

## Chair's Welcome

I'd like to welcome you back to Enlighten. This newsletter is for you, to keep you informed and up to date with past and future events as well as some of the work that the Association is involved in. We have included features such as an insight into an inspirational journey to Sri Lanka, interesting information on religious festivals, events, volunteer opportunities and different faiths as well as upcoming future events. If you have an article or wish to run a social event which we can support please contact the Committee. Many thanks to everyone who contributed to the newsletter. We hope you enjoy the read, your chair Shilla.

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## A Successful Year for AFSA London region

Once again this year has been an extremely exciting time for AFSA, as we have grown nationally and as a region we have successfully supported the national group. We have recently attended the national AGM and supported their national conference in Newcastle and

Lancashire. We are importantly working in partnership with other London Fire Brigade support groups to organise the 100<sup>th</sup> year of the

International Women's Day event in March 2011. The newsletter is a great opportunity for you to hear about our plans and for you to get involved.



## National AFSA goes from strength to strength

AFSA National during the last year has built its membership across the country, including Greater Manchester, South Yorkshire, Lancashire, Tyne and Wear and Wiltshire. The national association held their AGM and development day in September in Newcastle upon Tyne which was jointly sponsored by North East Regional Fire and Rescue Services. There was some focus on the new Equality Act 2010, giving delegates an opportunity to enhance their knowledge on the new implemented legislation. Workshops followed on the second day giving delegates a chance to

develop skills in different areas, including public speaking and delivering presentations, which was facilitated by your London chair. A conference was also organised in Lancashire where both the new Fire Service Minister, Bob Neill and Peter Holland, President of the Chief Fire Officers Association were speakers.

Two 2009 conference reports are available, click the links below:

[http://edms/docs/SupGrps/AFSA/nat/National%20Launc h%202009/0052%20Conf%20in%20Pics%202009\(final\).pdf](http://edms/docs/SupGrps/AFSA/nat/National%20Launc h%202009/0052%20Conf%20in%20Pics%202009(final).pdf)

[http://edms/docs/SupGrps/AFSA/nat/National%20Launc h%202009/AFSA%20Conf%20Report%202009\(final\).pdf](http://edms/docs/SupGrps/AFSA/nat/National%20Launc h%202009/AFSA%20Conf%20Report%202009(final).pdf)

## The Volunteer Sri Lanka Project by Divya Patel

The Volunteer Sri Lanka Project is run by Janaka de Silva (the Project Manager) who had aspirations to help the community following the Tsunami in 2004 as a tribute to both his parents who died in the tragedy. Although the Tsunami happened several years ago and most people have re-homed themselves or been helped by NGOs, the effects are still far reaching. The Volunteer Sri Lanka Project aims to raise the future prospects of poor children through education and improve the skills of adults to enhance their employment prospects and their ability to provide for their families.



My desire to support this project came from a long time goal to work on a volunteer project in a developing country where my skill set would be of use to people. I was a Primary school teacher before working for the London Fire Brigade and these skills are valued in countries where education is a luxury. My current role in the LFB is a team leader for the Fire Community Safety Team (FCST) and Arson Task Force (ATF). The FCST in particular aim to support the prevention of accidental fires amongst vulnerable people most at risk to fire through education and awareness. I have always been drawn to roles that can help make a difference through education.

This project was picked at random following an internet search and I was drawn to the profile of Sri Lanka, and was intrigued to experience first hand how this community has moved on following the devastating Tsunami.

Following communication with the project manager Janaka, I arranged a 10 day intense visit to Galle in Sri Lanka to support his many projects. This was my first time travelling alone and doing a volunteer project and I had a mixed feeling of excitement and nervousness. I received overwhelming support from family, friends and colleagues at the LFB. AFSA and other LFB colleagues helped me raise nearly £300! This didn't include bags of stationery, electrical equipment, books and other donations colleagues donated. In a difficult time of austerity I felt such gratitude for the generosity and kindness shown by colleagues at the LFB.

My experience consisted of working on several projects : teaching at a street children school, teaching adults English to better their job prospects, teaching English to nurses, helping at an orphanage, visiting street families in the evening and providing them with hot meals. My day would start quite early at 7am and my last project ended at about 8pm. The other volunteers were amazing and this provided a great support network after a hard day. The work itself was never hard, but emotionally some of the projects would break you down. There is always the danger of



feeling like you are not doing enough but the project manager reminds us every little bit we do makes a difference and collectively it can change lives.

