earliest memories of this was going to a local temple in India with my mum and praying that my dad should get a job. Eventually he did get a job and since I was an incredibly innocent and gullible child I immediately thought it was because of god that my dad got a job.

When I first came to Aberdeen there was no local temple and because my mum was born and raised Catholic she used to take me to church and so for a while I was confused between both religions since my dad would practise Hinduism at home but my mum would take me to

church. I never felt the need to choose between either religion instead I learned to respect both and understand all aspects of faith.

At the moment I do feel as though I identify more with being a Hindu because now we have a local temple in Aberdeen which I go to regularly and so I'm learning more about the different rituals and practises.

## **11. Fiona Beeley**

I have recently been ordained as a One Spirit Inter-Faith Minister, so the ethos and aims of the Aberdeen Inter-faith Group reflect the spiritual path that I have been exploring during my training. I firmly believe that we should try to respect and understand each other's faiths and beliefs and to my delight the Interfaith group is a working example of pluralism in action.

In my training with One Spirit, we were encouraged to practise 'spiritual envy' – to seek out the best points of all spiritual paths. I think that at the heart of the interfaith movement is the people' we are united by our common humanity and the way that we express and follow a variety of faiths is rooted in this. This common humanity is the driving force behind the inter-faith support for the refugee population in the Aberdeenshire. At the recent Aberdeen Mela, some young men from Iraq came to the Interfaith stand attracted by the Islamic symbols on display. They were so excited to see something familiar, in what must seem to be a very alien environment to them. They accepted an invitation to the "You, Me and a Cup of Tea" event that the Inter-faith group are hosted in October and hopefully they went on their way feeling valued for who they are.

For many years I taught Religious, Moral and Philosophical Education in secondary schools. As a teacher I viewed different faiths from an intellectual viewpoint and felt interested but detached from any particular spirituality. When I formally left teaching, I wanted to take the time to examine my spiritual beliefs properly. This was when I decided to study with One Spirit as it offered an experiential course of study, and this was revolutionary for me. For the first time I had to read the religious texts and follow the practices of different faith paths rather than reading about them. Now, I am exploring Zen Buddhism in greater depth but don't feel that I have to reject other faith paths due to my allegiance to the inter-faith ideal. What a joy!

## **12. Imam Ibrahim**

In my 20 years of being part of the interfaith group in Aberdeen, attending our gatherings and even hosting meetings in our mosque, I've had the privilege of embarking on a profound journey of discovery.

Through this experience, I've not only gained knowledge about various faiths and cultures, but I've delved deep into the diverse tapestry of personalities and characteristics that define individuals of different religions. It's been eye-opening to witness the unwavering dedication and commitment of these fellow seekers in their mission to assist others.

Along the way, I've formed invaluable friendships, bonds so strong that I now consider the members of this group as my brothers and sisters. What I've come to realize is that beneath our different beliefs and forms of worship, there lies a remarkable common ground in our shared morals and ethics.

It's become clear to me that our strength lies in respecting and appreciating these differences while working harmoniously together as a global family. We possess the power to contribute significantly to making the world a better place, especially for those in desperate need of hope and help.

As I reflect on this journey, I believe it's our duty to involve and inspire the younger generations from all faiths to unite and carry forward this noble mission. Together, as brothers and sisters of diverse backgrounds, we can pass on the torch and continue spreading a message of hope and compassion to the next generation of our human family.

### 13. Gary Dean

Originally coming from a Christian background many years ago, I started exploring the many faceted routes through spirituality in the hope of understanding how I could bring calm to my overactive mind and provide a solution to my lifelong struggle with pain from my regular migraines. I started looking at different ways to meditate and take some kind of control back from my incessant thoughts which were driving my brain into a mode of stress.

This search brought me closer to Taoism through learning energy work such as Tai Chi and Chi Qong, which was quite soothing and at the same time I was earning the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching. I looked at Buddhist philosophy and how they use meditation which also brought me awareness of the 4 noble truths and the eightfold path, feeding my hunger for spiritual knowledge. I turned to the Hindu faith and explored the Bhagavad Gita which was now speaking to the core of my being. Reading 'A Course in Miracles' brought the mind training into full fruition and at the same time gave me a better understanding of life.

With the migraines gone I continued my thirst for exploring what the many world religions had to offer on insight and spiritual connection. I started my training in Interfaith ministry through the One Spirit organisation which provided exploration into some of the major faith paths. Realising the beauty and richness of these connections led me to join Scottish Interfaith in the hope that I would experience opportunities for meeting like-minded people, opening my ministry for serving the world by witnessing the light of hope in humanity that shines in each and every one of us. I find that the Aberdeen Interfaith group endeavours to reach out to the community and bring opportunity for open dialogue through its amazing efforts and fellowship. I am very grateful for being a part of this wonderful group and the work that they do.

## **14. Jackie Ware**

My interest in Aberdeen Interfaith started around 8 years ago when I was assigned by my Bishop from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to attend Interfaith meetings and get involved with different faith in the city.

I phoned Caroline who was the chair of Aberdeen Interfaith Group at the time, and asked if I could attend, she told me where to meet the group.

At first, I was unsure of my new potential friends and slow to get involved, but as I grew to know these fine people and their commitment to the idea of building a strong group of different Faiths here in Aberdeen I learnt to love and respect their individual beliefs.

