

History and Evolution of World Interfaith Harmony Week in Halifax

How has the interfaith movement developed in Halifax?

The Halifax Interfaith Council was born as a result of the Swiss Air disaster in 1998, when an interfaith memorial service was required to honour those who died in the crash. Since then, relationships of friendship and respect have grown among members of diverse faiths in the Halifax region, with an understanding of how precious and valuable life is. We don't have the time or luxury of conflict due to difference. The Interfaith Council spent years of rotating meetings in the sacred space of each faith community. This brought us into each other's homes and where relationships could develop.

An annual celebration (2004-2010) for World Religion Day was hosted by the Baha'i community of Halifax, and later grew into a collaboration with Mount Saint Vincent University for the final three years, ending in 2013, when the Baha'i community suggested that efforts shift from World Religion Day to the international initiative, World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW).

Other collaborations developed over the years, resulting in the Dalhousie Multifaith Centre, and Mount Saint Vincent University's Interfaith Peace and Friendship Centre, as well as three Spiritual Diversity Conferences, and focus groups in areas such as the environment and poverty, death and dying, mindfulness and prayer, as well as ongoing relationship building opportunities.

What is World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW)?

WIHW was initiated in 2010 by the king of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, King Abdullah II on September 23, 2010. Its vision is to spread harmony through promoting "Love of God and Love of Neighbour; Love of the Good and Love of Neighbour." Just under a month later, on October 20, 2010, it was unanimously adopted by the UN and henceforth the first week of February will be observed as a World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW). Each year, the King awards three prizes from the growing number of events held worldwide. Halifax (2016), along with Toronto (2015) and Calgary (2017) were proud to have Canada awarded the King's prize over three consecutive years.

The WIHW is based on the pioneering work of The Common Word initiative. This initiative, which started in 2007, called for Muslim and Christian leaders to engage in a dialogue based on two common fundamental religious Commandments – Love of God and Love of the Neighbour, without nevertheless compromising any of their own religious tenets. The Two commandments are at the heart of the three Monotheistic religions and therefore provide the most solid theological ground possible. The WIHW extends the Two Commandments by adding "Love of the Good." This formula includes all people of goodwill. It includes those of other faiths, and those with no faith.

Who is Interfaith Harmony Halifax?

Interfaith Harmony Halifax is a community collaborative whose purpose is to promote the vision of World Interfaith Harmony Week. We represent diverse community partners, cultures, ages, skills, and abilities, along with diverse faiths and people of good will. We do not issue statements or sign petitions on issues, conflicts, etc. as a group, but individuals make their own choices in these matters. We reject intolerance, persecution, violence, and conflict in any of their forms. Our hearts go out to those who suffer in this way. We feel that education, understanding, and relationship building can lessen this suffering and help all peoples come to live in harmony. The events we post on our webpage, Facebook, and Twitter accounts do not promote or favour any faith tradition over another. Postings are intended to encourage interfaith awareness, understanding, appreciation, respect, and peace. All events are open to the public and are usually free of charge.

How do we keep the global vision active locally?

The WIHW provides a platform – one week in a year – when all interfaith groups and other groups of goodwill can show the world what a powerful movement they are. The thousands of events organized by these groups often go unnoticed not only by the general public, but also by other groups themselves. However, the Week enables these groups to become aware of each other and to strengthen the movement by building ties and avoiding duplicating each others' efforts.

When Halifax became involved in WIHW, things immediately expanded in two significant ways: a growing leadership team, and the annual afternoon World Religion Day celebration changed to a weeklong series of events, including:

- Visits to at least a dozen Sacred Spaces, sites for Meeting Our Neighbours
- Interfaith Engagement Program, where people register to participate in a deeper exploration of the Sacred Spaces
- Declarations by political, religious, educational, business, and other groups recognizing the Week
- A two-hour Celebration event culminating the Week, held most recently at Paul O'Regan Hall at the Halifax Central Library
- Panel discussions on public explorations of the theme were held at three branches of Halifax Public Libraries
- Annual Barho Memorial Award – given to an Interfaith Engagement Program participant (14 years or younger) for their interest, appreciation, and initiative shown during WIHW. Beginning in spring 2019, this award is given in memory of the Barho children, a family of local Syrian refugees, whose seven children tragically lost their lives in a house fire in February 2019.

The evolution of WIHW in Halifax has been a shining example of interfaith harmony, collaboration, and shared vision among people from diverse faiths and of good will.