

Horsham hosts international conference 20 - 23 August 2013

International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) World Congress of Faiths (WCF) Horsham Interfaith Forum (HIFF)

After months of detailed planning, delegates began arriving here on 19 August from India, Japan, North America, Europe and the UK. The theme was *"Religious Freedom and Responsibility for Planet and People"*.

After checking in at the nearby Travelodge or being met by individual hosts, there was a tangible air of anticipation as people arrived at the Unitarian Church to collect welcome packs and happily greet old friends and acquaintances.

A short tour of the town centre stopped at the Peace Garden in Denne Road. Here they were greeted by the High Priest of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine in Japan, Guji Yakiyasu Yamamoto, and the Rev Tetsuji Ochiai, dressed in their ceremonial robes.

In the peace and tranquillity of the small sunlit clearing, the priests recited prayers of purification and dedicated offerings of rice, sake, water and salt to the Kami (the Divine Being). Those present at the ritual were also invited to come forward and offer branches of evergreen. For a conference concerned with responsibility not only for people but also for the planet, Shinto was the perfect way to begin since it has been described as combining reverence for nature and ancestors with a profound sense of human beings' dependence upon cosmic powers for growth and development.

After a brief visit to the beauty of the Parish Church for a brief visit, at the Church Centre in the Causeway pipe music from John Clifford and songs with guitar accompaniment from Stuart Coupe greeted us before the official welcome by Cllr Philip Circus, the Chairman of Horsham District Council, the Rev Jo Elvidge of St Mary's, Tim Firth, the Moderator of HIFF, and Dr Shlomo Alon, the Vice President of IARF.

That afternoon the keynote address of the conference was an illustrated lecture by *"The Widening Vision of Interfaith"* by the Rev Dr Marcus Braybrooke, WCF President. This was the story of how the interfaith movement began with two pioneers whose birth 150 years ago is being celebrated this year: Sir Francis Younghusband, a British army officer, who founded the WCF, and Swami Vivekananda, a 19th century Indian Hindu monk and leader of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Movement.

After supper in the Unitarian Hall, "Israel Night" began with a performance by Andrew Wickens (violin) and Elizabeth Hills (piano) of Bruch's Kol Nidre (*whose title comes from the prayer which is recited during the evening service on Yom Kippur*).

The evening session, *"Peace in the Holy Land; it can be done"*, was introduced by Dr Alon, who is former Head of Arabic and Islamic Education at the Israeli Ministry of Education in Jerusalem. The speaker was Dr Yehuda Stolov, the founder and Executive Director of the Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA).

Dr Stolov gave us a fascinating insight into how, some twenty years ago, having joined an interfaith group of young adults in Jerusalem, the prejudices he had grown up with were gradually being replaced with a more complex view. He realised the transformative power of interfaith dialogue and, in the autumn of 2001, the newly-formed IEA set itself the task of building and strengthening a grassroots interfaith movement for peace, justice and sustainability in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Each of the following days began with a time of meditation in the calm of the Friends' Meeting House led by Sister Georgina Long of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU). In the limited space available it is not possible to summarise all the lectures given over the two days. Thanks to Patrick Wynne-Jones the excellent publication "**Religious Freedom & Responsibility for Planet and People**" contains all the papers presented at the Conference. Copies £4 plus £1 postage from "G.A. of Unitarian and FCC" Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex St. London WC2R 3HY (**plus £4 for postage outside UK**).

To provide a flavour of other subjects covered, in addition to those mentioned above, here is a list of titles:

Interfaith Lessons

- "*Religion and Violence*" - The Rev Dr Doris Hunter
- "*Violence, Non-Violence and Religious Freedom*" - Charanjit AjitSingh
- "*Doing the Splits: IARF Impossibility or Challenge*" - Dorothee Gehrmann
- "*Ethics and Magic: Two Liberal Modes of Social Change*" - Dr Dan McKanan
- "*Religious Freedom and the Challenge of Blasphemy*" - Derek McAuley
- "*Apostasy and Conversion*" - Dr Kishan Manocha
- "*Teaching Conflict Resolution Processes Through Animation Resource Materials*" - Kathy R Matsui
- "*Challenges for Religious Freedom in South Asia*" - Advocate Rengapashyam
- "*The J Holdeen India Fund: A Unitarian Universalist Trusteeship*" - The Rev Kenneth MacLean
- "*Celebrating Diversity*" - Fr Roby Kannanchira CMI
- "*Catch the Whisper from Nature*" - Guji Yakiyasu Yamamoto and the Rev T Ochiai

Partners in Peacemaking

- "*The Genius of Interfaith: Adopt, Adapt, Adept*" - Dr Hal W French, Chair IARF/US
- "*Faith and Fire: Fire and Rescue Service - Faith Communities*" - Jacquetta Gomes

Wednesday morning at the Unitarian Church a Women's panel on "Religion and Violence" was followed by a lecture on "Ethics and Magic" by Dr. Dan McKanan of Harvard Divinity School. Then participants strolled up to East Street for lunch upstairs at the Wabi Restaurant honouring our guests from Japan.

