

Charanjit Ajit Singh and Ajit Singh submitted a long and detailed summary of the recent 35th World Congress of the IARF held on Sunday, July 29—Wednesday, August 1, 2018, at the Marvin Center, George Washington University, Washington DC. The following is a shortened and edited version of that report for our Unifier done by our editors based on their submission and using as much of their words as possible.

Report on Re-imagining Interfaith Conference

The conference was opened with an inspirational service prepared by the IARF Peace Commission. Delegates were welcomed by Chuck Wooldridge and Rev. Dr Robert Hardie along with members of the All Souls Unitarian Church of Washington. The inspirational sermon 'Cultivating a habit of Persistence' was given by Rev. Jennifer Bailey, named as 'one of the 15 Faith leaders to Watch' and one of the keynote speakers at the conference.

The pre-conference continued with a meeting of the IARF PEACE Commission and concluded with a sumptuous lunch. Over 20 of us [met as](#) old friends and new, especially from [the USA](#), [UK](#), Germany, Israel, India and Japan.

Later that afternoon, the Conference began with a colorful opening ceremony of singing, dancing, painting and an artwork display offered by the artists from THE SANCTUARIES-DC. It was followed by welcome from Tahil Sharma and Elaine Lakam, RI Fellows and Rev. Eric Cherry, Executive Director UUA and RI Host Committee Convener. Rev. Cherry introduced more than 25 partner organizations who had contributed to the planning of the conference which was attended by more than 300 delegates from all over the USA and across the globe—from Japan, India, Europe, Kenya, and the UK. The presentation of Dana McLean Greeley Award by IARF was made to the Sanctuaries: Interfaith Arts Education, who demonstrated through their work with young people how they have used arts to 'transform two of the most divisive global issues of our time—race and religion—into forces for personal growth and social change.' The opening ceremony was closed with a song which fits the theme well: "I am you and you are me, Together we make the community, Together we share, From you I receive, to you I give, together we share. And from this we live."

During the Opening ceremony, Keynote Panel Presentations were made by Rabbi David Saperstein (Senior Adviser to the Union for Reform Judaism), Rev. Jennifer Bailey (Founder and Executive Director of the Faith Matters Network), Dr Mohamed Elsanousi (Director of the Network for Religion and Traditional Peacemakers) and Satjeet Kaur (Sikh Coalition). The panel were moderated by the Rev. Victor Kazanjian, Executive Director of URI. Some themes raised by the speakers included:

- What interfaith movement can be for people pushed to the margins
- We are not prisoners of the past but shapers of the future.
- Make justice and peace for all possible
- Reach out and be inclusive- women and youth and other colors and traditions round the table
- Peace Building needs to be coupled with development
- Move from dialogue to Interfaith projects
- Imagine what re-imagine means, take stock and what is here and now
- Shut our egos at the door, betterment for all and unrelenting optimism
- Interfaith movement needs to be a catalyst for change
- Look to the future, learn from the younger generation, have inter-generational allies
- How to use Marrakesh declaration and how to translate it into reality

- How do we deal with our 'Troubling texts'
- One cannot be a God intoxicated person without a passion for Justice
- Religious literacy is a crucial challenge

Charanjit Ajit Singh comments that this provided "A lot of food for thought for the coming days!"

During the following two days delegates held IARF Council meetings and chapter meetings.

Session II began with the presentation of the Distinguished Leadership Award in International Liberal Religion to Rev. Dr Richard Boeke. He was presented with a bronze commemorative plaque and a certificate in recognition of his active involvement and work and writing over several decades at national(UK) and international levels to promote peace and understanding between religions and cultures. The IARF award was established in 1980. It is a matter of great pride to the British Chapter that our esteemed trustee and friend was honored in such an august gathering. Dr Boeke deserves our appreciation and gratitude for what he does.

Robert Ince, incoming President, said that he looked forward to the next four years as President after his attendance at the Re-imaging Interfaith Conference. The New Council will work against extremist ideology and fundamentalism and fight against injustice of partisan governments. He said that the IARF was in a unique position, representing different faiths, and cannot work in isolation. Respect and independence are important and peace is not the absence of war but the reality of peace. His key message was 'Think freely, work freely and worship freely.'

