

Home Ministry: Interfaith action is the defining aspect of our personal lifestyle

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David: We were living in New Jersey, where David was working for Il Hwa. The work was not interesting, but there was the opportunity to hear Father speak at Belvedere on many weekends, which was wonderful. Patricia looked after our three small daughters and did a lot of Home Church activity, continuously. Patricia's father came to visit us twice and was very inspired to meet all our friends in the local community, resulting from this Home Church activity. Through this, he changed his perception of our movement, which was the foundation for him to buy a house for us when we moved back to Europe.

We were planning to stay in America and were granted a Green Card [a Lawful Permanent Resident Card] in early 1991, after receiving Labor Certification and Immigration Status. However, on hearing Father speak at Belvedere in July 1991, asking everyone to go to their hometown, we felt a deep calling from God, and gave up the Green Card to begin a new phase of our life. We arrived back in Birmingham, United Kingdom, with three small children, our dreams and not much else!

Why Interfaith?

This is not easy to answer, as a number of factors were involved. One is David's experience when joining; he was so inspired by the universal aspect of salvation, based on God's heart and the desire to have all people return to God's embrace. Another is that we both have a natural curiosity; we want to get to know people who are different from us. Another is the unique nature of Birmingham, where that curiosity can find its full expression in a city that is probably one of the most diverse in the world, considering its small size of just over one million people.

Another is the unique institution where David's parents worked in Birmingham for twenty years, the Selly Oak Colleges. Initially a federation of Christian colleges, Quaker, Methodist, Baptist, Anglican, etc., in the 1970s it added on a Black and White Christian Partnership, then a Jewish-Christian Study Center and then a Muslim-Christian Department. Students came there from the four corners of the earth to study and then go back home with a qualification. We were able to stay in one of the International Student Houses when we first arrived back from America in November 1991 and made friends from all over the world very quickly.

Patricia: Two people in the Selly Oak Colleges pioneered Interfaith work, an Anglican priest and a Catholic sister. The Catholic sister persuaded the Birmingham City Council to fund a new Multi-faith Center, where people could go to learn about world religions. David attended their course, and then Patricia after him. Through this, we got to know people and faith leaders from all the major religious traditions.

In addition, Patricia was able to work in one of the colleges, helping to arrange a Women of Faith Day on a regular basis. This exposure gave us great confidence and was a foundation for all the interfaith work that we have been involved in during the last thirty years. In particular, Patricia's Women's Peace Meeting played a major role, beginning with three women, and being ecumenical -- Christian and then developing into an interfaith group as women brought their friends, and women of different faiths found a safe-space in which to learn, and to share openly -- particularly Asian women and Muslim women. The meetings are now roughly one-third Christian, one-third Muslim, and one-third other faiths and no faith.

Many difficulties arose

We can list a few of the main ones. To be accepted, or to relate normally, to many Christian people, particularly in mainstream Christianity, especially middle-aged and older Christians, who had a lot of

negative feelings toward our movement was difficult. This impacted on our Interfaith work, because it was often Christians who initiated and directed Interfaith activities and organizations.

The Women's Peace Meeting helped many Christian women to change their concepts about us. Also, Patricia was asked to help organize Women of Faith events at one of the Selly Oak Colleges, the College of the Ascension. Women from non-Christian faiths, who helped to organize these events, testified to the Christian woman organizers, who then changed!



David: Many of our own FFWPU members thought what we were doing was "strange," and that it was "not witnessing." We could not offer the results of our efforts vertically and often felt lonely and isolated. Fortunately, we always had the backing and support of the UK national leaders, who were more enlightened. We kept each other going as a couple; we had experiences with God all along the way to help us, and we were genuinely inspired by the many good people we met in different faith communities.

A constant, daily challenge was trying to find a balance between raising a family of four young children, and our public life. When our children were small, they would happily join in with many of our public activities, but in their teenage years they needed their own space, time for studies, etc., and this was not always available, as many of the public meetings took place in our home.

For many years, the Birmingham City Council had regarded us as an extremist organization, so we were not allowed to use Council property or facilities. Through appointing over four hundred ambassadors for peace, and with the support of several prominent people in the Asian community, we were able to turn this situation around in 2006.

