

The Manifestation of Muslim Chaplaincy in Higher Education

Sabiha Iqbal, Muslim Chaplain at the University of Roehampton

In autumn 2018 I began work with the expanding multi-faith Chaplaincy team at the University of Roehampton. The Chaplaincy Team are ever so keen to forge interfaith relationships as we look to break down barriers and build bridges between people in the world.

I am delighted to share with you an insight to this interfaith work over the last year or so through photos and short stories I have blogged between November 2018 and November 2019.

Chaplaincy at the University of Roehampton most certainly has a distinctive character and unique position, in contrast to other chaplaincies in Higher Education (HE). Though I have only been involved in chaplaincy for just over 6 years, through my role as an Associate Chaplain at the University of Hertfordshire before moving to Roehampton to serve as a full-time Muslim Chaplain, I have realised the undeniable need of Muslim Chaplaincy in Higher Education.

Indeed there is a need in other institutions too such as hospitals, prisons, the transport industry and others. However, the critical need in Higher Education is something I feel I can now speak about with authority, having had real exposure to the challenges being faced by students

and staff, as well as gaining a wealth of experience from being a student myself.

There is so much I can write about in relation to Muslim Chaplaincy; do I share with you my day to day, the similarities between the works of Chaplains across different faiths, or the types of challenges being faced at Southlands? There is so much! I have a vast collection of events and activities that I can share with you from the last 15 months of my journey.

So I will instead attempt to share just one highlight (perhaps two on occasion) of every month, from my last twelve months as a Muslim Chaplain.



November 2018

Annually we mark “International Week”, and the University looks to celebrate this occasion from a variety of angles. Most HE institutions look to promote the idea of studying abroad to students and encourage them to link up with the International Office to consider their options.

I too did just that when studying for my Bachelor’s degree in Geography, which resulted in me studying abroad for a year in Morgantown, West Virginia, USA. So when the International Office approached the Chaplaincy about doing an event that could contribute to International Week, it took very little convincing to be involved, but the real question was, what place would Chaplaincy have in this week?

The underlying passion for travel and study abroad really stems for me from the encouragement from God in my holy scripture, the Holy Quran, where it is said, "Travel in the earth and see how He [God] has originated the Creation" (chapter 29, verse 21). Through all my travels, a very big lesson I learnt is that as human beings we are far more similar than we are different.

Our needs, our day-to-day activities, whether getting children to school, discussing what to make for dinner, or chatting with a neighbour about the weather is all as relevant to those of the far east as it

is to those of America. From Uganda to England we’re far too often similar, and not too often different. This is all too true with our curiosity about culinary experiences; after all, we all like food and food brings people together. So what better way to convince students to study abroad than through the culinary experience. Together with the help of international students, I organised an International Food Bazaar and we presented foods from China, India, Bangladesh, Ghana, Spain, Finland, just to mention a few.

The event brought together students and staff from all over the University and was a scrumptious success!

