WTB Monthly Meeting Minutes - World Interfaith Harmony Assembly

February 8, 2015

WTB and Interfaith Works co-sponsored the 2015 5th annual World Interfaith Harmony Assembly. As snow fell and frigid winds blew, over 200 people gathered from 3-5 PM in gorgeous St. Paul’s Episcopal Cathedral on East Fayette Street to celebrate the rich diversity of faith traditions in Central New York. The theme of this year’s event was “Commonalities in Our Diversity.” Eleven faiths participated in the program, most collaborating with a different faith in their presentation.

The program began with Dr. Joan Hillsman playing piano and leading us all in her original “Harmony Song”. Beth Broadway, President/CEO of InterFaith Works, and Betty Lamb, Interim President of Women Transcending Boundaries, each welcomed us warmly. We learned that World Interfaith Harmony Week was proposed by King Abdullah II of Jordan and established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010. The goal is to seek a peaceful world through understanding the beauty of each faith and the common values that unite us all.

Dr. Mehtab Singh Bajwa gave of the Sikh faith gave the blessing. Masters of ceremony were President Marc Clay of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints whose church hosted the event last year, and The Reverend Georgina Hegney of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

St. Paul’s Episcopal Cathedral and Ahmadiyya Muslim Community presented together. David Morgan and a group from St. Paul’s and Safeta Cerimovic (Local President of the Woman’s Auxiliary) and women from Ahmadiyya Muslim Community stood at opposite sides of the altar under a symbol representing his/her faith. They spoke of similarities among them:

* Both mark the day in prayer. Episcopals say “the office” and Muslims say prayers at the same times each day
* Both have a call to worship. We were treated to a magnificent organ prelude which resonated throughout the cathedral; Satefa read an English translation of the beautiful Muslim Adhan.
* Both begin worship services with prayer, have prayers of praise, and close with a prayer that sends worshipers out into the world to serve others
* Both have great traditions of hospitality

Next, The Islamic Society of Syracuse and Temple Concord presented. Magda Bayoumi of the Islamic Society said that both groups pray to the same God and share some similar prayers, the golden rule, fasting, justice, and peace. A member of the Islamic Society read a poem she had written “Poem for a Woman Growing Up” and a cantor from Temple Concord sang.

Pastor Richard Yost from Immanuel Lutheran Church and Bishop Matt Perry from the Church of Latter Day Saints on Bear Road introduced their portion of the program by talking about the close relationship between their churches. They have joined for dinners and programs like “God’s Work in Our Hands” collecting blankets for Vera House, school kits, and a project knitting scarves and hats. A large group of members of both congregations sang, “Have I done anything good in the world today?”

The Oy Cappella Hillel from Syracuse University brightened up a winter afternoon with two songs: “Comfort” and “One Day” (a day when war is no more). While this is a Jewish group, not all members are Jewish. “Whatever our faith,” a spokesman said, “we come together and sing.”

A representative from the Sikh foundation of Syracuse spoke about the commonalities Sikhism shares with other faiths. Sikhs believe in one God (our human creator) with Whom they communicate directly, gender equality, freedom of speech, righteousness, and service to others. Sikhs wear a clerical beard in a manner similar to that of Muslims and Jews; the turban is worn as a religious symbol. He performed a song in Hindi (?) whose words meant “God knows no boundaries. He is among us.”

Next the Sudanese Community at St. Paul’s Cathedral presented, Dr. Hegney standing with the group. They spoke of their worship and journey to be here in America and sang a lovely hymn.

The Zen Center of Syracuse and Unity of Syracuse, neighbors on East Seneca Turnpike, presented together. Rev. Edith Washington of Unity discussed their similarities: Zen is our true Nature expressing our nature moment by moment. Buddha means “the awakening.” Members of Unity have awakened to their true oneness with others, and seek to help others along the way with compassion through a “kaleidoscope of individualized expressions of ourselves.” Sing Roshi Roko Sherry Cherat of the Zen Center introduced a traditional Buddhist tale that was acted out by members of both groups. Next a multi-generational choir from Unity brought the house down with two songs: “Start a Fire in my Soul” and a Michael Jackson medley including “We are the World,” which had us on our feet and joining in.

Daryl Files of Interfaith Works invited us all to become involved in “The Compassion Games.” This program is designed to “make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world.” Sign-up sheets were available after the program and the first gathering will be held on February 26th. The goal is for Syracuse to become a city of compassion.

After a closing blessing by Rev. Penny Hart, Joan Hillsman led us in a final song “Love, Joy and Peace.” A reception followed in the lovely Hansen Dining Room, hosted by women of St. Paul’s. Finger foods were beautifully arranged and served on china, as we all mingled in a warmth that belied the blowing snow outside the windows.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Bova,

WTB Sunday Secretary