I grew up in my faith, my parents joined the church in Aberdeen in the 1960s after listening to our proselytising missionaries.

I have brought my children up in the same faith which has brought to their lives good honest virtues to live by. They now teach their children these same values. I have 14 grandchildren, so my life can get quite busy, but I always try to make time for my commitment to Aberdeen Interfaith.

My faith has always been centred on Jesus Christ who I believe lived, died and lives again. What great comfort this knowledge gives to me and my family.

I enjoy being involved with the Aberdeen Interfaith Group as we work together on various projects and look forward to many more years together.

## **15. Jefline Jacob**

Growing up, I'd been brought up in a strong, Christian Orthodox family, where I would attend regular church services in Malayalam with others in my community. The experience that personally brought me closer to God and solidified my relationship with him was during a time when I felt really alone. Despite being surrounded by friends and family, I felt like I had no one there for me and felt like nothing made me happy anymore.

After trying many things to make me happier again, I decided to put all my worries and feelings into prayer which my parents had always encouraged me to do from a young age. My religion and faith really brought me out of a tough patch in my life with stress with exams, loss of self-belief and trust in my friends. Just having the belief that God was there for me and that he was listening to every single one of my problems and worries, without judgement, made me feel like I wasn't alone anymore and that he was there to guide me.

I started to trust in the plan that he had set for me and looking back, every hardship and struggle I've faced in my life, which I didn't think I'd overcome, I've tackled and they have all worked out for the best. Ever since that time, I've grown in my faith more and more each day and I continue to pray to him during my worries and my sorrows, as well as in my happiness.

## **16. Kathryn Hendry**

My interfaith journey, spanning nearly 40 years, has been a profound odyssey marked by personal growth and deep connections with individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. It started in 1985 when I joined the Edinburgh Interfaith Group and participated in events at the International Flat/Sharing of Faiths in Glasgow, where I was introduced to the rich tapestry of beliefs and practices that constitute the world's religions. These early experiences opened my eyes to the beauty of diversity and the common threads that bind humanity together.

In the early 90s, I relocated to Aberdeen and was surprised by the absence of active interfaith dialogue in the community. Recognising the significance of the 1993 Centenary celebrations of the World Parliament of Religions, I took the opportunity to initiate interfaith dialogue in Aberdeen. Supported by like-minded individuals, we founded the Aberdeen Interfaith Group, a beacon of unity and understanding in the community.

Part of my journey was to serve on the executive committee that contributed to the establishment of what is now Inter Faith Scotland over twenty years ago. This organisation continues to play a vital role in fostering understanding and co-operation among people of different faiths in Scotland.

Today, I reside in Brussels, Belgium, where I continue to engage in interfaith dialogue. As co-president of the European Women of Faith (EWF/RfP) and a Board Member of Religions of Peace Europe (RfPE), and my involvement with the RfPE Environmental Working Group and the Board of the Hindu Forum Europe and Belgium.

Through this journey, I've come to realise that, beneath our diverse beliefs and practices, we share a common humanity. The stories and narratives of individuals sharing their faith experiences have deeply moved me. We all seek meaning, purpose, and connection in our lives, irrespective of our backgrounds. These dialogues have taught me that the bonds of our shared humanity are stronger than the distinctions within our religious traditions. This realisation continues to inspire me to advocate for greater understanding, tolerance, and cooperation among people of different faiths in our society.



## 17. Khloud Ereksousi

I was born and raised in Damascus. In my eyes, Damascus was nothing but my whole life. It never crossed my mind that I would leave it one day. It is my home and not only my home, but it is also my home that I love. It never even occurred to me that it would be I have a passport. Everything happened quickly, as if it was yesterday.

When the tape of those times passes in my memory. I became fluctuating between myself. My mind continues to display the tape of my memory inside my eyes, and my heart squeezes with nostalgia for Damascus and my eyes fill with tears.

The war overnight was the main reason to keep me away from Damascus. I ran away from my house with a baby girl from the mortar shells scattered sometimes on our building and at other times on the neighbouring buildings.

I hear the sounds of explosions. I said it to myself and then repeated it on my tongue (I will not stay here). I felt that I cut off part of my body so that the other part could live, and here I grew up a hundred years and maybe more.

I stayed after that in a safe neighbourhood may be for two months and then my heart died in Damascus and my body was born In Cairo. I had no choice but to breathe, live, and complete my life as those who live in never until life goes on.

There is nothing harsher than leaving your country and your life by force. I extracted the passport myself and booked the tickets myself, no one forced me to do so except for a moment of certainty that there is no life with war.

I wish all peace to my country Syria, and I do not wish for war, nor for any country in the world.

Damascus will remain my love, and  
I will hide it inside me in its  
streets with the scent of its jasmine,  
until one day I meet with it...

## 18. Lena Briggs

Born in Eastern Ukraine in the USSR. I lost my father at five. I lost my mother and became her lifelong carer due to her mental illness, at ten. Lived through the collapse of the country in 1991. I lost everything at the age of 21. My daughter was born two years later, and I had to survive many hardships to feed and protect her. My daughter's father could not find a job in the destroyed country, and I had to provide for my child on my own. But before I left my ex-husband, he told me that he heard of the "Tibetan Book of the Dead" and that title stuck in my head. I found and read the book. Everything began from there.

