

Birmingham UK's Interfaith Peace Blessing 2017

David and Patricia Earle
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Birmingham. The UK's 'second city'. A 'City of Sanctuary'. A city of Tolkien and Lord of the Rings. A city of hundreds of churches, mosques, temples, synagogues and gurudwaras. A city of industry which played a major role in the first and second world wars. Hopefully moving towards being a 'City of Peace'

We held the annual Interfaith Peace Blessing in the main hall of the Arya Samaj Vedic Mission, situated in Birmingham's heartland near the city centre. This year's Blessing had a somewhat different flavour to previous occasions, making it something of an 'unknown quantity', with no real idea of how many people would attend. Our UK National Council had decided to make it more of a 'Family Festival', and in the end the main hall was close to its 300 capacity. We were only able to manage the numbers due to an excellent Family Federation staff, and several supporters, who worked seamlessly together for about 7 hours, providing a very meaningful and joyful experience for all our guests.



Several months of outreach, preparation and education meant that individuals and couples came representing: the Birmingham Iranian Club, the Association of Ladies of Pakistani Origin, the British Organisation for People of Asian Origin, the Polish Expats Association, the Bangladeshi Women's Association, the Somali Families Association, the Federation of Indian Muslim Organisations, the Indian Ladies Club, a Kashmiri Association, the Namdhari Sikhs, Arya Samaj, Clifton Road Mosque community, the Krishna Temple, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha community, and several Christian churches. In addition, we were joined by seven Syrian families who have found refuge and safety in our city.



We were also privileged to have with us 8 of our City Councillors, 3 of whom were former Lord Mayors, and our Deputy Lord Lieutenants, Jagjit and Satinder Taunque, representing the Queen. Truly it seemed as though the whole world had gathered in one place, creating a very special feeling for such a unique occasion.

After an introduction and welcomes, three short speeches were given on the theme of 'Marriage and Family' by Mrs Nila Parmar, former Chair of the Birmingham Council of Faiths, Rev Canon Eve Pitts, the first UK woman of Afro-Caribbean heritage to be ordained in the Anglican Church, and Sheikh Nuru Mohammed, recently appointed from Africa as the spiritual leader of Clifton Road mosque. David Earle, representing FFWPU, then gave a 15-minute presentation about the meaning and significance of the Peace Blessing, particularly for those guests who had been invited to attend by friends and family members to be able to understand the significance of the occasion.



We then conducted the Holy Nectar Ceremony of Forgiveness and Renewal with all the couples generating a feeling of seriousness, sincerity and joy. It was such a precious moment.

Just prior to the Blessing itself, we had 5 women offer prayers from the Sikh, Jewish, Muslim, Christian and Hindu traditions, with our devotees ranging in age from 17 (Abida) to 95 (Ruth) years old! Following the sprinkling of Holy Water on our assembly, all the couples promised to do their best to be faithful to God in upholding the values and virtues of their different traditions, to remain faithful to one another, to try and bring up their children with purity of mind and body, and finally to develop a 'True Parental' heart and be a blessing to others – in their family, neighbourhood, workplace and all spheres of influence.

After the Blessing prayer, we heard a very touching, personal exchange of letters to one another, written that morning, by Maureen, a lay preacher in the Methodist Church and Chaplain at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and her loyal husband Colin. This was followed by a most beautiful rendition of 'One God' by Mrs Betty Rodrigues, expressed with such purity of voice and spirit. "...Many the path winding their way to One God; Brothers and sisters, there are no strangers after His work is done; for your God, and my God, are one".

Mr Kuldip Singh Ubhi, National Director of the Namdhari Sikhs in the UK, long-standing friend and Ambassador for Peace, gave the congratulatory remarks, and we concluded the formal part of our proceedings with 3 rousing, joyful (Korean) cheers of 'Ok Mansei', literally 10,000 years of happiness to all !! UPF Ambassador for Peace (Youth) certificates were presented to 4 young people from the British Carnatic Choir, and to 3 men – Sheikh Nuru Mohammed, Cllr Jay Walia, and Mr Onkar Hunjan of BOPA. Following this, 10 most delightful women, all doing amazing things in a whole variety of capacities, received the Women's Federation Ambassador for Peace Certificate.



Vegetarian food of all descriptions was then served to everyone in a 'Feeding the 5,000' experience, in no small way due to the wonderful generosity of a few of our FFWPU members. Also, the collective effort of both the parents and young people in our Family Federation community was crucial for the success of the whole event, and many people commented how delightful it was to see the different generations working harmoniously together.

We had a fundraising stall at the back of the room, with proceeds going to support an Orphanage in Syria, and the meeting wound down gradually with some lovely musical offerings from Betty, Tom Pritty, David Rennie and Viola Dirnhofer.

This Interfaith Peace Blessing was a powerful statement regarding the value of the family in present-day society, coming from more than 100 couples and their families, people from 35 different nationalities, representing all races, cultures and different faith traditions. The fact that the Blessing is taking part in other countries all around the world gives an added sense of solidarity with one another, a greater feeling of oneness, friendship and hopefulness in an increasingly secular and legalistic society. On a personal level, especially where couples had been sincerely preparing for the occasion, there was clearly a genuine desire to bring more love into the couple relationship, and consequently into the home, the family and extended family, through forgiveness, renewal and a 'spring-cleaning' of the heart.



Overall, the feeling was one of a beautiful offering for our city and nation but, equally, the sheer diversity of people present made it feel like the whole world was taking part. It is always a great feeling when the whole seems greater than the sum of the parts, through the presence of the Divine.



Some comments...

Rajinder. "Thank you very much for your kind hospitality and for organising such a large function on Saturday. It was a great success. Please pass on our highest appreciation to your family and friends who contributed so much 'labour of love' to make everybody happy. The programme and speeches were excellent. We look forward to meeting you again some time."

Sharon. "I was truly blessed and cherished every moment of the Peace Blessing initiative. It is very clear that God is using you to enlighten those who were in isolation, by showing them that we are all children under the same one God of the universe. 'My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit shall ever praise His name'. May God's continuous blessing be upon you throughout your endeavour."

Jaya and Ramesh. "Thank you very much for inviting us to Saturday's event. We both really enjoyed it and getting the award of Ambassador for Peace was a lovely surprise."

Maureen. "Thank you for such a wonderful peace blessing event. It really is becoming a highlight of the year."

Charlotte. "It was so good to see such an amazing diversity of people coming together peacefully, for such a wonderful purpose. All the speakers were very clear and strong. Sheikh Nuru spoke so powerfully. It was good to have all the city councillors there to hear this message about the family."

Rama. "It was wonderful. Everything was amazing, incredible...the speeches, the prayers, the ceremony, the food, the company. Thank you so much to everyone."

Sourour. "Thanks for the lovely evening, my dear. My neighbours are very nice! Glad I gave them a lift today to come together."

Rana. "A fantastic event, my lovely. Well done!"

Neeta. "Thank you for a lovely evening. It was great to see so many different people coming together, and meeting new people...."

Marcela. "The whole event was so touching, so moving. It was like the day of our wedding all over again!"