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**UPDATE**



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**December 2023**

*Wishing you Christmas blessings and prayers for a peaceful New Year*

**A special link to the Day of Reconciliation**  
**Happy Endings after a frustrating theft**  
**Reflections from an Oblate trainee**  
**Re-capping recent Arts events**



**A major donor for Street Lit**



**A tall darkly clad stranger**



**Music and dance for all**

**ENCOURAGING RECONCILIATION BETWEEN FAITHS IN 2023**

The annual Meal of Reconciliation is now a fixed part of our calendar at the DHC and also, we hope, of the wider Durban community. It started, in our first year in 2015, from the realisation that, whilst most religions have a ceremonial meal that they share among their own followers, there is not a meal which brings together people of different religions. If reconciliation is a key belief of the new South Africa, we should share a Meal of Reconciliation and what better date than 16 December, the national Day of Reconciliation? Here was a chance to bring together people of all faiths, homeless people and the housed, South Africans and foreign nationals, young and old.

Paddy Kearney, our founder, said at the very first Meal of Reconciliation that he felt that this epitomised what the DHC was created for. But, modest as he was, he did not let on about his personal link with the Day of Reconciliation. This emerged during recent research into his life for a PhD thesis. It turns out that in the mid 1980s - during the darkest days of the State of Emergency when the possibility of peace seemed so distant, and when 16 December was far from being a unifying event - Paddy wrote in an article: "Can we imagine a time when the Day of the Vow becomes a day of reconciliation for all South African people?".

The idea was picked up by other journalists and started to spread. When, after 1994, President Mandela declared that 16 December would remain a

public holiday but now be called the Day of Reconciliation, Paddy's idea became official policy.

The interfaith aspect of our Meal has always been important, but even more so this year when the conflict in Gaza – and the reaction to it – reminds us how easily religion can be weaponised as a justification for violence. (Raymond reflects on this in his [December article](#) in 'The Southern Cross').

Faced with rising anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, it was wonderful that the Muslim and Jewish communities of Durban took an active part in the event. RAUF (a Muslim charity) and the Union of Jewish Women each contributed a large pot of breyani, as did the Christians from the Catholic parish in Newlands and the Hindu organisation, Food for Life. In addition, we also had generous donations of cool drinks from the UJW, Boxer and Spar.

The event was a huge success with well over 400 people attending and sharing not only the meal but also their stories. We were delighted that it received coverage on the TV news with a [live interview](#) while it was happening and then an [edited clip](#) that evening that was seen by millions.

The outpouring of generosity from the Meal of Reconciliation has extended right into the Christmas season. Not only were we able to stretch out the cool drinks and cakes to last for a few more meals but we also saw a number of new volunteers coming to serve. This year, as every year, we have been able to serve meals on all the days that we usually would, plus we added in a Monday so we could do a full 'five colours' traditional family meal for the homeless on Christmas Day itself.

By year end it is likely that, thanks to our volunteers and donors of food, we will have served 162,000 meals in 2023 – bringing comfort and joy to people throughout the year.

*Photo: Just one of the halls containing the crowd of over 400 present for the 2023 Meal of Reconciliation (see [Facebook](#) for more photos and videos).*



## **MULTIPLE HAPPY ENDINGS TO THE TALE OF ILLA'S CAR**

Sadly about 100 cars are stolen each day in South Africa which means very few car thefts end up on the front page of the Saturday paper. But this is what happened when a well-recognised, 21-year-old, bright blue Ford Laser was stolen from near the Durban Playhouse. It belonged to Illa Thompson who, as well as being our *pro bono* PR advisor for the last 15 years, is also publicist for a host of arts and tourist activities in the Durban area.

The car being so old, the insurance was not going to provide a suitable replacement. As well as that being a great personal inconvenience, the loss of Illa's car also severely compromised our Street Lit bookselling since she is also the project co-ordinator. We were worried about how she would manage personally but also how we would transport our booksellers, tables and books to various events and also collect boxes of donated books from around town. But, in our experience, every problem is an opportunity; and as one door closes two more seem to open.