At the age 26, I experienced what I call a 'Presence' of something 'out of this world', what some call 'Divine' – an unforgettable experience. Whatever touched me then is still guiding me through my life. I read loads of books on philosophy, religions, spirituality, "The Little Prince" type books too. The topic for my dissertation at the Teacher Institute was to explore Jesus' personality. Through my studies I discovered Jesus not as 'God' but as a great Teacher and a remarkable person! In 2003 I asked my invisible Guide to send me a person, with whom I could feel safe, who would care for me, with whom I could find peace of mind. The response was almost immediate! I met my now Husband and followed him to Scotland.

A strange thing then followed: I could not find, in the local churches, the Jesus I had 'met' through my studies, and my foreign language was a barrier. I struggled to find a solution to this situation. One day I saw an advert about the Interfaith gathering in Aberdeen, so we went and met a Buddhist Monk, who offered a short guided meditation on the breath. That felt like a breath of fresh air to me, and I started learning meditation and the Buddha's Teachings with Venerable Sujana. The timing was just perfect because in 2014 the horrible war broke out in my Homeland. I would not have been able to survive the last ten years and other challenges in my 'new' life here without being able to meditate!

This is in a 'nutshell'. There were more meetings with amazing Teachers, including the "Inner Engineering" course with Sadhguru. After all that has happened to me, I feel one of the happiest people on the planet, despite, like everyone, having my 'low' days. In fact, my main 'prayer' is "I am Grateful!". May you be happy, too!

## 19. Lynne Clark

How can I reflect on being spiritual, without any faith? But then I realised that spirituality is not dependent on the belief in a single thing or person. For me, my journey has been about finding faith in myself. I first met Ajahn at one of the lowest points of my life when I was crippled with anxiety. I never really knew anything about Buddhism or meditation at that point. If anything, I probably associated meditating with being quite alternative and something a hippy would do!

The first time I drove to the Varapunya Meditation Centre Aberdeen I didn't go in! I actually felt so nervous about going in on my own and having no idea what to expect. I went back the next week and this time I went in. I had no idea what I was doing and what to expect. I took a seat at the back and spent a long time trying to hide! But there was something about meditation that just clicked for me immediately. I felt a spiritual connection to not only myself, but also to something much bigger than me. Not a deity nor God, as I've said, I'm atheist, but as if the universe was holding a space for me to connect with it.

A huge part of this has been the privilege to learn from Ajahn Sujana, a resident Buddhist monk and to benefit from his wisdom and guidance has been one of the greatest learning experiences of my life. Sitting on the cushion week in, week out, I learnt more about meditation and about Buddhism. The emphasis on loving kindness appealed to me most and was integral in teaching me to be kinder to myself. I always found it very easy to be kind to others, but never to myself. A trait which my anxiety was firmly rooted in. But Buddhism, and its insistence on putting loving kindness first, rooted me to something deep within me. As if I was connecting with my soul on an elemental level and for me, that is spirituality and that has been my journey. One of discovery, one of hope, one of love.

I feel thankful every day that the universe brought Ajahn into my life. for I firmly believe that I met him at exactly the time I was meant to. When I needed him most and when I needed to find Buddhism and meditation.

## **20. Matthew Lyn Aung Cho**

My name is Matthew Lyn Aung Cho and I wanted to write a little about my spiritual journey. My father is from Burma (Myanmar) and my mother is from England. I grew up with influences from both Christianity and Buddhism. As a teenager I started to practice meditation, and that lead me to be interested in the Buddhist religion. After coming to Aberdeen to study religion at the university, I went for a few weeks with my family to Burma and ended up ordaining for a temporary period as a Buddhist monk there in the Sagaing Hills. Upon returning, I continued studying about the major world religions, but my practice was as a Buddhist.

It was only years later, while living In Aberdeen that I had an experience that led me to Christianity. I was walking near the beach, and suddenly felt the presence of God, and knew that everything I saw on the horizon was part of his creation, and that both myself and everyone else were precious to him. I realised that I was yearning for a relationship with God, through his son, Jesus Christ. I came to the realisation that God cares for us, and we are all his children. I eventually found fellowship at the Methodist church and made prayer and communion with God part of my daily life.

I love spending time with people from all cultures, backgrounds, religions, and ways of life and to see God's love and mercy through relationships with others. Both Buddhism and Christianity have been a major part of my spiritual journey, and I am very grateful to both religions, and everyone I have met along the way. I pray for peace and understanding between all the religions traditions, and for opportunity to share and listen, support and welcome and to be healed and humbled.

## **21. Natthaphat Sinjaupsorn(Jeep)**

I am a Thai and I have been a monk for seven years. My Buddhist name is Santacitto, which means a peaceful mind. Being a monk, mostly related to ‘meditation’, and my spiritual journey is about it.

I started meditation when I was young and often practised by myself because I wished for merit to make my life better (as Thai people believe). I found that meditation was so relaxing, also increased my concentration on studying, so I tried to practise as much as I can.

After high school, I began to work in a MLM company. After five months of finding customers to earn money in a ruthless society that tried to encourage me to lie, I didn't follow instruction, yet I was successful and got promoted. On the day of promotion, I was so happy that I got it without telling lies, but the reward was an alcohol party in a luxury bar. I realized, "it is not the life that I wanted." I tried to figure out the solution to my life, that time I couldn't find anything apart from "meditation". Then I packed my bag and went to the closest temple leaving a letter to my mother saying "I shall be in the temple for a retreat. Do not visit me nor call me. I don't know how long it will take but when the time comes, I will be back."