We invited Bishop Riah, the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem and the Middle East Diocese, to speak in Birmingham. He was hosted by the city's Lord Mayor [the title for the mayor of major UK cities] and the rest is history. We also invited a number of other people from the Holy Land to visit and speak in Birmingham, and this significantly enhanced our reputation. All of this came on the foundation of taking many Interfaith groups of people from Birmingham to the Holy Land to join the Middle East Peace Initiatives, between 2003 and 2008.

Anxiety within the group

Patricia: Although the Women's Peace Group developed rapidly from 1993 onward, there were often tensions within the group's meetings, particularly when we discussed controversial topics. After the September 11, 2001 attacks in the US, strong forces were trying to separate us, but the depth of the friendships we had developed and our commitment to peace enabled us to overcome these. We continued on together even more strongly united.

One further problem was the ever-increasing number of friends and contacts, particularly in the Women's Peace Group, and how to be consistent in keeping in touch with everyone. The recent developments in social media and technology, particularly WhatsApp, have made this much easier. We have had to reduce the number of Women's Peace Meetings in the last few years, to five or six per year, as the average number of women attending became more than a hundred to a hundred and twenty.

During the Bosnian War of the early 1990s, WFWP Europe held a forty-day prayer condition, praying for women and children caught up in the conflict. Those from a different European nation would host the prayer every day. When it was the UK's turn, Patricia gathered several woman friends together to pray. It was felt that the prayer improved the prospects for peace, so three women agreed to continue to meet on a regular basis, on the 21st of each month. They were Sister Phyllis from a local convent, Julia McHugh from the Catholic Church and Lola Kundhakar from Bangladesh. Other women began to join the meeting, and the Women's Peace Group, and Women's Peace Meeting, were born.

The main format and blessing activities

All those attending very briefly introduced themselves. The guest speaker presented for twenty to thirty minutes. We then had questions and answers, an open discussion or sharing. We then allowed time for donations towards the speakers' work. A quiet time of prayer and reflection followed. We then had a musical offering. We ended with refreshments and networking.

With time, we felt that some of the women from a Christian background might like to study aspects of the Divine Principle, together with other people we were witnessing to. We invited people individually for an evening program and made clear that this was under FFWPU, not WFWP, in order that people didn't feel that we were using WFWP as a means to proselytize.

We called the evening program our Family Evening. We presented the Principle fairly systematically, but in such a way that new guests could join in as necessary. We have tried to make the evening interactive, up-to-date in terms of bringing current affairs into the presentations, and relevant to the circumstances and needs of the individuals in the audience.



David: When we began holding a public Blessing Ceremonies on a regular basis, around 2009, we called it the Interfaith Peace Blessing and held it under the banner of UPF and FFWPU. We tried to give as much education as possible before the Blessing, either to individual couples or to invited guests at a Family Evening that was focused on the Blessing rather than straight Divine Principle.

At the Interfaith Peace Blessing, couples would be asked for a donation and most couples were happy to offer this. Although many individuals and couples came to the Blessing via the WFWP Women's Peace Meeting, again they were very clear that the Blessing was a UPF–FFWPU event.

We have always held the Interfaith Peace Blessing in a public venue, apart from 2019 when we began to hold the event in our home, in a simpler way, as part of an evening program. We began around 2009, holding the Blessing in an independent, black-led Christian Church where Patricia and I had been Trustees for several years. The then European president, Yeon-cheon Song, obtained permission from True Parents for us to officiate at the Blessing Ceremony. In subsequent years, we held it in a Christian-run conference center, a Hindu Temple, a Unitarian Church and an Anglican Church. We also gave the Blessing to specific religious or cultural communities, in a Mosque to a Shia Muslim community, in a Hindu Temple to a Gujerati community and in an Anglican Church to an Eritrean Orthodox community.

Character education

We have not been presenting Character Education consistently, rather we have been looking for opportunities to introduce it into specific situations, to communities in which we have a connection with a person in a position of responsibility, a teacher, religious leader or community leader. David gave a presentation to around a hundred high school students, during a seminar at the University of Birmingham, where the Lord Mayor and the Police Crime Commissioner also spoke. A leader from the Rwandan community organized an afternoon seminar for their teenagers and parents. David gave a presentation, together with two Rwandan Christian ministers. The Rwandan High Commissioner came from London to support the event.

Currently, we are partnering with two other organizations to present a series of five one-hour online seminars for teenagers, every Saturday afternoon for the next five weeks. David will give two presentations, one called "My Place in Society, My Place in the World" and the other, "Becoming a Peace-Maker: How to Resolve Conflict."