We are pleased to report that, on the personal front, a crowd-funding appeal by her many friends around the world means that Illa is now sorted with a nippy run-around. But this is not nearly big enough for supporting the book project. Not to worry – a knight in shining armour by the name of John Mulgrew from the DESign Group came to our aid. He made a substantial donation and connected us with CMH the Renault dealer in Ballito.

As a result of this, the DHC now owns the Red Duster that it was being lent as a temporary measure, as well as benefiting from a cash injection to support the project into 2024. What is more CMH arranged for the Red Duster to be beautifully branded with the DHC and Street Lit logos, not only making it instantly recognisable but also (we pray) harder to steal.

With the Street Lit project expanding out from the city centre to Umlazi and Kwa Mashu, the car has already shown its worth. It is also deployed as a workhorse for the DHC for general collections and as a back-up when the mobile clinic is not available. In fact, almost immediately, we needed it to take a young man to hospital who had collapsed outside the DHC out of hours and had waited in vain for five hours for an ambulance. (We are pleased to say that he survived the night when he would almost certainly have died if left on the streets).

It is the spontaneous generosity of so many people throughout 2023 which has enabled us to do the work that we do - sometimes grand extravagant gestures like this one, sometimes smaller ones that go un-noticed. The new born Christ received the gifts of the three kings and also of the shepherds. We are grateful to all those who support our work in their various ways.

*Photo: Our smartly branded Duster ready to for the city's traffic. (At the top: Steve McCulloch from CMH, Prof Jairam Reddy a DHC Trustee and John Mulgrew CEO of DESign Group).*



## **AN OBLATE REFLECTS ON HIS PASTORAL EXPERIENCE**

*The Catholic religious order of which both Archbishop Hurley and Bishop Barry Wood were members is called the 'Oblates of Mary Immaculate' hence the letters OMI after their names. Founded in 1816 as a response to the growing spiritual and practical deprivation in France's newly industrialising cities, their motto is "Go and preach good news to the poor". Patrick Regnard OMI - of Mauritian origin and brought up on the Bluff in Durban - is a young trainee Oblate who was recently sent for pastoral experience at the DHC. He shares his reflections:*

"Such kinds of experiences are invaluable, as they push a trainee Oblate like me out of the realm of theoretical knowledge to practical experiential knowledge. Often in our spiritual life we can romanticise over ideas of simplicity, detachment, humility and a sense of 'poverty for the kingdom'. Yet unless these spiritual ideas actually meet the realities of the world, they remain mere ideas.

My first day at the DHC was spent working at the Nkosinathi project. It was there that I was met with 200 to 300 people, all from the street, waiting for breakfast patiently seated on three rows of benches under a metal awning on Paddy Kearny Way. Like other volunteers, I was called out that morning to say the grace before meals. I wasn't too sure what to say in fear of sounding insensitive, overly preachy or naively 'nice'. I resolved to say a simple prayer, and swiftly retreated back to the serving station where I began to hand each person some breakfast. I remember feeling dirty just being in the same space as these homeless people, and ever consciously aware of my surroundings, as if I could be pick-pocketed at any moment.

Yet, as the days went by, I began to speak more and more to each one of them and learnt about the harsh effects of poverty. The more they spoke, the more I came to realise how many of these people had great respect for the DHC. They would tell me about the shelters they were staying in and how



badly at times they were treated there. Even those that slept out in the open, in a kind of 'homeless camp' could not stand the way it was 'every woman or man for themselves'. Yet, when they were at the DHC they felt that they were in a comfortable and safe space. This struck me because it showed how well people respond when they are treated with dignity.

As well as working with the Nkosinathi project, I also did other jobs around the centre which exposed me to the complexity and generosity of what takes place behind the scenes of such an endeavour. Could you imagine having social workers readily available, or a clinic open for anyone who would need medical attention? How about offices available for the homeless to organise their ID documents or refugee status? They even offer legal advice as well as skills training to help people earn money.