My first intention was to spend four days at the temple. I switched off my phone and tried to concentrate on the routine in the temple attending chanting, reading, meditating, and sweeping the yard mindfully. In the evening of the third day, I got to a high state of concentration. It was so calm and so happy; it was the happiness that I couldn't compare to any worldly things that I had experienced before. I could even say that it was my happiest day in my life. Then I thought “Oh, am I going back home tomorrow? but this is strange, I need to learn more about it (meditation).” So, I decided to stay longer, a week then a month. I finally decided to be ordained in Buddhism.

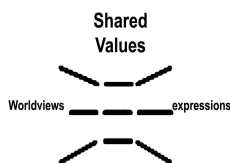
Later, I could see the state of being non-self of the body and everything in this world is being one and connected. Finally, the more we crave, the more we suffer. The more anger, the more harm. The moment we are mindful, peace begins.

## 22. Nigel Dower

### Cat's Whiskers, Ethics and Interfaith Dialogue

The event I describe below was a kind of 'Eureka moment' which shaped my understanding as a philosopher of global ethics and as a Quaker of interfaith dialogue. In 1994 I was a rapporteur for a workshop on environmental ethics. At this workshop a Christian geneticist said: 'we should value nature thus and so because God had created it' and immediately after him a Buddhist philosopher said: 'we should value nature thus and so because it was not created'. This caused me a moment of intense intellectual excitement and I wrote this:

I had an insight into how to understand the possibility of a global ethic as a set of shared values common to people across the world whether it be about the value of nature, the key elements of human well-being, the golden rule – which can be supported by people with very different (even contradictory) worldviews – whether theologies or philosophies, more generally source stories - but also leading to diverse expressions in different cultural and personal circumstances.



This lies at the heart of the value of interfaith dialogue. It's not just that we recognise that people of different faiths have the same core values but also that we share these actively in the mutual recognition of this. As one author put it - we can assent to these values given our own different stories and we can consent to them because they are the product of cultural dialogue.

Sadly this does not mean these values are shared by all human beings but they are common to people with very different backgrounds and faiths around the world. As there is this sharing of core values and the recognition that what is shared is as important as the stories each of us has for why we accept them (and certainly more important than trying to persuade others of the 'truth' of our stories), the more likely we are to live at peace with one another.

Some years later a student who heard my views described it as the 'cat's whiskers theory of ethics' - a title I'm more than happy to embrace!

## **23. Nisa Maris**

My connection with Interfaith Scotland commenced through a fateful encounter with Patricia. This serendipitous meeting unfolded during my volunteer work at a charity shop. Patricia's inquisitive eyes caught sight of a journal I had at the till, one that delved into the intriguing realms of resilience and spirituality.

What began as a conversation about the pages of that journal soon evolved into an invitation that would significantly influence my outlook on life. I distinctly remember Patricia's genuine warmth as she extended her invitation, inviting me to partake in the activities of Interfaith Aberdeen. It was an invitation I eagerly accepted, setting the stage for a remarkable journey of exploration and enlightenment.

One of the activities that left a profound impact on me was our Tuesday gatherings at St Mary's Cathedral. Here, we came together to prepare food for the homeless. It was a hands-on experience that not only allowed me to contribute to the community but also provided an avenue to connect with individuals from diverse walks of life. This humble act of kindness reinforced the values of compassion and empathy within me.

In addition to our charitable endeavors, I had the privilege of participating in meditative sessions within these diverse faith communities. These moments of introspection and spiritual contemplation transcended religious boundaries, revealing the universal desire for inner peace and self-discovery that unites us all. Other than that, our roundtable discussions and interfaith events served as platforms for open and respectful dialogues among individuals representing various faiths. These gatherings exemplified the power of dialogue in dispelling misconceptions and fostering genuine connections.

My journey with Interfaith Scotland has been a remarkable chapter in my life, replete with opportunities for self-discovery, growth, and forging connections that transcend religious affiliations. It has reinforced my commitment to promoting interfaith harmony and understanding. Through these activities and experiences, I've come to appreciate the richness of our shared humanity and the significance of unity in a diverse world.

## **24. Njabulo Ndlovu (aka NJay)**

While reflecting on my involvement with AIFG (2013-2021) my experience was inseparable with the individuals that have not just been the face of the organisation for me, but, ultimately, have been the authentic ambassadors of the ethos of an inter-faith community. The deeply engrained Inter-Faith network vision for mutual respect and a tangible commitment for common good has been lived out with understanding and meaningful relationships.

From Sujana's orange robes, the warmth and peace he personally generated, to Patricia Findlay's bright smile and vivid hospitality, the incarnation of inter-faith ideals by a host of these and other members has been the highlight of my encounter with the organisation.

While I acknowledge the diverse faith practices, I feel I had a richer experience and deeper appreciation of my own faith. I was challenged to live out my values in a more intentional way that, however, had more regard for dissent. Effectively, I found myself critiquing aspects of my faith experience from new horizons and levels of appreciation.

