

A Report from the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions

by Sunfire (Robert Kazmayer)

Friends who have been to FGC will appreciate it when I say that I find the task of describing my experiences at the Parliament of the Worlds Religions close to impossible. No one can experience more than five percent of an FGC gathering. With over a thousand presenters at the Parliament, no one can report from personal experience even one percent of what happened. The focus of this report will be on my experiences and how attending the Parliament has changed my life.

I attended all seven of the plenary sessions: In addition to the opening and closing sessions, each session had a theme: "Women's Dignity and Human Rights," "Emerging Leaders," "Income Inequality," "War, Violence, and Hate Speech," "climate Change," and "Indigenous Communities," Each session had ten or more speakers, and usually ran over their scheduled time slots. Almost all of the speakers were articulate, informative and inspiring. Some were people whose words I had read but never expected to see or hear live - including Marianne Williamson, Dr. Jane Goodall, and Rabbi Michael.

My time at the Parliament was exhilarating, sometimes thrilling. But at moments it was sobering to the point of being heartbreaking. One of these moments came when Dr. Suzanne Barakat told a plenary session about the execution-style assassination of her brother, sister-in-law and another family member solely because they were Muslims. Another came at the final plenary session, when a speaker reported that, in a recent survey, fifty percent of those responding said they considered Islam to be an "evil" religion – and that same fifty percent admitted to not knowing even one person who was a Muslim.

At the time I requested my travel minute, I thought that my application to be a presenter had not been approved. In August I learned that I had a forty-five minute time slot to lead a program of Quaker Worship sharing. I used a handout with guidelines from the FGC website, properly credited, and used queries that had been used in Quaker meetings but were adapted for interfaith use:

In this time of increasing conflict over natural resources and the destruction of life-support systems (water, soil, air) on which we all depend:

1. What am I called to do in order to protect and restore the earth?
2. What is my faith community called to do?
3. How can my faith community reach out to other faith communities to protect and restore the earth?

Twelve people attended my presentation. Everyone spoke during the sharing, and one man said he would use the queries and guidelines with an interfaith group in Idaho working to combat climate change.

Since returning from the Parliament I have been making additional efforts to meet with people from other faith communities. I was already a Quaker representative to the

Greenwich Interfaith Fellowship, and my work with them has become more important since attending the Parliament.

I have also discovered a program in Albany called the Interfaith Story Circle. The act of gathering to tell stories from ones own faith traditions strikes me as something in a way equivalent to our seventeenth century forbearers refusing to take off their hats – something easy to do but which could have far-reaching benefits.

In this time of increasing calls to meet violence with violence, meet hate with hate, I encourage all of us to look for leadings on how we can reach out other faith communities with a message that peace and love must become universal values of humanity.