Blessing education

We have presented Blessing education since 2009, always in the one or two months leading up to a public Interfaith Peace Blessing, which we have held at least once a year between 2009 and 2019. We have used a basic PowerPoint presentation, developed here in the UK, and have adapted it for an interfaith audience, particularly an audience including Muslim couples, since Birmingham is fast approaching twenty-five percent of the population being Muslim. We mention a possible forty-day period, and a holy honeymoon, but do not go into details publicly, because in our experience, we have to do this with individual couples after the Blessing Ceremony.

Divine Principle education

Patricia: Since 2009 or 2010, we have tried to give consistent Principle Education at our Family Evenings, every week or every second week. We try to go systematically through the Divine Principle. Patricia has kept a record of who attends each program and what they have studied. Obviously, it is not always possible for everyone to attend consistently, as people have busy lives and often children to take care of. However, sometimes mothers are inspired by the teaching, and then start to bring their children

with them.

The style of teaching we have developed has certain elements. We try to make it as inclusive as possible, as often a variety of people are attending. We try to make it relevant to people's day-to-day lives, to show that the Principle can help us with everyday problems and relationships. We try to make it relevant to what is happening in our world, to current affairs. We try to emphasize that by becoming a good person individually and by developing a good family, we are already making a significant contribution to peace. We try to make it relevant to the specific people attending, which means getting to know them well, their character, their jobs, their family, etc. We try to make it interactive, within reason, sometimes asking questions during the presentations, to keep the evening dynamic. In this way, although the essential content of the Principle is always the same, it is always different, even if people have heard it before.

When people qualify as new members, we encourage them to continue to attend the evenings programs, to support others who are hearing the Principle for first time and to gain a deeper understanding for themselves.

Regarding new people, we consider on a case-by-case basis if they can join an existing program based on how far we are into the program, etc. If an existing program is not appropriate for new people to join, we try to find enough people to begin a new series of presentations. Generally speaking, anywhere from ten to thirty people might be studying at any one time.

Teaching materials

David: We use the standard two-day and seven-day workshop PowerPoint slides for sharing the Principle (we call them Principles of Peace) but we will add in additional material from time to time to keep them up to date. We use a standard Blessing Preparation PowerPoint slide presentation for blessing preparation, which European members developed, again adding in extra material, for example, for a Muslim audience or to show the Interfaith Peace Blessing. In other parts of the world, we sometimes show videos, which illustrate specific aspects of the Principle, followed by discussions.

- a) "The Imam and the Pastor" (on overcoming enmity between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria)
- b) "Beyond Forgiving" (on forgiveness between black and white people in post-Apartheid South Africa)
- c) Various Religious Youth Service videos (Interfaith Cooperation and Living for the Sake of Others)
- d) The Middle East Peace Initiative video (Interfaith Cooperation in the Holy Land, Israeli–Palestinian, Muslim–Jewish reconciliation)
- e) Ambassadors for Peace video
- f) Assembly of the World Religions 1990 video (Interfaith Dialogue and Harmony)

Worship

- a) We have our own local FFWPU Family Church where our Birmingham/Midlands community Worships
- b) We have been trying to pioneer an interfaith worship service for the last three or four years. This has been either in our home, when we have around fifty to seventy people, or in a bigger public venue when we have more. We have been given the use of the Prayer Hall in a Muslim Academic Institute, the Al Mahdi Institute, which can hold a hundred and eighty people. The last time we used this, in June 2019, Dr. Balcomb and Mrs. Balcomb came. We had around a hundred and fifty people from all faiths, and we focused on remembering all the Muslims and Christians who had died in the terrible shooting massacre in New Zealand and the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka earlier in the year. Dr. Balcomb spoke, as did a member of the European Parliament, the secretary of the Birmingham Council of Faiths and the institute's imam, among others.

Our gift

Patricia: In conclusion, we feel that all the things we have described are a beautiful gift which we have to offer to people, in particular the Blessing. However, they all need to be wrapped in love, unconditional love, to be the most effective. This requires service, taking care of people through consistent, small acts of kindness. We can all do this, but it needs time, effort and investment, which is not easy with the busy lives we all lead. For us, this is the essence of tribal messiahship, which brings all the other things alive, and allows people to discover the heart of God, our Heavenly Parent, and the heart of our True Parents.