The Forgiveness Project brought to Aberdeen by the Seventh-day Adventists Church, saw an exhibition of moving stories of forgiveness involving people from various religious backgrounds. The inter-faith community was quick to embrace this initiative and through it many barriers and misconstrued ideas about aspects of my faith were corrected or at least addressed. As intended, the challenges of forgiveness entangled with guilt, self-pity, honour and shame amongst other things, were collectively addressed as matters affecting us all regardless of our religious affiliations.

Carl Wilkens, the founder of World Outside My Shoes and former head of Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Rwanda, the only American, who remained in the country when the 1994 genocide led discussion, which later he presented it at the University of Aberdeen on 'Restorative Justice: Lessons from Rwanda in Healing and Building Peace'. A profound story on forgiveness was instrumental in helping me reflect on my personal encounters with matters of forgiveness and on the role of practical religion in society.



## **25. Nisha Halai**

The path that feels homely for me is a path of feeling. It is not a linear path, but one that courageously ebbs and flows; often weaving with anxiety and crises. Through these crossings, I become steadily conscious of the why and how of my story, and its purpose in the wider tapestry of life.

Founded by Rudolf Steiner, ‘Anthroposophy’ encompasses all the previous cultural epochs of development. Over the years, I have seen myself returning to its many offerings, and now having started to feel at peace with it, I choose to stay with Anthroposophy. I appreciate the way it approaches the human being in its wholeness, where wisdom can arise by trusting the unknowns.

By applying myself to its multitude of ways for living into the cycles and rhythms of Nature, a truthful perception of the world has flowered, which enables me to bring through what is needed. I have found it most helpful in meeting the challenges that our global humanity is encountering at this time, both for my own anxieties, and simultaneously in supporting my students and clients through Anthroposophical Art Therapy.

Since the human soul looks forwards and backwards, up and down, left and right, I strive to include the soul in my interactions. Through its workings, the new member of the human being, ‘the higher I’ can help to regulate it, otherwise it can go into extremes of things, feeling, and doing.

Wholeheartedly, I can say that I had been searching for this way of living life ever since I arrived, because I must have previously met its possibilities for health and wellbeing, and evolutionary need.

Essentially, I would describe my chosen path as a way towards discerning goodness, beauty, and truth; out of human freedom, by building bridges of collaboration and heart-centred listening.

## 26. Patricia Findlay

2017 was a year of drastic change- death of my husband, illness of my son and retiral from a job I loved.

I was asked:

“Is Inverurie home?” and didn’t know how to answer.

Now it is 2023 and the answer is most definitely “Yes”.

Thanks to attending a conference on Hospitality at Aberdeen University and meeting a lady who was delivering goods to an Iraqi family who had recently arrived as refugees in the town.

They were the first family of many to make me feel welcome and at home though I thought that was my role! Jean Vanier reminds us that “God’s presence is revealed through vulnerability and mutual dependency” as I was to learn first -hand, because when I required help and support, they were the ones I turned to first and they came up trumps.

We have volunteered together – sewing, working in the kitchen and even painting. We have played together- paddled in the sea, played on the swings, and gone on trips together. We have celebrated birthdays, engagements, weddings, passing driving tests but also lamented at death and suffering amongst friends and family near and far. We have laughed and wept together and prayed together, because sometimes that was all we could do in the situations particularly they face, with all the trauma they have endured and the challenges they are still having to cope with.

There is only one Patricia who cannot be everywhere at once – but they miss me if I’m not there: “to belong is to be missed,” as John Swinton says. I am grateful for the Imams in Aberdeen who have been there in the background ready to pick up the pieces when things just get too much. But most of all we are glad that God/Allah is in our lives, our homes, and our world- that is our common bond.

## **27. Pawan Suman**

Being the sole Sikh student in my school meant that I never had many opportunities to discuss my faith outside of my home, so I never truly understood it when I was growing up. Only after my family began travelling to Punjab, India more frequently, did I begin to comprehend my faith and who I was. I started asking about happenings in our faith to my father, uncle, and granddads and discovered a lot.

I've personally experienced Sikhism. For instance, I really wanted to visit the Golden Temple in Punjab (the holiest site in the Sikh religion) this year because it had been so long since I had been. Whenever we go, I feel much more connected to my religion. However, there was an extremely long line to enter the Golden Temple when we got there. A man we had never seen approached us. He was unable to speak. He signalled us to follow him because he knew a faster route, and we decided to take the chance and follow him. After years of being unable to visit, he showed us the entire temple and led the way through a route that neither my dad nor I had ever taken to enter the Golden Temple showing us a different side to the Temple. This was much faster than waiting in line (where we wouldn't have made it in time).

Without him, we would have had to wait years before entering the golden temple and would have remained there for hours, and I'm confident that someone up there was looking out for my father and I that day and sent that man to help us.

## **28. Raphael Mekhail**

Growing up in Egypt, a predominantly Muslim country and being an Orthodox Christian certainly had its challenges. Facing stigma and being seen as weird or different to everyone else, just because of my beliefs had a toll on my mental health. Church often felt like more of a chore, and I started to lose interest in my beliefs.

A few years later though, that totally changed. I had a period of time where I was seriously feeling low, and I felt alone and helpless. Nothing that I usually found fun was helping and so I tried to do the one thing that I hadn't done in quite a while, which was to pray.

I couldn't tell you why, but knowing that someone is listening, someone who won't judge or mistreat you, definitely helps you deal with it, and that was exactly what I experienced with prayer.

