

Interfaith Peace Blessing

Birmingham, UK, 9. February 2014

".....I found the whole event really interesting, at times quite moving, and came away feeling very happy and positive. Seeing all types of people together for a common goal is inspiring, also energising and motivating. Please keep me informed of future events - I would like to work together on projects such as Marriage Preparation and Marriage Enrichment, also Character Education, and projects which involve schools...."

Thus wrote one participant after the Feb 9th 'Interfaith Peace Blessing' in Birmingham, a Muslim lady who leads some of the interfaith and youth activities of her particular denomination of Islam. We were certainly 'all types of people together'! We were leaders and members from most of our faith traditions, members of the Birmingham, and Wolverhampton, Council of Faiths, the founder of a Birmingham mosque and the founder of a south Indian Hindu temple, 4 Birmingham City Councillors, Her Majesty the Queen's representatives in the West Midlands, the late and beloved Lord King's wife, sister and niece, people from the nearby cities of Worcester, Coventry and Rugby, officers of the Indian Overseas Congress and the British Organisation for People of Asian origin, doctors, lawyers and teachers, social workers, refugees and asylum seekers - the entire social spectrum ! And in terms of age, our youngest couple were in their mid-twenties and our oldest couple in their mid-seventies. So in age, faith, race, nationality and social status we were just about multi-everything!!



The Bahai, Christian, Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, and Jain traditions were all represented.



Many countries of Africa, Asia and Europe were represented among the 140 or so people present.

Our venue for the Blessing was again Rowheath Pavilion in Bournville, run by Trinity Christian Centre whose staff have been most kind to us in recent years when hiring their venue to us for Interfaith Blessings and the Women's Peace Meeting. It helps a lot when the spiritual atmosphere of the venue, and the generous attitude of the staff, contribute to the occasion.

We had received a number of sincere apologies from people who could not attend, most notably the Deputy Police Crime Commissioner for the West Midlands, and Sheikh Arif Abdul Hussain, a Shia Muslim leader and head of the much respected Al Mahdi Institute.

Sheikh Arif had spoken at each of our three previous Interfaith Blessings, but this time had to offer his apologies at the last minute. In his place, Henna Rai came to represent him as our first speaker.

Henna began by saying that we should first and foremost give thanks to those that nurture us and, in the family, think of the unconditional love between mother and child. She quoted from the Islamic tradition where God's love is described as "the unconditional love of 70 mothers!", and from Zachariah's prayer of gratitude to God after receiving his son. Our mother is most worthy of our care, then our father. Our duty to our mother is 'infinite'. Our younger generation today tend to forget this debt of nurture, given to them by their parents and by society. We need to be aware of this, and then strive to be a greater good to society, beyond the confines of our family.

Our second speaker(s) were Colin and Maureen Foxall, representing the Christian tradition, with Maureen being a local preacher in the Methodist church. Married for almost 28 years, with 3 children, they have journeyed through several denominations towards a progressive, inclusive faith which is at the heart of their beautiful relationship. They began by singing 'The Servant Song' together, and then proceeded to read letters which they had written to each other that morning, expressing their sincere affection for one another and the qualities which they admired and appreciated in the other, allowing them to find and be their true selves. Colin... "our bond is created by our faith in God, and our lives can be healed by expressions of love for each other..." Maureen... " My dearest Colin, you are like Christ to me. Thank you...for our children, for your patience, for sharing our home, that we are not afraid of each other, for the freedom to be me, to be willing to go on into the unknown together..." Their sharing was very tender and sincere, and many said they found it extremely moving.

Our third speaker, currently President of the Hindu Council of Birmingham and a member of ITV's Diversity Panel, Mrs Jyotsna Thanki, gave us a number of valuable points in the brief six or seven minutes which we had allotted to each of the speakers. She spoke about the value of marriage in the Hindu tradition, the 'coming together of two souls', in a process where we have to respect and nurture each other. She stressed her belief in the extended family, and suggested that any 'loss of independence' is a myth, often subtly promoted and encouraged by the media. Children are protected by aunts, uncles and grandparents, learning a code of conduct and inheriting family values in a natural way, and those values are strengthened when we pray together. Grandparents have much more time and patience than parents (!) and often teach the children through stories. The extended family can be very supportive in difficult times, and we share both good and bad fortune together. We can enjoy the benefits of greater mental health, as we endure less stress. As a result of 'extended' unity, Jyotsna's UK family consider Birmingham to be their 'family HQ'!



Colin and Maureen Foxall from the Christian faith. - Mrs Jyotsna Thanki receiving the Ambassador for Peace award.

Following our speakers, David then gave a 15 minute slide presentation covering the main points of the purpose and value of the Blessing. Most of our guests had heard this presentation in the 3 or 4 weeks leading up to the Blessing, hopefully inspiring them to participate. However, a few people had not received so much preparation and we wanted to be sure that everyone could catch the significance of the occasion, and feel a sense of 'togetherness'. It is always good to remind ourselves of the incredible value of each person's life, and what a privilege it is to be together in one another's company, representing all our respective faith and cultural traditions on such a unique occasion. David emphasised the 3 steps towards peace, what we would call the 3 Blessings, the important sense of renewal which we are cultivating on this occasion, individually as couples and all together representing so many strands of humanity, and the unique contribution which Father and Mother Moon are making in bringing people together towards the ideal, and under the banner, of 'One Family under God'. One couple who were attending for the first time, prominent members of the Birmingham Council of Faiths, commented on this unique aspect of our gathering and the remarkable diversity of people under one roof, coming together around such an important common purpose. David also emphasised the goal and aspiration for each one of us to become a 'True Parent', something which Father and Mother Moon have been pioneering on the world level for so many years.

