



Interfaith Peace Blessing

“Towards the Ideal of One Family Under God”

Birmingham, UK, February 27, 2016

By David Earle

Held in the Unitarian New Meeting Church in the city centre of Birmingham, and attended by people of all faiths, cultures, races and nationalities, coming together to recognise the central importance of the family, and marriage, in building a harmonious society where we can live together with one another in peace.

Introduction, Recognitions and Speech Presentations.

February 27th 2016 was a momentous day for the city of Birmingham, and beyond! 70 couples and, altogether 160 participants, people of sincerity, representing so many faiths, races, cultures and ethnic backgrounds - it felt like the whole world(!) - came together centred on our common recognition and understanding of the importance of

marriage, and the value of the family, in maintaining a healthy society and building a world of peace. So much heart, collective effort and preparation had gone into this day, such that we were able to create a beautiful atmosphere together, transcending all our differences and making us genuinely feel like 'One Family under God', the overarching theme of this day of blessing.

This tradition of blessing was begun many years ago by the Founders of the Universal Peace Federation, Family Federation and Women's Federation for World Peace, Father Moon and his wife, Dr Hak Ja Han Moon, and has become widely known and supported by religious leaders and adherents of all faiths during the last 25 years.

Some participants had travelled several hours to attend the event, from Wellingborough, Leicester, Coventry, Sheffield and Lancaster, in addition to those of us from the West Midlands. We began by recognising their presence, and the effort made by all of us to make it such a special occasion. We then recognised some of our 'VIP' guests and dignitaries : our Deputy Police Crime Commissioner, Cllr Yvonne Mosquito; 3 former Lord





Mayors - Cllr Chaudhury Rashid, Cllr Mahmood Hussain and Shashi Dholakia, the latter now the Chair of the Wellingborough Interfaith Group; our Deputy Lieutenant - Dr Jagjit Singh Taunque MBE, representing his wife Satinder Taunque OBE; Resham Singh Sandhu MBE, who held the position of High Sheriff of Leicestershire, the oldest secular office under the Crown; city councillors Mohammed Idrees and Mariam Khan, the latter being the youngest to currently hold this public office at 25 years of age; the President of the Hindu Council of Birmingham, Tarang Shelat, and his wife; Sheikh Arif Abdul Hussain, founder of the Al Mahdi Institute (1993), and its current Director and Senior Lecturer; Gopinder Kaur Sagoo representing Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh and the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sevak Jathar community; United Nations representative of many years standing Mrs Friederike Rice; several Christian ministers, including Rev Eve Pitts, the first black woman to be ordained as a Deacon in the Church of England in 1992, and ordained as Rev Canon Pitts in 1994; and long-time friend and media representative Dhiren Katwa, Senior Editor at Asian Voice. Quite a list!

We were also extremely privileged to have with us 5 women from Syria, and we asked them to stand for us, in recognition of our solidarity with all the many thousands of families and individuals who have suffered in the Middle East crisis. This provoked a spontaneous round of applause, and was a very moving, poignant moment for all of us in the room.



Sheikh Arif Abdul Hussain

Patricia with Iranian and Syrian women



Councillor Yvonne Mosquito



Gopinder Kaur Sagoo (GNNSJ)

Dr David Earle, MC for the occasion, and officiator for the Blessing with his wife Patricia, began the proceedings, introducing each of our 4 speakers in turn. Sheikh Arif spoke of our fundamental essence as a man or woman, beyond all external labels and circumstances, and how, in our coming together, 'love changes everything'. Cllr Yvonne spoke in a very 'human' way about her recent trip to The Gambia in west Africa, where her heart of compassion was moved by the plight of some of the people there, and she both felt and treated them as if they were part of her own family. Kathleen Roche-Nagi, Director of 'Approachable Parenting' in Birmingham, described the broad range of courses and skills which her organisation has to offer, to Muslim and non-Muslim alike, and described herself as a teacher, life-coach, counsellor and community mediator. Her soft-spoken, unassuming style belies the impact which she and her organisation have had on hundreds of people, particularly helping many children with their self-esteem and achievement through the 'Positive about You' programme. Finally, Gopinder Kaur

Nagoo, representing the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sevak Jathar community, and a non-executive director of the Nishkam Centre, spoke not only from a Sikh perspective but also as a wife, a mother, an educator and as someone passionately concerned about our children's future, and the future of the whole of modern-day society. She suggested that we live in a 'post-secular' time which offers a chance for more dialogue between people of faith and secular positionings as to what ingredients are necessary to generate personal, family and societal wellbeing. We should reflect more deeply what faith perspectives can bring to the table. 'Family' evokes ideas of kinship, interconnectedness and interdependence, all reflected in the Sikh logo for Oneness, Ik Oankar. These ideas and feelings bring a different mood and tone to how we relate to each other and collaborate in the wider society. In Sikhism, family life itself (grihasti jeeavan) is valued as a gift and responsibility, and as a vital first base to nurture spiritual traits which all humans are born with, the spiritual 'inheritance' passed down to us from our Creator. Both adults and young people, therefore, have a role to play in bringing the best out of each other, and then naturally making a difference in the wider world.

