

AN OUTSIDER BECAME AN INSIDER

(A brief Report on Dr. Thomas Mathew's participation at UUA's General Assembly on June 19-23, 2013 in Louisville, Kentucky, USA.)



A View of UUA GA Delegates (Photo Credit: UUA)

It was a bit surprise for me to receive an invitation from our dear friend Rev. Eric Cherry, IARF CL member and the International Office Director of UUA on February 1 , 2013 to attend the UUA's General Assembly from June 19-23, 2013 in Louisville, Kentucky.

As we know UUA and IARF has an inseparable relation from the very beginning of IARF. IARF was founded on May 25, 1900 in Boston at the 75th anniversary of the UUA. During my Presidency, I have had dreamed to attend the UUA Assembly but it became possible only now by this invitation after two years since I left from IARF Presidency. No single member of IARF can forget the history of our foundation, which was strong enough to serve the humanity last 113 years and survived many ups and downs as usual in any human history.

My religious background is quite different from UUA, and I attended only two or three UUA worships ever in my life. So, I was deeply moved to accept the invitation. Also I have been told to share about the Human Rights Education program, the flagship project of IARF in South Asia, especially in India since 2005.

The International Convention Centre was located in a beautiful place facing the Ohio River, at the Louisville City of the Kentucky State. It is relatively a calm and easy going city than other metro cities around the world.

As per the request, I prepared a presentation (ppt) to present in the program session on 21st June 2013, 01:45-03:00pm, **"Our Faith and Inter-Faith: The Blessing and Opportunity"** at the International Convention Centre. Later I got another invitation from Prof. Harold French, the US Chair of IARF to make a presentation about SACC and [SEEDS-India](#) (my charity NGO) activities at their workshop immediately after the UUA program at 03:00pm in the Paddock Room at the Marriott Hotel.

Firstly, I have to say that the entire program was well arranged, disciplined and tried to embrace all diversities as always seen in an international conference. The inauguration function was fabulous. I had never seen such big and large procession of a denomination represented by all over the country with singing, dancing and waving hands... making such joyful mood. Upon watching it I could see a banner of IARF carried by Prof. Harold French, probably the only banner other

than of congregations of UUA. This seen once again affirmed the relation between IARF and UUA. Beautiful songs, music, colourful banners, galaxy of church leaders and extraordinary speakers made a wonderful beginning. Smiling face of Rev. Peter Morales, UUA President reflected the joy of the fellowship.

Since my arrival at the Louisville airport on 19th morning I met many people who were new for me. After a while we became friends and shared our thoughts, joy and concerns. Slowly I became one of them; nobody ever enquired my religion or nationality but graciously welcomed with warm hearts.

Later I, Rev. Doris Hunter and Prof. Hal French spent lot of time at IARF booth in different occasions and shared sincerely about the future of IARF and its programs to go along with the challenges and hopes of the century.

Our session was led by four people; myself, Rev. Kotaro Suzuki, RKK Hiroshima, Japan, Rev. Rebecca Sienes from Philippines and Rev. Cassius Shirambere from Burundi, Africa. It was an informative one for the participants as well as the speakers since it was an international forum to learn one another. My presentation lasted for around 15 minutes which focused on the Human Rights Education of IARF since its inception in India till date. After all four presentations there was an interaction between the speakers and the audience.

Soon after the interaction I rush to the IARF workshop at the Marriot Hotel adjacent to the Convention centre. The room was almost packed with the participants including former IARF President Rev. Abhi Janamanchi. There also I made a presentation about the recent IARF South Asia region interfaith activities. Rev. Doris shared about her experiences especially with H H Dalai Lama and sweet memories of IARF 33rd Congress held at Kochi India in 2010. Prof. Hal French shared about Chapter programs and IARF next Congress. I appreciate both Rev. Doris and Hal French for their dedication to lead IARF in USA. I hope this momentum will attract more people to join IARF in the next world Congress.

Following days many delegates came to me and appreciated the IARF works in South Asia especially in India. It was quite new for them that IARF is so active in this region with lots of

programs. Lots of enquires were made on the procedures of the HRE training and some shared their concerns about the consequences of HRE programs in South Asia from the Government and right wing political outfits.

Rev. Eric Cherry looked very calm and cheerful throughout the sessions, but in reality he was shouldering lot of responsibilities. I had few meetings with him and mostly we shared about the IARF activities and future plans. I found all of them keeping IARF closer to their heart with an ardent desire to make it better and better.

I had a luncheon meeting with Bruce Knotts, Director UUA UN Office, it was so impressive to hear the success of his service with UUA UN and Human Rights Commission and different activities with other UN accredited NGO's.

The Ware Lecture on 21st was a magnificent one by noted young Muslim interfaith activist Mr. Eboo Patel. On 22nd morning Rev. Peter Morales chaired a Breakfast meeting with Mr. Eboo Patel with a handful of delegates from overseas and USA, framing an opportunity for us to hear one another about the interfaith achievements and future actions. I also had a chance to meet former UUA President and IARF Executive member Rev. Bill Sinkford and recalled our old days together in IARF.

I sensed lot of diversities within the congregations and its members, but all were led by one spirit- we are enjoying the differences, it is the beauty of the creator. For me it was an unforgettable experience. I realized the foundation of IARF began with mutual respect to all creations not just with humankind only, UUA is the master of this thoughts.

I came from a total different background by religion, ethnicity, language, tradition, nationality and colour but I was warmly welcomed by everyone I met and slowly integrated with the vision and fellowship of UUA.

At last Rev. Peter Morales and Mrs. Morales hosted a special farewell meeting for the selected delegates. It was a one to one meeting, which was so friendly and sweet.

View Photos (selected)

<http://www.iarfsacc.org/media/photos/index.php?cat=114>