Wednesday afternoon and evening, we enjoyed the modern sanctuary and hall of the United Reformed Church for Asia night starting with IARF Council member, V. Rengapashyam and Rev. Ken MacLean

Then special thanks to United Reformed for the power point to project lectures by Father Roby Kannanchira, IALRW President, Dr. Kathy Matsui, and the film of Shinto Priest Yamamoto, MISOGI, "waterfall purification."

Thursday morning at the Unitarian Church, US/IARF President Dr. Hal French and Jacquetta Gomes stressed the value of Interfaith in helping us to adapt to change with programmes such as FAITH AND FIRE with Fire Departments..

Thursday noon the delegates travelled by coach to the Performing Arts Centre at Worth Abbey, to be welcomed by the Rt Rev Kieran Conry, Bishop of Arundel and Brighton.

After lunch in the Abbey narthex kindly laid on by Crawley Interfaith, some participants were happy to remain at the Abbey and enjoy the peace of this beautiful place. Others wishing walked down a long winding footpath to the leafy coolness and pools of the Quiet Garden. There we could also enjoy distant views over the open countryside beneath the curious stare of sheep grazing in front of the Abbey complex.

The Abbey's Unity room was the setting for the South East England Faiths Forum (SEEF) Panel chaired by Iyadh Daoud, SEEF Eastern Sub-Region Co-ordinator. Cllr Robert Lanzer from Crawley Borough Council gave an interesting overview of his work in the local authority to support the many different faith communities in the Borough. His two fellow panellists, Mr Mohammed Burghli of the Worthing Islamic Centre, and Mr Bede Gerrard, Chair of the SEEF Board, then reported on the activities of the Forum before the discussion was opened to the floor.

The return journey was made to Horsham for "Irish Night" at the Church of St John the Evangelist, beginning with supper prepared again by Eileen Wield and volunteers from the Unitarian Church and Horsham Interfaith. Thanks to a hard working band of helpers who assisted with preparation, serving and washing up, the delegates enjoyed three very different and delicious suppers, and three early morning breakfasts.

The Irish theme of Friday evening was continued in the music by Stuart Coupe and friends on guitar and harp. Everyone relaxed and joined in singing. "NO, NO NEVER."

In a change of mood, one of the highlights of the conference for me was the closing talk - "*Partners in Peacemaking*" by the Rev Chris Hudson MBE, Minister of All Souls Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church in south Belfast. A true non-conformist, Chris Hudson worked as a trade unionist, hairdresser, postman, actor and writer before becoming a minister. He played a key role in the Northern Ireland peace process as a negotiator with Protestant paramilitaries and the IRA - a role for which he was awarded his MBE.

He explained that Northern Ireland is still a divided society where, in working-class areas, people live in separated communities - Protestant (Loyalist and British) and Catholic (Nationalist, Republican and Irish); this brings about contentious situations, particularly during the "marching season" in July and August. The key, he said to solving conflict or inter communal violence "is dependent on the development of trust and partnership . . . Finding a willing partner across the table who at least wishes for a workable solution is paramount when inching towards settlement. . . It is important to be pragmatic and not demand from others what you, your community, will not accept. The hardest part is to bring the maximum number of people with you".

After a Closing Circle on Friday morning in the garden of the Unitarian Church, six IARF Council Members met to discuss the 2014 IARF Congress to be held in Birmingham, England, 24-27 August. The theme is **Challenges for Religious Freedom in the Digital Era**. On the three days preceding the Congress, the International Association of Liberal Religious Women (IALRW) will meet. Join us! For details see www.iarf.net and www.iarfus.org and www.IALRW.org

by Catherine Andrews
Edited - Richard Boeke r.boeke@virgin.net

Kansha (Gratitude) to Tony Reese (WCF), Chris Smith (HIFF), and Jeff Teagle (IARF) whose help with registration and finance made this conference possible. Special thanks to the Konko Church of Izuo in Osaka, for a generous grant toward the event.

The Pearl of Peace”

Meditation by Sister Georgina Long

The Pearl comes in many colours and sizes, and the beauty of the Pearl is at its best when set in the midst of its neighbours. We strive to draw out the most beautiful in each other, for we know the value of being together as a group. Each pearl is different, yet we arrange them so that each enhances the other. The lustre and glow of each one combines to make a beautiful necklace.

In spiritual terms each soul is valuable to the Divine and the inherent core qualities of peace, love, wisdom, truth, happiness and purity, when fully realised in the self, make one as beautiful as the glowing and lustrous pearl.

In company with each other we look and wonder at our uniqueness and we become blessed to each other. Then we can exchange pearls of wisdom from our traditions with respect and love.

As we learn together, in the full truth and original purity of our faiths, we can go hand in hand to the Divine, in sweet companionship and integrated into the human family that calls our Planet home.