Highlights from my trip included working with the street kids and street families. The children were so happy and full of life. It was hard to imagine these same children had spent the night before sleeping on a pavement! The children at this school lived on the streets with their parents or relatives. However, many of their parents have turned to drugs/alcohol to cope with their situation and the effects can be seen in the children. The only proper meal they eat is through the ones provided by the project. Without a curriculum to follow I was able to have fun with the children, paint, play games and sing English songs – which they loved to learn. Fortunately I was able to use the money donated by the LFB to buy lots of second hand games, books, writing materials and used all my luggage allowance taking these supplies to the children. There is nothing more gratifying than being able to personally hand the items bought from donations directly to the people who need it most. The school is located in a slum area and consisted of 4 walls and holes as windows. With that said the room is filled with laughter and warmth. This is mainly thanks to their amazing teacher who was like a mother to the children and the children clearly adored her.



I also thoroughly enjoyed teaching English at the nurse's residential school. They were older, in their 20s many whom have come from villages and poor families. These women had great aspirations

to qualify as nurses and work in the Western world. The allure of a lifestyle portrayed by magazines and movies fuel their desire. I was overwhelmed by their response to my presence as they saw me as a role model - educated, Asian woman from England. Many hope to have the same level of freedom and opportunity to travel. I was able to buy sports equipment and donated these to the nurses school as other than studying they had no facility for any activities. The nurses school is home to 100 students and they all sleep in one open plan bedroom with no TV or even windows. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting these young women, learning about their hopes and dreams and teaching them to play rounders!



One evening a week the volunteers help pack and distribute food parcels to the street families. The project manager was particularly targeting the poor communities who lived near the railways in make shift plastic tents. Many of the children we taught in the day lived here. It astonished me to see how clean the children would arrive at school after spending the night before on the streets. These families had pride and wanted the best for their children in spite of their circumstances. At night the beautiful Sri Lankan town looked completely different as we walked around the railway district. One night it was pouring down with rain and I found one of the children from my class asleep on a plastic sheet on the side of the road with an old towel over her – soaked through from the rain. These families not only live here but are taunted by other drunks at night looking

for trouble at an easy target. Many of the families living here are big with up to 5 children – all very young. However when we arrive with our food parcels they are full of gratitude and warmth. With the help of a translator I was able to talk to some of the families. They told me how they fear for the safety of their families and children every night and how they try to find work but are ostracised from the community because they are from the streets. I was heartened by their honesty and warmth towards me and each other. The street families are like one extended family and they all look after one another. It was reassuring to know these little children were not facing their difficult circumstances alone in this world.



The orphanage was the only challenging part of the experience, as with all the other projects I felt I got back more than I gave. The orphanage was an empty, soulless place where the children were like vacant shells institutionalised by their environment. The staff didn't play with the children or have any contact with them. As a result they were frightened of us, didn't want to engage with us and it took awhile to reassure them we were not going to hurt them. Once they came out of their shell they loved playing games with the volunteers and had big smiles on their face. Unlike the street children these children are one of hundreds in the centre with no one in the world to love and care for them. Sadly there are many places like this around the world. What the staff lacked in motivation and desire to care for these children, the ongoing stream of volunteers made

up for by providing these children with hugs, smiles and fun.

Within moments of meeting this local community you are touched by a feeling of warmth and affection. As a stranger, I was welcomed by everyone I met and treated like family. I have come away from the experience with an immense appreciation for how fortunate I am and how easily we take everything for granted. The people of Sri Lanka really are proof of what the human heart is capable of when you can have so little. Never have I come across a community so happy, full of spirit and warmth. I was told by many that have visited this country how special it is and now I know I have experienced why. I hope to continue fundraising efforts to support the projects I worked with and look forward to returning one day to a country of people with big hearts.



# A FSA celebrate the diversity of the World Cup

Following the success of the AFSA BBQ in 2009, AFSA's summer socials have now become an annual event. In June, members gathered at the centrally located Thai Silk to watch the evening's World Cup match as the summer tournament continued to play out. AFSA had exclusive use of a private room and Wii games console. The evening saw members



competitiveness as well as some interesting virtual bowling techniques and ended with a delicious meal of Thai delights. The event provided great networking opportunities for members that have few occasions to come together. If you have any ideas for future members events, get in touch with your Executive Committee.

# A FSA member takes on the London Marathon challenge

Ricky Cheema a firefighter at Willesden ran his first ever marathon this April for the Anthony Nolan Trust. Ricky donated his bone marrow to a leukaemia sufferer last year and received excellent support from the trust. He raised more than



£1,400 and completed the marathon in five hours, 10 minutes, even after injuring his leg at the 14th mile.

Ricky has now joined the AFSA Executive Committee to help support and develop new members.