It is always very empowering to see the fundamental commonalities which we share, particularly relating to the centrality of the family in society, expressed so eloquently from our different faith perspectives.



Kathleen Roche-Nagi spoke on 'parenting'

David Earle then gave a brief presentation on the significance and importance of this Blessing, emphasising the value of making a new start, particularly as couples but also collectively, representing so many strands of our modern 'global village'. He also stressed the crucial value of the integrity of the family which we uphold and stand for in this blessing ceremony, and that in standing for the integral family we are not standing against something else. We can only feel compassion and empathy where there is pain and brokenness. Our challenge is to try and bring more of God's love into each of our families, as a parent for our children, as a husband and wife for one another, as a child with a heart of love



and respect towards our parents and elders, and beyond that to be a blessing for our neighbours and community. We reflected that one way to do this is through a willingness to forgive one another for past hurts and mistakes, and having the courage to apologise for things we may have done wrong - through a 'Spring-cleaning' of the heart.

Holy Nectar Ceremony



Sam and Alex Lukwago



Willem & Carolina Hollmann

After spending a few quiet moments in reflection, all the participants shared a cup of Holy Nectar, the wife drinking half the cup first, then the husband drinking the remainder, representing our new beginning and symbolising our oneness under God. This gesture of peace towards one another is a familiar part of some of our faith and cultural traditions. We reminded ourselves that

similar events were taking place all over the world, with brothers and sisters of all nations and cultures following the same ritual, linking our hearts and lives together as one human family. We concluded this part of the proceedings with a sincere prayer, promising to make a new beginning, individually, as couples and families, for our city, and for our nation.

Blessing

We next invited representatives from the Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh faiths to offer words and prayers of blessing on all the participants. The depth and sincerity of each one's offering was beautiful to behold, and a fitting way to begin.



Words from the Holy Qu'ran



A Christian prayer



Anjana reading from the Hindu scriptures

We all then stood for everyone to be sprinkled with holy water, symbolising a new start, and then took a universal vow, promising to remain true to the values and virtues coming from God and our respective faith traditions, aspiring to develop a true parental heart, to keep fidelity within our couple, to help our children maintain their purity of mind and body in a very difficult world, and to share God's blessing with our extended family , neighbours and the wider society.

We hope to make a real difference in our fractured society, and will try and influence government and media, particularly on the issues of pornography and the sexualisation of our young people, to develop programmes of marriage preparation and marriage enrichment, and to help young people in schools through character education.

After a presentation of flowers, we all turned to the East and, thinking about the founders of all our different faith traditions, Abraham, Jesus, Prophet Mohammed, the Hindu saints and sages, Guru Nanak, the Lord Buddha, and finally Mother Moon in Korea, we offered a collective bow to the Divine. This was followed by a musical offering, an original song composed by Tom Pritty called 'Making Rainbows', very appropriate for this unique occasion. Tom, his son Patrick, and Viola Dirnhofer sang together : "Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews; Sikhs and Buddhists, all religions; one God, Allah, Yahweh, Brahma; it's good to be together...."



Presentation of flowers



Tom's original song



Congratulatory remarks



Three rousing cheers of happiness - Presentation of Ambassador for Peace awards

After some final, eloquent words from Dr Jagjit Taunque who, together with his wife Satinder, has represented Her Majesty the Queen in the West Midlands for a number of years now, we concluded with 3 rousing cheers of "Ok Mansej" wishing everyone, quite literally from the original Korean, 'ten thousand years of happiness' ! How wonderful !

Before indulging in the banquet of food which awaited us, Patricia Earle presented the prestigious 'Ambassador for Peace' award to a number of well-deserving ladies. Brief biographies can be found at the end of this report, representing so much collective goodness on the part of all these wonderful women.

Most people then stayed for the food and refreshments on offer, a substantial part of it kindly donated by arguably Birmingham's No 1 Asian caterer, Shankar's Sweet Centre. Musical entertainment was provided by several of those who had been attending the blessing, and the whole affair concluded with a genuine sense of happiness and fulfillment. As in previous years, it was a unique and unforgettable experience, and we hope everyone came away with a sense of renewal and a greater feeling of hope in the future.



