

Festivals of Light

Redbridge Faith Forum Women's Workshop 8th December 2015

A group of women from different backgrounds and faiths attended this event at the Hindu Community Centre in Ilford to learn more about the festivals of light celebrated by some faith communities in the borough around this time of year. Women from the Hindu, Sikh, Jewish and Christian faiths explained the history and background to the festivals of Diwali, Chanukah and Christmas.

For the Hindu community the festival of Diwali celebrates Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity and the victorious return of Rama and Sita to the kingdom of Ayodhya after their exile. For Sikhs it commemorates the day the sixth Guru was released from prison along with 52 imprisoned princes who were also released as they were all able to hold onto the Gurus cloak (a condition of release) as a special cloak had been made with long tassels attached. The festival is celebrated with fireworks, lighting of lamps (diyas) and candles and the giving of gifts and sweets.



For the Jewish community the current festival of Chanukah (7-14 December) celebrates the triumph of light over darkness as it commemorates the Miracle of the Macabees when a small band of Jews reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem from the Greeks. When they sought to light the Temple's menorah (the 7 branched candelabrum) they found only a single cruse of oil but miraculously the one day supplied burned for eight days until new oil could be prepared under conditions of ritual purity. To celebrate this miracle there is a nightly menorah lighting – a single flame on the first night, two on the second evening and so on until the eighth night of Chanukah when all eight lights are kindled. Chanukah customs include eating foods fried in oil -latkes (potato pancakes) and sufgaiot (doughnuts); playing with the dreidel (a spinning top on which are inscribed the Hebrew letters *nun, gimmel, hei* and *shin*, an acronym for *Nes Gadol Hayah Sham*, "a great miracle happened there"); and the giving of Chanukah gelt – gifts of money to children.



Christmas for Christians celebrates the birth of the Saviour, Jesus Christ who said he was the light of the world and whoever followed him would never walk in darkness. Jesus came to break down barriers and to show that God is Love. Christmas is celebrated on 25th December but the preceding 4 weeks are known as Advent when Christians are preparing for the coming of the Saviour. This is marked in many churches by the lighting of the Advent candles on the four Sundays before Christmas in hope and anticipation. There are 5 candles on a wreath of evergreen (symbolising eternal life) with the 5th central candle lit on Christmas Day. A more recent custom has been the holding of Christingle services where children decorate an orange (which represents the world) with a red ribbon (representing the blood of Christ), 4 cocktail sticks of dried fruits/sweets representing the fruits of the earth and the four seasons and a candle in the centre (representing Jesus as the



light of the world). Christmas services are often candlelit and many people have found comfort in lighting candles in churches.

The women enjoyed hearing how other faiths commemorate events and it was interesting that the lighting of candles or oil lamps to dispel darkness was a common feature, along with the practice of giving and exchanging gifts and enjoying festive food.

The women then enjoyed a time of inter-faith conversation and socialising whilst tasting a selection of festive food and agreed that the afternoon of sharing and learning from each other had been both enjoyable and beneficial especially at such a time of suffering and uncertainty for many communities worldwide.



Redbridge Faith Forum (RFF) is a registered charity (number 1118765) and an independent organisation whose aims are to:-

- bring together representatives of different faith communities in order to gain mutual understanding and promote social cohesion
- give Faith Communities in Redbridge a collective voice by identifying and addressing issues that affect residents.

Next Event

A “family friendly” fund-raising cultural/music concert on Sunday afternoon 7th February 2016 3-4.30pm at the IRDSA Hall, Craven Gardens, Barking in partnership with Redbridge Equalities and Community Council.

For more information contact RFF on 020 8708 2478, visit website www.redbridgefaithforum.org or email faith.forum@redbridge.gov.uk

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