

Parliament of the World's Religions Gathers 10,000 People of Faith

Michael Balcomb
October 19, 2015



The Parliament of the World's Religions held its sixth conference at the Salt Palace Convention Center in Salt Lake City, Utah on October 15-19, 2015. This is the second time this event has been held in America, the 1893 Chicago event being the first time with his holiness the Dalai Lama as the main speaker. The 1893 Parliament was the first organized gathering of Eastern and Western spiritual groups and today is recognized as the birth of formal interreligious dialogue worldwide. Organizers began to replicate this well attended event more frequently a century later, with five more conferences taking place in the 1990s and 2000s. This year, more than 10,000 people attended and participated in the religious and cultural exchange that took place over the last five days.



The conference began on a hot, summery day and ended with the chill of autumn. Mornings outside the Salt Palace were greeted by a traditional prayer of blessings offered by the indigenous Nations of Utah.

Morning meditation and prayer were key elements to the start of each day. Meditative music played even in lavatories throughout the mornings to retain a sense of well being and calm. Many sessions were held out of doors pending good weather, in harmony with the surrounding nature. Teepees were displayed prominently outside the entrance to the Salt Palace. People of all forms of worship were there, from the major religions that worship God as one entity to polytheists, spiritualists with no affiliation, organized religion and naturists who revered Mother Earth as a goddess.



It is significant that the second Parliament of the World's Religions to be held in America should be held in Salt Lake City, a city built around the Jesus Christ Church of Latter-day Saints, more commonly known as Mormonism. As a result the conference was essentially hosted by the Mormons, who are known to be very private people. The Mormons there have a very good relationship with the indigenous people, so there were many indigenous peoples in attendance and many sessions were dedicated to their struggles. Several Mormons also stopped by the Unification booths and received the Holy Wine and Holy Marriage Blessing. Don Garrick, a Mormon from California who is the Director of the Orange County Interfaith Council and long-time friend of Dr. Ki Hoon Kim, the Continental Chair of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU) North America, described the gathering as “an example of Father Moon's notion of one family under God.”

The majority of the days were filled with plenary sessions and smaller sessions varying in programs from musical performances and yoga to discussions about climate change and the effects of the war in Syria and how people of faith can make a difference. Areas for an EMPOWR Film Festival, a cultural hall exhibition and a booth exhibition were set up on the main floor next to the grand ballroom which holds 10 smaller spaces for the main sessions. The Salt Palace has three floors and more than enough space to accommodate the parliament's needs.

“As an artist myself, I was more drawn to the sessions and programs that were art and music oriented,” said participant Shinyoung Chang. “I felt I sat in on the most important session of the conference” a history about the Norman Rockwell mosaic, ‘The Golden Rule’, which currently hangs in the United Nations building in New York City. This golden rule is a grouping of sayings from many faiths that follow along Jesus's golden rule to ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’. It's this series of rules that have permeated every interfaith dialogue from the local gathering to the international scene.”

Cultural exchanges took place all day long through improvised dancing, arts and crafts coupled with dialogue, and several international children's choirs where songs from cultures around the world were performed in their native tongue. The most immediate exchange happened right at registration where people of non-traditional ethnicities could be seen dressed in traditional Sikh garb and Tibetan monks and gathered together to create a mandala—a spiritual and ritual symbol of the universe—which would take the course of the parliament to complete. Of all the cultural exchanges, everyone looked forward to the daily Langer's Lunch, a Sikh tradition that promotes the idea that everyone should have access to food daily. Sikh temples provide Langers (pronounced Longers) to anyone who enters. For the parliament, over 500 volunteers escorted a never-ending line of participants to a place to sit and served lunch for three hours, each day at midday. People of the Sikh tradition could be seen in the back of the room preparing salads and cooking the delicious meals. It was a great opportunity to speak with a new neighbor each day.



Twenty Unificationists supported the parliament with two information booths and several presentations given throughout the program. Each of them found themselves pleasantly surprised to be bumping into friends and connecting on so many levels. Dr. Michael Balcomb, President of FFWPU USA, manned one booth with FFWPU Utah State Pastor, Michael Stovall, giving the Holy Wine and other Marriage Blessing materials to passersby. Another booth promoted True Parents' interfaith vision through the Universal Peace Federation (UPF).

On Sunday, October 18, Dr. Ki Hoon Kim gave a Sunday message followed by a question-and-answer session where he spent an hour answering the questions of participants of all ages. Later that day, a choir made up of 200 children, including 12 young Unificationists, performed in an interfaith concert.

The beautiful thing that participants of the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions could take away was having taken part in a cause promoting interfaith respect, openness and dialogue. Religious groups, rather than defending or pushing their faith, came with the heart to teach, interact, listen and learn, opening a window into what is possible when we come together in peace.