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December 2018

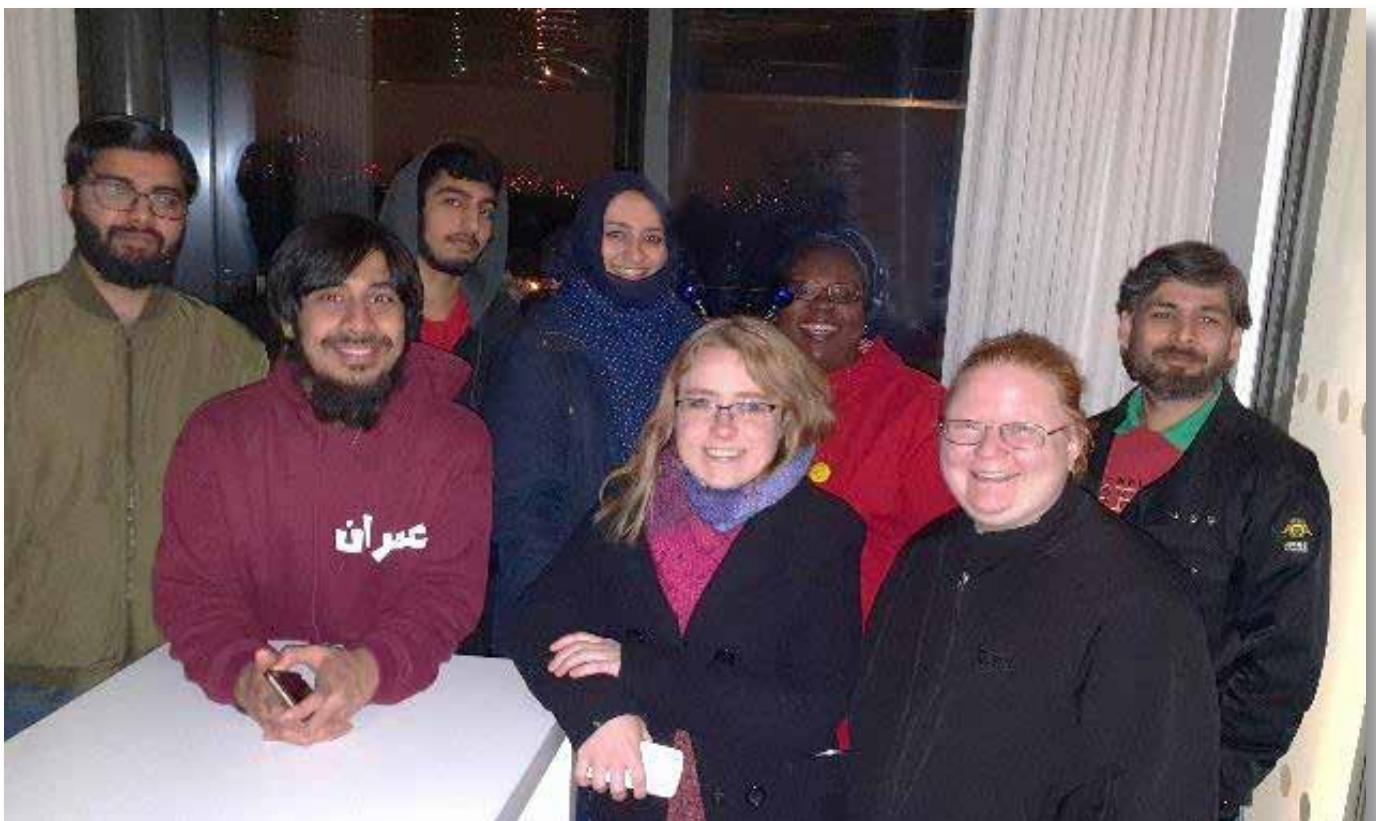
Recognising that not all our residential students return home over the winter vacation and neither do our commuting students all live with family or friends, the Chaplaincy offers a selection of events over the vacation to reach those who may be looking to connect with others. I focussed on events after Christmas, plugging the free days with a movie, Boxing Day shopping trip and a New Year's Eve gathering that involved watching the fireworks across the city of London from the recently built Elm Grove complex.

This year, I would love to expand on the New Year's Eve event and really hone in on a couple of key messages that my faith teaches me to exercise at this pertinent time; reflection and resolution. After all, December into

January, is no different to January into February, but we like a good milestone, a new year, a new decade; it presents a noteworthy occasion in our journey.

We must be the change we want to see in our world!

With this in mind, I am keen to encourage a moment of grace, of thanks, a prayerful moment for the future, because if we don't think about what it is we want to achieve, how can we ensure someone is doing something to change the situation we are in – we must be the change we want to see in our world!



January 2019

Over the course of the year I have been delighted to promote HE to prospective students. This has mostly taken place on Open Days, although I have done some school visits too.

Making the decision to come to study at Roehampton, or indeed any university is one that inevitably affects the path way of life. To 'seek knowledge throughout life' is a faith-embedded motto that I very much live by, and encourage others to do so as well.

Through education we can build bridges between communities, and I am always so pleased to share with others how Chaplains and Chaplaincy provisions can enable that development, as well as a personal faith journey to continue while at University.



We often hear about the importance of looking after physical wellbeing and mental wellbeing. But what about spiritual wellbeing?

I believe the three are intrinsically linked and to demonstrate the link I am



passionate about showing that each component of our wellbeing does not have to be mutually exclusive.

Therefore, I decided to invite boxing to Southlands College and took part – while fully dressed in my abaya (loose outer garment worn by Muslim women) – for a few bouts.