By talking with God, I felt much better about my situation and had a clear enough head which helped me to improve myself as a person.

From that day on, I tried my absolute best to develop my relationship with God, and I no longer felt ashamed or embarrassed because of my faith, and I'd happily spend hours sharing that faith with the world.

## **29. Robert Bob Panyavajiro**

I'm not sure what spirituality is, or whether I have a spiritual bone in my body. Maybe though, I could say that when I first met the Buddha's teachings, I could hardly believe what I was reading. Charity, morality and kindness, lovely thoughts in which I could see the best of me. Contrasted with the greed, anger and difficult thoughts which exist side by side in me.

Then, there I was trying to mentally manipulate these thoughts and how they related to my world, when a fellow passenger dragged me back to reality, demanding that I give up my pod as she wanted to see the northern lights when they came up. I don't speak to entitled people like that, so I pushed the call button and asked the attendant to tell the person to go away.

Then the thought occurred to me, just how do you find ways of encouraging the best parts of you, in face of all the negativity thrown your way. I mean how can you be calm when faced with a situation like this. I didn't think I'll just give up my place to keep the peace, rather I thought no way will I be dominated by her. I'm fact she's not high enough up the pecking order for me to bother to speak to, so I'll tell someone else to do it.

Not really a good start for a Buddhist journey, I think most would agree. Slowly though, imperceptibly even, I've learned to just let go of feelings, happy or otherwise. To just be. Maybe I shouldn't say that because many of my responses are of frustration, anger even. But I'm getting better. I look more carefully now. Why did that happen? Maybe it didn't. Does it really matter?

Always do what's right. Even if it's the hardest thing to do. That's what I've learned.

### **30. Ruth Payne**

I was born in 1934 and with a grandmother who insisted all her grandchildren should be christened- baptised into the Church of England so I became a Christian at the age of three months.

During the Second World War I remember starting Sunday School near our evacuation home where I enjoyed singing hymns with other children. Once the war was over, I was happy to walk the mile or so cross country to attend Sunday School and then to go to Matins in the village church, which was founded in Saxon times. There we had a priest of great humanity who liked bringing out the best in people and he and I both decided at the same time/age that I was ready for commitment in the form of confirmation. I continued and continue to attend church regularly.

During the war I knew that the Jewish pupils worshipped differently and separately but began to meet others at the University of Aberdeen and to help with student welfare. I was asked after some years to take on the role of Counsellor to Overseas students and that was when my interfaith education started with students from over 90 countries. I was helping Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims to meet their needs as they studied, and I also had the privilege of sharing in some of their festivals such as Eid. It was a very great privilege, and this included meeting the Dalai Lama. The only real problem I had was convincing one Islamic student that exams had to be passed by reaching the necessary levels and that I could not persuade the examiner on his behalf.

Imam Ibrahim had to ask for leave to remain at immigration desk and since I knew him, he said you don't ask for things that are not needed. And he got it? You can't have all exams changed for Ramadan, but we could negotiate tea and bread and butter before exam with the Imam. We had to make sure that faith and the academic world must not cancel each other out. It has given me opportunities to see other faiths at home and I have shared with the people of 93 countries- a great honour.

Now I'm Granny in a Muslim household to a Syrian refugee family.

### 31. Sahar Abdulla

Everyone knew him, called him, or used to call him Abuna Frans, meaning in Arabic “Our father Frans.

A Russian lady who is the wife of an old friend of ours, invited us back to Syria in 2002 to visit the place called Al Ard, which means in Arabic the Earth; it also means the ground. So, we went and found out that it was-almost heaven on Earth -the ideal setting for inclusive gatherings from all around Syria, whatever the colour, accent, dialect, or religion. In any gathering you would hear colourful tales about Syria, its history, culture and much more.

You would stay for two nights for free (they were always at the end of the week so kids can attend and not miss school), enjoy the products grown on-site and the fresh air and the great company in a safe place for children to play.

We would get up early in the morning for Yoga classes led By Frans, followed by an organic breakfast.

The only fee the place expected from visitors was to keep the place clean and tidy, in and out. Frans would delegate tasks based on the most pressing requirements which included: cleaning the fields of stones, weeding, picking fruit.

Frans was the ideal man of faith, although from a Dutch Christian background, he chose Syria willingly as his second home for more than 30 years, spoke fluent Arabic, Dutch and English.

That interfaith initiative he established was led and maintained through his complete devotion to Syria, which sadly ended with the conflict. I heard that Al Ard was subjected to looting, burning and theft.

The greatest loss for us all and for the wider community, who considered Frans as its true friend and father, was his brutal death in Homs, April 2014. One of the last images of him, riding his old bike in one of Homs streets, tells the story and the sad ending of a human being who believed in humanity. He said: “I don’t see Muslims or Christians. I just see human beings.”

Father Frans always repeated this phrase: “Il’aalamam’ which means moving forward. For me, he symbolises an ideal human being, a representation perhaps for those who knew him, of humanity that cannot develop without moving forward. Rest in peace, Frans.

## 32. Simone Coetser

I am an educator, mentor, and activist. I grew up as a mixed-race person in Apartheid South Africa, participating in its transition and now I live and work as high school teacher in the UK.

