

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## The Parliament of World Religions: Helping repair our broken world

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I am writing this week's Insight from Salt Lake City while attending the Parliament of the World's Religions.

The original Parliament was held in 1893 as part of the Chicago World's Fair.

It was the first major gathering of religious representatives from the Eastern and Western traditions and is considered the beginning of formal interreligious dialogue worldwide. More than 5,000 people heard a Hindu monk, Swami Vivekananda, greet the gathering with the words "Sisters and brothers of America."

Despite the success of this first gathering, the next World Parliament was not until 100 years later in 1993. Since that time, there have been Parliament meetings every five or six years in such locations as South Africa, Spain and Australia.

They mark the renewed

worldwide interest in interfaith understanding and engagement. One only wonders how 20th century world history might have been different if these world conferences among the religious traditions had been held more often during that 100-year gap.

This year's event brought together about 10,000 people from more than 80 countries and representing more than 50 religious traditions.

Plenary sessions featured themes on women, climate issues, poverty and violence. We heard from outstanding speakers, such as Jane Goodall and Karen Armstrong as well as Allan Boesak, Reformed minister and a leader of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and John Esposito, professor and director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding

at Georgetown University.

One of the inspiring sessions was chaired by Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core and a recent speaker at Aquinas College and Grand Valley State University. His session on emerging interfaith leaders featured Dr. Suzanne Barakat, a medical resident physician at University of California, San Francisco.

Born and raised in North Carolina, she spoke movingly about the discrimination she and her family experience daily as devout Muslims. She spoke of being pulled aside at airports for fear of what she might have under her headscarf, or facing patients in the hospital who refuse to be treated by her.

But hatred culminated when her brother, his new wife and her sister, dentistry students at the University of North Carolina, were murdered in their apartment last February.

Out of such a senseless tragedy, her faith and resilience

is inspiring.

Another story was shared by Faatimah Knight, the 23-year-old Muslim woman and seminary student behind the campaign, "Respond with Love," to raise money to help rebuild southern black churches that have been burned. More than \$100,000 has been raised.

It is sad that the powerful stories of American Muslims who have accomplished so much and contributed meaningfully to our communities are not the image that is portrayed in our media.

Another experience, new to me, was participating in a langar, the Sikh tradition's term meaning "open kitchen."

Throughout the Parliament's five days, everyone was invited each noon hour to participate in this vegetarian meal served free by the Sikh community.

In some cities, this meal is offered each day "to uphold the principle of equality between all people regardless of religion, caste, color, creed, age, gender or

social status."

What a beautiful expression of love from this religious community that has for centuries practiced this commitment to love and peace. And also how tragic that for many of us our introduction to this faith was in the reports of the 2012 massacre at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, where the gunman murdered six worshippers.

Why are hatred and violence so often the response that some have to religious practice that is different from their own? Why don't we see the acts of peace and love that religion teaches us as we encounter the "other"?

Next Thursday, in Grand Rapids, we will have the opportunity to hear three leaders from the Abrahamic traditions discussing these issues at the Jewish/Christian/Muslim Dialogue on the theme, "To Repair the World: How Does Religion Help or Hinder?"

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