

## Religious Youth Service Project Promotes Interfaith in Washington DC

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RYS group photo in front of the U.S. Capitol Building

Washington DC, USA - Planning for the July 9-13 Religious Youth Service program in Washington, DC, began months ago inspired by the successful model carried out in Albania last year. Initially outreach was to the diplomatic community. The embassies of Botswana, Ghana, and Timor-Leste responded. The daughter of the Botswana ambassador and the daughter of the Ghana ambassador were among the 18 participants; the others were from the Ivory Coast, Albania, and the US. Two are still in high school, one recently graduated from a university, and the daughter of the Ghana ambassador graduated some years ago from medical school; the remaining were university students.

The Religious Youth Service (RYS), an interfaith service-learning project of the Universal Peace Federation, was founded by Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon in 1986. RYS embraces three key pillars which foster internal growth and external transformation: (1) interfaith education, (2) developing personal leadership and peacemaking skills, and (3) service — living for the sake of others.

### Interfaith education

The Interfaith Education Day was held at The Washington Times, with a focus on major world faiths. By learning about other faiths, participants came to appreciate shared values and recognized that cooperation between faiths groups is the foundation for an ethical and healthy society.

Dr. William Selig served as Master of Ceremonies. Welcome remarks were given by Tomiko Duggan, followed by a video about UPF activities. The Director of RYS International, Dr. Frank LaGrotteria, greeted the participants on behalf of RYS and UPF.

An Interfaith Candle-Lighting Ceremony was held to symbolize the unity of the participants. Seventeen candles were placed on a table on the stage. In an emotional ceremony, each participant read a quote about peace and lit a candle.

A session on Abrahamic traditions featured presentations on: (1) Jewish Faith Traditions by Prof. Richard Rubenstein, School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University; (2) Christianity by Rev. Ruth Burgess, Pastor of the Bruen Chapel United Methodist Church; and (3) Islam by Shakir Mohammed, Project Nur Program Manager, American Islamic Congress.

A second session presented the religions from the Far East and Native American religion. Presentations included: (1) Buddhism by Ven. Dr. Thanat Inthisan, Vice President, Council of the Thai Bhikkhus; (2) Hinduism by Minister Amar Nath Gupta, founder of Rajdhani Mandir Hindu Temple; and (3) Native American by Sharon Jackson, Historian and crafts maker.

The luncheon speaker was Thomas McDevitt, Chairman of The Washington Times, who spoke about the paper's four founding principles: family, faith, freedom, and service. He challenged the participants to live meaningful lives and work in their community for positive change.

The afternoon session focused on "A Vision of Peace," and featured the speakers on: (1) Unificationism by Rev. Levy Daugherty, National Adviser, ACLC Executive Committee; (2) Religious Freedom by Dan Fefferman, Executive Director of International Coalition for Religious Freedom; and (3) UPF Principles of Peace by Susan Fefferman, Director of the Ambassadors for Peace Association, UPF-DC.

The participants received further education on the faiths by visiting various sacred sites in the city, including the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the largest Catholic church in the Americas, and the Islamic Center of Washington for an in-depth briefing by Iqbal Abbasi, an imam at the mosque. The visit was made special because it was during the period of Ramadan, the greatest religious observance in Islam.



Rep. Rodney Davis (R-Illinois), in his office at the Longworth House Office Building

### **Developing personal leadership and peacemaking skills**

Participants met with men and women and organizations, role models, who exemplify dedication and leadership, and who are making positive contributions to society, the nation, and world. On Capitol Hill, they met with the Congressional representatives of the State of Illinois: Danny Davis (Democrat) and Rodney Davis (Republican). At every meeting and opportunity, copies were presented of World Scripture and the Teachings of Sun Myung Moon and As A Peace-Loving Global Citizen.

They also met with Rep. Christopher Van Hollen (a Democrat from Maryland) and Rep. Tim Griffin (a Republican from Arkansas). The meetings were followed by a guided walking tour of Capitol Hill. All of the congressional leaders expressed hope in youth and emphasized the need for responsible and honest leadership.