# Join the AFSA Football Team

AFSA have put together a 5 a side football team. Practices and matches are to be

scheduled and the team will be coached by Surjit Singh. For more information, or if you would like to get involved, please contact [Surjit.Singh@london-fire.gov.uk](mailto:Surjit.Singh@london-fire.gov.uk)

# Updating member details

AFSA will soon be updating the details of all its members. You will be asked to complete a short survey to ensure that we have the correct information for you. This will help AFSA identify the location of its members and give you an opportunity to get

involved in your AFSA and tell us what we can do for you. Look out for the new membership survey coming soon!

# VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

GETTING AHEAD

## What is GETTING AHEAD?

**GETTING AHEAD** is a programme of employability skills based conferences for young people in Tower Hamlets secondary schools, managed by the Tower Hamlets Education Business Partnership. The conference is divided into various workshops, each one covering a certain area of work. These areas include first impressions, employer expectations, team work, problem solving, applying for a job, interview skills, and so on. There are usually around 70 students, 14 to 15 years old, divided into teams of 6 to 7.

## What do volunteers do?

Each team has a Group Advisor - an adult volunteer with experience of life/work/business. Their role is to guide, support and motivate their team as they work through the sessions. They also maintain the order and focus of their group, though teachers are on hand at all times to deal with any serious problems.

The Advisors are briefed thoroughly on the morning of the event and are given guidelines and materials to use in each session. The Group Advisors act as role models and add real experience and credibility to the event.

The Advisors also benefit from the experience - developing their communication, motivation and management skills plus the satisfaction of helping young people.

Volunteers need to bring nothing and to dress as they would for the office. Lunch will be provided. Typical conferences start at 8:30am and finish by 3:00pm. A variety of venues in Tower Hamlets are used, all close to public transport links.



## How to Volunteer

If you would like to volunteer, or have any questions about **GETTING AHEAD**, please contact:

### Ian Pope

Project Manager, Getting Ahead

Programme, Direct Line: 020 7655 0308,

Email: [ian.pope@thebp.co.uk](mailto:ian.pope@thebp.co.uk).

See also:

<http://www.thebp.org/ga.htm>

## Community Engagement during Vaisakhi

AFSA members Akwala Deol, Manjit Singh, Shilla Patel and Pav Singh were joined by Ricky Cheema in attending the Vaisakhi celebrations (Sikh New Year) in Southall.

The day started early at Southwark Training Centre where we picked up the fire appliance to take to Southall fire station.

Once there the fire appliance was decorated with balloons and flower garlands and a banner wishing everyone a happy and safe Vaisakhi.

We then boarded the appliance and left the fire station to take our position in the queue at Southall Gurdwara (Sikh temple).

We followed the procession around the streets of Southall, moving at a crawling pace through the sheer numbers of public, which at times was amazing to see.

All manner of delicious food, all vegetarian, and drink was given out on route. The procession lasted most of the day but for us it ended back at the fire station.

The fire station was open to all with home fire safety advice and another opportunity to try all the food and drink supplied by the Southall community.

Station Manager Jules Lloyd thanked all the staff for their efforts during the festival and hopes more members will attend next year.

## Future upcoming AFSA events

### May Social

The next AFSA members' event will be in May 2011 and will be held in a central London venue. Come and join us for a night of excellent food, great company and entertainment. More details will be announced in January.



## International Women's Day Event – 17th March 2011 – centenary year

AFSA will be supporting and helping to organise with NWFS (Networking Women in the Fire Service) and Fairness, the 100<sup>th</sup> International Women's Day event on the 17th March 2011 in the Sir Frederick Delve Suite at Southwark Training Centre. The theme will be "Celebrating 100 years of Women's Achievements". More information and opportunities to register will follow in January.



## Celebrating Christmas around the world

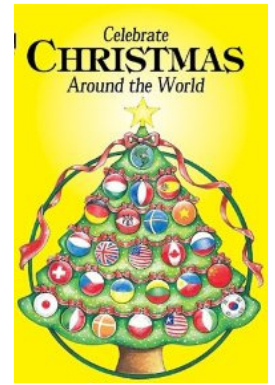
Christmas is a time of great celebration in the UK, particularly for children who, normally, are the main beneficiaries of so many presents that they don't know what to do with them! For adults it is often an occasion for taking time off from work, and spending time with the family. Despite the fact that winter has well and truly made its presence felt, it is also a 'feel good' time of year for many people.

In the UK, we have a number of Christmas traditions that have woven themselves into our culture over the years. The giving of gifts, hanging of lights and decorating a Christmas

tree, the turkey roast and Christmas pudding for Christmas lunch, Father Christmas being available for all to make their

requests for presents with Rudolph the Reindeer taking the sleigh around the world, dropping presents down our chimneys, and not forgetting kissing under mistletoe. These are all traditions adopted in the UK.

