

UPF USA Commemorates Interfaith Harmony Week

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February 8, 2016

World Interfaith Harmony Week 2016 was commemorated by Universal Peace Federation (UPF) USA at several local chapters. The observance of the week, which was established by the United Nations in 2010 and is celebrated worldwide in the first week of February each year, points out that mutual understanding and interreligious dialogue are key ingredients to a culture of peace and harmony.



UPF Michigan held a simple program at Michigan State University’s Breslin Student Events Center, located in the city of East Lansing. A video highlighting the work of UPF in the Middle East was shown. Then three faith leaders—Imam Sohail Chaudhry from the Islamic Center of East Lansing, Rabbi Dana Benson from the Hillel Jewish Student Center, and Ladi Multani from the Guru Nanak Sikh Center—each gave a presentation on the topic “**Creating Peace.**” After an interesting discussion of the unique approach to peace of each faith group, Richard de Sena, UPF regional secretary general for North America, presented the UPF approach. The attendees were impressed with the foundation of UPF and its unique aspects, including the emphasis on family as being essential to peace.

In Salt Lake City, UPF Utah, together with the Salt Lake City Interfaith Roundtable, held the annual Interfaith Prayer Breakfast to commence the city’s celebration of Interfaith Month in Salt Lake City and to connect it with the United Nations’ World Interfaith Harmony Week.



Ms. Jennifer Seelig, community relations director for Salt Lake City Mayor Jackie Biskupski

Rev. Fr. Elias Koucos, Salt Lake Interfaith Roundtable chair and assistant priest at the Holy Trinity Cathedral and Prophet Elias Greek Orthodox Church, welcomed members to the Hellenic Cultural Center, the venue of the breakfast. Imam Muhammed Mehtar of the Khadeeja Mosque and Islamic Center gave the invocation. Before he prayed, he emphasized that when we pray we should always give thanks to God first before we ask anything for ourselves.

The guest speaker, Ms. Jennifer Seelig, community relations director for Mayor Jackie Biskupski, related the mayor’s thoughts on interfaith relations. She further expressed how happy she was to be among other people of

faith, as she is personally a Methodist with a strong interest in Buddhism after traveling to Tibet.



One of the highlights of the event was the presentation of the Interfaith Roundtable's Annual Awards. Several awards were given to distinguished members of the committee, and a special award was presented to Wendy Stovall, UPF Utah executive director, for all her work for the Roundtable.

Finally, Father Elias invited everyone to write a message of peace and place the messages in a bowl. Members were invited to come up and offer a prayer. Rev. Susan Roberts, an Episcopalian, and Alan Bachman, a Jew, offered prayers over the peace messages.

For UPF Las Vegas, the monthly Peace Forum which was held at the Las Vegas City Hall was focused on interfaith harmony. The event included representatives from several religious groups, including Sikh, Muslim, and Christian, who spoke about the root causes of conflict, the barriers to

interfaith cooperation, and possible solutions to overcoming these barriers. Noted panelists included Dr. Aslam Abdullah, Mr. Teji Malik, Mr. James Rigney and Rev. Jerushia McDonald Hylton.

One panelist felt that the wearing of traditional garb was a barrier to interfaith harmony and suggested that we have an event at which everyone dressed the same. However, it was felt that we would all have to "come naked" for this to happen, as stated by Jerushia McDonald Hylton. The main focus of the discussion was finding solutions to overcome the barriers to interfaith cooperation. Also discussed were the importance of encouraging our youth to become the next generation of leaders centered on God and ways to bring better understanding and appreciation of others. The importance of parents as role models for their children was stressed. Group picnics, group sports, theater and the arts are some of the programs that could be implemented to give the entire family opportunities to engage with other cultures and develop a feeling of "One Family under God."



Another area that the panelists focused on was the role of the interfaith community in the refugee crisis and homelessness. Sikhs have a tradition of feeding whoever is hungry, and we learned that the State of Utah has learned how to deal effectively with its homeless community.

Su Phelps, publisher of *Veterans Reporter News*, was appointed as a UPF Ambassador for Peace.

Overall, these events testify to the extent of progress we can bring to our religious, social and interpersonal relationships. If we allow ourselves to listen, study and respect other faiths, we can create better outcomes as a community of faith and can raise our families as models for peace. An everlasting world of peace is very possible when our families are deeply rooted in these principles of international, interracial and interfaith dialogue and cooperation in which the central core is the heart of love and service.