A briefing on how the government connects with non-profit organizations was given by Dr. Ken Bedell, Senior Advisor at the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Office at the U.S. Department of Education. Dr. John Merrill, Chief of the Northeast Asia Division, and Adam Hantman, Desk Officer for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) at the U.S. Department of State spoke on the workings of the State Department and the current status of the Korean peninsula.

After a picnic lunch in Lafayette Park, across from the White House, they met with Melissa Rogers, Executive Director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships in the White House Conference Center. The faith-based office was launched under former President George W. Bush to provide federal grants for social services to religious groups. Ms. Rogers warmly welcomed participants and expressed her desire to work with RYS and future activities.

An evening speaker was Dr. Antonio Betancourt, Director of the Office for Peace and Security Affairs, UPF-DC, who spoke on “Peaceful Reunification of Korean Peninsula and the Role of Religion.” This was followed by cultural night with singing and sharing.

A visit to the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy included a briefing by Rebecca Cataldi, Program Manager, who spoke about the importance of faith-based diplomacy. She shared about her personal journey and interest in citizen diplomacy, particularly since the 9/11 attacks in the US.

Diplomatic exchanges included a visit to the residence of the Ambassador of Ghana, H.E. Daniel Agyekum, and Mrs. Agyekum, which is also the home of RYS participant Irene Agyekum. A delicious dinner buffet with Ghanaian dishes was served followed by traditional dancing.

A lunch/briefing at the Embassy of Botswana included a welcome by the daughter of the Ambassador, RYS participant Gaebulwe Sereste, and a briefing about the Botswana economy and government by Mr. Masego Nkgomotsang, Second Secretary (Economic & Commercial Affairs), and Mr. Master Baipidi, Training Attaché.



Congratulations to our “Youth Ambassadors for Peace”

### **Service — Living for the sake of others**

The entire week was warm and sunny. But Friday, July 12, saw rain pouring down creating mud slides and lowering the temperature 10 degrees. Yet nothing would thwart the commitment to build a peace garden. The rain flowed all morning softening the ground, but when the team arrived the rain suddenly stopped and the clouds kept the temperature low so the work could progress. It felt like God had answered our prayers!

The 18 youth participants were joined by an equal number of Jewish summer camp participants ages 7 to 10 in a groundbreaking ceremony for the new “Shalom Peace Garden” at the Jewish Center and School in Silver Spring, Maryland. The children spent about 40 minutes digging and picking up sticks in “controlled chaos,” while the international participants tried to help them in constructive efforts, all the while dodging the long handles on the adult-sized garden tools. When the children finally went in to clean up to go home, the youth and adults worked in earnest. Everyone dug in enthusiastically, even the drivers, supervisors and American Clergy Leadership Conference executive director, Tom Cutts.

A well-researched plan allowed the RYS group to improve substantially an area of older boxwood shrubs, overgrown prickly holly bushes, and scrawny azalea plants. The soil was improved with topsoil and fertilizer after the weeds and debris were removed and the ground turned over. Deep holes were dug with pitchforks and shovels to hold the blue hydrangeas in the shady area, and the white tea roses on the sunny side of the 30 by 12 foot area next to the main driveway. Yellow day lilies, purple cone flowers, and gentle ground cover plants were added after the older plants were pruned. A good layer of mulch completed the look and a bright pink whirligig was added with “Shalom Peace Garden” and “RYS 2013” written on the swirling petals, which the children will certainly enjoy all summer long. Another area under the menorah on the front of the building was weeded and mulched, improving the ‘face’ of the

building considerably. The driveway and sidewalk areas were cleaned up so no trace of mud remained. When it was time to water the garden, the rain returned to do the job for us!

Rabbi Herzel Kranz, his daughter Eliya, his grandson Hershy, Executive Director Sam Leibowitz, and the school principal, Helen Goldberg took pictures with the participants in front of the beautiful area. All returned quite tired but very satisfied with the results. Working side by side created a memory no one will ever forget.



