

The Committee of Religious NGOs Helps Launch the First Annual

WORLD INTERFAITH HARMONY WEEK 3 February 2011

The Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations, working with the UN Department of Public Information, hosted an Interfaith Breakfast on 3 February 2011 to help launch World Interfaith Harmony Week. World Interfaith Harmony Week was proclaimed by UN General Assembly Resolution A/65/PV.34 to fall on the first week of February of every year. It was proposed in 2010 by HM King Abdullah II and HRH Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and was warmly supported by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Monica Willard, President of the Committee of Religious NGOs, saw the Week as an excellent project for RNGOs to demonstrate their commitment to interfaith solidarity and support of the goals of the United Nations. The RNGOs enlisted the partnership of the NGO Section of the UN Department of Public Information, organizing the breakfast for 8:30-9:45 a.m., preceding the weekly DPI NGO briefing. The NGO Section sent the invitation to the entire list of affiliated NGOs, greatly helping to publicize World Interfaith Harmony Week. The Salvation Army, itself an NGO, kindly offered the use of its space on East 52nd Street, where many of the DPI NGO briefings have been held during the current period of UN reconstruction.

Despite the early hour and the ice storm the day before, nearly 100 people attended the event. They were greeted by a lovely continental breakfast buffet set up by volunteers from the New Seminary for Interfaith Studies. Along with their refreshments, they enjoyed quotes on harmony from various traditions that were posted on the walls, such as: "All human beings regardless of religion, race, national origin, color, creed, or gender are living icons of God, innately worthy of such respect and dignity." (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew)

Monica opened the brief formal part of the gathering by inviting Commissioner Christine MacMillian, Director of the Salvation Army Social Justice Commission, to welcome everyone, which she did with great warmth. Rev. Deborah Moldow of the Committee of Religious NGOs expressed gratitude to the Kingdom of Jordan for initiating World Interfaith Harmony Week. She set the tone with an opening Minute of Silence and invited everyone to say together, "May Peace Prevail on Earth." Monica then introduced the very distinguished speakers.

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UN Under Secretary-General Kiyotaka Akasaka shared some of the Secretary-General's message for World Interfaith Harmony Week and mentioned the importance of human rights in interfaith harmony and how interfaith harmony helps build a culture of peace. HRH Prince Zeid Ra'ad Zeid Al Hussein, Permanent Representative of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the UN, began his remarks by joking about the length of his name. He went on to say that the real purpose of the GA Resolution is to go beyond social gatherings and reach out to congregations and encourage them to site passages from their own traditions to acknowledge the "others," as a way of breaking down stereotypes. He shared that the Resolution emphasizes the terms "love of God and love of neighbour or love of the good and love of neighbour." Since February already has Valentine's Day, it was a good month for a Week that encourages love! Marc Scheuer, Director of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, shared how the Alliance supports interfaith cooperation and that President Jorge Sampaio, UN High Representative for the Alliance, supports World Interfaith Harmony Week. Stephen Hanmer from UNICEF shared the importance of faithbased organizations in meeting the Millennium Development Goals. He also shared that spiritual well-being is mentioned four times in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Dr. Azza Karam of UNFPA ended the program of speakers. She spoke about the importance of UNFPA's work with faith based organizations and made special mention of the rights of the disabled. She was also grateful to be with us as a past President of the Committee of Religious NGOs and as a person from Egypt during this moment of turbulence in her country. Monica shared a story she saw through the United Religions Initiative list serve about how Christians were protecting Muslims at prayer during the demonstrations in Egypt. She encouraged communities of faith to recognize what they are already doing to build interfaith harmony.

Everyone in the extremely diverse crowd enjoyed the spirit of the event and agreed that more must be done next year to promote and implement World Interfaith Harmony Week. As one of the signs on the wall said:

"May Peace Prevail Among Religions. May Peace Prevail on Earth."