

Maidstone Interfaith Network Chair's Report
Rev Dr Bonni-Belle Pickard, November 2025

Introduction

As with the past several years, Maidstone Interfaith Network continued its work in 2025 to promote better understanding of various faith traditions amongst the Maidstone community and to facilitate good working together amongst persons of different faiths. MIFN remained active throughout the year, particularly in its work with local schools, a public event in March at the County Hall, and participation in the Scout Jamboree in Detling in August. Though the number of active members remained small in 2025, we noticed more interest from others in the community who hadn't been aware of our presence. We hope to build on this in the coming years.

Creation and Creativity Event

MIFN's largest event of the 2025 coincided with the Spring/Now Ruz celebrations on 21 March. The event, entitled 'Creation and Creativity,' took place at the County Hall with contributions from several faith traditions, including performances from the Maidstone Nepali Gurkha Community, Maidstone-based Hilton Hall Dance Academy, gospel singer Mayowa Oyinloye and the Kent-based Soul Choir. Lady Colgrain (Lord Lieutenant of Kent), the Chair of Kent County Council, the Mayor of Maidstone and five Mayors from other parts of Kent attended the event with about 100 guests. The evening also featured artwork from St Augustine's Academy and multi-cultural refreshments after the meeting. The Creative Communities Grant from Maidstone Borough Council provided the funding for the event, with KCC graciously providing the venue free of charge.

Detling Scout Jamboree

Over several days during the first week of August, MIFN joined forces with Medway Interfaith Action in an Interfaith Tepee at the Scout Jamboree held on the Detling County Showgrounds. With very short preparation time, the two groups pulled together a rota of a dozen or so persons from the Baha'i, Christian, and Muslim faiths to be present each afternoon for interactions with the young people and their adult leaders. Though our original plans for an interfaith prayer meeting each day didn't quite fit the drop-in nature of the gathering, we were able to have a service on one afternoon as well as informal interactions and conversations about our faiths with several dozen persons on each afternoon. As the week also coincided with the 80th commemoration of the bombing of Hiroshima, many tried their hand at making an origami peace cranes, and others enjoyed team-building competitions involving cocktail sticks and sweets! We offered delicious plums and apples that had come from trees we had helped to plant at the Union Street Methodist Church a few years ago and which had come into fruition this year. We were encouraged by the openness of the young people and adult leaders who came to spend time with us.

School Visits

As in previous years, MIFN members provided assemblies and/or classroom lessons for several local schools, including Maidstone Grammar School for Girls, Cornwallis Academy, St Augustine Academy, Langley Park Primary, St George's Wrotham, Lunsford, and Allington Primary. These presentations ranged from assembly presentations and panel discussions to interactive lessons on festivals from various faith traditions. All of the programmes met with considerable interest from the students and staff, many of whom seemed to know little about faith traditions.

Community involvement

Overall, our community involvement saw somewhat of a decline over this year, primarily due to changes in the local political climate. We retained some contact with the Maidstone and Pembury Hospitals, the Maidstone Museum, and with SACRE, though some of the key contact persons and/or policies have changed, making effective interaction more difficult. We were sad that the new local government cancelled its Community Outreach Officers programme. In general, we are finding community involvement through various agencies more challenging than in previous years.

Members' meetings

Meetings of MIFN members were held approximately every second month, either on Zoom or at the Christian Science Reading Room or the home of David and Jackie Grant. We continued to start each meeting by sharing readings and quotations from members' faith traditions as these continue to help us learn from and appreciate the rich diversity and commonalities of our various faith traditions, as well as set the tone for respect and cooperation for doing our business together.

Social media/Website

David Grant has continued to maintain MIFN's website, providing an important window for the outside community. We discontinued our X social media presence due to the change of political circumstances and are hoping to set up a Facebook page in the near future.

Plans for 2026

A public interfaith event is being planned for April 2026 following on from the success of the public events of the past two years. Again, we have applied for a funding grant from Maidstone Borough Council with permission to use the Kent County Hall for the event.

Officers

As the Chair of MIFN for the past year, I have been ably supported by the members, especially David Grant as the Secretary, Nicky Younosi as Vice-Chair and contact for several of the community organisations, Jackie Grant as contact for several of the schools, Peter Snell as Treasurer, and Gordon Mackley as eager helper for whatever needs doing! Their support for MIFN was especially apparent during the successful Creation and Creativity event in March for which they each carried heavy responsibility; I sadly had to miss the event due to my sabbatical travel in Asia. As I will be retiring and probably leaving Maidstone in 2026, this will be my last report as Chair of MIFN. I am very grateful for having had the opportunity to serve the Maidstone community in this capacity and especially for the deep friendships which have emerged from working with a fine group of persons of faith in Maidstone. My prayers and blessings remain with you all.

Bonni-Belle Pickard