

The Inaugural Convocation of World Clergy Leadership Conference (WCLC)

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In this July 18, 2016, file photo, Pastor Paula White delivers the benediction at the close of the opening day of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland. White now has a formal role in the administration with the Public Liaison Office, which oversees outreach to constituent groups seen as key parts of the president's base. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite, File)

NEW YORK | Faith leaders from dozens of nations gathered here over the weekend to promote unity, imploring each other to see diversity not as a stumbling block, but as the 'cornerstone' for developing a peace that can elevate nations and its leaders.

President Trump's personal spiritual adviser Paula White-Cain called for the leaders to push past barriers that have divided denominations for far too long.

"When we come into unity, we can shake nations," she said to rousing applause from hundreds of pastors, reverends, bishops and others assembled Friday at the opening of the two-day summit in the renown Hammerstein and Grand ballrooms of the Manhattan Center in midtown Manhattan.

The presence of Ms. White-Cain at the summit -- titled the Inaugural Convocation of World Clergy Leadership Conference and inclusive of all denominations, evangelical or not -- brought a sense of connectivity with American political power. Ms. White-Cain's participation came against a backdrop of Mr. Trump's own efforts to unify U.S. evangelicals around his run for a second term.

Others who spoke Friday drew focus to a subject long-contemplated by some theologians: How to positively embrace pluralism in religion as a divine bedrock for promoting harmony and equanimity in the world, rather than allow it to be a source of acrimonious division.

"The challenge for us here today is to use this cornerstone of God's universal design to build a unified and peaceable world," said Rev. Penial Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar. "But this task is rendered all the more difficult in a context today, where religions have often been violently recruited as an ally of divisive and discriminatory forces."

"We are here to fight this together," said Rev. Rajkumar, a representative from the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, an organization with 350 member churches spanning dozens of

Christian denominations across 110 countries.

The summit in Manhattan on Friday set in motion what organizers described as new international association of faith leaders, backed by the Universal Peace Federation, Family Federation International and the American Clergy Leadership Conference -- a multid denominational organization with more than 12,000 affiliated clergy from all 50 U.S. states.

Friday's gathering was followed by a massive peace rally on Saturday that was attended by tens of thousands from churches around the greater New York City area, as well as from around the nation, who packed into the Prudential Center arena in Newark, New Jersey.

Known by her followers as 'Mother Moon,' Mrs. Moon praised the formation of the WCLC in a keynote address at Saturday's rally, calling it a "realization of God's will."

"Please remember that the launch of WCLC is heaven's blessing," she told the near-capacity crowd at the Prudential Center. "Today I wish to tell each one of you, I believe in you and in particularly members of the clergy leadership of the Christian world gathered here today."

The World Clergy Leadership Conference (WCLC) inaugural convocation on Friday was celebrated at the rally. Both events were initiated by Hak Ja Han Moon, widow of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the leader of the Unification movement that grew from the Unification Church the Rev. Moon founded in 1954.

Mrs. Moon has led the movement since a few years before the 2012 death of the Rev. Moon, whose ministry grew from a tiny, embattled church in his native South Korea to a global spiritual movement and an affiliated commercial empire comprising real estate, manufacturing and agricultural operations, as well as media properties including The Washington Times.

The rally featured thumping Christian gospel choirs, dance routines and collective prayers of peace, and was highlighted by a performance from Dionne Warwick.

The six-time Grammy Award-winning singer -- now in her late 70s -- brought tears to the eyes of many in attendance with a stirring delivery of the lyrics, "What the world needs now, is love, sweet love," from 1965 popular song by Hal David and Burt Bacharach.

The arena also thumped with gospel music from Bishop Hezekiah Walker, the two-time Grammy winner and founder of the Love Fellowship Tabernacle in Brooklyn, who performed with his 500 Voice Choir. Grammy winning vocalist and famed radio host Yolanda Adams offered a crowd-moving performance as well.

But it was the initial summit gathering of clergy leaders in Manhattan on Friday that underscored the philosophical and spiritual outlines of the weekend's broader proceedings.

"My friends, if we truly believe in Jesus Christ, then we have to put aside our differences," said Rev. Charles Mendies, senior pastor of the Nepalese Christian Society, drawing drew heartfelt hoots and hollers from the crowd by adding that,

"We have to stop being Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Protestant, Catholic -- we have to be believers in Jesus Christ."

Others offered similar messages, with remarks given by a range of clergy leaders, including but not limited to Archbishop Augustus Stallings Jr., chairman of the U.S.-based Interreligious Association for Peace and Development; Mrs. Martina Viktorie Kopecka of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church in the Czech Republic; and Bishop Noel Jones of the City of Refuge Church in Los Angeles.

In another speech, Prophet Samuel Radebe from the Revelation Church of God in South Africa, spoke of the intersection between religion, spirituality and politics around the world.

"Religious people, especially the clergy, have the responsibility to guide politicians and help them rule with impartiality," Prophet Radebe said. "Many times we have failed in our mission."

"We need spiritually inclined religious leaders," he said. "I was impressed to see the adviser of the president of the United States being here today and speaking the way she speaks -- that means we are heading to the right direction."

Indeed, Ms. White-Cain drew a hush over Friday's gathering by speaking frankly about the history of her relationship with the president, telling the crowd she first met Mr. Trump nearly two decades ago.

"I get on the line and he said, 'You're fantastic, you have the 'it factor,'" she told the summit in Manhattan, adding to laughter that she responded to Mr. Trump: "'Oh sir, we call that the anointing.'"

During that first call, Ms. White-Cain said, Mr. Trump "repeated to me three of my sermons almost verbatim. At the time, my church was a little under 20-something-thousand members and we had thousands of churches under us, and I thought to myself, 'he listens better than most of my congregation!'"

"The lord spoke to me and said, show [Mr. Trump] who I am, and I just thought it was an assignment from God to simply live as a Christian and show the love of God to him," Ms. White-Cain said.

"I had no idea 18 years later what that would hold," she said, recalling that on just their second meeting in New York, where she was famously involved at the time in leading a Bible study for the New York Yankees, that she told Mr. Trump: "'Sir, I don't want your money, I have enough of my own. I don't want your fame, I have enough of my own.'"

"I said, 'I want your soul,' and I walked out -- and I just think he thought I was crazy enough or either God really anointed me," she said, drawing laughter and applause from the faith leaders gathered on Friday.

"We continued to build relationships with him, his family, his staff, praying, meeting, doing Bible studies and, more than anything, living out the love of God," Ms. White-Cain added. "Many, many years later, he would say: 'Paula, would you come pray? I'm thinking about running for president.'"

In November, the Trump administration announced that it had officially hired her to advise the president's "Faith and Opportunity Initiative."