My friends and I had to see what was so special about the white beach. We knew the black beaches didn't really exist and the few places that did were not safe because there were no shark nets. When we arrived at the white beach, we had people giving dirty looks and young people shouting at us – "Go back to your own side".

The next time I went back to that beach I was with my friends from DYIC – they were black, Indian, white, and coloured (mixed). That day on the beach we played, danced, swam, ran a mini his and her beauty pageant and we raised awareness about AIDS.

Fast forward it is 2020 I am almost 45 years, it's COVID and it's 4 days after George Floyd was killed.

I am walking along the Beach. As I walked my mind wandered; I questioned myself. Had I become less vigilant, less involved with challenging change, I can't influence members of my own family to accept the duality of my own experience or see their white privilege. I have not made a difference, who I am I? -I am not enough. I remembered the words of Viktor Frankl,

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space.

In that space is our power to choose our response.

In our response lies our growth and our freedom."

Here are the 3 pillars called the ABC's of creating the story of you want to live in.

### **A – is for Author**

Embrace the fact that you have the authority to author your life. You have the authority not only rewrite your story, but you can also re-envision it.

### **B- Beyond the box**

The solutions call for us to brave and bold to think of and try solutions that are out the box. If the solution you come up with is something that does not yet exist, then you have to be the first.

**Pillar 3** – Create Creative Connections: These are where you learn and give in a safe space so that you can enact you're out of the box solutions creating a transformative life story.



### **33. Sofala Angala**

I was in Aberdeen for almost 9 months. The Aberdeen Interfaith Group added something special to my short trip. It is worth noting that my interfaith journey in Aberdeen began thanks to Patricia Findlay who asked me if I was free and if I could join the June 5th programme at the Varapunya Buddhist Meditation Centre to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. I attended another session at the Brahma Kumaris Centre always enjoy spending time with peace-loving people, people who always like to help others or have a positive mentality towards others, regardless of their religion or race. I found these types of people in interfaith group.

We all love our human family; we take care of them in their time of need. When we feel this way, we feel the connection between us. When we talk about humanity, about helping others, it renews our minds, our souls, and inspires us to do our best. However, I think that in addition to establishing connections between people of different religions, they can plan some actions to solve problems.

I am Muslim and Asian. I noticed boys teasing Asians and throwing sticks and stones at them, including me and other Muslims in Aberdeen. This is not just one incident. Many of us have faced the same thing. I informed GREC who made an appointment with me and then recorded everything. But this hate crime has continued for so long. I believe that Aberdeen Interfaith Group should make some plans to solve this type of hate crime. Perhaps they can organize some programmes for the younger generations to inspire their actual role of being a human. My interfaith journey with Aberdeen was brief but the memories of it moved my soul.

### **34. Sr. Marychidalu Mbajiorgu**

The Holy Family Sisters of the Needy in Aberdeen is a Catholic female Religious Congregation founded in Nigeria to give God's love to the poor and needy wherever we may find ourselves as missionaries, thereby alleviating them from their impoverish/helpless human condition of any sort.

We, the Holy Family Sisters of the Needy, through the will of God, came in contact with Interfaith Scotland through Mrs. Patricia Findlay, a noble lady who is both a friend, mother, organiser and so reliable. Her relationship with us started in late 2016 after her GOD destined encounter with our Sr. Mary Joseph HFSN.

This encounter germinated seed that is producing endless fruits. She introduced us to interfaith group during the 2017 Interfaith advent season spiritual recollection. From that very day, Jackie Ware became another fervent vessel that God is using to provide immense support to us in all ramification. Dr. Jayashree and her group also joined our GOD given interfaith family members in Aberdeen to become part and parcel of our work to the needy. They have always teamed up ensuring that our apostolate to poor/needy continuous to flourish.

Interfaith in Aberdeen remains indelible in the centre of our mission in Scotland. We give all the glory to God who lives forever and ever. AMEN.

Rest assured of our prayers as we trust in yours too.  
Prayerfully yours

### 35. Sue Good- Unitarian

Now I know you're going to say that One World Week is over for this year, and you would be right, since it's always held in October. However, the ideas behind this week of activities, ideas of celebrating diversity, of acknowledging our interconnectedness and of working towards unity, are with us all year round and are part of what attracted me to Unitarianism in the first place.

Each year One World Week has a theme, and this is one from several years ago called "Moving Stories". The Action Kit included a suggestion for telling stories, using a set of symbols created by the Reading artist, Peter Hay. There were fifteen in all, strong black and white images that held relevance for different people from varying backgrounds, possibly not even sharing a common first language. The artist's explanations of why he chose a particular symbol and what it actually meant to him were interesting, but the beauty of the symbols lay in the fact that they could mean so many things to different people.

In Aberdeen we have an active Inter-Faith group, and one-year members were invited to share their "Moving Stories" during our December meeting. I thought it might be possible to summarise a faith journey quite briefly, reinforce the impact with pictures, and leave a much more lasting impression than by using words alone. Here's my personal "moving story" of faith, told using five of the pictures.



I started off in a very conventional, mainstream brand of Christianity, where everything had its place and saints lived the sort of lives that sounded dreadfully unattractive but were definitely to be emulated.

After a while, trying to reconcile this viewpoint to what actually happens in the world felt like being confined in a bag, with no escape.



Gradually I became involved with issues of justice and fair trade, and these seemed more important than trying to convert others to a narrow religious view of life.

