

**CONGRESS 2002**  
**STATEMENT by the PRESIDENT**  
**at the GENERAL MEETING**

This time it is not an acceptance speech by the incoming President, as I shall continue for another two years, till the halfway evaluation of the Strategic Plan in 2004. It enables me to highlight a few points, as well as look back upon this Congress and the past three years.

You have just elected a new Council to serve for the period 2002-2006. The new Council has undergone considerable change: 12 people are leaving the Council and 8 new names appeared on the slate. In addition you elected 4 new people. So we are saying goodbye to Norio Sakai, who acted as Honorary Treasurer, John Buehrens, Polly Guild, Kayoko Yokota, Anne McClelland, Tatsuo Miyake, Creamlimon Nongbri, Manfred Paul, Mohinder Singh, Arpad Szabo and Sebellon Wale. On behalf of you all I would like to thank them for their service on the Council and their support of our organization.

Yesterday we remembered Yukitaka Yamamoto. His term of office would also have ended today. We owe him many thanks for all he did for IARF over a long period. I welcome the new members of the Council. We have to form a new team and I look forward to working with you. We have a lot of plans and you will be actively engaged in implementing them.

This General Meeting has not only dealt with the usual agenda of Reports by the Secretary and the Treasurer, but some important decisions were taken. In endorsing the Strategic Plan 2001-2007 you have set the IARF on a new course at the beginning of its second centenary. It should enable our organization to develop further into a programme oriented activity, attractive for young people to participate in and recognized for the quality of its work. However, we will only be able to run programmes for which we can find funding. Some funds will continue to come from our membership who are supporting the new Religious Freedom Programmes; for some activities we will have to find sponsors. But sponsors will only consider a request from us if we have demonstrated that our work is making a difference in the field of religious freedom. So to build up a "track record" we are presently using some of our reserves to get things started. In that sense this Congress is an investment for the future.

And then, of course, we will need money for our operating costs. This will have to come from our own membership. At present two-thirds of the money needed to run the International and Regional offices comes from only two membergroups. We want to redress this askew situation and I am using this opportunity to ask all the membergroups and chapters represented here, to discuss within your own organization whether it is possible to increase the annual contribution to Oxford.

The draft Voluntary Code of Conduct to be adopted at the Council meeting in 2003 or 2004 should lead to a major contribution in the struggle to safeguard religious freedom. It will enable us to enter into dialogue with many religious communities and faith traditions about the fundamental issues underlying the precious human right of religious freedom.

**The 31st Congress**

This first congress in the new millennium has been different in many respects. Of course we kept essential elements like devotions and Circle groups. But the Strategic Plan called for more active participation in designing programmes that

people can take home and implement. The Council realized it was taking a risk in making certain changes. Changes need time to be absorbed and internalized and not everybody finds this easy. It has been an exercise in finding the right balance between the expectations of the older generation, many of whom attended previous Congresses and the ambitions of the younger generation who want to participate actively in new programmes. I urge all of you to fill out the evaluation forms. We have been listening to you in the past week and we will carefully review the lessons from this Congress.

Then finally looking further back for a moment, a lot has happened since Vancouver August 1999. We had to say goodbye to Bob Traer, who served our organization for 10 years. I consider us fortunate that we found a successor in Andrew Clark. Under his inspiring leadership we have developed the Strategic Plan, which will guide us in the coming years. New faces appeared in the Office in Oxford and the regions. We have a dedicated team who work hard. The report by the General Secretary has already given you an impressive list of the 14 Religious Freedom Programmes which have been set in motion in a relatively short period.

I hope that you find on balance that the Council 1999-2002 has looked after the interests of IARF in a responsible manner. We have set ourselves ambitious goals for the coming term 2002-2006. We will need all the support we can get, not in the least from our membergroups and chapters. Let me conclude with a quote from my acceptance speech in 1999, which I think is still appropriate today. "We live in an exciting period of time. There will be problems, but I hope we can see them as opportunities to find new ways of moving forward."