## Conclusion

This project was a total success on many levels:

The 27-year-old formula, inspired by the vision of our the founders: “Young leaders of all faiths, serving together for peace,” is a powerful means for young people to rise above doctrinal differences, unite in activities of service and learning, and develop leadership abilities.

The U.S. capital is an ideal locale for introducing young people to leaders representing the major components of society: government, diplomatic corps, NGOs, sacred sites, and offers many opportunities for service.

Religious Youth Service offers a wonderful opportunity and tool for young people to live and work together as a community, deepen their faith, share their best qualities, and become true “Youth Ambassadors for Peace.”

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## Reflections

I found (today) to be very successful first of all because we got the opportunity to meet with the ambassador of my country (Ghana) and taste the great food my country has to offer. I also enjoyed the tour of Capitol Hill and the many stories about how it came to be. This also somewhat set the mood for me to participate in the history class that I am taking this summer. I appreciate the chance to listen to (Congressman) Danny Davis, the representative from Chicago. If there are any words I will remember for a long time they are his when he says, “pain, struggle and strife are the prerequisites for change.” - Tim Adade, Bethany College, West Virginia

The content presented and discussed during the sessions at The Washington Times was an enlightening, refreshing experience, albeit quite a broad scope of topics, mainly focusing on worldly religions, peace, current issues our world faces, etc. I learned an immense deal about UPF in The Washington Times, which I had not foreseen, and which I know will provide a healthy foundation for me to work in my new administrative work for someone who is very much involved in interfaith work. The whole day overwhelmed me with a multitude of new ideas, inspirations, as well as a few future aspirations. I’m

really grateful for all of the speakers' time and investment in us. - Hana Angelino, Fordham University, New York



My initial intention was to simply observe, to be a fly on the wall. I was not so keen on involving myself too much in the activities so that I could focus more on procuring the best footage I could, while always keeping the final product in mind. But after the second day, which was the first full traveling day in DC, the true value and importance of this event really began to dawn on me. This wasn't simply an event to expose these young adults to new cultures of religions, nor was it to promote the idea of Unificationism or plant trees in the name of good service. This was a boot camp for future leaders, ambassadors, and lawmakers, in order to actively strive for peace through non-conflict resolution. This was a program designed to produce results, and to expose bright young minds, with inspiring intellect and a passion to share a larger vision for the future. - Paul Duggan, Towson University, Maryland

Seeing the congressmen who were proud of their beliefs and my peers who were really passionate about spreading their ideals really helped me to open up to this idea of using my faith as a foundation. In order to change the world, I must start by making sure that my internal foundation is pure and strong. Otherwise, I cannot win for the side of God. Perhaps what I was supposed to get out of this program is the lesson of leadership with humility and my life events these past few years seem to show that God really wanted to press this point to me before he could guide me forward. I learned a lot. I love the people participating in the program (staff included), who were all genuine and who all possessed great potential. - Seolah Kim, University of Virginia, Virginia

I had a great time being active and planting (the garden). The kids are so cute and sweet and the volunteers at the center (who were more our age) were really friendly as well. This was a great ending activity because we all had to work together to create this garden. Lunch at the Embassy (of Botswana) beforehand was great as well and I thought that the NGO meeting (ICRD) before was inspirational. That young woman (Rebecca Cataldi) has accomplished so much. She seems so normal and it was nice seeing an average nice woman have so many amazing accomplishments. I hope to one day be a similar average, nice woman who accomplishes many amazing things. - Jenna Benferhat, Boston University, Massachusetts

Rep. (Danny) Davis is a good man, even amidst the stagnant, suffocating atmosphere at Capitol Hill. Visiting multiple places (religious cooperation seminar, national Basilica, national Islam institutes, etc.), I found each one has a very different spirit. We met another representative from Illinois (Rodney Davis). He was very sincere. We also walked about the entirety of the Capitol building. It is always much more impressive in person. The spirit inside of Ghana's ambassadorial home is quite good. The ambassador was very kind to us, and I can see why my friends have always loved that country. - Chris Kenedy, George Mason University, Virginia

