

World Interfaith Harmony Week Observed in London

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London, United Kingdom -- Eminent speakers from Parliament and religious groups attended an interfaith program, "Building Bridges through Interfaith Dialogue," organized by the Forum for International Relations Development with support from UPF.

The event commemorating World Interfaith Harmony Week 2019 was celebrated on February 6 in the House of Commons in the afternoon and then at UPF-UK offices in the evening under the theme "Prayers and Words to Create Harmony."

Hosted by Mr. Afzal Khan CBE MP, the program included presentations from Rev. Dr. Marcus Braybrooke, the chair of the World Council of Faiths, and Mr. Virendra Sharma MP, UPF's patron.

During the evening program at its London offices, UPF revived a tradition developed in the 1990s when it convened a long-lasting series of "Prayers for Peace" which featured many causes and issues around the world. The program encompassed both short speeches highlighting the good features of faiths other than the speaker's and prayers for conflicts that did not include the speaker's own faith community.

Professor Harbhajan Singh, a retired educator and interfaith proponent, shared a personal experience from his youth, which shaped him to be who he is now. He was born into a Sikh family but started exploring other faiths. When he was 12, he was already reading the Bible and knew he was open to other faiths. Even though his parents opposed him, he kept searching and came across the teachings of the Rev. and Mrs. Moon.

This had an impact on his spiritual search, and in the course of that journey he fulfilled his dream of meeting extraordinary people like Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Rev. Moon. Through his experiences and wisdom, he spread the message of modesty and humility. People of faith shouldn't be rooted in external things, as that can lead to conflict and emptiness, he said. Furthermore, his advice "not to hate and not to have jealousy toward others" is very fundamental for all faiths.

Meeta Joshi, an executive coach and consultant, recounted the times her heart was touched, hearing of the real-life experiences of refugee families who came to the United Kingdom after being displaced from troubled areas of the world. She addressed issues these families had faced on a daily basis, such as abuse and genocide.

She went to the United Arab Emirates to practice her strong belief and passion for providing food for children who are vulnerable and poor. "We are all one" and "We have to embrace diversity" are interfaith teachings to which we should aspire, she said.

Many religions have a common base of nonviolence, love and peace, Meeta Joshi said. She's learned mainly from Hinduism, but also from other faiths, that you should look after your neighbors first. This demonstrates that all religions teach different paths but lead us to the same goal, she said. God resides in every human being. Respond, forgive and let's be together as one, she said.

Meeta's daughter, Nishi, performed a beautiful South Indian dance devotional and a classical Indian dance.

Sheikh Dr. Hojjat Ramzy, the director of the Oxford Islamic Information Centre, spoke about how similar and one religions are in so many forms. He encouraged us to talk about everyone's religion and not to single out our own for our own benefit. Sheikh Ramzy said he wants to educate people that all religions aim for peace, no matter what they are, and we should help each other to be united because true peace comes from these religions.

His question "Do we love each other enough to stop bitterness in this world?" was very thought-provoking. He said, "We must leave behind this bitterness and come together to give peace a chance." As an example, he related a quote from Nelson Mandela: "As I walked out the door to the gates to lead me to freedom, I thought if I didn't leave behind the hate and bitterness, I would still be in prison." He stated that 70 percent of the Quran includes Christianity and Judaism, showing it's important that we should trust each other and start working for peace.

Dr. Krishna offered a wonderful reflection about her Hindu faith with some history to support her message that there should be no segregation and that we are all one community. She explained about the origin of the name "Hindu." There is no Hindu religion, but it is a caste and a community, she said.

Sheikh Rahman of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community added his insights. Faith is divine because it is a human interaction, he said. "Any faith is right," he said. He emphasized the importance of carving religion out of the political affairs and said that we are victims of faith policies of the 1960s and 1970s. Every human being is blessed with a human spirit, and we can call upon the angels to save us, he said. Interfaith is like a circle: You can have any faith and you will reach the center if you're sincere, he said. Even if you are a non-believer, you will reach the light.

The final speaker was Dr. David Hanna, the regional chair of UPF for northern Europe, who has a Unificationist and Anglican background. In 2003, he went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem with the Middle East Peace Initiative, a project of UPF. He recalled an incident when he was sitting on a wall in the center of the city next to a church. It was almost sundown, and he saw Muslims, Jews and Christians running to pray. He was very inspired that everyone had this fervor and devotion to pray, and he felt it exhibits how we are all one.

He referred to UPF founder Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon, who said, "All religions hold peace as their main and essential hope; even in segregated denominations, the kingdom of love will heal it."

The event concluded with prayers from different participants, with each lighting a candle following his or her prayer.