My way of dressing, to comply with the instructions of my faith, has fortunately never been a barrier nor an oppression. Rather it has granted me the liberty to take part in all I wish to in a way that upholds modesty and other values of my faith.

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March 2019

I was delighted to attend the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community's National Peace Symposium 2019 entitled 'The Critical Need for Peace' with colleagues.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community organise this event annually and invite a variety of individuals and organisations to reflect on and discuss pathways to peace.

From right to left in the photo, Heads of College, Dr Christopher Stephens (Southlands College) and Dr Gulliver Ralston (Digby Stuart College), Bill Topping, our Chaplaincy Community Worker, and Southlands College Wellbeing Officer, Jo Eskdale, all attended from the University of Roehampton, alongside me.



April 2019

Southlands was vibrant with colours – all environmentally-friendly might I add, and totally washable – for the festival of Holi. This festival is known by several names including the ‘festival of colours’ and it marks the start of spring.



Holi is observed by those of the Hindu tradition; however, we had a diversity of people attending including those of faith and those of none. Naturally an event also referred to as the ‘festival of love’ would capture all!



Later in the same month, though I admittedly did not organise this excursion, I took part to represent the HCPT group 704!

HCPT stands for the Hosanna House & Children’s Pilgrimage Trust. Each year HCPT organise a pilgrimage for approximately 2000 young adults and children with disabilities or certain medical/social needs, and allow for their families to have some relief time, while everyone away is allowed to have fun in Lourdes, mostly indulging in a colossal amount of crepes! A delightful, humbling experience, one that I’ll cherish the memories of for the rest of my life.



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May 2019

A keen eye may recognise the Castel Sant'Angelo in the background, which gives away the location for this photo – si, Rome!

This trip involved the residents of Barat House, an intentional student community house, a Roman Catholic and Methodist ecumenical project. Also included in the excursion were the Chaplains and Chaplaincy Community workers of Digby Stuart and Southlands.

Though the relationship that upholds the Barat House Community is formally rooted between the Catholic and Methodist tradition, this photograph beautifully demonstrates the desire to work ecumenically and the joy we feel in doing so because there are those of other Christian traditions in this photograph as well as me, a Muslim.



June 2019

Ramadan is a holy month in the Islamic calendar when Muslims who are able to fast between sunrise and sunset daily for 30 days. The month is based on the lunar calendar and thus the dates change each year.

This month was my first at Roehampton, away from home and family, which was tough because spending time with loved ones is a core part of Ramadan. Therefore I sought out ways to connect with students and staff in the University – I organised iftari together (breaking the fast with a meal), arranged talks to share knowledge about the dos and

don'ts of Ramadan, and I also set up a break-fast station.

This station (shown in the photograph) was situated in key locations on campus and provided students engaging in fasting with a place to break their fast with dates and water, as is tradition.

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July 2019

Over the course of the year I teamed up with Bill Topping to drive forward the Southlands Venture, a scheme that allows students to apply for funding to the Southlands Methodist Trust and deliver a community based project.

Several projects were accomplished over the course of the year. One

particular favourite was the 'Chicken House Roof' project that saw the removal of tarpaulin off a roof, and the building of a new, sturdier and stable roof for the chickens on campus.

**Happy hens,
happy eggs!**



August 2019

Eid is the largest festival for Muslims and lasts three days, marking the festival of sacrifice and the end of the Hajj pilgrimage.

At the University, as part of the Community lunch that Chaplaincy host on a Tuesday lunchtime (amongst others generous with their time!), I held a special Eid lunch.

As you may be able to gather from the photo, a variety of people joined and, while having food, a session of henna-designing on hands and feet also took place.

Decorating hands with henna is cultural rather than being rooted in religion; nonetheless it was a therapeutic experience!



A therapeutic experience!

September 2019

Yoga Work out for Women, Coexist Café, College Breakfasts, Fortnightly Film Night. These are just a handful of the new events I supported the initiation of at Southlands College from September.

Many of the event ideas are inspired by the history of Southlands I see displayed on the walls and corridors of Queens Building. That includes photos framed

to remind us of our alumni – indeed, the legacy lives on and continues to motivate us!

