

World Interfaith Harmony Week Observed in Washington, D.C.

Susan Fefferman
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Washington, D.C., USA—UPF held an interfaith prayer ceremony in commemoration of UN World Interfaith Harmony Week at the Peace Embassy in Washington, D.C. on February 14, 2016. The event was organized to bring people together to share a common hope for peace by learning about one another's faith and understanding the heart that draws all human beings toward the ideal of "one family under God." Fifty friends and guests of UPF attended the program, including the seven people offering prayers or meditations.

One tall, white candle was lit, representing the hope of all people for a peaceful world, and the common bonds that can bind all humankind toward that goal.

The traditional Hindu conch shell was blown to begin the ceremony, by UPF friend, Minister Amar Nath Gupta, head priest of the Hindu Capital Temple, who explained that all religions are sacred and each person should be respected. He then offered several prayers in the Hindu tradition. Next, Pastor Greg Jones, director of the American Clergy Leadership Conference of Maryland, offered his insights into Christian interfaith and a prayer for all to join together in peace.

Ven. Maharagama Dhammasiri, president of the Buddhist Vihara Society in Washington, D.C., stated that Buddhists don't pray. But then he countered that by saying that certain meditations focus on becoming good and at peace within oneself so that one can reflect and share that goodness and peace with others. Mr. David Balto, a Jewish chaplain at Medstar Washington Hospital Center who is active in three different synagogues, shared his insights into interfaith and offered a Jewish prayer for peace. Dr. Mimi Hassanein, a senior fellow at and Middle Eastern community liaison for Montgomery County in Maryland, represented Islam. As a Muslim woman she is allowed to lead prayers for women and to speak on Islam at some mixed gatherings. She is an Egyptian who found deeper faith while living in the U.S. Her bright smile encouraged everyone to join in her reading of Koranic verses and her prayer for peace.

Native American Mr. Michael Gray Hawk Parsons is of Algonquin Coastal, Skurare (Tuscarora), Tsalagi (Cherokee) and Scotch/Irish ancestries. He drums, sings and dances at Native Powwows in the eastern U.S. He shared a pinch of tobacco with everyone and, together with the participants, offered the tobacco in four directions: north, south, east and west, for peace, and then explained Native American beliefs about the creator and the sacred earth. Mrs. Susan Fefferman, a Unificationist, shared one unique teaching of the founders, Rev. Sun Myung Moon and Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon; that God is the parent of all humankind, representing both the male and female, and as God's image, both men and women are equal in value and each has a specific role to play in creating good families and working together for peace in the world.

Mrs. Fefferman, who served as the moderator for the program, prepared a PowerPoint of passages from sacred texts of different religions for each participant to read, regardless of their religious background or beliefs so as to “stand in the shoes of the other.” The presentation began with words from HM King Abdullah II of Jordan, who introduced the concept of a World Interfaith Harmony Week at the Plenary Session of the 65th UN General Assembly, and from the UN resolution that declared this to be an annual program. The PowerPoint also highlighted quotes from the U.S. Bill of Rights; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18, which affirms freedom of religion; UNESCO’s Preamble concerning peace; and quotes from well-known peace and religious leaders, including Nelson Mandela; Mahatma Gandhi; Mother Theresa; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.



Also included in the presentation was an excerpt from Rev. Moon’s proposal in August 2000—just before the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York, for the “forming of a religious assembly, or council of religious representatives within the structure of the United Nations... comprised of respected spiritual leaders in fields such as religion, culture and education. These members of this interreligious assembly will need to have demonstrated an ability to transcend the limited interests of individual nations and to speak for the concerns of the entire world and humanity at large... The two chambers, working together in mutual respect and cooperation, will be able to make great advances in ushering in a world of peace. The wisdom and vision of great religious leaders will substantially supplement the political insight, experience and skill of the world’s political leaders.” Hon. Jose de Venecia, Jr., Ambassador of the Philippines to the UN, at the time, brought the proposal to the UN. Eventually a committee was established and efforts to bring this important proposal to fruition are ongoing.

UPF member Mrs. Nanae Goto, a popular singer, offered her rendition of “The Impossible Dream,” while a montage of photos moved behind her. The program concluded with refreshments and time for the participants to get to know one another, which was facilitated by the moderator, who challenged everyone to learn at least the first name of each participant, in the spirit of cooperation and peacebuilding.