

Report on IARF's 32nd World Congress, Fo Guang Shan

by Ellen Campbell, President

IARF's 32nd World Congress - themed "Dignity in Diversity" - was held from March 26th–30th 2006, at Fo Guang Shan, the Taiwan monastery headquarters of our Buddhist member group. The planning committee included members of the Japanese Liaison Committee, Fo Guang Shan and representatives of the IARF staff and council, with Megumi Hirota, Rissho Kosei-kai UK staff member, co-ordinating much as committee secretary.

The setting was magnificent. Located in the foothills outside of Kaohsiung, the monastery is filled with gardens, statuary, and beautiful vistas. The temple and the Great Buddha statue will remain long in participants' memories. Meeting rooms and accommodation were comfortable and well-equipped. We are deeply grateful to the Venerable Master Hsing Yun, Founder of Fo Guang Shan, for the contribution of facilities, accommodation and meals.

The major keynote address was delivered by the Venerable Master, on the topic "Harmony in Diversity." Three plenaries, with connected workshops, examined the role of religion in modern life. Participants had the opportunity to hear addresses on "Religion and Family Life" by the Rev. Bill Sinkford of the UUA, Dr. Maki Saionji, a medical doctor and author from Japan, and Dr. Oniah Kamaruzaman, Associate Professor in Comparative Religion at the International Islamic University of Malaysia. At the workshop following that presentation, Nangroi Suting, a young adult from the Khasi Hills in India spoke, and Rev. Peronne Boddaert of the Netherlands responded to the addresses.

The sessions on "Religion and Civic Engagement" were addressed by Professor C. S. Song, of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, and young adults Yvonne Pangsiw and Woodrow Maquiling of the Philippines; Rev. Will Saunders of the United States was the respondent. A final plenary session, on "Religion and Peace-making" was addressed by Dr. Elizabeth Harris, Secretary for Interfaith Relations for the Methodist Church in Britain; Shlomo Alon, a founder of the Interfaith Encounter Association in Israel; and Dr. Homi Dhalla, founder and president of the World Zoroastrian Cultural Foundation in Mumbai, India. Young adults Dotan Arad and Salah Aladdien, Jewish and Muslim co-leaders of the Jerusalem Youth Interfaith Encounter, spoke at the workshop. Dr. Gene Reeves was the respondent.

There were three sessions on IARF programmes: Young Adult Initiatives; the United Nations and Human Rights, including material on the Affirmation developed in the past four years; and the Human Rights Education project. A series of workshops on spiritual journeys and East Asian spiritual values, a workshop on Fo Guang Shan and one on Religions in Taiwan, provided rich opportunities for

learning and discussion. Also part of the programme was the opportunity to walk a labyrinth as a spiritual practice, provided by Selma Sevenhuijsen from the Netherlands.

An important feature of the Congress for the past twenty years has been the Circle Group, the opportunity for small groups of participants to meet together for several sessions, to converse and learn about one another's faith, culture, and life experience. Once again this was a highlight of the Congress. Many participants also shared in Monastery Life programs, taking part in Tai Chi, meditation, calligraphy and monastery care. Fo Guang Shan also provided tours of the monastery which included visits to the museums, the main shrine, and a performance. A cultural evening featured indigenous dancers and singers, the Rissho Kosei-kai Choir, and music by nuns and monks of FGS. The closing ceremony featured a presentation of music by the RKK and FGS choirs combined.

Devotional services were held each morning, led by representatives of several different faith groups. A beautiful commemorative service recognised the contributions of Rev. Dana Greeley, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, Rev. Toshio Miyake, and Guji Yukitaka Yamamoto, who were instrumental in expanding IARF into a truly interfaith organisation in the 1960s.

The Congress was greatly enhanced by the contingent of 35 young adults, many of whom had participated in young adult programs during the period between Congresses. They made presentations, provided splendid entertainment as part of the cultural evening, participated in sessions, and provided assistance to the Congress staff, especially in the lead-up to the meeting. Many older participants were impressed and delighted by the energy and enthusiasm the young adults brought to the meeting.

A new Council was elected at the General Meeting. The Rev. Abhi Janamanchi, currently minister to the Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater, Florida, was elected president. The new Council includes: Thomas Mathew (India, Vice-President) Rev. Geoffrey Usher (UK, Treasurer), Dr. Shlomo Alon (Israel), Fredelle Brief (Canada), Rev. Peronne Boddaert (Netherlands), Ven. Man Chien (R.O.C. Taiwan), Dr. Homi Dhalla (India), Angelina Grapa (Philippines), Morse Flores (Philippines), Esther Kopmels (Netherlands), Rev. Guji Takahiro Miwa (Japan), Rev. Yoshinobu Miyake (Japan), Rev. Bill Sinkford (USA), Rev. Guji Yukiyasu Yamamoto (Japan), Rev. Katsunori Yamanoi (Japan).

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