

A Call to Conscience: Defending Freedom and Human Rights

was the theme of the
Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago
from the 14th – 18th August 2023.

Over 7,000 people from over 95 countries and from over 210 traditions participated in five colorful days filled with passion to return us to a state of human flourishing. There were many inspirational moments – a project that takes guns and makes them into useful tools – a woman whose young son had been shot and killed in the US Sandyhook Elementary School shooting in 2012 who decided to forgive and started the organization: 'Choose Love' – a Israeli man who is part of 'Roots' that brings Arabs and Israelis together, he said: 'Up to now I thought there was only one story, my story on the land, now I realise that there are two stories and two peoples on this land'. Sikhs opened a Langar and fed around 4,000 people daily throughout the Parliament as an act of love.

Click the link below to see the video sent by the Parliament organizers for glimpses of the opening & plenary sessions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZyRFFx5YOOQ>

BK Participation

A BK delegation from several cities in the USA and from Canada, India, The Caribbean and UK gathered to serve people through networking, panel discussions, a cultural performance and a booth with reflections, blessings cards and tying the Link of Love. We made contact again with our good friend Bishop William Swing who began the United Religions Initiative (URI). His first words were: 'Sister Chandru is with us'. She was very close to URI whose headquarters in San Francisco. Sr Mary and the BKs in Chicago showed us wonderful hospitality, taking care of all our needs with a lot of love.



Sister Binny from Madhuban was on stage during the opening session



BK delegation on the steps of the Chicago Centre

We asked people to deeply contemplate on the Parliament theme. Here are a few examples from the 13 reflection cards:

- *What does truth mean to you? Is the conscience connected to truth?*
- *Is following my heart the same as following my conscience? Or can my heart and my conscience lead me in different directions?*
- *On matters of human rights, how do I balance my conscience and public opinion?*
- *What quality is your conscience telling you to reawaken and nurture?*

BKs either organised or were invited onto panels in several side event on the following themes:

- *Contemplative Practice to Build Community, Promote Justice, and Embrace Peace*
- *Understanding Spiritual Rights: A Pathway to Defending Human Rights*
- *Catalyzing a Global Ethic of Cooperation in Service of Love*
- *How Does Your Spirituality Enhance Your Personal Freedom and How Can You Help Others?*
- *Practicing Compassion*

We also offered an Interfaith Musical Performance featuring Singing, dance and harp playing.



BK Binny at a panel discussion



At the BK booth, BK Susan with friends

performance by BK artists



The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders

By special invitation, BK Maureen represented the Brahma Kumaris at a three day meeting of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders parallel to the Parliament. The message of the Elijah Interfaith Institute is: 'The world's great religions radiate wisdom that can heal the world' (<https://elijah-interfaith.org/>)

Representatives from Hindu, Moslem, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist faiths gathered including the former Archbishop of Sweden and the Archbishop of Chernivtsi and Khotyn who was with the delegation of religious leaders that visited Ukraine in April 2022.

Drawing on the religious geniuses who had inspired us, we entered an open sharing on what it means to be a 'religious leader' balancing our spiritual development, dealing with the issues of the day, nurturing and sustaining those who we serve. Our questions for discussion included:

- Who are we beholden to? Scripture, the "Church", the community, the world at large, our personal spiritual development?
- Where do we identify as religious leaders and the different dimensions: meditators, activists, peace makers (interfaith), teachers, scholars
- Balancing the functions of religious leadership – teaching, action, administration, survival strategies, what examples of other faiths can bring to balance?
- Leadership and community – should emphasis be on leader or on community? Quality of listening and leading by consent



The conversations were both nurturing and thought provoking. We spoke of how every task is something of grace that is put before us and the importance of the eternal truths of our faiths and how we must not be insular; of the courage needed to bring people into a new possibility and to be authentic and maintain a sense of vision; how do we develop vision and read the signs of the times? We spoke of how a spiritual leader can emerge based on spiritual attainment and that there is no wisdom without practice and of the simplicity of friendship and at the heart of successful communication. Perhaps our discussion could be summed up in this way: How can we help each other to improve; how can we help each other to be better?

We held two plenary sessions:

The 10 spiritual principles for Climate Repentance – with reflections from our traditions:

1. We are stewards of this world
2. Creation manifests divinity
3. Everything in life is interconnected
4. Do no harm
5. Look after tomorrow
6. Rise above ego for our world
7. Change our inner climate
8. Repent and return
9. Every action matters
10. Use mind, open heart

A fuller version of the principles can be found at: <https://climaterepentance.com/the-spiritual-principles/>

The second was on: Interreligious Friendship and a tribute to Ukraine With several of us sharing on these two themes.



Plenary on Interreligious Friendship and a tribute to Ukraine with a quartet of Ukrainian musicians, living in Chicago, playing traditional Ukrainian music.

Charter for Compassion

At the special invitation of the Executive Director of the Charter for Compassion, Mary and Maureen were invited to the Compassion Banquet where the Karen Armstrong Humanitarian Awards were given to:

- The Mayor of San Antonio for making his city welcome to refugees and people of all backgrounds
- Valerie Kaur Founder of the Revolutionary Love project, a civil rights leader, lawyer, film maker and author
- Charles Barker, Founder of Compassionate Dallas
- Scarlett Lewis, co-founder of the Jesse Lewis Chose Love Movement, an intergenerational educational programme taught to over 2 million children.

The keynote speaker was Marianne Williamson, author, spiritual leader and political candidate.

We networked with several old and new friends. Sr Mary is now involved in the Compassionate Chicago project.

www.charterforcompassion.org

History

The very first Parliament of the World's Religions took place in 1893 at the World's Fair in Chicago. It was the first ever gathering of people of various faith traditions and the first time that Swami Vivekananda came to the West. Here is his first speech to the Parliament in his own voice: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WI0tnn6meWA>

His famous opening: 'Brothers and Sisters of America' was language that had not been used before. The centenary of the first Parliament was held in 1993 in Chicago where Dadi Prakashmani, Jagdishbhai and Sister Jayanti had major roles. Since then the Parliament has been held in different countries every 3-5 years.

Conclusion

For the BKs to participate in events such as these shows our openness to people of all faiths. Through making friends and sharing a spiritual perspective on the issues of the day, we are able to serve people of a wide variety of backgrounds in a royal and dignified way. It is definitely an enriching experience.