

The Religious Youth Service Summer Service Program in Washington, D.C.

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The Religious Youth Service held its 2014 event in Washington, D.C., from July 21 to 24, focusing on its three key pillars: 1) interfaith education, 2) developing personal leadership and peacemaking skills, and 3) service—living for the sake of others.

The Religious Youth Service (RYS) is an interfaith service-learning project of the Universal Peace Federation, founded by Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon in 1986. The project brings youth from the world's different religions to work and live together while carrying out social service projects and putting into practice Reverend Moon's vision of solving social problems through interreligious cooperation. Since its founding in 1985, RYS has carried out 216 projects in 80 nations.

This year's event kicked off at The Washington Times, where RYS Director Tomiko Duggan and RYS Coordinator John Haydon explained the program to the 15 participants, who ranged in age from 14 to 31. Most of the students came from the East Coast, but one student had flown in from as far away as the Russia-bordering country of Georgia.

Pillar #1: Interfaith Education

Students started their Interfaith Education at The Washington Times by learning about the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as world religions of the Far East including Buddhism and Hinduism.

The students then went to Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., where they stayed for the four nights of the program. Gallaudet is a private university for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. The accommodations were very good, and it was humbling for the students to meet students with hearing disabilities. A special section entitled "A Vision of Peace" featured speakers from Unificationism, Native American issues and the Ambassadors for Peace Initiative. The presentations not only educated the participants on faiths that they may not have known much about but also helped them understand the similarities and the mission of all people of faiths to unite in peace. As Susan Fefferman, program coordinator for the Ambassadors for Peace Initiative, UPF-DC, said, "By knowing what a person believes we can respect them and work with them to bring about world peace." The RYS 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 where the students received an in-depth briefing by Imam Iqbal Abbasi. The visit was made special because it was during the period of Ramadan, the greatest religious observance in Islam. The day finished with a wonderful meal at Upshur House, the longtime Unificationist church center in Washington, where the students reflected on their busy day. Many of them remarked on the visit to the mosque and Mr. Gary Fellman's talk on Judaism.



Pillar #2: Developing Personal Leadership and Peacemaking Skills

On Day Two, the RYS students met with men and women from organizations that exemplify dedication and leadership, make positive contributions to our society, nation and world, and emphasize the role of religion in policy making. Dr. Ken Bedell, senior advisor at the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Office at the U.S. Department of Education, gave a presentation on how government connects with non-profit organizations. Dr. Bedell spoke about his time as a teacher in Swaziland in the 1970s and encouraged the students to become teachers. A trip to the Embassy of Mexico, where Vanessa Calva Ruiz from the press office gave an informative talk on the role of the embassy, gave the participants the chance to think about current issues like trade and immigration that directly affect both Mexico and the United States. A visit to the Embassy of Botswana featured an inspiring speech by Ambassador Tebelelo Seretse. Mrs. Seretse is the first female ambassador to the United States from her nation. For many of the students, her talk was the highlight of the seminar. “The one good thing that religion does is to make us more tolerant of others,” said Mrs. Seretse. “It should teach us to be embracing of other people and cultures.” The day concluded with a visit to the office of Rep. Rodney Davis from the 13th district in Illinois and a guided walking tour of Capitol Hill. The congressman spoke to the students for 20 minutes about the importance of upholding individual principles and never giving up. He also spoke about the importance of faith in his own life. “Our faith plays a role in everything we do in our daily life,” he said.

Pillar #3: Service —Living for the sake of others

On Day Three the group heard a talk from George Tumasyan, a young UPF worker and fellow participant from the Republic of Georgia, on the situation in Ukraine. This was followed by a talk given by John Haydon, the RYS coordinator, on solving resentments in the world. Focusing on the biblical story of Joseph, Mr. Haydon emphasized the two ingredients for resolving resentments in the world: being able to say sorry, and to forgive. The students then visited the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy and heard an informative and inspirational talk by Program Director Rebecca Cataldi on how conflict resolution is easing tensions in hot spots around the world.

Ms. Cataldi talked about her experiences visiting female madrassas (Islamic schools) in Pakistan. She said that her life was at risk at the time but her own personal faith helped her in the situation. “We have a perception that people are hostile to us,” said Ms. Cataldi, “but through dialogue and contact we can break down these barriers.”



Day Four, the final day of the RYS program, and perhaps the key highlight of the seminar for many students, was the service project performed at the Washington Buddhist Vihara on 16th Street NW in Washington D.C. After a wonderful lunch prepared by the temple staff, all 15 students and the staff, under the guidance of Susan Fefferman, planted over 30 trees and plants in a beautification project in the front garden of the Buddhist center. While the soil was very hard and rocky, the students accomplished an amazing transformation of the garden in just over three hours.

Participants received a well deserved graduation dinner to close the program. Overall, the program was a remarkable success. Washington, D.C., was an ideal location to introduce young people to religious and government leaders, the diplomatic corps, non-governmental organizations and sacred sites. In addition, the city offers many opportunities for service. So many of the participants were inspired and enlightened by the weekend. As Haruko I. of Northern Virginia put it, “I had experiences I have never had before, such as meeting congressmen and ambassadors, and almost all of the speakers used the common word ‘God,’ which made me realize people may have different religions but we all believe in one God. We can all unite and work together as one family under God.”