Our youngest city councillor, Mariam Khan.



With members of a West Bromwich church



A beautiful inter-racial couple



An 'impromptu' band providing entertainment

Some comments

Dear David and Patricia,
I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for inviting me/us to the Interfaith Peace Blessing today. I enjoyed every moment. Thank you for acknowledging me, a symbol of our true and cemented friendship. Keep in touch and may you continue to fly the flag for peace, harmony, love and unity higher and higher. You have, I feel the blessings of many.

Kind regards, Dhiren Katwa

Greetings.

Ram and I would like to thank you for inviting us to the Interfaith Blessing, and honouring me with the

Ambassador for Peace award at the event. I feel very blessed, truly humbled and inspired to work hard further and serve the community. Ram and I enjoyed the event. It was organised so well and was very inspiring indeed. Have a blessed day, Dr Chithra Ramakrishnan FRSA

Good morning, Patricia and David. May I first of all thank you for inviting myself and Usha to the Interfaith Peace Blessing yesterday. It was such a joyous event that we were so glad we could take part. Our friend, Bhupendra, thoroughly enjoyed it too. I mentioned to you that I have recently been asked to Chair the Wellingborough Interfaith Group. Our AGM is set for Tuesday 12th July at 7.00pm. I am requesting you to be our Guest Speakers for that event, and hope that you will be able to accept this invitation. Hope to hear from you soon.

Shashi Dholakia

Good morning, Patricia.
Thank you for encouraging me to take part in the annual World Peace Blessing. I would love to see it taking place at a central place in Birmingham - the Town Hall, the Council House, even the International Convention Centre - with more churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, etc taking part. Maybe get young people to help with social media to get the word out. PEACE and LOVE... so very important in today's world. You have done fantastically well ... and continue to be a voice for Peace and Love.

Have a great Sunday, Patricia. Love Lucretia

Brief biographies of some of our new Ambassadors for Peace. (14 awards were presented in total)

Amra Bone

Amra has been involved in interfaith activities for more than 20 years, including with the West Midlands Faiths Forum and the Coventry Circle for Peace and Reconciliation. Her work

in the UK has also been supplemented by visits to Germany and Jerusalem. She sits on a Sharia Council panel in Birmingham's Central Mosque, helping women to come through difficult marriage experiences, and she always stands up for 'gender justice'. Amra has been a Maths and English teacher, and currently teaches Islamic Studies at Universities in Birmingham, Warwick, Bristol and Cambridge. She has devoted much time representing the Islamic faith in personal conversations, in debates and in television documentaries, all for the purpose of greater cohesion in our society.

Diana Lampen

Diana and her husband spent the first twenty years of their marriage living and working in a special school for emotionally disturbed boys. They learnt so much there about the hurts that can lead to violent behaviour and about the long slow work of healing. Subsequently, they lived in Northern Ireland during The Troubles, joining in many of the efforts to bring about a more peaceful society, including Peace

Education work with children, quite literally risking their lives in the process. They joined the West Midland Quaker Peace Education Project when they returned to England in 1994, working in many local schools. After the break up of Communism, they were invited to Belarus and Ukraine to train teachers and hundreds of children in the skills of communication, co-operation, conflict handling and mediation. Each experience has taught them so much, which they could then take into the next adventure. They both feel that they have been guided by God throughout their lives.

Cllr Yvonne Mosquito. West Midlands Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner

Yvonne Mosquito was born in Balsall Heath, Birmingham. Her community work began at the age of seventeen when she became a supplementary school teacher assistant. She was elected as a councillor to Birmingham City Council in 1996 and has served as Executive Member of the Birmingham City Council Cabinet, Chair of the

Labour Group and Deputy Chief Whip. Yvonne has chaired several committees including: Birmingham City Council's People & Organisation Committee, the West Midlands Immigration Strategic Board, the Social Cultural & Health Board and the Birmingham Housing Benefit Review Board.

Yvonne was formerly Vice Chair of West Midlands Police Authority, where she served on several committees, including as Chair of the Personnel Committee and Vice Chair of the Equalities Committee. Other previous experiences include being Chair of the Council of Black Led Churches (112 Churches), advisor on the Interfaith Religious Board, Chair of the Birmingham Women's Enterprise Development Agency and co-coordinator of two Supplementary School projects. Additional experience has included serving as: Commissioner of the Legal Services Commission and representative for Initiatives of Change which is a world-wide organisation promoting respect and peace.