

Where People of Faith Seek Unity

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November 2015



The Family Federation booth at the Parliament of the World's religions

Chicago is a US city that arose in the midst of a rural landscape. For much of its early existence, features of farm life remained in the midst of the growing metropolis. One humorist wrote in 1880 that residents of Chicago's Northside "consist of men, women, children, dogs, Billy goats, pigs, cats and fleas." He added that among those residents, fleas had the largest population.

In 1871, a massive fire, which burned for two days, utterly destroyed a vast area at the heart of the city. Photographs of the aftermath look less like a fire had struck and more as if the city had been bombed from the sky. The conflagration began in a barn owned by a Mrs. O'Leary. One theory of how the fire started was that Mrs. O'Leary's cow had kicked over an oil-burning lamp. That Mrs. O'Leary was keeping a milk cow in a farm building-although she lived in the city, not far from the business district-was well known. Many families in the neighborhood depended on the milk produced by Mrs. O'Leary's cow.



The Cheon Il Guk Holy Scriptures displayed at the Family Federation booth

Despite the extent of the devastation from the Great Fire, Chicago had recovered completely by 1893

when it hosted the World's Fair. In a city that had suffered terribly from the use of fuel-burning lamps, one innovation introduced at the World's Fair was electric lighting. Virtually none of the twenty-six million visitors to the fair had ever seen an electric light bulb.

More than two hundred thousand bulbs lit up the fair grounds and all the buildings during the six months that the fair remained open. Writer Eric Larson described the effect of electric lights in this way: "[W]hat visitors adored was the sheer beauty of seeing so many lights ignited in one place, at one time. Every building was outlined in white bulbs. Giant searchlights-the largest ever made and said to be visible sixty miles away-swept the grounds and surrounding neighborhoods, it "was like getting a sudden vision of Heaven."



Members who staffed the booths

World's Parliament of Religions

In the same way that electricity was illuminating the world's fair, religious figures in the city wished to bring spiritual illumination to their city and the world. The World's Parliament of Religions was the brain child of a local attorney whose personal faith was strongly influenced by the writings of the Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) whom our own Divine Principle describes as "a renowned scientist whose spiritual senses were awakened; he began a systematic investigation of the spirit world and discovered many of its secrets."

The planning committee for the world's parliament comprised fourteen prominent Protestants, a Roman Catholic bishop and a Jewish rabbi. Several historians have interpreted that the planners had intended to show the superiority of Judeo-Christianity and to renew the effort to convert those of other faiths all over the world. That seemed a natural fit with the World's Fair, which would highlight the advancements of the United States, over which the overwhelming religious influence (in those days) was Judeo-Christian. Unlike today, Eastern religions had virtually no presence in US society in 1893.

If the planning committee's intent had indeed been to cause religions from the East to look backward by comparison with Judeo-Christian faiths in a modern US setting, they did not enjoy much success. Their own "side" did not cooperate. Several powerful orthodox Christian organizations declined to take part in the parliament. Among Christians that participated, some petty-minded audience members heckled even Christian presenters for not being orthodox enough. These audience members became particularly incensed when presenters from Eastern faiths from overseas criticized the heavy-handed practices of Christian missionaries in the speakers' countries.

Meanwhile, several of those non-Christians speakers made a deep, favorable impression that went far beyond the audiences they spoke to in Chicago's recently constructed Art Institute building, where the parliament took place. Shaku Soyen (1860-1919) a Zen Buddhist monk described Buddha's teachings on the law of cause and effect. This had strong appeal to scientific minded Americans that heard him speak.