We then conducted the Holy Juice Ceremony, with 4 representative couples from the Jain, Muslim, Christian and Hindu traditions participating at the front, followed by all other couples together. There is a light-hearted, joyful aspect when doing this, but many couples also take it very 'seriously' especially if they have been able to prepare themselves a little beforehand.



David speaking about the 3 Foundations for Peace. - Our 4 representative couples were the first to receive the Holy Juice.



Around 43 couples took part, some where both members of the couple were present, in some cases where only one of the couple was able to attend, and also several older people were there as widows or widowers, thinking about their departed loved ones and all the memories of a life shared together.

We then moved on to the Blessing, beginning with several readings/prayers from the Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian, Bahai and Jewish scriptures, inviting God's blessing upon us all, followed by the various components of the Blessing Ceremony, including the Holy Water Ceremony, the affirmation of our 4 Blessing Vows, and the Blessing Prayer. Bouquets of flowers were offered by 2 younger members of our congregation and, in offering these, we sent our collective good wishes and thanks to Father and Mother Moon and the Founders of all our different faith traditions, as well as to those people/couples participating in the same Blessing in countries all over the world!



L to r: Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian and Bahai prayers. - Even towards the back of the room, all felt part of the occasion.

Two congratulatory addresses were given, the first by Councillor Hendrina Quinnen from our local government. She expressed her concern as to what is happening to family values, and how we can bring them back, stressing that if society is to improve we all need to take part, government, faith communities, media, schools, etc. She described the close family she grew up in, where neighbours were treated as an extension of the family. She emphasised that young people need a lot of support and guidance, especially to understand that marriage is a long-term commitment. She mentioned that in standing for a traditional view of marriage, we are not standing against others. The union of husband and wife is intended by God for their mutual joy, and we need to encourage people and families to live for the benefit of the whole community.

Mrs Satinder Kaur Taunque, OBE, Deputy Lieutenant for the West Midlands, and as such a representative of Her Majesty the Queen, gave the concluding remarks. She, and her husband Dr Jagjit Taunque, have taken part in the Blessing a number of times, including in Korea. "As Her Majesty the Queen's representatives for this region of the United Kingdom, we would like to offer our very best wishes to all of you, and for holding this event. We have come here together as 'One Family under God'. How do we pass on family values to our children? The family is the key to peace and togetherness. In Sikhism, 'seva' or selfless service, and listening to others are keys to peace. They can be practised in the family, and through selfless service you can find unconditional love, which is true parental love. This equals an ocean of peace, love and togetherness. The young people and children here have hope because of you. Well done to all of you for sharing positive love.

Love has entered my heart. Even though I wrote a note on its door saying 'No Entry', love replied "I cannot read". A loving human being is many times better than an educated human being without love. Be role models to instigate good values. Accept the 'otherness' of people around you, and live in harmony. Take care of your thoughts when you are alone, and take care of your words when in public."



Cllr Hendrina Quinnen speaking to us.

Mrs Satinder Taunque giving her concluding remarks.

Finally, we took the opportunity to recognise 2 very special families, one Hindu and one Sikh, with a Family Recognition Certificate, and then a number of men and women with the UPF and WFWP Ambassador for Peace awards.

It is such a joy to recognise and honour people's goodness, at all levels of society, in governance at the national and local levels, but also at the family and community level where people are genuinely living for the sake of others. We always make the point that it is both a recognition of admirable achievement, providing others with role models as individuals, couples and families, and also an encouragement to continue to live for the greater good as we work together to build a better world. What greater title can one have than 'Ambassador for Peace'! It has such a lovely ring to it.



Receiving the UPF Ambassador for Peace award. - Lady Mohinder King receiving flowers and a WFWP award.



Recognising Lisa Eksteen (South Africa) and Lily Sibley (UK). - Recipients of the WFWP Ambassador for Peace award.

Following the formal proceedings, we proceeded to enjoy a wide variety of food provided by both a local Asian caterer, Shankar's Sweet Centre, and a number of our FFWPU families. At the same time, we were able to listen to some lovely songs offered by a number of participants. We have to say a big "Thank You" to all our Birmingham/Midlands community, first and second generation, who worked so well together to take care of all the practical aspects which allowed the event to happen.

It's also encouraging when our different Federations work together for the same cause. The Women's Federation in particular, was instrumental in bringing many of the ladies to the Blessing, via the Women's Peace Meeting and other related activities. The woman's heart of compassion and concern for peace is a powerful force in this respect.



A very happy Jonathan, the youngest participant in the Blessing!

In conclusion, as mentioned in the Blessing Prayer ... "let us pray for the courage to make a new beginning, in our couple, in our families and in society; let us bring more love into one another's lives in our families, as fathers, husbands, mothers, wives and children; let us pray for God's blessing on all those couples who are participating with us in this same event all over the world; and let us pray to find ways to bring greater peace and harmony into our troubled world, towards the ultimate dream, the ideal of 'One Family under God'.

David and Patricia Earle