



The Presbyterian Church in Canada

## Celebrate the Light!

By the Rev. Kenn Stright,

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee

Light is important in many religions and festivals throughout the world. It is most often the symbol of the divine who brings light into the world... “Let there be light!” (Genesis 1:3). Being such a religiously diverse and multicultural nation, Canada and Canadians have many wonderful opportunities to “celebrate the light.”

*God is the Light of the heavens and earth. His Light is like this: there is a niche, and in it a lamp, the lamp inside a glass, a glass like a glittering star, fuelled from a blessed olive tree from neither east nor west, whose oil almost gives light even when no fire touches it—light upon light—God guides whoever He will to his Light; God draws such comparisons for people; God has full knowledge of everything—shining out in houses of worship.*  
—Qur’an 24:35–6

*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*  
(John 1:5)

The “Where are you going?” questions below are to let people know they can go and celebrate these festivals of light regardless of faith background and all of them are found here in Canada, maybe just around the corner.

### Where are you going?

**To celebrate Diwali.** It’s Diwali, come and see the lights! This is the festival of lights, celebrated by millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Jains across the world with each candle symbolizing the power of light to conquer darkness. Hindus also take advantage of this period to contemplate and dispel the darkness of ignorance.



The Rev. Shalini Rajack-Sankarlal reflected, “Diwali reminded me of my days growing up in Trinidad when we would go from one friend’s house to another, shaping bamboo to make decorative stands for the diyas (oil lamps).”<sup>i</sup>

### **Where are you going?**

**To celebrate Hanukkah.** A festival celebrated in Judaism. It is observed for a period of eight nights and days anywhere between the end of November and December. It all starts with lighting candles. The blessings are said, the Menorah is lit, and light enters the world. Rabbi David reminds us that latkes go well with Hanukkah!

### **Where are you going?**

**To celebrate Christmas.** Come to a Christmas tree lighting, but not just any Christmas tree. The Boston Christmas Tree has come from the forests of Nova Scotia and stands tall in the Boston Commons in Boston, Massachusetts. It is a symbol of thanksgiving for the generosity of the city of Boston as the people of that city reached out to the victims of the Halifax explosion on December 6, 1917.

Or maybe Le Réveillon is for you: Le Réveillon is a festival celebrated in four Canadian provinces (Quebec, Manitoba, Ontario and New Brunswick). This holiday is similar to Christmas in that it celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ. On Christmas Eve, a large candle is lit symbolizing Christ, Light of the World. This candle is left to burn throughout the night.

### **Where are you going?**

**To the Sacred Fire.** The fire is one of the ways to start a ceremony or any sacred event. The light of the fire is a spiritual doorway that opens to a spiritual realm. The sacred fire is never left alone, it is watched and attended to by a Fire Keeper. People gather around the fire for ceremony and conversation. Indigenous societies have numerous ceremonies for the transitions of the seasons, like the full moon ceremonies incorporating the sacred fire.



Vivian Ketchum speaks of lighting a candle to guide someone who has died to help them on their journey.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Where are you going?**

**To celebrate the Lantern festival.** Celebrated on the 15th day of the Lunar year, which falls anywhere between late February and March. The festival is highlighted with many lanterns floating in local bodies of water. Many think this Chinese festival of lantern lights originated in Buddhism.

### **Where are you going?**

**To celebrate Kwanzaa.** Kwanzaa (first fruits) is an African-American celebration that isn't religious in origin, yet incorporates practices of ancient spirituality from Africa and elsewhere. Light is used in this celebration as a symbol of seven principles\* where each principle is symbolized with a candle. A *kinara* is the candle holder that holds the seven candles. Each night a candle is lit, and families talk about one of the seven principles. This is done each night until all the candles are lit.

\*These principles are:

- 1) Unity
- 2) Self-Determination
- 3) Collective Work and Responsibility
- 4) Cooperative Economics
- 5) Purpose
- 6) Creativity
- 7) Faith



The Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee of The Presbyterian Church in Canada has an extensive and diverse mandate. Part of that mandate is to promote and encourage peace, respect and understanding between ourselves and those of other faiths...to encourage Presbyterians to acknowledge, understand and appreciate other faith traditions, and to help Presbyterians to live in good relationship with persons who belong to other religions.

As we celebrate the light, especially in the darkest months of the year, we realize that we all cherish this gift of creation.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*  
(Isaiah 60:1)

*The most precious light is the one that visits you in your darkest hour!*  
—Mehmet Murat ildan

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<sup>i</sup> The Rev. Shalini Rajack-Sankarlal is the minister at University Community Church in Windsor Ont.

<sup>ii</sup> Vivian Ketchum originates from Wauzhushk Onigum Nation of Northern Ontario and now a member of Place of Hope Presbyterian Church in Winnipeg, Man., and Life and Mission Agency Committee member.