

Religious Youth Service welcomed GPA to take part in its Summer Project

Tomiko Duggan
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Washington, D.C., United States -- For the second year, the Religious Youth Service welcomed participants of a youth leadership program to take part in its summer project.

From May 22 to 27, 2017, eighteen participants of the Generation Peace Academy (GPA), a youth program of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), an affiliated organization, joined in the RYS project. They were accompanied by GPA staff members Louise Honey, Jan Pearson and Francis Marsal.

RYS, established in 1986 by Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon, the founder of UPF, has allowed thousands of young people to experience social service-learning projects with emphasis on leadership building in countries around the world. For the fifth year in a row, a RYS project was held in the U.S. capital.

The RYS schedule was especially designed to introduce the GPA participants to the core values of the mainline faiths and to help them understand how those faiths resolve conflicts. Also included were fact-finding tours and briefings with various think tanks and government officials and offices that focus on religion-related issues. A community service project gave the participants firsthand experience with a farming program that gives its produce to the needy. And lastly, the participants listened to the faith testimonies of longtime FFWPU members.



Monday, May 22 (Arrival Day)

On a relaxing first day, the participants visited some of Washington, D.C.'s major attractions. Tomiko Duggan, the executive director of the UPF-USA Office of Public Affairs, warmly welcomed the group.

Professional tour guide and longtime FFWPU member Steven Matthew Goldberg took the young people to the Lincoln Memorial, the World War II Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, and the Washington Monument. His dedication and love for history fully engaged the young people.

For many students, the Korean War Veterans Memorial was especially amazing because the sculptures of soldiers represented different races and faiths. Military personnel from more than 21 nations fought for Korea's freedom from communism.

After dinner the young participants listened to longtime FFWPU members Dan and Susan Fefferman recall their life of faith and sing several original songs.



Tuesday, May 23 (Interfaith Education Day)

The main focus of this day was learning about different religions through meeting representatives of the faiths.

In the morning, the young people participated in an interfaith conference at the offices of The Washington Times, listening to presentations from Judaism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and Unificationism. The program began with a candlelight ceremony in which each RYS participant read a quote from a different faith or spiritual leader and then lit a candle. The ceremony created an atmosphere of acceptance and peace among the participants, speakers and guests.

Rabbi Mark Rafael gave an excellent overview of the main beliefs, holidays and practices of Judaism. He passed around different items for everyone to handle: yarmulke, menorah, shofar, and tefillin (a small leather box containing verses from the Torah).

Father Emmanuel Effah, a Ghanaian Catholic priest, presented his deep, insightful knowledge of the core beliefs of Catholicism.

Dr. Mimi Hassanein, who grew up in Egypt and immigrated to the United States in the 1970s, recounted her experience as a Muslim and her efforts to educate Westerners about Middle Eastern culture and about Islam. She brought along a prayer rug, the Quran and a black dress which Muslim women use to cover themselves from head to toe.

Ven. Dr. Handy Inthisan, a Wat Thai Buddhist monk, explained the role of each part of a human being, according to Buddhist philosophy. "When we meditate, we must feel how the eye, ear, nose, and mouth each is inhaling and exhaling. What is the purpose of each part of our body?" The essence of the Buddha's teachings, he said, is the Four Noble Truths. "But," he emphasized, "it is important to be true to oneself and listen to our own conscience."

Rev. Henri Schauffler, a longtime leader and teacher in the FFWPU, gave an excellent presentation of the principles of Unificationism with special emphasis that it is based on a new revelation from God, given through Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon.

Through these presentations the young people learned about the beliefs and practices of the different faiths and recognized the many points of commonality that they share.

Afterward they visited three religious sites: the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (Catholic), the Washington Hebrew Congregation, and the Islamic Center of Washington.

In the evening, Dr. Alex Cromwell, the youth programs manager at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, gave a talk. His wife had given birth to their first child just two days earlier, and he spoke of his joy at being a father. Then he challenged his listeners to implement their faith in their everyday life. He suggested that a world of peace can begin when we apply our core values to our passions and change the world through our career.



Wednesday, May 24

The day began at the U.S. Department of State, learning how government officials link peace and interfaith to their activities. At the State Department's Office of Religion and Global Affairs, Amy J. Lillis, an acting special representative, and Jennifer Eldridge, a policy advisor, explained how religion has played a big part in their lives and careers, and spoke about religion's role in society. Mrs. Lillis noted that the day was historic because President Donald Trump had met with Pope Francis earlier that day at the Vatican.

"It is always important to remember one's own identity and choose the right words, so that we can create better relationships with people of different religions," Mrs. Lillis said. She explained how she found her identity through her religion, and said she is committed to help the world understand their value and identity, no matter what faith they have.

On Capitol Hill, the participants met Sen. Tim Scott, a Republican senator from South Carolina, in his office at the Philip A. Hart Senate Office Building. Senator Scott was very energetic, giving everyone a "high five" and encouraging everyone to follow their dreams.

On the way to the Capitol, they met Sen. Tim Kaine, a Democratic senator from Virginia and Hillary Clinton's running mate in the 2016 election. Senator Kaine graciously stopped to talk to the group. He asked where they were from and, seeing the logo on their T-shirts, asked what RYS stood for. It turned into a perfect moment to explain about the organization's origin and visions. He kindly joined us for a group photo on the Capitol steps.