Christmas is celebrated all around the world and in many different ways. Read on to see how other countries celebrate this universal festival.



## Christmas In Bangladesh

In the sixteenth century Christianity brought to the historic region of Bengal (now divided between Bangladesh and India) by Portuguese traders and missionaries. Aside from Bengali Christians, a significant number of the population in Bangladesh are Christians.

Christians exchanged gifts and cards to express their Christmas greetings to one another, before Christmas. Like other countries Bangladesh people also like to decorate their house with candles, Christmas trees and coloured papers.

People go to the church to attend the special prayer session on Christmas Eve. In Bangladesh, Christmas, called "Bara Din (Big Day)" is celebrated by Bengali Christians.

When Christmas day arrives, people go to church before they commence the

celebration. The day is known as a national holiday and it is formally celebrated by the President of Bangladesh. Bengali Christians greet friends and family by saying 'Shubho Boro Din', which means Greetings of the Great Day, and offer traditional sweets and pithas (traditional Bengali cakes).

They decorate their homes with local handmade decorations and hang artificial stars on their rooftops to signify the stars of Bethlehem. Christian villagers also cut banana trees and replant them in pairs along the paths that lead from their homes to the Church. The leaves of the trees are bent to form an arch. These bamboos burn to illuminate their way to the Church for the unique service. Several day-long large gatherings are held at the churches, functions include illumination of churches, decorating Christmas trees and other Christian festivities.

The main towns and 'middle class' communities also celebrate Christmas by decorating hotels, cafes and festive style theme parks. Five star hotels in the city also arrange special Christmas programs where Santa distributes gifts among the children. Tribal communities follow their own tradition slightly different from the Bengali tradition. TV channels telecast special programs and newspapers publish special supplements to mark this occasion.

Breakfast at Christmas consist of food

## Christmas in India

There are many British traditions in India. Christmas is a state holiday in India, although only 2.3% of the population are Christian. Christmas is also known as bada din (the big day).

The markets are very colourful, as they are decorated with Christmas trees and decorations such as images of Santa, balloons, stars and festoons. Gift sellers release a thorough marketing campaign via television, newspapers, and radio.

A lot of parties and dance activities

occur across the holidays, most Indians take part but mostly all urban Indians participate wholeheartedly. Smaller clubs and restaurants, luxury hotels, groups of friends, schools, colleges and virtually all social

organizations have parties, eat, drink, dance and celebrate. Gifts are exchanged; Santa Claus brings gifts to a lot of good Indian children, just like he does around the world. There isn't any lack of spirit during this period.



like cakes, pitha, paes, semai, or sandwich. Different vegetables, mutton, chicken, pork, or beef are selected for lunch and dinner with delicious fruits, soft drinks, and ice creams.

Bangladesh have lots of unique traditions and food, but also follow suite in the worldwide traditions such as church going and exchange of gifts and food. There is a diverse range of celebrations in Bangladesh as the traditions change throughout the tribal towns to the urban locations.

Every region has a noticeably different means of honouring Christmas. In far North Eastern Mizoram, Christmas is often a local community occasion, a period for community feasting, called Lengkhawn Zai, (with roots in pre Christian era). Christmas carols are soft songs symbolizing religion and spirituality. Goa is a favourite location for Christmas celebrations.

Banana and Mango trees are used close to Christmas time. Lots of people use mango leaves to beautifully decorate their homes. Candles decorate most

churches through the entire Christmas services. An Indian Christmas is abundant with the presence of point sepia leaves rather than holly because holly is fairly rare here.

Despite the fact that the actual Christmas lunch

menu is roast duck, occasionally pork and mince pies, there's a occurrence of appams and stew too (this is pancakes involving a batter of rice flour and coconut milk), to be savoured along with mutton stew . The spirit of Christmas exists like nowhere else. In other south

Indian states, there is murukku (a fried pretzel made from rice flour and lentil), and athirasam gracing the table alongside the Christmas pudding. Sweets like doughnuts, rose cookies and diamond cuts are often homemade just like cookies in the western countries.

The December 25th celebrations are filled with devout believers attending the midnight or morning Mass, children

wearing multi-coloured clothing coordinating with the tropical plants and Drums and hymns. Christmas Carols are sung in Christian homes days in advance, a significant star is hung up from the front of the house. Gifts are exchanged, tips are offered around, and lots of Hindu people ultimately end up spending more on Christmas gifts to one another as compared to a Hindu festival. This is the spirit of Christmas in India.

