

UPF Ferndale, WA Conference: Religious Freedom - The Bedrock of All Freedoms

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Washington, USA -- The UPF chapter located in Ferndale, WA convened a conference on religious liberty under the theme: "Religious Freedom: The Bedrock of All Freedoms" on February 4, 2023.

Inspired by the UPF conferences on religious freedom held in Korea last November and December, our community committed to holding a program that would lead to building a coalition of informed defenders of religious rights.



Ferndale is located between Seattle to the south, and Vancouver, Canada to the north. As speakers, we invited UPF international communications director **Dr. William Selig** and **Dr. Katsumi Kambashi**, the FFWPU pastor for Western Canada. In addition, local author **Mr. Michael Downey** and Stake President **Mr. Stephen Pratt** of the LDS church, were featured speakers. **Pastor Gregory Perrin** of the Faith Community Bible Church, gave a spirited invocation to set the tone.

Dr. Selig described the situation of religious liberty in Afghanistan, China, North Korea and Russia, and the increased persecution of religious devotees around the world, particularly in those nations with communist, authoritarian or theocratic governments. He also introduced UPF International's worldwide programs and activities, including the World Summit and the Conference of Hope series which focus on freedom of religion, thought and conscience.

Mr. Pratt's family are long-time followers of LDS, going back to an ancestor in the 1800s who personally followed Joseph Smith. He gave a fascinating account of the cross-country trek by the Latter-day Saints from New York to Missouri to Illinois to Utah in search of religious freedom. In Illinois, the founder, Joseph Smith, was murdered by an anti-Mormon mob. In 1976, the governor of Missouri offered an official apology for the suffering it had caused the Mormons, and in 2004, the state of Illinois issued their

apology as well. Mr. Pratt's testimony moved the hearts of the audience.

Mr. Downey, who lived in Korea for 21 years and worked with North Korean refugees, spoke about his experiences with the Church of Almighty God, a new religious movement in China which has been persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is now banned. Mr. Downey explained that in China there are two kinds of churches: those under the control of the CCP, and those known as "House Churches," which are not registered with the government, and therefore not legally protected. The Church of the Almighty God opposes communist ideology and has replaced Falun Gong as the main target of Chinese religious persecution.



Dr. Kambashi said he feels Japan is standing on its fading samurai ethos and the bushido moral code. "I'm pessimistic about the future of Japan," he said. "After World War II, Japan had to deny itself, become more Westernized, and in the process, came close to losing our cultural heritage." He recalled a scene in the 1990 movie, *Dances with Wolves*, when the isolated soldier has overcome his cultural beliefs and won the hearts of the Lakota Indians by learning their language and customs. The dance around the bonfire with the wolf watching is a moment of transformation when he finds the freedom from within to be his true self. Dr. Kambashi said this is a universal lesson: We must learn to free ourselves from how society defines us by looking within and understanding that the "rights" we are blessed with, including religious freedom, come not from man or a government, but from our Creator.



The Q and A period following the talks allowed for a lively follow-up discussion. The program concluded with a Water Ceremony when the speakers gathered around the bowl, raised their glasses of water toward Heaven and poured the contents into the bowl to honor the oneness of our diversity. An abbreviated version of the "Conference of Hope Declaration," drafted and approved last year in Korea, was signed by the presenters and participants.

This was the third UPF program in the past year hosted by the local UPF chapter. The staff and community agreed that it was the most meaningful and hopeful so far.

The next UPF event is tentatively planned for May 27, 2023.