

UPF-Australia's conference to support and foster peacebuilding in Melbourne

John Bellavance
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Melbourne, Australia -- In recognition of UN International Day of Peace, a conference to support and foster peacebuilding was held in Melbourne's Docklands suburb.

The one-day conference was held on September 24, 2016, by UPF-Australia together with the Australian chapter of Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), an affiliated organization.

The 75 participants included many Ambassadors for Peace. In addition to UPF and WFWP, the organizing committee comprised members of the Victorian Peace Council, Africa Day Australia, and I Declare Peace.

The keynote address

The keynote address was provided via video from MK Hilik Bar, deputy speaker of the Israeli Knesset. His 25-minute address focused on the theme "Prospects for Peace in the Middle East." He stated that the peacebuilding efforts of UPF are significant and important. He also gave his views on how to build peace between the Israeli and Palestinian people. The video provided a platform for a healthy discussion.



Breakout sessions

John Bellavance, vice president of UPF in Australia, spoke on "Three Pillars of Peace," namely, peace in the individual, in the family and with the natural environment.

The second session dealt with "Prospects for Peace in South Sudan." The presenters were Peter Pal and Dr. Charles Mphande. Mr. Pal, an Ambassador for Peace, related some important information and insights on the current situation in South Sudan.

Dr. Mphande, a professor of international and community development at Victoria University, spoke on the role of the South Sudanese diaspora in peacebuilding in South Sudan. They can be either “peacebuilders or peace-wreckers,” Dr. Mphande said. Diaspora members often maintain links to their country of origin and can play a significant role in conflict promotion or prevention because they maintain relationships with the homeland and have relative economic strength, which can impact the political and economic life of their country of origin.

The audience was entertained by a traditional orchestra from Eastern College Australia. Teachers and students from the college provided beautiful traditional Chinese music using traditional instruments and wearing period costumes.



Bridge of Peace

Anne Bellavance, the international vice president of WFPW for the Oceania region, and Dr. Mimmie Watts, a WFPW-Australia patron, conducted the signature Bridge of Peace Ceremony together. The Bridge of Peace seeks to build real and lasting friendships between people from different cultural, religious and national backgrounds. The motto of the ceremony, coined by UPF and WFPW Co-Founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, is: “If the women of the world can be sisters, the men of the world won’t go to war.” The purpose of the Bridge of Peace is to enable healing and reconciliation between people who may have been from enemy

nations in the past.

The leading ladies for the ceremony were Arfa Sarfaraz, chair of the United Muslim Sisters of Latrobe Valley, and Shillar Sibanda, vice president of Africa Day Australia. Both women gave powerful talks about the role of women in peacebuilding.

Arfa’s reflection: “It was my privilege to be one of the leading ladies for the Bridge of Peace ceremony. I thoroughly enjoyed the day with beautiful speakers, especially the video presentation by MK Hilik Bar, who spoke about prospects for peace in the Middle East -- a talk that was very thought-provoking in the prevailing environment. His idea to ‘live with one another, not live instead of the other,’ if practiced, can bring coexistence in the war-trodden realm of the Middle East. I enjoyed the analysis of the South Sudanese diaspora by Dr. Charles Mphande about how diaspora members may be peacebuilders or peace-breakers in their homeland of origin. I was also introduced to my co-leader, Shillar Sibanda. I hope we can continue our relationship of friendship for a long time. I met many interesting people with diverse backgrounds who share a common desire for peace.”

Shillar’s reflection: “Occasions like the Bridge of Peace always make us look back and be grateful for who we are and what we have. As I was walking to my car after the ceremony, I thought about the workshop presentation that dealt with the history of the South Sudanese war, and the number of times that various governments have attempted to bring peace but failed. The fact that people as individuals have never experienced peace within themselves leads them to always revert back to what they thought they knew best -- war. Hence peace has to start in our heart and mind, before we can apply it to the nation. Arfa, my new sister, reminded us in her talk about her family deciding to house the lady who was homeless. Her parents invited the lady to stay, even though she was of a different faith and her father could end up in trouble. Peace was within the heart and mind of Arfa’s father. He knew he had to do the right thing against all odds. Thank you, WFPW, for organizing such an occasion, an event which was enlightening but also reflective of who we are as people.”

“I Declare Peace” Event in the City

The conference concluded with the “I Declare Peace” event in the city of Melbourne, where a human chain was made to form the letter “P” to represent peace. This final event was organized by Negin Mansoury, a peace activist and Ambassador for Peace.

Partners and Supporters

Partners and supporters include the City of Melbourne, Africa Day Australia, World Peace Prayer Society, the Union of Upper Nile States, United Muslim Sisters of Latrobe Valley, Eastern College Australia, I Declare Peace, and Simon Babb Photography.