

# A beautiful experience with the UK Eritrean community.

A report by David and Patricia Earle. Birmingham, UK. August 1, 2019



A feeling of holiness, and tradition, permeated the atmosphere inside St James Church in Handsworth, scene of a national gathering of the UK's Eritrean community. Around 600 people, members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church, had arrived in Birmingham, from London, Manchester and other cities, for a day of worship, fellowship and social activities. Preparations started in the church at 2.00am (!), worship began at 6.00am and continued until 2.30pm, with wonderful musical offerings from 3 groups of young people, parents and finally elders.

The latter reflected the importance and value of the family in the Eritrean community. Arriving in the UK, often as refugees and asylum seekers who have experienced great hardship, like so many others from African and Middle Eastern countries, they have found our culture not so family friendly, with their children being exposed to a much more secular, individualistic and sexualised social environment. For Christians and Muslims, the church and the mosque will often become a refuge where the parents and elders try to give their young people the education and experience which will hopefully allow them to maintain their spiritual and family-oriented traditions. The couple relationship also often comes under strain, as a result of other social factors.



A musical offering from the parents.



The spiritual leaders process around the church.

We have been close friends with one Eritrean couple, Emmanuel and Jordanos, for a number of years, and have always been impressed by the quality of their children. Jordanos has attended our study evenings and the Women's Peace Meeting on a regular basis. Emmanuel, invited us to speak in the church, during this national gathering, and so David spoke about our Federations' peace activities, the Interfaith Peace Blessing, the difficulties of integrating into British society, and our Character Education programme.



David speaking, and Emmanuel translating.



Both men and women clothed in white.

We said that we would try to help their community with both educational and practical resources, and we have already managed to locate some office space for them where couples can go for counselling, and family-related issues. After the worship concluded, food was available for everyone outside, and Patricia was able to walk in the grounds of the church, offering everyone the Holy Nectar, which none of the 100's of people refused! It was a very moving, holy occasion.

We hope that, with time and a deeper foundation, we can conduct the more formal Interfaith Peace Blessing, help with some of the issues which their community is having to deal with, and provide family and character education which can allow them to integrate into society, on the positive foundation of their existing culture and values.



Outside in the beautiful sunshine.



Patricia offering everyone the Holy Nectar.



The women's catering team!



Young people enjoying lunch.