

## LETTER FROM STOUGHTON DRIVE

David Lamb visits the Inter Faith Centre in Leicester

St Philips Centre.

Many of you will know the Parish Church of St Philips in Stoughton Drive, Evington. It is now somewhat dwarfed by the splendid Masjid Umar mosque opposite. After a fire in 1996, the church was re ordered basically dividing the previous worship space into two. The eastern half is now the parish Church. The western half is a hall available for meetings, play groups and various activities. The other evening I saw the Leicester Philharmonic Orchestra practising Beethoven's Seventh Symphony in the hall.



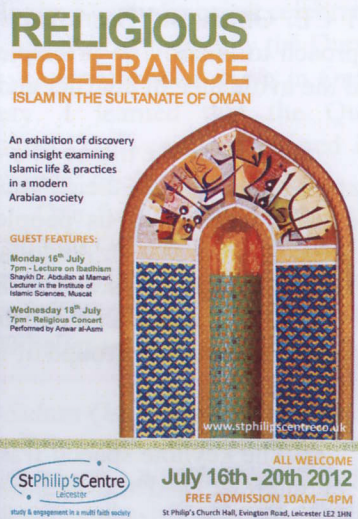
*Church of St Philip, Stoughton Drive.*

The house next door which looks like the former vicarage, is now home to the 'St Philip's Centre' within the Diocese of Leicester, which is devoted to study and engagement in a multi faith society. About a year ago, when the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales had published their treatise on relations with other faiths, the centre hosted a day when various faiths considered the posture of the Catholic Church in inter faith matters. I had a pleasant buffet lunch with the Bishop of Nottingham, who, I discovered, had served on the ARCIC Committee. This treatise, by the way, entitled 'Meeting God in Friend and Stranger' is worth studying.

Among other activities, the centre arranges courses on 'Multi faith Guiding', a useful skill in this city of many faiths.

Religious Tolerance.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> July 2012, the centre hosted an unusual exhibition provided by the Sultanate of Oman. The theme was 'religious tolerance' as practiced



Matthews. He recalled with humour the welcome dinner for the first Hindu Mayor of Leicester. It was a traditional English dinner of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding! Laughter all round. I thought that he captured nicely the dilemma of tolerance between religions. He suggested that tolerance should not be a label, but a reality, in cities like Pontefract, Bradford and Leicester. When I talked to the Bishop afterwards he recalled Fr Clifford Carver as the Vicar of St Mary de Castro, and asked whether we were still in interregnum.

The Exhibition

The exhibition was simply organised with 20 flip chart stands each displaying one theme connected to the Sultanate of Oman and the idea of Islam as practised there, linked to the notion of tolerance. The graphic designers had cleverly produced a booklet to accompany the exhibition which reproduced the poster material on each 'flip chart' in the same colour and style. In this picture



you can see some of the 'posters' on the flip charts. This picture was published in the Leicester Mercury with an account of the exhibition.

*Riaz Ravat, ( centre) Deputy Director of the centre with guests from Oman, and their posters from the exhibition.*

The topics of the individual 'posters' included the philosophy of religious tolerance and also, religious coexistence. This latter poster showed, interestingly, a Catholic priest celebrating Mass in a Catholic Church in Oman. Another poster explained how the Quran, revealed to the Prophet Mohammed over 23 years, is handed down in Omani society. I learned that the Quran contains 6236 verses, structured into 114 'suras' or chapters.

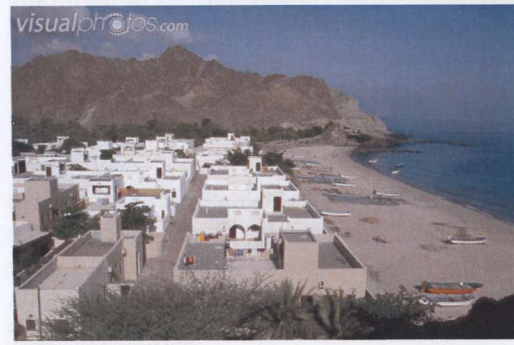
One further poster explained the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque built recently in the capital city of Muscat. The prayer hall has spaces for 6,600 believers to pray together.