Today was such an amazing day! Truly saturating for the mind. So many truths and ideas are running through my head. However, love is connected through all of them. The love for family, society, peace, oneself, and ultimately God. So many things are new to me. Especially the people I met with and

interacted with. I was inspired by people who are willing to go beyond themselves for the way of sacrifice, love, and peace! My mind has definitely grown today. Also my perspective broadened. We must extend the peace that is already there and try to multiply it out. The food was amazing, especially the curry. Today I tried to reach out to others who may have not felt included or were not being talked to. The staff did a fabulous job, serving us all the time, making sure we are okay and on schedule. It was so well organized it was incredible! So happy to have a full, fun, exciting, meaningful, insightful, mind expanding day. - Elizabeth LaGrotteria, University of Bridgeport, Connecticut



Melissa Rogers, Executive Director, White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships

I enjoyed sharing a bit about Botswana and my culture, further I enjoyed the service project of planting flowers as a symbol of peace and helping others. I found the visit to the NGO intriguing and inspired me to do internships along the lines of my goals. The visit highlighted the advantages of RCR (religious conflict resolution) and our (religious respect) as a matter of peaceful discussions. It was my first time touring the Holocaust Memorial Museum and physically seeing some of the living conditions of Jews during that time period. If possible, it would be nice to have a guided tour and I would like to return for a visit to the museum. Besides that, everything was well organized. I thoroughly enjoyed the camp and I appreciate all the work it took to make this a success. - Gaebulwe Serestse, Howard University, Washington DC

The things that I was exposed to are absolutely amazing, but perhaps the most important thing that I learned was the role of religion as well as what religion can drive a single individual to do. Going into the day, RYS representatives and I went to the headquarters of The Washington Times. I learned the role of all world religions. The information given today showed how related all religions were instead of different. Moreover, if the religion were to be followed correctly then perhaps the world would be better for all who live in it; solely due to the fact that they all promote peace. Finally, I learned how religion can impact an individual to bestow the best of oneself as well as others. I learned about Rev. Moon. I've come to be intrigued by him through his efforts of promoting peace and his dedication to improve human living conditions. To conclude, I had an unforgettable day and I am forever grateful for it. Thank you. - Danny Ouman, Montgomery College, Maryland

I really enjoyed listening to Rebecca Cataldi at the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. I found her work very interesting and how it uses religion to bring out peace. She has many stories that I was very interested in. I really enjoyed going to the Embassy of Botswana, and I am eager to visit other African embassies. Planting the plants felt very peaceful and my friendships with the other participants grew more. The staff is always very helpful and organized. I'm so grateful to them for this wonderful time that I've had in the program. I will definitely do something like this again. I hope it will allow me to grow even more. - Moona Hamad, Irvington High School, New York

One of the most special things that hit me today was inspired by the continuity and the advice being given to us as young people ("be true to yourself," and "take responsibility for your life"). What made this advice somehow more special than usual was the sincerity and the experience of the people who were offering it to us. In some sense, the congress-persons, diplomats, faith leaders we've been meeting here are at the very height of success in the secular world. And here they are, turning around and sharing with

us their heart and wisdom; they believe in themselves and in others and most importantly, today, in us. A deeper conviction emerges. The children we met today were so bright and wonderful. If anything, they made real the importance of efforts like RYS and those of all the people we met. They made real and true the darkness of the Holocaust Museum and the bright, hope future/present that's worth fighting for. Thank you. The activities today were fantastic. God has managed, once again, to give me an experience I couldn't have imagined or asked for but needed. Thank you :-)

- Gerin Eaton, Cornell College, Iowa



Each speaker I heard today has such confidence in themselves about their religions. Something I learned today from the key speakers was to be true to yourself. Even though each day is filled with a lot of information every point made was so valuable and worth the patience. I love the people I'm around! This whole experience is close to amazing, sharing different languages and different points of view makes me have such a greater outlook on life. The leaders have created such a wonderful atmosphere. With a great team of adults something beautiful like this program can exist. RYS has given me a window today to see into the hearts of a wide range of peoples' faiths. I am very grateful. - Shinyul Taylor, Anne Arundel Community College, Maryland

