

## SIKHS IN BIRMINGHAM

Some 70,000 Sikhs now live in the city, with more living over the border in Sandwell. They are served by 15 gurdwaras in Birmingham, of which the first was established in Balsall Heath in 1958. One of their most impressive buildings is the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha on Soho Hill, which was given a City Council award in 1997. The adjacent Nishkam Centre received The Queen's Award for Voluntary Service in 2010.

The Council of Sikh Gurdwaras was founded in 1989 to represent their interests and to initiate work of common benefit, including the Vaisakhi celebrations of the founding of the Sikh Order, which have been held with a fair in Handsworth Park and processions to it for 25 years as of 2016.

Sikhs were among the those who helped found Birmingham Council of Faiths and they have been keen supporters of joint faith initiatives in the city, partaking in the meetings of the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group, Council-led consultations and Birmingham SACRE. A Sikh representative sits on the steering group of the Faith Encounter Programme and many gurdwara members have now qualified as faith guides. There are also Sikh health service, prison and police chaplains. A more recent initiative was the founding of the Nishkam School, which provides an education on inter-faith principles at both junior and secondary level.

For further information, contact the Sikh Council at **3 Grove Lane, B21 9DJ**, tel. **0121 523 4144**, Email: [info@sikhcouncilbirmingham.org](mailto:info@sikhcouncilbirmingham.org), Web: <http://www.sikhcouncilbirmingham.org>.

# B C F

**Post: Birmingham Council of Faiths,  
c/o BVSC, 138 Digbeth,  
Birmingham B5 6DR**

**Email: [membersbcf@gmail.com](mailto:membersbcf@gmail.com)**

**[www.bhamfaiths.org.uk](http://www.bhamfaiths.org.uk)**

**<http://www.facebook.com/bcf.bhamfaiths>**

Originally founded in 1974, Birmingham Council of Faiths' objective is to promote knowledge and mutual understanding of the beliefs and practices of the city's many faiths.

Its belief is that through greater understanding of each other, a more harmonious and cohesive society can be created.

An additional strategy is to act as an interfaith hub, networking between the diverse faith organisations in the city and to serve as a focal point for information about their activities.

This brochure is one of a series that cover the Council's faith membership, currently including Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and Zoroastrians

# Sikhs



one of  
Birmingham's  
faith  
communities

## SIKH BASICS

One of the more recent faiths and of Indian origin, Sikhism is now the fifth largest in the world with 25 million followers. It arose from the teaching of Guru Nanak (1459-1539) and was maintained by a succession of teachers until the tenth, Gobind Singh (1666-1708). The latter instituted the Sikh Order (Khalsa) in 1699 and decreed that in future their scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, should be the 'eternal teacher'. The word 'Sikh' means disciple and is applied to the followers of their teaching.

The scripture is written in Punjabi and made up of poetical texts, some of the oldest of which were written by Hindu and Muslim holy men who had risen to the insight that the creator God is one and not the property of any single religion. Further teaching there, developed by Sikh saints, is that all humanity is equal and that devotion to God should be shown in selfless service to people and striving for their social welfare.

Sikhs believe in rebirth and that spiritual progress is made through a succession of lives until unity with God is achieved. This entails meditation on the divine name and the guru's teaching and a life disciplined by truthfulness, self-control and purity of conduct.

The Sikh symbol is known as the Khanda and consists of a circle, referring to God's eternity, and a central two-edged sword signifying divine wisdom that is flanked by outer sword blades representing spiritual and political authority.

## SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Worship takes place in temples known as gurdwaras, a word meaning the door to the teacher. There may be paintings of historical scenes and figures on the walls, but no statues. The focus of the main hall is the scripture, which is placed on a raised throne at one end, before which devotees bow on entering. All there must wear a head covering and men and women sit separately. Often there is a continuous reading of the scripture and at regular intervals there is singing with musical accompaniment of the hymns contained there. As a consequence, children are encouraged to perform and to learn Punjabi in order to understand it.

Alcohol, drugs and smoking are forbidden and no one may enter the gurdwara carrying or under the influence of these substances. Members of the Sikh Order must wear five things (all beginning with 'k' in Punjabi). Uncut hair (covered by a turban) and beards; a wooden comb to keep it tidy; a small sword, since the Khalsa was founded as a defensive order of 'soldier-saints'; the steel bracelet at the centre of the Sikh symbol; and a pair of long white shorts. Members are also distinguished by the name Singh (meaning lion, for men) and Kaur (princess, for women). Children are initiated into the Order as soon as they are old enough to understand this commitment.

Since all are equal, there is no special priesthood and women are given scripture-reading and organisational responsibility. Special festivals include celebration of the birth and death of the gurus and some occasions linked with their stories. These include Diwali in autumn (when the sixth guru was released from imprisonment), and Vaisakhi in spring, when the Sikh Order was founded.

## SOCIAL PRACTICE

The gurdwara usually serves as the main centre for social outreach, at the very heart of which is the 'communal kitchen' serving the daily free meal called *langar* to anyone who cares to come in and ask for it. It is vegetarian so as to accommodate all equally and not transgress their food prohibitions. As a token of this, those attending part of the service in the main hall are given a small handful of sweet semolina during its course. If meat is eaten at home, there is a prohibition on animals slaughtered in the Muslim (*halal*) way.

Gurdwaras also organize frequent health checks for their congregations, and meetings where subjects such as organ donation are discussed. Healthcare charity work in hospitals and other care centres is also directed from there. Some have gyms installed on their premises which are open to all in the local community, of whatever faith.

The gurdwara is also the focus of social events as this is where the scripture is kept. It is on public display and is taken to its stand in the morning and put to rest at night accompanied by a special service. In its presence weddings and funerals are performed, other special occasions are marked by thanksgiving and new babies named. The name will begin with the first letter or even word of the service for the day.

Some marriages may be arranged but often couples are introduced and the choice left to them, or they may make their own choices. Because Sikhism originated in a hot land, funerals are arranged as soon after death as possible. The usual method for disposing of the body is by cremation but very young children may be buried.