

## UPF Birmingham, UK's World Peace Blessing -- 60 Couples - Many Backgrounds

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Birmingham, United Kingdom -- Sixty couples from many different backgrounds took part in a World Peace Blessing held by UPF and an affiliated organization.

As the UK's second city, Birmingham is relatively small, with a population of just over 1 million. However, from being a haven for Protestant nonconformists in the 1660s until today, over 350 years later, its capacity to welcome people of all religious, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds has been one of its best characteristics. The resulting, astonishing diversity is nowhere better displayed than at the World Peace Blessing, held each year in Birmingham for the past 10 years.

The Marriage Blessing Ceremony was organized jointly by UPF and Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) on July 14, 2018, in the Unitarian New Meeting House.

Around 180 people gathered together, focusing on the family as the bedrock of a healthy society, seeking to renew our shared commitment to one another as couples and families, and within the wider "family" of brothers and sisters under one God.

Bishop John Jackson, one of five Christian ministers present, opened the proceedings with an invocation, inviting God's presence and blessing on us all. Bishop Jackson is a great man of God and someone whose lifelong devotion, in service to others, has touched many lives.

We were privileged to have with us our deputy lord mayor, Councilor Chaudry Rashid, together with three other city councilors, all of them great public servants. Also with us were Dr. Pyara Bhogal from the Sikh Council UK, Mr. Adrees Sharif from the Muslim Council of Britain, and Mr. Jatinder Birdi, co-chair of the Interfaith Network UK.

Several other organizations were represented, including the Indian Ladies Club, the Birmingham Iranian Club, the Bahu Trust, Arya Samaj, the All Pakistan Women's Association, the British Organization for People of Asian Origin, and the Federation of Indian Muslim Organizations. Several families were also present, having sought refuge in Birmingham as a "city of sanctuary" -- from Syria, Rwanda, Somalia and Eritrea.

A young UPF volunteer, Viola Dirnhofer, sang a beautiful devotional song to begin the program, followed by Rev. Carver Anderson, a long-standing friend, who gave a personal, Christian perspective on "God and Family" that was full of heart and passion.

David Earle, the leader of UPF in Birmingham, then gave a presentation in which he reminded the audience of the purpose of the gathering: to renew our commitment to fidelity, purity, family life and public life within our respective faith traditions, personally, but also in solidarity with our brothers and sisters all over the world.

Following the holy nectar ceremony, with couples sharing the same cup, symbolizing our oneness under God, we reminded ourselves of the darker side of human history, comprising physical, emotional and psychological abuse, especially perpetrated by men against women. The couples made a promise to each other, with three light taps on each other's shoulder, to do our best, from now on, to never allow violence or anger to enter our relationships, to always treat each other with the utmost respect, and through our words and actions to always try to focus on our shared happiness.

Six ladies offered a short reading about "blessing" from different faith traditions: Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Bahá'í and Brahma Kumari. Attendants then sprinkled the couples with holy water as a symbol

of a new and fresh beginning. The couples then affirmed the Blessing vow: to uphold the best values and virtues of our respective faith traditions, to remain faithful to one another as couples, to try to bring up our children with purity of mind and body, and, finally, to develop a "true parental heart" and be a blessing to others -- in our family, neighborhood, workplace and all spheres of influence. This was then solemnized with a Blessing prayer.



We heard two more wonderful perspectives on the family, from Serina representing Sikhism and from Sheikh Nuru Mohammed representing Islam, followed by a beautifully sung recitation of the Holy Qur'an from Amina Sultana. Congratulatory remarks were offered by Mr. Jatinder Birdi of the Interfaith Network UK. Then David Earle led the participants in three cheers of the Korean phrase "Eok Mansei" -- which means literally "10,000 years of happiness and peace."

Having concluded the Blessing, all that remained was to present Ambassador for Peace awards to a number of deserving recipients, five men and ten women. The award recognizes each person's past efforts in family and public life and also commissions them to continue their good work in living for others, which benefits our future society.

A variety of food and refreshments were then on offer, some supplied by one of Birmingham's finest caterers, Mr. Shankar and family, and with contributions from a number of local UPF members, all of whom came together and worked hard to make the event a great success. We look forward with anticipation to many more such Blessing events in the future.