The meeting with Rebecca Cataldi was a great opportunity for me to learn about how the interfaith organizations such as the ICRD have put efforts towards understanding, approaching and broadening the teaching of other paths to reduce or minimize extreme practices that lead to violence, hatred and death. The visit to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial museum was another opportunity to look back on war and violence; an experience I personally had in my country (East Timor). I really feel the pain the Jewish people felt at that time. I was brought to tears as I was walking and reading Daniel's diary (in the kid's story). He went through a lot of uncertainty and pain he wasn't ready for. I'm glad he survived in the end. The last activity, the service of planting a "peace garden" at the Jewish Center was meaningful. I learned that with this small activity, we start to build trust among other faith beliefs and even if it is just to make little kids smile and be happy, it is worth investing. - Francisco Neto, Luther College, Iowa

The last day meeting with representatives from different organizations was really impressive. I really got to know more about the situation in the Middle East. Also how religion and diplomacy can work together to bring order to tension zones. Visiting the Holocaust museum was really moving and made me see up close how brutal sometimes human beings can be. But working at the garden and getting to know all these children was really nice and really lifted my mood. At the end, I was really proud of our work. This made me feel part of the group seeing how hard we were all working. Lastly, I would really like to thank you for the great job. I really appreciate what everyone on the staff has done. This has been an excellent experience which I'm sure I will cherish for a long time. Thank you very much for the opportunity to meet you all! - Enareta Bezati, Baruch College, New York

I'm really grateful for the opportunity and diverse perspectives I have been given so far. I know these connections are very special and valuable, as well as hard to come by. I enjoyed the talks. There were a lot of great topics! I feel we would also benefit from having discussions and a few less talks because I know it's easy for these things to be forgotten unless you express and dig deeper into the content (which is very interesting content!) I enjoyed the American Indian dance and would've loved to do meditation

Buddhist style or pray like the Muslims and recite a scripture. There are a few ways I show God I love him: through being happy, giving to others, and experiencing the world and life he's given us, gratefully. Every day is another chance to grow in my heart and capacity to love. When it comes to youth, (and many people), we love doing, experiencing and taking action to make others happy and be happy, so more activities or interactive experiences are always interesting to us. I want to give back joy. - Angela Ruf, George Mason University, Virginia



I really got to know a lot of the brothers and sisters here. Really felt closer even if they were not Unificationists. They are so open-minded, funny, and smart. My favorite religious presentations: American Indian - People were dancing and her clothes were beautiful. She really spoke from the soul. Buddhism - I always enjoyed this religion and the monks really were cute and wonderful. They just reminded me why I find peace with this religion. All the religions really made me realize how True Parents tied all the religions together. In the US, I feel that there is a little bit of every religion. Visiting the Islamic center was interesting. I have never entered a mosque and the scarves were really fun to wear. - Yuri Higuchi, George Washington University, Washington, DC

We finished the day off by planting a "Shalom" Peace Garden at the Silver Spring Jewish Center. Rabbi Krantz kindly gave us permission to revive 2 patches of garden and plant flowers. While I am not a big fan of worms and flying bugs, I am again reminded by the beauty we helped create. Hard work pays off. This evening was particularly meaningful. If we could have harnessed the positive emotion we all generated from sharing our thoughts and experiences, it would have stopped a tsunami! I have had some very meaningful relationships in my life but this has been the most, at one time. We all shared some very deep thoughts and experiences. Being a little older and an instructor, I gave as much friendly and useful advice as I could. I personally also learned a lot from my young friends. I saw the world again through their eyes. My hope for the world was reinforced by the knowledge that these good-hearted young people, with the help of all these peace-loving persons in power, are going to make sure that the world keeps moving in a positive peaceful direction. - Irene Agyekum, Kwame Nkrumah School of Medical Science, Ghana

Susan Fefferman and Dr. William Selig contributed to this report.