

RYS international meeting in Washington, DC

Tomiko Duggan
July 15, 2015



Twenty-three future leaders gathered in Washington, D.C., from July 12 to 15, 2015, to take part in a Religious Youth Service (RYS) program. RYS is a project of the Universal Peace Federation, which encourages youth to get involved in interfaith dialogue and service work for peace. The RYS participants came from as far away as Russia and Azerbaijan, as well as New York, New Jersey, Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C., to attend the four-day event. The time was full of educational and inspiring experiences, as well as a chance to put some of those ideals into practice through service work in the community.



After a day of exploring Washington, D.C., and its many sights, the participants began the next day with presentations given by different faith leaders. The interfaith education component is a huge part of what RYS does. The day began with an RYS tradition of a candle lighting ceremony in which each participant reads a quote dedicated to the cause of world peace and understanding. The quotes read by the participants came from Mother Teresa, Saint Francis of Assisi, the Dalai Lama, and Rev. Sun Myung Moon. The participants then heard presentations from representatives of Judaism, Christianity, Native American religions, Islam, Unificationism, Hinduism and Buddhism. These presentations offered valuable insights into unique cultures and practices, while also highlighting the similarities that many shared of seeking a world of peace, honoring and serving others, and compassion for the earth and its creatures.



In the afternoon, participants visited three houses of worship: the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the largest Roman Catholic church in the United States; the historic Sixth & I [Street] Synagogue; and the Islamic Center during evening prayers. Participants enjoyed seeing the

different places of worship and especially witnessing people of faith in their traditional dress and worship practices. The evening was a time to meet together with their teams and reflect on the day.



After morning meditations on the third day, the team headed out to the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships at the U.S. Department of Education, where they met with Rev. Brenda Girton-Mitchell, the director of the center, Ken Bedell, and Anna Leach. Rev. Girton-Mitchell explained that their office doesn't teach religion or promote it, but "utilizes the unique and powerful resources of religious people to help those in need." She said, "We learn that communities are doing great things because of faith. The government and these people can collaborate to make a better world through service." Rev. Girton-Mitchell encouraged the participants to get involved in the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, which will begin at Howard University in September to involve students in this religious/government service effort.



The group then made a stop at the United States Capitol for a tour and to meet with several congressmen including Chris Van Hollen, D-MD, Danny Davis, D-IL, a UPF supporter, and Sam Johnson, R-TX. The group then enjoyed an evening panel discussion on "The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding."



The fourth and final day of the assembly began with a visit to the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia. This embassy is a historic landmark in the nation's capital and is decorated with religious images representing all the 253 million citizens of the nation.

The next stop was the unique International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, which works with local partners in many nations to build better understanding and peace. Douglas Johnston founded ICRF. Our group was briefed by Michael Braeuninger, director of development and outreach, and Nicole Magney, executive assistant to the president, who spoke about various ICRD projects including working with Madrassa teachers in Pakistan, helping them to learn how to reform real education with a broad view of the world, and teaching tolerance across faiths.



From there, the group went to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building (EEOB), formerly known as the Old Executive Office Building (OEOB), to meet Taylor Lustig and Yasmina Cergui, policy assistants to the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Taylor said, “Faith has the moral authority within communities, and the faith leaders are in touch with the needs of the people.” Their office helps faith communities help the people better. They specifically helped people register for the new federal healthcare program. They also work with the Energy Star program to help decrease energy use. They have policy issues, interfaith work and do ceremonial events for the White House.



Participants then took some time to speak with Danielle Doane, a senior program manager with the B. Kenneth Simon Center for Principles and Politics at the Heritage Foundation, before heading off for a service project in the late afternoon. Participants rolled up their sleeves to work with the Mayor’s Office on Volunteerism to pull weeds and plant vegetables at the Neighborhood Farm Initiative in Northeast D.C. The locally grown food is donated to poor families in the area. Despite an afternoon shower, everyone’s spirit remained upbeat and inspired.



The group enjoyed a farewell dinner at The Washington Times building, as well as an address from the evening's guest speaker, Rep. Dan Burton, R-IN, who inspired everyone to consider working in government and public service. He encouraged the RYS participants to "set your goal, never give up, maintain steady efforts and hold on to your dream." The congressman and his wife then presented each participant with a certificate as a Young Ambassador for Peace and urged them to do even greater work as promising young leaders for tomorrow. Many photos, music and singing followed the happy and successful conclusion of this summer's Religious Youth Service program in Washington, D.C.