A 1998 retrospective article in the New York Times described the presentation of Hindu reformer Narendranath Datta (1863-1902), also known as Vivekananda. "A thirty-year-old monk from Calcutta took the podium at the World's Parliament of Religions, an unusual interfaith gathering in Chicago, and declared that the faith he followed emphasized toleration and accepted all religions as true. His handsome face, saffron turban and flowing coat may also have affected members of the audience, because they

greeted his first words 'Sisters and brothers of America' -- with a standing ovation." During the parliament, the New York World described a man who lectured on "The World's Debt to Buddha." He was a Sri Lankan leader of the Theravadin school of Buddhism. "Mr. Dharmapala was one of the most interesting personages at the parliament. Always dressed in spotless white, his hair parted in the middle and curling in the back, his face gentle and refined, he seemed just like a familiar portrait of Jesus." The St. Louis Observer also described Mr. Dharmapala admiringly. "With his black curly locks thrown back from his broad brow, his keen clear eyes fixed on the audience, and his vibrant voice, he looked the very image of a propagandist at the head of a movement to consolidate all the disciples of Buddha and to spread the 'Light of Asia' throughout the civilized world."

Our movement's involvement

Following the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, a planning committee formed to prepare for another parliament at the Paris World's Fair, in 1900. This did not happen. A hundred years passed before the parliament, under a slightly different name took place, again in Chicago. In 1988, figures in the Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i Zoroastrian as well as Protestant and Catholic faith communities formed a planning committee to hold that centennial memorial of the landmark original event. (By 1988, Eastern religions had indeed established themselves in the Western world.)



The UPF booth

The planners formed the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions. The Inter-religious Federation for World Peace (IRFWP), one of the unification movement's providential organizations, was a cosponsor of the Parliament of the World's Religions and as such held a two-day symposium at the parliament on "World Scriptures: Learning from Other Traditions."

Whereas the 1893 event had religious leaders describing their own faiths and worldviews, the intent of the planners of the 1993 event was to encourage dialogue between religious people. This parliament took place at the Palmer House Hotel in the center of Chicago. Those who had registered early paid a \$200 fee; late registrants paid \$350. Whereas four hundred delegates had attended in 1893, the 1993 event attracted more than six thousand people. Even though registration for the event closed early, twice as many people had registered than the planners had expected. It was crowded.

Hundreds of speakers gave presentations. Seminars, workshops, performances, events and films were included in the itinerary. The Dalai Lama took part, as did Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam. In the November 1993 Dr. Thomas Walsh explained our movement's direct participation as follows:

The Inter-religious Federation for World Peace had an exhibit, including the display of World Scriptures, Dialogue and Alliance, and numerous other publications; videos showing such activities as the Religious Youth Service, the Assembly of the World's Religions, and the recent IRFWP Delhi Congress were also presented at the exhibit. The exhibit attracted thousands of visitors, and kept our staff busy from morning to night answering questions and handing out literature.

Following the centennial event, the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions held events in South Africa in 1999 and Spain in 2004 before this year's parliament in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the US. It attracted ten thousand people from eighty countries. Fifty different religious traditions took part. They

held it at the Salt Palace Convention Center from September 9-19. Imam Mujahid, chairman of the Parliament Board of Trustees, explained the importance of inter-religious events by saying, "At this juncture in human history when hate, fear and anger is rising in America and across the globe, it is important that faith communities, rise with loving, caring relationships, even if we do not agree on some issues." People of faith flocked to the convention center. When Dr. Ki Hoon Kim, president of the North America region, visited the conventional hall, he ran into an old friend, Don Garrick, a co-founded of the Orange County California Interfaith Network, who is a prominent Mormon. The Family Federation had a booth on the convention floor. On the day that Shinyoung Chang, a woman who has invested her effort over the past several years in improving our movement's media outreach, visited, the US church president, while he was manning that booth. Dr. Balcomb told Ms. Chang, "I have been telling people about Father's tradition of marriage as a means of peace. People are very interested in that." Ms. Chang spoke to various people including one man working a booth, who said, "Our message is that there is truth in all religions." She responded, "I love that; I totally resonate with that."

Throughout its various incarnations, the Parliament of the World's Religions remains a meeting point for those who abhor religious hatred and seek harmony among the world's many faiths.



Interfaith choir