***7th Annual World Interfaith Harmony Assembly Minutes***

Monday, February 6, 2017 Hosted by University United Methodist Church

On a clear, cold Monday evening, the lovely University United Methodist Church was filled to capacity as people came together to celebrate the diversity of our community. Co-sponsored by InterFaith Works (IF) and Women Transcending Boundaries (WTB), this event is part of Interfaith Harmony Week, which has been sponsored by the United Nations since 2010. The event felt especially meaningful this year in light of the President Trump’s recent executive order barring travel from five Muslim countries.

A banner proclaiming the theme “Love is the Answer” hung over the altar; a large screen above clearly projected words and lyrics. Dr. Joan Hillsman and the Syracuse Chapter of the Gospel Music Workshop of America sang in prelude, and then led us all in her original song “We Can Live in Harmony.” Beth Broadway, President and CEO of IF, welcomed all faith traditions proclaiming “The whole world is here.” Betty Lamb, President of WTB, welcomed us saying, “We are all together in this world. One person can make a difference.”

The Masters of Ceremony were introduced. Hassina Adams of Mosque of Jesus, Son of Mary, last year’s host, passed the torch to Pastor Alicia Wood of UUMC, whose opening Blessing noted her gratitude for the energy, love, and enthusiasm radiating though the room.

In a lovely candle ceremony, each of the InterFaith Works Round Table of Faith Leaders present shared his/her religious affiliation(s) and then lit a candle in celebration of a hope or dream. It was impressive and moving to realize the rich range of traditions represented and the goals honored, among them hope for refugees, compassion, love made manifest, justice, light, thankfulness, sanctuary, growing in spirit, unity from diversity.

Twelve faith traditions then shared their understandings of the question answered by “Love.” First, Rabbi Andrew Pepperstone of the Conservative Jewish Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra Shas, spoke about the Biblical love between Abraham and Sarah. His wife Paula led members of their congregation singing a song in Hebrew and English. The words were projected in English and we all joined in on the chorus. “I will build this world from love…And you must build this world from love…And if we build this world from love…Then God will build this world from love.”

On behalf of the Mosque of Jesus, Son of Mary, Hassina Adams spoke about the similarities between the recent executive order and American’s policies restricting immigration in the 1920s and denying sanctuary to Jewish refugees prior to WW II. She fears that history will repeat itself, and reminded us of Martin Luther King’s quote: *Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*

May Memorial Unitarian Universalist Society and First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse presented together. Pastors Rev. Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe and Rev. Jennifer Hamlin-Navias reflected that Unitarians have a long history of supporting justice causes like abolition, suffrage, help for Jews after WW I, and LBGT rights. They quoted Dr. Cornel West*: Justice is what love looks like in public.* Members from both congregations sang, “Answering the call of love.”

As a deacon held the bread and wine, Pastor Rev. Quinn Caldwell of Plymouth Congregational Church explained the ritual of communion, “the fullest expression of love in our church.” At Plymouth no one is denied the communion table; its gifts are open to all. Pastor Quinn said: “We would never build a wall around it. All you have to be to eat at this table is hungry.”

A lovely young soprano from University United Methodist Church sang a beautiful song accompanied by piano. Words were projected on the screen. “Fill your days with music…Let music fill your heart.”

The Director of the Celebration Team of Unity of Syracuse introduced their presentation saying, “Love is the answer, but we are all responsible for spreading that love.” Members of the Celebration Team sang two songs. The first was a reflective song “There is only love… love that heals and sets us free.” The second was a rousing “Go Make a Difference in the World.”

As Monday is “Family Night” in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, children of all ages joined their parents in the LDS presentation. One father said that “Love is the answer” answers the question “How do we treat each other?” He retold the Parable of the Good Samaritan; Jesus’ parable tells us we should stop, have compassion, and take care of our neighbor. The group then sang “Love One Another,” a LDS Hymn often learned by young children. “As I have loved you, love one another.”

Tim Sanka of the Turkish Cultural Center spoke about how we are all part of the same family. A verse from the Koran was read in Arabic and English. “O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another.” His daughter Meryem read “For Love,” by Gulen, whom he called “a modern-day Rumi.” “Love is an elixir...In the vocabulary of humanity, love is life; we feel and sense each other with love…this chain that binds humans one to another.”

Jee Hai Song, Pastor of Hope Korean United Methodist Church and herself an immigrant from Korea, spoke about agape, the form of love which Jesus embodies and to which he calls his followers, best represented as compassion. Compassion begins with “acknowledgment” which leads to understanding and then love. On the other hand, ignoring other people leads to fear and then hatred. She and her husband read a lovely Korean poem about acknowledgment called “Flower” —her husband read in Korean and Pastor Song in English translation. “When I called his name, he came to me and became a flower.”

St. Mary and St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church presented next. A member explained that the Coptic Church, a Christian Church of Egyptian origin, was actually funded by the apostle St. Mark. Children from the Coptic Church acted out a skit of the Good Samaritan, a highlight of the evening warmly received. They then sang a Coptic song “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself” in Egyptian and English.

The Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji, Rangrig Yeshe, Thekchen Choling USA (Syracuse), and Mindfulness Group presented a Buddhist perspective. Sherry Chayat and **Bonnie Shoultz,** monks from the Zen Center, enacted a Zen dialogue about compassion based on an image of Buddha with 1000 hands and eyes. Buddhism teaches to care for everyone; to love one another without expecting anything is sincere love. Babette Visco quoted the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet: “None of us can escape the need for love,” and summarized “My religion is kindness.” Pauline Cecere from the Mindfulness Group read an “awareness” poem: “This simple love for what it is.”

Last to present, Gurdeep Singh Nidosra of the Sikh Foundation of Syracuse spoke eloquently of his own journey and fears for the future. He left his homeland 25 years ago because of religious oppression. When he looked at the Statue of Liberty, it gave him a sense of security. Recently, with Trump’s executive order and a growing hostility toward immigrants, this sense of security has disappeared. Americans are being asked to “shut our doors if someone asks for help if the person doesn’t look like you. We are being asked to build walls and hate.” He pointed out that none of the faith traditions represented tonight teach this creed. Instead, our faiths teach that “the ones who love will find love.” He urged us all “to open our minds to each other… to spread love and end hate.”

In response to recent political events and concerns for refugees, Beth Broadway spoke about the challenges ahead and encouraged those assembled to take the power of unity displayed this evening and continue to stand together for harmony and justice. “Interfaith has been nurtured in Central New York,” she said. “Don’t take this kind of diversity for granted.” She spoke of the successful collective resistance carried out in Denmark in 1942 that saved 7000 Jews from Nazi aggression. President Trump has threatened to create a Muslim Registry here. “On that day I will be a Muslim and sign the registry and I urge all of us to be Muslims on that day.” She urged us all to stand for justice, opposing the targeting of any one religion and any halting of refugees into our country. “Go Make a Difference in the World” she charged us. “Love is the Answer.”

In a closing Blessing, Rabbi Andrew Pepperstone prayed that all be brought together in peace as one big, beautiful human family.

Betty Lamb recognized Daryl Files and Penny Hart, retiring co-chairs of this event for the past three year, and thanked them for their outstanding contributions.

The program closed with Dr. Joan Hillsman leading us in singing “We Can Live in Harmony.”

A reception hosted by the Hospitality Team of UUMC followed in the fellowship hall downstairs, featuring refreshments contributed by many people who attended the program.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Bova

Sunday Secretary