During the General meeting, Chris Hudson spoke on the two resolutions from the British Chapter, which had previously been endorsed by the Peace Commission and the European Chapter. The first calls for a campaign to abolish nuclear weapons. The second commends Dr. Yehuda Stolov and the Interfaith Encounter Association. "The Interfaith Encounter Association is a group which challenges all religions and those with no religion to overcome the barriers of theology and language - to heal the frustrations and angers that could lead to Atomic Holocaust — to build friendship and trust between faith communities." The resolutions were unanimously passed.

The IARF Albert Schweitzer Award for distinguished service to the cause of liberal Religion was presented to **Sheikh Khaled Bentounes**, the Sufi master, founder and President of AISA (International Sufi Association Alawiyya) in France, a UN accredited organization promoting peace efforts, interfaith dialogue, reconciliation and women's rights. In his acceptance address to the conference, the Sheikh reiterated his respect for all diversity and explained how he managed to convince all the 193 states of the UN to unanimously declare 16th May as 'The International Day for Living Together.' He recognized the challenges faced and not much time left but insisted, 'We must integrate living together in our daily lives, in all the schools worldwide and in the Universities and to construct an International Academy of peace. He said, 'We have to make a culture of peace our new hope.

Programme Tracks

Ajit and I chose to attend a mix of program tracks out of the five on offer that interested us and found them useful and informative. The tracks were-

- Cultivating inclusive communities in the face of religious discrimination,

- Community organizing for social change,
- Staying 'Woke', recognizing privilege, challenging systematic oppression
- Interfaith organizing in a changing spiritual landscape purpose
- Building Skills to bring Interfaith to the next level

It was very obvious and totally understandable that the panelists in most groups were from the USA communities.

Inter-religious Public Action

On Tuesday afternoon, delegates participated in “**Inter-religious Public Action**” at Lafayette Park, followed by langar, a Sikh meal. About a hundred delegates walked in a procession, carrying placards and singing, as they made their way to Lafayette Park in the proximity of the White House. There they congregated and heard a number of speeches made by some representatives of faith communities about diversity and social justice. It was an interesting rally for us to be part of.

Later on, the delegates walked in a procession to the Church where they gathered to join in the evening meal of rice, chick peas and yogurt, provided by a Washington Sikh group. Ajit and I and other Sikhs at the conference were saddened that they themselves were not there to serve (which is part of the Sikh volunteering tradition). We did our best to say the prayers and help with serving food. Thankfully the participants enjoyed the simple vegetarian meal. It made us think even more that the Sikh place of worship, where we were in touch with the elders, would have done a better job of hospitality on the Sunday lunch time, which the program makers could not fit in. When we met the elders after the conference, we felt even stronger about what Sikh hospitality means in practice.

Circle Groups

Each delegate was assigned a circle group, which met three times during the course of the conference with the final opportunity for discussion and sharing in the plenary 'World Café/ Open Space' session on the last day. We found it of great value to learn about each other, why we became interested in interfaith work and how have we participated in our own areas. A great wealth of knowledge and experience was revealed, as well as the issues and challenges faced by those working in the field, such as language and culture, multi-faith vs interfaith, universal values vs specifics, educational privileges of certain groups, race, gender and interfaith, bi-racial families, young people and faith, religious freedom issues. It was also acknowledged that young people find their faith in action and Interfaith action is the way forward.

Some of the take-aways/ challenges / calls to action, from the conference are:

- Interfaith is not only about social justice, but it must have a spiritual dimension
- How do we sustain the positive interfaith energy when we are no longer here?
- How do we transmit the learning we have had in our own area of work and in our own communities?
- How do people perceive interfaith, or is it a fashionable label?

After a beautiful closing ceremony and the offer of gratitude and thanks to the Conference organizers, what Rev Cherry put across succinctly, was the message about building of connections, a clearer vision from the '**Re-imagining Interfaith** perspective, skills enhancement and further learning and taking home a goal, a different 'Re-imagined goal' and with Blessings!

Overall, it was a worthwhile experience for both of us and we contributed In the best we could through attendance, asking questions, raising issues, sharing our local and global experiences, networking and our own 'Re-imagined Interfaith learning' for which we are truly indebted.