That evening's dinner was at the Sakina Halal Grill, whose owner is Abdul Manan, an Ambassador for Peace. Everyone was excited to meet the owner and to enjoy the fine Indian-Pakistani cuisine.

The evening's guest speakers were Rev. Zagery Oliver, the director of African-American affairs of UPF-USA, and Mrs. Olga Kenedy of FFWPU-Virginia. They recalled some of their personal experiences with God and their perspectives on the importance of faith.

Thursday, May 25

Back to Capitol Hill! The participants visited Rep. Anthony G. Brown, a Democratic member of the U.S. Congress from Maryland, who is Tomiko Duggan's congressman. Rep. Brown is a colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve. The participants received a thorough briefing from his military legislative assistant, Sapna Sharma, and posed for a group photo with the congressman.

Each day the participants visited a different mainstream organization, such as a think tank, embassy, etc. On this day they visited the headquarters of the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) to meet with Dr. Douglas Johnston, the president emeritus and founder, and Michael Braeuninger, the director of development and outreach, who introduced faith-based diplomacy. They gave backgrounders on some of ICRD's signature projects in Colombia, Yemen and Syria, and in particular spoke about the success of the Madrasa Project in Pakistan. Mr. Braeuninger said, "Even in conflict, not all people are bad all the time. We are a hopeful organization. Every individual holds the potential to move on, even in a state of conflict."

At the conservative Heritage Foundation, Melody Wood, a research assistant at the foundation's DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society, said, "The Heritage Foundation stands on the principles of conservatism, which is rooted in the founding principles of traditional American values. The foundation does not officially align itself with either Democrats or Republicans. Our mission is to create and promote innovative policies and find ways to get those ideas out to the field."



Friday, May 26 (Service Day)

On the last full day of the RYS project, the participants were driven to Baltimore, Maryland, to work at the Garden Harvest farm which Gregg Jones, the director of UPF-USA for Baltimore, started a few years ago to donate organically grown vegetables to local churches and communities.

The participants were grateful to be able to give something back after all that they had received so far in the week.

In the evening Larry Moffitt, the executive director of The Washington Times Foundation, and Tomiko Duggan were the speakers. They have worked together in organizing many programs, one of which enabled the 1990 meeting of the UPF founders with the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. "In our journeys of faith," Mr. Moffitt said, "we sometimes do not feel adequate, but we've come to realize that the world is slowly moving toward peace. The world may not fully understand the internal meaning of the age we live in, but God is very alive and with us. We are never alone."

Saturday, May 27 (RYS Closing Ceremony)

The RYS Graduation Ceremony began at 9:00 a.m. in the Founder's Room at the offices of The Washington Times.

Dr. William Selig, the RYS program coordinator, who had arranged the appointments on Capitol Hill and the State Department, offered a prayer to begin the ceremony. This was followed by a beautiful song prepared by the participants. Mrs. Duggan welcomed everyone and expressed her sincere gratitude for every participant.

The ceremony continued with reflections by three representatives: Taishi Minosoko, Aika Mori and Gabriel Soulman. They agreed that their understanding and appreciation of the world religions were greatly deepened and that there is common ground among the faiths to come together for the greater good. One participant said, "Understanding an ideology in our minds has no value unless it is practiced in our hearts." They also expressed that they gained a better appreciation of their parents, who had dedicated their youth for a greater purpose than just pursuing their own happiness.



Rev. Dr. Doris T. McGuffey, founder of the Center for Dimensional Transformation Worldwide, advised the graduating group "to be true to yourself. You are each unique. You do not have to be Number One. Do your best, but don't define yourself in that way; instead, always be true to yourself."

Jennifer Gray, the director of Interfaith Outreach in the Maryland Governor's Office of Community Initiatives, was happy to learn about RYS and its initiatives to educate young leaders to understand the different religions and to find ways to work together. She said that her office would be pleased to work with RYS next year to organize a meeting with the governor.

Thomas McDevitt, who had just returned from Japan and Korea, greeted everyone in his capacity as chairman of UPF-USA. He said, "What we are believing and fighting for is real." He quoted UPF founder Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon, who urged his followers to "have the vision to help everyone on the planet."

This was followed by a ceremony in which each RYS participant received an appointment as a Youth Ambassador for Peace.

Conclusion

Everyone testified that in these six days, they gained more knowledge, inspiration, and love than they ever could have received in a university setting. "Our hearts are full. We take with us many things," said one participant.

As director of the RYS in Washington, D.C., I am very grateful to the RYS staff, especially the Japanese staff members who volunteered to prepare all the lunches and dinners in order to save money.

I am forever touched by the words of Sister Jenna of Brahma Kumaris, who told us on the first day: "Young people are the hope for the future. Since the future of the planet is the future of young people, my message to the young would be to use time, money and inner, spiritual power in a creative and constructive way to serve the self but also serve the world."

Truly I believe that to create the culture of heart, we must believe that we each have the potential to change this world. The RYS experience, more than anything, gives to each participant the hope and belief that with God everything is possible.

My gratitude and thanks to everyone working behind the scenes who took care of us: Dr. William Selig, Otmar Weinmann, Randy Francis, Yuriko Kitagawa, Nanae Goto, Haruko Iwata, Keiko Patton, Hideko Aoyama, Mayumi Kernan, Machiko Moran, and Mr. and Mrs. Tsurosaki, who donated fresh fish.