

UPF and IAPD Birmingham, UK Observes World Interfaith Harmony Week

David and Patricia Earle
February 7, 2023



UPF-UK organized the webinar through its Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD). Almost 200 people from the UK and a number of European countries joined the online meeting on February 7, 2023. Dr. David Earle, the director of UPF in the city of Birmingham, was the moderator.

Several speakers gave examples of people of faith engaging constructively with decision makers, and those with responsibility. They also discussed methodology and ways in which more might be done.

The meeting began with one minute of silent prayer, meditation and reflection, sending a collective heart of empathy and compassion to all those affected by the earthquake in southern Turkey and northern Syria.



The first speaker, Sheikh Nuru Mohammed, a minister of religion and co-chair of Citizens UK in Birmingham, emphasized that Citizens UK is a broad alliance of people from different backgrounds, including all faiths, and that it stands for social justice and change. It focuses on "relational power" rather than dominant power, he said, 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. Harriet Crabtree OBE, executive director of the Interfaith Network UK since 2007, detailed the origin of the phrase "speaking truth to power." She cautioned against the oversimplification that those in power are not truthful, and that 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, former executive director of Initiatives of Change and honorary fellow at the Edward Cadbury Centre, University of Birmingham, emphasized that there is far more that unites us than divides us. He spoke of his pioneering work in bringing together those who exist physically and/or ideologically at the margins of British society, and those having very different religious and ideological perspectives. This includes those who are at risk of radicalization.



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 among the evening's speakers.

Dr. Lakshmi Vyas, president of the Hindu Forum of Europe, explained about Satya (truth) as the mainstay of basic moral law in Hinduism. Ideally, this is inbuilt in us from childhood, so that we become a truthful and honest person of integrity. By making Satya our life's principle, we are taking the essential steps toward living a happy and fulfilled life, she said. This principle should maintain the proper working order of a society, its members and those who govern.

Dr. Vyas described her congenial relationship of some years with Hon. Roberta Metsola, who in 2022 became president of the European Parliament, and her two audiences with His Holiness Pope Francis in 2021 and 2023.

Dr. Michael Balcomb, the Europe and Middle East president of Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), an organization that is affiliated with UPF, has met a considerable number of political and religious leaders through his work. 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.

Dr. Balcomb referred to 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."

Finally, we heard from two respondents, City Councilor Shehla Moledina and Mahmooda Qureshi from the West Midlands Faith and Belief Forum. Ms. Qureshi posed the questions "Why are we not being listened to?" and "Why are we not speaking out more together?"

The panelists spent some time discussing these questions. A very good meeting concluded with the music video "Where Peace Begins." As Dr. Balcomb previously reminded the audience: "Peace starts with me."