*The Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque.*

The exhibition seemed to be a good example of how a 'foreign'

by this small country. Oman has been a sea faring and trading country since biblical times. Sinbad the sailor was, I think originally from Oman. This is a country about which I know little. When I worked at the Army's School of Signals, I remember being consulted by the Sultanate Armed Forces about problems with radio aerials; this was my speciality at the time. The problems arose when they tried to mount army radios on camels!

Oman is the country at the south east tip of the Arabian peninsula. It has been a traditional desert country for centuries, but has made remarkable progress in recent years. When Sultan Qaboos took over in 1970, there were some 2,000 km of road of which only 10km was paved. Today the figure is 23,000 km paved. Life expectancy was around 50 years, it is now 74 years. The cities have thrived, and developed; tourism now allows visitors to enjoy the amazing scenery of sea and mountain.



*Village of Al Bustan, a seaside resort with the hilly country never far away.*

Islam arrived in Oman in 629 of the common era, when the sons of the Kings received a letter from the Prophet Mohammed exhorting them to convert to his new religion. In a complex scenario, the school that developed was neither Sunni nor Shia, becoming the Ibhadhi School of Islam in 711 CE. Oman and Basra (now in Iraq) were to become the centres of this approach to Islam. The principle of the Ibhadhis is based on religious tolerance and the avoidance of conflict and violence.

This was the theme of a fascinating exhibition mounted at the St Philips centre that week. The theme was 'Religious Tolerance', surely a subject which resonates with all of us people of faith living here in Leicester. We were welcomed by Sheikh Dr Abdullah al-Mamari who is the head of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Religious Affairs. He explained that his personal mission was to maintain a constructive and genuine dialogue with scholars and representatives of all groups of mainstream and minority religions and those of no faith.

The keynote speech was given by Rt Revd Tony Robinson, the Bishop of Pontefract, and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Adviser on Multi Faith Issues. He told us that he came to Leicester in 1985 to be the Vicar of St

religion might display itself within a new country. Apparently, Leicester was between the cities of Madrid and Cologne in its tour of Europe.

Musical offering.

Just as we thought the evening was over, and the VIPs from the City and the County were thinking of departing, there came a nice cultural surprise. One of the Omani gentlemen, dressed in immaculate white, with a coloured turban, was announced as a singer, an Islamic singer. I understood that he was what we might call a 'Cantor' within the mosques of Oman. Anwar Al-Asmi sang un accompanied a 'sura' of the Quran and also a lyrical poem to the Prophet. The intonation was not familiar to western ears, but the tonality of the melody and the modulation of his voice marked him, I thought, as a professional singer.

Closing thoughts

I find that I am writing this letter from Stoughton Drive on the 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2012, which is the start of Ramadan, the Muslim period of fasting and serious observance of their religious tradition. My next door neighbours tell me that they are used to the discipline, but they are working hard to explain it to their children. I was moved by this exhibition, even if it was about Muslim people in a land far from us. I discovered in conversation that the Armed Forces now mount their radios in Land Rovers. The idea of me, a Christian person, being deeply stimulated by visitors from Oman fascinated me. It illustrated perhaps the value of the work of the St Philips Centre, here in Leicester.

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## CASTLE PARK FESTIVAL

Many thanks to all who have promised contributions for the refreshments at the Castle Park Festival; however as we usually do a very good trade we shall be glad of more goods. Please see the list on the Notice Board. Also contributions to the Cake and Preserves stall will be welcome. Although we like to advertise "home made" cakes (and the visitors do appreciate them) bought ones will not be refused! As several people who normally help will not be able to do so this year, people are also needed to look after stalls and to welcome visitors. Even if you can only spare a short time. "every little helps".

**Items for the September magazine should reach Catherine Aston by Sunday August 19th, please.**