

UPF Downpatrick, Ireland hosts Interreligious Peace Road Walk and Forum

Colm O Cionnaith
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After milling around the world's tallest statue of St Patrick for a while, participants then made their way to the altar area a little bit further down the hill and assembled for readings from Peace Ambassadors Mrs. Maryam Timile and Mrs. Zeinab Mustafa, who read Biblical, Qu'ranic and other inspirational passages from the World Scripture book on the holy site.

Everyone joined with FFWPU National Pastor Ely Loew as he offered a prayer of unity and gratitude to our Heavenly Parent for sending Saint Patrick to our shores (in 432 AD), reflecting on his origins as a slave and how he was effectively one of the earliest recorded campaigners in history for the rights of those unfortunates subject to slavery and trafficking - a point often missed by many when considering St. Patrick's legacy.



The inspiration for the Peace Road Walk in Ireland being held on this particular weekend is to mark the

UN Day of Peace, which fell on the previous day and the 21st anniversary of the Belfast, Good Friday agreement which has secured peace for our Island and helped us to live with dual identities and citizenship after 30 years of civil war.

Concluding the peace walk, the more than 30 participants made their way down the hill and headed for the St. Patrick's Centre in Downpatrick town centre for the second part of the day, the Peace Road Forum, where a number of presentations were given by current and new Peace Ambassadors.



2019's Peace Road Walk and Forum had the theme: "Global Family, Local Harmony" and the topic the presentations addressed was: "Is there a role for Faith in modern society?" Colm Ó Cionnaith emceed the afternoon events and first up was proud Irish-American, Kate Tsubata, who delighted the audience with the first Ireland and UK private screening of her new motion picture "Dancing Joy" which features Beethoven's famous 9th symphony as the choreography for traditional dance troupes from all over the world, from Japan and Fiji to Bulgaria, Belfast, Dublin, Honduras and Africa to name but a few of the locations. Before the screening Kate gave some insights into her work and what motivated and inspired her to make the movie: how art for her was the way she preferred to express her faith, rather than simply lecturing. She emphasised that creativity was universal and all cultures and nations can appreciate art, music and dance as an expression of cultural and religious unity, given that we all share the almost all the same dna and ultimately the same Creator.

Next up was Dr. James Uhomobhi from Ulster University who enchanted us with his story, how he came to Northern Ireland over 30 years previous, having had to study for his qualifications in Italian and how he almost had to learn Serbo-Croat as well in order to progress in his studies!

Dr. Uhomobhi contrasted his fortunes in the pursuit of educational excellence and the opportunities he received with those of his compatriots in the developing world. He told the forum that education was the best way of out poverty and the opportunities it can bring can benefit the recipients on all metrics, from sustained income to good health and life expectancy. He conveyed very well the heart of someone who has given so much to his colleagues, family and friends and who continues to spread light to his students and colleagues and all he comes into contact with. UPF Ireland are delighted to have him join the ranks of our Peace Ambassadors along with Marisa Goldstone-Leavold from Cavan and also his Ulster University colleague, Dr Marisol Giardina de Navarro who was next up.

Dr. Giardina de Navarro movingly told the audience how she was determined through her work with "Healing Venezuela" to highlight the decline of this once great nation, which has been ravished by the entrenchment of an ideology and slavish adherence to marxist doctrine which has left the country destitute, with its citizens forced to search garbage bins in many cases in order to find food. Later FFWPU Ireland National Pastor Ely Loew called on the audience and participants to support the various charities showcased at the forum, 'Healing Venezuela', 'Religious Youth Service' and 'E-ducare'.

Rev. Marshall de Souza reminded the forum that we are celebrating the 20th anniversary of the historic RYS service project, held down the road in what was then the Columcille Centre on the Antrim Road in Belfast. Historic, not least because participants there were able to visit the new Northern Ireland Assembly as part of the project along with the other conferences which took place in 1999, under the auspices of UPF's forerunners IIFWP and the WFWP.

Government recognition could be seen in video footage of the event which showed former President of Ireland, Uachtarán Mrs. Mary McAleese visiting the Peace Garden project shortly after it was completed, where she acknowledged the hard work of Marshall, Columbanus Centre Director Rev. Glenn Barclay and former UPF Ireland Secretary General Mr. Halvard Iversen and RYS participants from all over the world, representing multiple faith traditions.

Rev. de Souza talked about the work of the RYS in Britain and throughout the world and how service learning is so beneficial to both the participants and the areas chosen alike, enabling education and healing to take place. Many testimonies of transformational internal change have been recorded due to his work with various interfaith endeavours such as RYS and the anti-AIDs project, WAIT, which provides abstinence-based education through the medium of modern hip-hop dancing.



Marshall thanked earlier presenter Mrs. Kate Tsubata, who set up the latter organisation in the US many years ago and which is still active in parts of the world, such as the Philippines, which are still struggling to deal with the crisis of HIV/AIDs and whose citizens do not have access to same level of healthcare that citizens of western countries enjoy to combat this scourge.

The final presentation to the forum continued with the education theme where Bruno Miresse (another former UPF Ireland Secretary-General) and his colleague, Pierluigi Cosca gave the forum some insights into the incredible work the charity Mr. Cosca founded - 'E-ducare' is doing in funding the schooling and education of young people in the developing countries such as Vietnam and Tanzania as well as with the homeless in Dublin.

It was clear for all to see the satisfaction that E-ducare members derive in living for the sake of others and supporting the underprivileged and giving hope and dreams to so many through fund-raising and paying for schools and teachers. "Give a man a fish..." is the motto of E-ducare and as the current UPF Sec-Gen, I for one am very inspired by how our Peace Ambassadors and former Sec-Gen's continue the work of inspiring and living for the sake of others in their day to day lives.

My call to action for our global network of peace-builders was echoed on stage by Pastor Loew and Northern Europe Regional Director of FFWPU, Rev. Dr. David Hanna, who gave both gave closing remarks, before the presentation of Peace Ambassador awards to Dr. Marisol Giardina de Navarro, Mrs. Goldstone-Leavold and Dr. Uhomobhi, who graciously received their commissions and acknowledgements.

In presenting the awards, I emphasised that this award was in recognition of lives lived in service to others, but that it is also a call to continue to live the upf values of 'living for the sake of others' by working together as peace ambassadors.

Pastor Loew told the forum about his experiences in working on an RYS service learning project in the past and explained a little about the vision, our UPF founder Rev. Moon has for an interfaith assembly in the UN and how politics should be aided by faith, not seek to exclude, especially given the religious dimension to many of the world's conflicts, not least in Northern Ireland's past. Dr. Hanna closed this

year's forum by explaining more about the 'Peace Road' movement around the world, the different forms it takes and the inspirations of different participants and its genesis in the 'World Highway Project' first mooted by Rev. Moon, which seeks to connect the world and create trade links even between China, USA and Russia through the Bearing Straits.



My great hope is that the legacy of Peace Road Forum 2019 is that participants left feeling refreshed and inspired by this initiative and I look forward to suggestions from Peace Ambassadors and regional coordinators such as Mr Tinko Tinev, Mr John Kennedy and Dr. Omar Escalona as to how we can mark other significant UN days in 2020, such as Africa Day and Day of the Family with events and initiatives which can address at least some of our aims and some of the many innovative projects of UPF, such as the International Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), 'parliamentarians for peace' (IAPP) and the international conference for the Unity of the Sciences (ICUS). A great big thank you to all who contributed to the success of the days events, many travelling long distances, you know who you are! Beannacht Dé oraibh go léir (May God Bless you all!).

Photos courtesy of Róisín McManus

