

Religions, bringing over 7,000 souls together. Amongst the workshops, discussions, and plenary sessions, a Declaration Toward a Global Ethic was circulated. Participants signed on with:

We commit ourselves to this global ethic, to understanding one another, and to socially beneficial, peace-fostering, and nature-friendly ways of life. We invite all people, whether religious or not, to do the same. (5)

True to this spirit throughout, the 1993 Parliament aimed to find the means for putting deeds before words.

While dialogue (6) had always been the central achievement of interfaith groups, organizations such as the International Association for Religious Freedom and the World Conference on Religion and Peace were leading the way in working to translate inter-religious understanding into action for social justice.

1995: The United Religions

The United Nations celebrated its 50th anniversary in San Francisco in 1995. William Swing, Episcopal Bishop of California, was asked to conduct an interfaith prayer service. Out of this event came a pointed question: if the nations can get together for the daily promotion of peace, why can't the religions? Religions have been the cause (or political pretext) for so much of the violence between nations and peoples--why not a United Religions? Many attempts at creating a permanent forum for broad-based international religious deliberation had already failed. No one had been able to put the right people in the right place with the right vision.

But something was different this time. Perhaps it was that the world was finally ready, in the middle of this decade that saw the parallel rise of globalization and the Internet. Bishop Swing and others began a series of summits for the purpose of creating this United Religions. The first such summit, in San Francisco in 1996, was the midwife for a United Religions Initiative (URI)--a group working to build a meaningful United Religions (UR).

1995: The United Communities of Spirit

I first stumbled across Internet based interfaith discussions back in 1994. Here people from all different religions came together in e-mail and newsgroup discussions--at best, in hopes of gaining deeper insights into others' religious beliefs; at worst, to proselytize and bash heads with those who refused to agree. Exchanges tended towards the academic or (sometimes and) contentious. From this milieu came another Internet group, this with a more grassroots vision, as reflected in its name: the United Communities of Spirit (UCS).

The UCS's purpose was to bring together people from different spiritual communities (de-emphasizing the institution of religion) in discussion and learning. Many thousands of people joined the network, and a groundbreaking vision for linking people through a database of "common factors" emerged.

Unfortunately, new age groups soon dominated its exchange, if not membership.

Many of the more mainstream religious folks moved on. Further, only a few people really grasped the power inherent in using databases to collect, filter, and collate data for the purposes of consensus building and finding other individuals with whom to work. To this point, the technology has simply been too overwhelming for most potential users to grasp and feel comfortable with. For a time though, the UCS proved the Internet's usefulness in sustaining dialogue and creating consensus amongst people of diverse religious, spiritual, and geographic backgrounds.

1997-2000 Building the United Religions

In 1997 the URI invited more people from around the world to participate in the creation of the United Religions (a concerted effort to get more youth involved was my introduction and invitation to the group). There I sat in on, and was allowed and welcomed to contribute to, sessions on organizational design, pathways to peace, and other topics. Again the vision evolved towards the grassroots, with a UR composed of local organizations or "circles" (7) that would be the agents of decision and action, unlike the traditional top-down hierarchies of bureaucracies, corporations, and other international interfaith groups.

Work on the Purpose, Preamble, and Principles (PPP) of the UR continued until 2000. It was decided that the URI would not become the UR, a name that looked to critics like an attempt to organize an independent syncretistic religion. Finally, the Charter was signed in a beautiful ceremony at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. From the careful work to bridge the wishes and suggestions of contributors the world-over came the following:

The purpose of the United Religions Initiative is to foster enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice, and healing for the Earth and all living beings.

(6)

2003: Present and Future of the Global Interfaith Movement

The URI today has member organizations on every continent working to end hunger, slow the AIDS pandemic, and promote peace amongst conflicting peoples. Individually, these local organizations "think globally and act locally." But in coming together, they also act globally in thinking locally. The Council for a Parliament of the World Religions continues their work in building understanding between religions and will be hosting another Parliament of the World Religions in Barcelona, Spain in 2004. Likewise, the World Conference on Religion and Peace continues to bring religious leaders together in international "action for common living," and the International Association for Religious Freedom persists in their efforts to secure freedom of religion for all peoples. Other groups such as the World Congress of Faiths, Temple of Understanding, and Center for World Thanksgiving as well as hundreds of other local, national, and international organizations, are all growing in their diverse yet mutually compatible agendas and actions.

The prominent 2000 Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders bears witness to the growing recognition and acceptance of inter-religious activity, to the power in bringing a shared spiritual perspective to the table of social justice. Movements of peace and spirit are always slow to gain strength, for their traditional means of change are the conversion of hearts and souls rather than governments and vested interests. But as the number of people embracing the values represented by these organizations multiplies, their collective weight and influence must surely begin to bear fruit in the global arena.

STEPHEN A. FUQUA, Editor of InterfaithNews.net, April 2003

Notes

1. Pick up any decent history book or turn to current international news for evidence.
2. Paris Talks, p 130.
3. Bahá'u'lláh, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, passed away in Bahji, Palestine (modern Israel) in 1892. Bahá'u'lláh taught that all of the world's major religions were inspired by the same divine source and were unified in their essential mission. Thus Bahá'ís might see the Parliament's date as particularly auspicious.
- 4 . Sourcebook, p 128.
- 5 . Testing, p 4.
- 6 . Which I define contextually as discussion with the aim of overcoming prejudices and misinformation and find points of agreement.

Eventually called "cooperation circles"

- 7 . The inspiration of and common legacy with the Declaration Towards a Global Ethic are quite clear.
8. Even after years of mailing list use, many organizations are still struggling to determine how best to use them and keep from information overload.

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