

The Washington Times

Faith groups call for greater efforts to promote tolerance - In Jin Moon

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July 13, 2011
The Washington Times



The Rev. In Jin Moon, president and CEO of the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, speaks about her own experience with religious persecution Wednesday at a conference, "Stop Religious Persecution Now." (Barbara L. Salisbury/The Washington Times)

Religious leaders and activists from a variety of faiths called for tolerance of one another and said the U.S. government should step up efforts to fight faith-based discrimination and persecution around the world.

"Everyone should have the right to believe or not believe," said Suzan Johnson Cook, who was confirmed this year as the State Department's ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. "That is their God-given right."

Several speakers at the daylong conference "Stop Religious Persecution Now," held at The Washington Times, spoke in favor of a bill before Congress proposed by Rep. Frank R. Wolf, Virginia Republican, that would boost the State Department's role as an advocate for religious freedom abroad.

Provisions of the bill would give U.S. Foreign Service officers new training on promoting religious freedom, shine a brighter spotlight on countries identified as restricting religious liberties and reauthorize the independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Among those at the event were Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Other religions also were represented. Speakers and participants included lawmakers and administration officials, religious freedom

advocates and representatives from such groups as the Center for Understanding Islam, the Hindu America Foundation and ChinaAid.

The event was co-sponsored by the U.S. chapter of the Universal Peace Federation and The Washington Times Foundation.

The faith activists said there was strength in unity in the fight against religious discrimination.

“The problem is that no faith community is safe,” said Tina Ramirez, director of government relations at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. “You might be the persecutor in one but the persecuted in another. So, unfortunately, religious persecution knows no bounds.”

This is a problem that is dividing world religions when they should instead be uniting, said the Rev. In Jin Moon, the keynote speaker. She is president and CEO of the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity and the daughter of the founder of The Washington Times, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

“Do we not belong to one family?” she said. “How can you mistreat another faith group just because you don’t understand them, just because you don’t agree?”

She urged fellow religious leaders to do more than simply “tolerate” or “coexist” with people from different faiths.

“I certainly do not look at my children and say, ‘I tolerate you’ or ‘I think we can coexist,’ ” she said.

Participants at the conference said persecution is not so much of a problem in America, but discrimination remains an issue.

“The U.S. is surely one of the freest of countries,” said Ramesh Rao, human rights coordinator at the Hindu America Foundation, “but even we have discrimination problems.”

He said American Hindus have encountered problems getting permission to build temples in the country.

Hansdeep Singh, senior staff attorney for the United Sikhs, said people in his religion encounter prejudice at airports across the country. Oftentimes, Transportation Security Administration screeners make him feel like a “caged animal” when they call for someone to pat him down before he even goes through the metal detector because of the turban he wears. “What did I do wrong?” he asked.

Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis, Florida Republican, recalled the story of how his godmother was forced out of Turkey because she was a Christian.

“Religious persecution is an issue that has personally touched me,” he said. “I will always be there for you, I promise you, because this is an issue very dear to my heart.”