## Christmas in China

December 25 is not a legal holiday in mainland China. The tiny portion of Chinese residents who believe themselves to be Christian, celebrate Christmas privately and in most cases unofficially. A number of other citizens indulge in lots of Christmas style activities although they don't support the true significance of Christmas. Commercial Christmas decorations, signs, and other symbolic items have become increasingly prevalent during the month of December in large urban districts and are now becoming very popular.

Most people throw a big New Years Eve

celebration and some families enjoy a large Christmas dinner at a restaurant. Shops sell plastic trees and Christmas decorations for customers to decorate their homes and businesses with. On Christmas Eve, Christian children in China hang up their muslin stockings that are specially made so that Dun Che Lao Ren, or "Christmas Old Man," can fill them with surprise gifts. Santa Claus may also be called Lan Khoong-Khoong, "Nice Old Father." Santa Claus is a popular good-luck figure.



Christians in China refer to Christmas as 'Sheng Dan Jieh', which translates to mean Holy Birth Festival. They embellish their houses using posters, bright paper chains, and evergreens. Many traditions, including exchanging gifts, sending cards, and hanging stockings are much like Western festivities.

Household's mantels a Christmas tree, called "tree of light," and attire it with stunning flowers, lanterns, and red

paper chains that represent happiness. They cut out red pagodas to paste on the windows, and they light their houses with paper lanterns too.

China along with other countries enjoys the colour and sparkle that

Christmas brings to the dull winter season. Big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong are gaily decorated at Christmas. The Christmas season is welcomed in with fireworks, jugglers and acrobats entertain, and people enjoy the fun and happiness. In Hong Kong, which recently was restored to Chinese rule, Christmas Day is just one of seventeen public holidays.

As a result of the vast majority of Chinese people not being Christian, the

primary winter celebration in China is the well known Chinese New Year. This festivity takes place right at the end of January. Formally known as the "Spring Festival," this is the time when children receive new toys, get brand new clothes, eat luxurious meals, and enjoy firecracker displays. It is important to worship the ancestors during this time of year. Paintings and portraits of ancestors

are brought out and displayed in the primary room of the home.

The Chinese celebrations are different to many countries as there is a divide in beliefs of Christianity. There are people who celebrate Christmas and those who then use the 'Spring Festivities' to celebrate the sense of family and well-being.

## C hristmas in Pakistan

Christmas in Pakistan is in memory of Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Christians constitute an extremely small section of the population. But as Pakistan features a population more than 162 million people, you will find more than 5 millions Christians. It's a public holiday in Pakistan on the 25th December. The standard traditional Christmas greeting in Punjabi is "Bara Din Mubarrak Ho", which means, "the blessing of Christmas on you".

At Christmas and other Christian festivals such as Easter a big parade will take place which travels from St. Anthony's Church to the Cathedral. It takes a few hours to arrive at the cathedral for the services. During the lead up to Christmas there are lots of spiritual meetings and seminars that take place to prepare people for 'the big day'.

Like in England, during the last week of advent, groups of carol singers will sing to houses around the towns and village. In return of the entertainment the residents will give the groups tokens of money. This money will be given to the

churches charity. In areas that have a lot of Christian residents, they have a star on the roofs of their houses. The streets and houses are also decorated and lit up with Christmas lights. Unlike any other countries Pakistan has a 'crib' competition.

A vigil mass takes place on Christmas Eve, this draws in a large amount of people. During the mass there are choirs that sing important hymns. Afterwards, there are lots of fireworks, music and dancing. People also take this opportunity to exchange any gifts and celebrate Bara Din.

Finally Christmas day, Pakistani's attend a church service again, but dressed in their best clothing. Even the poorest people have new clothes and will attend the service. Afterwards they will all stay in the courtyard and enjoy, eat and drink. Most adults will visit their parents.

Christmas in Pakistan is celebrated with the special Christmas cakes and meals. Chicken or beef curry, rice and maybe a sweet dish is the staple menu during Christmas.

For more information and see how other countries celebrate Christmas see:  
<http://www.celebratingchristmas.co.uk/>

**Y**our AFSA Committee wish you a  
merry xmas and happy new year

- ✚ Shilla Patel – Chair – x39518
- ✚ Akwala Deol - Vice-Chair - x50187
- ✚ Tejinder Ajimal – Treasurer – x39846
- ✚ Sabera Bhimani – Secretary – x51923
- ✚ Meena Vagdama – Cultural Events Officer – x37609
- ✚ Adam Baker – x35788
- ✚ Parvinder Singh – x84126
- ✚ Richard Claydon – x30401
- ✚ Elaine Duffy – Equalities Advisor - x30659
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