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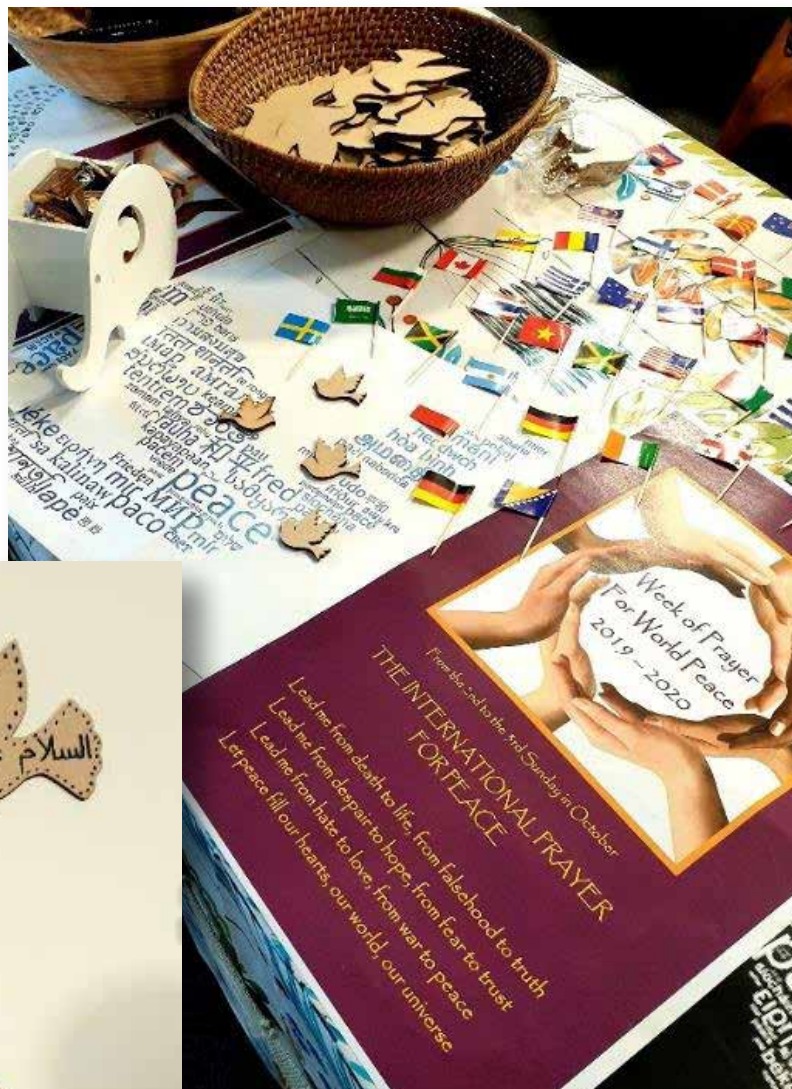


October 2019

Though the International Prayer for World Peace is an annual event, we marked it as a Chaplaincy in an exceptional way this year.

We offered an opportunity to students and staff to get creative while being reflective and prayerful.

A series of doves (for peace) were available for those wanting



to engage and they were able to write messages and prayers for peace, and to keep them as a symbol of their commitment.

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November 2019

In preparation for the Remembrance Service that I took part in at the university, I spent time encouraging students and staff to attend the event. I did this by supporting the poppy sale on behalf of the Royal British Legion in conjunction with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Women Students' Association.

It is important to partake in events that focus on reflection and remembrance and this is taught as part of my faith. Islam also teaches that 'loyalty to country is part of faith' – Prophet Muhammed (peace and blessings of God be upon him).



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I hope you enjoyed reading and viewing photos of my blog for the year past just as much as I enjoyed putting it together! Through this blog I hope you were able to also understand the need and place of Chaplains in HE.

Chaplains have a tendency to get involved in a breadth of events and activities; at times these are directly faith-focussed and at other times they involve the challenge of

Sabiha

community building. I see universities as microcosms of the world we live in and through the works of a Chaplaincy team my aim is to bring those of faith or none to coexist together.

Feel free reach out and connect back with us, to inspire us, and to help shape the events we look to organise.

May the peace and blessings of God be upon you, always.

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roehampton.ac.uk/Colleges/Southlands-College

southlandsmethodisttrust.org.uk