I am ever so grateful for the exposure and experience that I've gained at the DHC. As a Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate in training, I feel like I have been better equipped to engage with homeless people. For me this echoes words from our congregation's constitution: "We choose ... to enter more perfectly into communion with Jesus and the poor".

Praised be Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate."

*Photo: Brother Patrick sharing food for the stomach and for the soul with one of our many daily clients.*



## **LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARDS, ARTISTICALLY**

Whether singing Christmas carols, visiting the panto or appreciating beautifully crafted festive scenes, people are more aware at this time of year of the power of the arts to entertain, to inspire and to provoke thought. The foundation stone of the DHC - unveiled 10 years ago this coming February - has Jesus' words from John 10:10: "I have come that you may have life, life to the full." So we pride ourselves that we not only fill people's stomachs but also fill their souls with the beauty of the arts: especially when most of the people who visit our building would never otherwise have a chance to experience the creative arts.

As we end the year, let's round up some recent artistic highlights. Musa Hlatshwayo regularly uses our spaces to rehearse his contemporary dancers. When he won the Standard Bank Young Artist of the Year award, he used the grant to create the extraordinary 'Udodana' which "explores the black male

body, its constructed identities, its placement in traditional African communities, and the many incidents that draw attention to the brokenness of black male identities and masculinities”.

Having premiered at the National Arts Festival and then presented in prestigious mainstream theatres, Musa was keen to bring the work to community spaces and we were delighted that the DHC was top of his list. They performed for our staff but the show they did for our homeless guests was the highlight of their tour.

Musa comments: “The idea was to ‘ambush’ our homeless friends outside the DHC an hour before their lunch was served and present a section of the show. People passing by also stopped and engaged; nearby taxi drivers cheered us on and ululations and whistles erupted from every corner. Magic happened!”

He adds: “The cast members were moved by how effortlessly the audience participated in the chants and songs and also journeyed with the performance from the outside to the inside without being instructed to do so. They felt the performance and knew when to pull back and when to come in stronger. The mostly male audience had a lot to say to the cast on the subject of being ‘udodana’ (the sons, heirs, princes, future leaders etc). Instead of rushing for their lunch, most of them actually came to shake our hands, asked for hugs and some even prayed blessings upon the production to reach as far as overseas.”

One audience member in the middle of a section simply stood up from his chair, took off his hat and gestured to the dancers: “I take my hat off for you as my heart is full of love and respect. I don’t feel you understand what it means for people of your calibre to do this for us. You all belong to international stages. I don’t know how you are here and what we did to deserve experiencing this. May God bless you all!”

Another set of highly regarded professionals who have curated work both inside and outside the DHC in the past months are jazz couple George and Debbie Mari. They brought together a group of women musicians for a pop-up concert ‘Womuzo’ in Women’s Month (see photo at the top); then more recently the DHC hosted all the community-trained musicians who are part of their UKUSA programme, including those learning guitar at the DHC every Saturday morning. UKUSA are among several groups, such as the renowned Durban Gospel Choir, who regularly benefit from our offer of ‘free rehearsal space’ and we are keen to hear from other local performers.

Next year is a big anniversary year for the DHC (as the attached flyer explains). We look forward to working with our various arts partners by providing opportunities for all kinds of people to rehearse, to participate in and to enjoy the arts. Over the years, we have benefited from links with classical and jazz musicians and singers; modern and traditional dancers; actors, writers, directors and film-makers; photographers, painters, sculptors and art therapists. If you want to offer your creativity to help transform the lives of the people we serve, then please [get in touch](#).

*Photo (Simanga Zondo): some of Musa’s dancers from Mhayise Productions performing ‘Udodana’ inside the DHC. For more pictures see Facebook.*



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[www.denishurleycentre.org](http://www.denishurleycentre.org)

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