

Young Adults at IARF Congress 2006

by Ramola Sundram

A generous grant from the Fund for International Unitarian Universalism assisted young adults from different faith traditions to attend IARF's 32nd World Congress, held at Fo Guang Shan Monastery, Kaohsiung, Taiwan. This beautiful centre of Buddhism provided the venue for both the young adult preparatory programme and the main Congress. Other sources of funding included: IARF individual donors, Chapters and member organisations, the Greeley Foundation and the Hibbert Trust's Case Fund.

Since 2002, our RFYN (Religious Freedom Young Adult Network) has enabled young people from many different countries to be involved in interfaith projects, most of which have provided opportunities to gain essential leadership skills. Specific grants ensured that 14 Unitarians from various parts of the world were present, and 19 from other faith traditions.

The young adults arrived at Fo Guang Shan by 24th March, and we started our young adult programme on 25th March and continued until the 26th midday. The programme included getting to know each other, particularly by hearing the spiritual journeys of a number of the young people. (Personal accounts, some comments about their faith, what brought them to the Congress, experience of IARF projects etc). We also had time to share some models of good practice intended to inspire others! The young adults also had the privilege of being looked after by a wonderful "singing" nun who taught us songs, and with a colleague showed us key spiritual sites in the spectacular monastery grounds. We also had a huge amount to discuss and prepare for the main Congress as young adults were involved throughout.

For the first time, young adults made a major contribution throughout the Congress itself. In conjunction with my colleagues in the regions, we have been striving to ensure that the voices of young adults are not only heard, but are also acknowledged by their elders as having a great deal to offer. At the Congress this was certainly the case. The young adults took key roles in the plenary on religion and civic engagement, and in all workshops - on spirituality, religion and family life and religion and peace building, including one specifically on young adult projects and their methodology. They added vitality to the devotions, and Opening, Cultural and Commemorative ceremonies.

We now also have a young adult, Morse Flores, an indigenous Filipino, on our IARF International Council, the first time in IARF's 106 year history!

Woodrow Maquiling is one example of a young adult who has benefited from our work thus far. I would ask you to read the speech that he gave at the Congress (see www.interfaith.org homepage), as it gives you some idea of the background. This young man, a Catholic, has now taken part in every RFYN project since the start in the Philippines in 2003, and has been a leader throughout. He had a few words to say about what the Congress specifically meant to him.

That speech says it all regarding my involvement down to my enormous personal realizations ...but the Taiwan Congress taught me such a special lesson, which is to take things--from planning down to implementation -- with precision in a greatly harmonious way. Furthermore, beyond understanding our differences which provides a level of respect and tolerance so that we can work harmoniously, it is the friendship that we were able to create across religious, spiritual, and cultural backgrounds that links us and the people all over the world to work closely for a truthful goal--projects and programs that can strengthen us and bridge the gap of indifference and violence against humanity--towards an enduring peace that we all deserve.

As RFYN, the young adults have pledged that they would work together (indigenous peoples (IPs), Unitarians, Christians of all denominations including the majority Catholics and Muslims.) to break down the barriers that sometimes appeared so hard to collapse for the adults.

They are also playing a significant part in our Human Rights Education project work, in both India and the Philippines. Some have been trained as facilitators, showing the Human Rights films we have produced, in workshops in grassroots communities. In May, Woodrow was the person selected by a group of adults to escort a Muslim contingent to one of our HRE workshops in the Visayas, Philippines. The Muslims had been too afraid to attend because of the political situation, but Woodrow, whose father was a former Vice-Mayor, had enough status to assist. This was really an incredible event. At the start of our work, it was really hard in some places to even have the presence of young people acknowledged.

There are so many examples I could give you, including women of course, but Nangroi Suting, Unitarian from the Khasi Hills, India is another young adult who has gained a tremendous

amount. Nangroi took part in our very first RFYN project in Gujarat, India and is now trying to help set up an RFYN Khasi Hills:

The most important benefit that I received from the Congress is an experience and insight to comprehend the differences of one another that exist in our own region. Sharing our different traditions and cultures, involves immense knowledge and experience. Knowing other faiths and beliefs was what I felt very much impressed by. Meeting one another creates a better friendship rather than just knowing the parts of the world. Having met with many young adult participants from around the world, made me realize that this world is a beautiful place and we can do many things to make this world a better one. The unity, mutual understanding and our readiness that we showed at the Congress brought me some thoughts when I was back home of what to do to deal with my neighbours and my community. Respecting one another and active listening at the Congress were other lessons that I learnt from the whole session of the Congress.

As a young adult I participated in the first project in Gujarat, India where we helped to rebuild the temple and the mosque devastated from the earthquake in 2002. The work that we did in a team spirit, proved to be a very successful one and I strongly recommend to keep continuing conducting this type of project.

Apart from that, I am a Khasi Unitarian, a tribe to the extreme east of India. It is a very remote region I should say. But by getting the opportunity to attend the IARF Congress, enabled me to meet my Unitarian sisters and brothers from around the world especially from USA, Canada, Transylvania and many others. Not only that I could share and meet with my Unitarian friends but also other friends from different religions and countries and I felt so overwhelmed and blessed.

I also thank all those who were involved in planning the Congress Conference very successfully and it came out to be the best and great to all those who participated in it. Thank you very much for giving me the chance to deliver a speech on 'Religion and Family Life'. It was a wonderful lifetime experience for me being a young adult there. I know religion and family will always go hand in hand to make this world a beautiful place to live in.

I appreciate very much the unthinkable experiences that I learnt from the IARF. Thus I wish the organization to live long.

The young adults also discussed their future plans and there were also regional discussions. They went into some detail as to “What works and doesn’t work” to try to identify key points. I have encouraged them to take stock of any given situation and to identify the risks they may be taking and assumptions they may be making. If they want to do a specific RFYN project, then they receive programme planning guidelines and project design pro formas etc, so that their work is also undertaken as professionally as possible.

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Young adult participants at the Congress – total 33