The road from here led me in very tortuous ways, with lots of twisting and turning and a search for the right path.



Finally, more by luck than anything else, I came to rest in a church that believes in the essential unity of God, the unity of humankind and its interdependence with all life on our planet.

### **36. Suki Singh Pooni**

Warmth, friendship, love and positive energy! My immediate feeling when I was first introduced to the Aberdeen Interfaith Group and very soon after became a member making representation on behalf of the Sikh faith. The special events that the group has organised in the last few years have been a real pleasure to both be part of and attend. The pandemic came and went but the spirit of Aberdeen Interfaith group shines bright, and we look at that now as a mere blip of mother nature and a distant memory.

From tree planting and meditation walks at the Varapunya Buddhist centre, all with the warmth and love of our host Sujana, the Carol concerts at Jackie's Church of Latter Day Saints of Jesus Christ to the calm and serene meetings at the Brahma Kumaris centre hosted by Astrid; the Aberdeen interfaith group for me just feels like special extension of our own faith's congregations and the group is of course knitted together by our very special person, Patricia Findlay who steers the group with a sense of duty, love and compassion. When in the group's company it feels no different from our own congregation and the true manifestation of Oneness and equality that is a key pillar of the Sikh faith.

In 2021 it was also special to welcome and host the Aberdeen Interfaith group to our own Gurdwara, the first one in Aberdeen and the UK's most new and most northern one. This included a small flavour of a typical congregation followed by a shared 'Langar' a communal meal in the Gurdwara kitchen.

Aberdeen Interfaith Group is a true force for good for Aberdeen and Scotland in so many ways and long may it flourish and prosper!

### **37. Venerable S. M. (Sujano)**

I was born in a traditional Hindu family in Nepal. I practised Hinduism for long time but always felt something missing. When I came across with Buddhism, I felt an ocean full of knowledge and a year later despite my parents' other plans, I joined a Buddhist monastery. Later that year, I went to Thailand and after 8 years of training in 2005 I came to the UK. In summer 2011, I received an assignment to support the 1st Buddhist centre in Aberdeen that continued till today.

Although Buddha was born in Nepal, my understanding is that Buddhism is not of any particular group, race, ethnic or nationality, it is of humanity that teaches us to accept everyone regardless of their background as well as to give them respect and value their life without creating any divisions or levels.

It was not a bed of roses living in Aberdeen but managed to be in this new environment with the support of many good friends from all backgrounds that nurtured my spiritual journey. With the pious supporters, we established the Varapunya Meditation Centre in Aberdeen in 2012 as a place of Helping Hands, Healing Hearts.

Apart from offering meditation sessions in various places, since 2017, in collaboration with NHS Grampian Multicultural Health and Wellbeing Forum continue offering free meditation sessions to those facing challenges, including members of the public and NHS staff. Currently, I act as the Abbot of the centre, an honorary Buddhist Chaplain at the University of Aberdeen, an active member of Aberdeen Interfaith Group and an assistant secretary of World Buddhist Dhammadata Organisation.

In May 1997 I received permission to be a Buddhist monk on the condition that I would never travel far from home. But I have been living abroad for 25 years and finally feel at home in Scotland.

My hope for the future is that everyone will be accepted and respected for who they are and will be valued for their presence, wherever they are and whatever they believe in. Belief is personal and heartfelt and should not be forced but nurtured.

### **38. Vaibhav Kumar**

As a Hindu living in Scotland, it is a pleasure to go to India and experience the temples there. It's an experience that I have had almost every year and it is a time that allows me to reflect upon myself. These temples have a close connection with me, with my parents and my grandparents and I feel it has a big impact on my life, be it through my studies, the sports I play or even the way I act and treat others.

These temples are hundreds of miles away and sometimes it is quite hard to sit in a car for hours in the scorching heat, but when we arrive, I start to embrace that spirituality and that feeling of being devoted to religion. Having these thoughts has changed my perspective on life and it has made me into a different person today. I try to help those around me, I am much more patient and understanding and I now have realised the amount of hard work, dedication and the drive that is needed to thrive in today's world. And without the practice of Hinduism and the wise advice from the gods and my elders, I wouldn't have been led down this path of which I am truly grateful for and of which I would want to make the most out of.

My religion teaches me so many life lessons that make me stronger day by day.

### 39. Wali Moosa

In the past, if a person deviated from the ‘cultural norm’, they were an outcast, a betrayer and witch. You had to be the religion you were born with, and this has to be accepted by your country; most people were only exposed to very few religions.Ê

Compare that to today - we are so blessed today to live in such a free society. I, as a Muslim, have had to pray in public before, and this can always cause a bit of tension. However, it is always met with respect, and apart from the occasional stare or question I can pray in most places quietly and not get disturbed. For example, in our school, there is a prayer area for Muslims and people of other faiths to use every day and this makes me feel accepted and included.

This in my eyes is truly beautiful since we as people and society have come so far, and will go further, in understanding and appreciating different cultures and faiths.

#### QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO THINK ABOUT

What have been 2 highlights of Aberdeen Interfaith for you and why?

Which story particularly struck a chord with you and why?

What do you hope will be in our stories in the next 10 years?

Do send your answers (if you can and wish to) to [interfaithab@gmail.com](mailto:interfaithab@gmail.com)