



# Interreligious Association for Peace and Development

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By David & Patricia Earle

Interfaith Harmony Week began officially in 2010, in part to recognise and showcase all the good work going on in society between our different faith traditions, and also to create a greater synergy between us, increasing our capacity to build a more peaceful, harmonious world together.

With this in mind, we designed an online event 'Speaking Truth to Power', where several speakers could share examples in which people of faith are engaging constructively with decision makers, and those with responsibility, and also discuss methodology and ways in which more might be done.

Our speakers were : Sheikh Nuru Mohammed, Minister of Religion and Co-Chair of Citizens UK in Birmingham; Dr Harriet Crabtree OBE, Executive Director of the Interfaith Network UK since 2007; Mr Paul Gutteridge, Initiatives of Change, and Honorary Fellow at the Edward Cadbury Centre, University of Birmingham; Dr Lakshmi

Vyas, President of the Hindu Forum of Europe; and Dr Michael Balcomb, FFWPU Regional President of Europe and the Middle East.

Almost 200 people joined the zoom meeting, from the UK and a number of European countries, and we began our meeting with 1 minute of silent prayer, meditation and reflection, sending our collective heart of empathy and compassion to all those affected by the immense tragedy, resulting from the earthquake in southern Turkey and northern Syria.

Our first speaker, Sheikh Nuru, emphasised that Citizens UK of which he is a National trustee, a broad alliance of people from different backgrounds, including all faiths, stands for social justice and change. It focuses on 'relational power' rather than dominant power, building relationships with those in positions of responsibility to

bring about positive change which then impacts on, and brings more happiness to, all people.

Dr Crabtree, after detailing the origin of the phrase 'Speaking Truth to Power', made a number of informal comments including the fact that it is not always clear who we should be speaking to. She cautioned against the over simplification that those in power are not truthful, and those who are speaking may be somewhat self-righteous. "We are all fallible in our different ways!" She spoke of the importance of social media, and the fact that our voices may well get lost in 'the babble', stressing the need to choose careful paths if our voice is to be heard effectively.

Paul Gutteridge, emphasising that there is far more that unites us than divides us, spoke of his pioneering work in bringing together those who exist physically and/or ideologically at the margins of British society, and having very different religious and ideological perspectives. This includes those who are at risk of radicalisation. People of faith have a unique, though not exclusive, position to be a 'midwife', to provide a safe space and environment where radically honest conversations can take place. He stressed the importance of 'proximity' which enables relationships to be made, a common theme amongst the evenings' speakers.

Dr Lakshmi explained to us about 'Satya' (truth) as the mainstay of basic moral law in Hinduism, and that this is ideally inbuilt in us from childhood, to become a truthful and honest person of integrity. By making Satya our life's principle, we are taking the essential steps towards living a happy and fulfilled life. This principle should function

to maintain the proper working order of a society, its members and those who govern.

Dr Lakshmi also described her congenial relationship of some years with Hon Roberta Metsola, who has now become President of the European Parliament, and her two audiences with His Holiness Pope Francis in 2021 and 2023.

Finally, we heard from Dr Michael Balcomb, President of FFWPU for Europe and the Middle East, and someone who has met a considerable number of political and religious leaders through his work with UPF. He cited several historical figures, such as Nathan, Moses and Abraham, who spoke truth to power in different circumstances, but also reminded us that we should do the same in following the dictates of our conscience, and not be indifferent or think that we do not have the power to make a real difference in society. He quoted the example of UPF's founders, Father and Mother Moon, who have taken considerable risks in speaking to leaders such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Kim Il Sung, and Mother Moon's consistent message to world leaders that 'there are no permanent solutions to our current problems without God'.

We then heard from two respondents, City Councillor Shehla Moledina, and Mahmooda Qureshi from the West Midlands Faith and Belief Forum. Mahmooda posed the questions 'Why are we not being listened to, and Why are we not speaking out more together?' and the panellists spent some time discussing these. A very good meeting was then concluded with the music video 'Where Peace Begins' and, as Dr Balcomb had previously reminded us all : Peace Begins With Me.

