

*Message from Downunder: Fifth Parliament of the World's Religions*

***Make a World of Difference: Hearing each other, healing the earth***

A deep bell tone and the plaintive sound of a didgeridoo wafted across the colors of bright ochre and intense, red sandstone of the stage, as the sounds and colors of Australia engulfed the gathering at the Opening Plenary of the Fifth Parliament of the World's Religions.

Aboriginal chants and ritualized walkabouts preceded a welcoming blessing from an indigenous woman and child, as approximately 6,000 people from over 200 religious traditions gathered in Melbourne, Australia for a week of study, dialogue, reflections and worship. The stage filled throughout the evening with Shinto priestesses, Buddhist and Tibetan monks, imams, rabbis, and a Catholic archbishop as blessings were pronounced from twelve traditions. The blessings ceremonies were interspersed with performances by the Melbourne Philharmonic choir and Orchestra, sitar artists, solo dancers and ensembles.

Local and governmental dignitaries brought welcome and greetings. Each time an Australian official began a presentation, he or she began by "acknowledging the original custodians of the land and paying my respect to all of their elders." It was noted that humans have a common ancestor in Africa over 70 thousand years ago; that Australian land has been sacred over 60 thousand years; and that aboriginal culture is the oldest in the world, going back over 40 thousand years.

Three Keynote speakers lifted up concerns and themes to be addressed in the various plenary, workshops, and presentations. Dr. Sakena Yacoobi, founder of the Afghan Institute of Learning focused on bringing women and children out of poverty and empowering them through education. She was the most touching when she gave personal accounts of her country devastated by 30 years of war. "Life is struggle; jihad; life is jihad. My country is completely devastated. There is not water; no electricity; no security. People are mired in poverty, hunger and are dying. What am I to do?" For over twenty years, using personal funds and at great personal risk, she has worked to teach women to think critically because "asking questions is power." She attributes her ability to continue in the face of such monumental odds to her Muslim faith. At the heart of faith are love, compassion, justice and reaching out to help others. "Today the world is in trouble. There is war in so many places in the world. "She urged people to be strong in their faith.

Rabbi David Saperstein echoed Yacoobi's concern for a world in trouble, noting that with our advanced technologies, bad decisions of history are even more devastating. Uses of technology are the most profound moral and ethical questions of our day. "We are living in a time of failure of moral vision and political will." He urged embracing our spiritual traditions in such a way that will transform us and empower us to make better decisions in harmony with the wisdom of our spiritual traditions.

His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar told the audience that "the purpose of religion is to bring light to individuals and happiness to society." He noted that we are in a time of struggle for the survival of the planet. Another matter of concern is the pride he sees in violence and the glorification of it in so many ways in our cultures. "Faith and faith-based organizations have to play a role. We play our individual

instruments but keep our eyes on the conductor as musicians in an orchestra do so that we will have a symphony, not chaos.” He also urged through faith to develop a sense of belonging to each other so that we can together focus on the environment, children, sustainable agriculture, improving global mental health, and uplift each other. Each speaker in his or her own way lifted up the theme of this parliament, *Make a World of Difference: Hearing each other, Healing the earth.*

Hearing the same concerns and insights from diverse traditions, it was easy to relate them to the strong commitments of The United Methodist Church as found in Our Constitution, Our Social Principles, the bishops’ statement on Renewal of Creation, and the GCCUIC Strategic Plan. It is also a humble realization that The United Methodist Church is not doing this alone! Pray for the parliament and the light and wisdom God may send as we search the riches of our own spiritual traditions and learn of from others.