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U.S. Chapter IARF Reports to the International Council and to its Chapter Membership

Submitted March 2008

In July 2007 co-chairs of the U.S. Chapter, Rev. Doris Hunter and Nyla McCulloch, attended the annual IARF meeting in Clearwater, Florida (USA). We supported the financial changes required to move the International Office to Japan. We expressed our hope for the future of IARF and its new location in Osaka, Japan.

The U.S. Chapter held its annual board retreat in September. At this meeting, we affirmed our goals for the coming year: To increase IARF membership, to increase multifaith representation on the board, to promote relationships with other interfaith organizations, to develop IARF regions in the U.S., and to hold a U.S. Chapter conference. We also reviewed IARF's presence at the June UUA General Assembly in Portland, Oregon (USA), where we sponsored an informational booth, held a reception for members and guests, and participated in a workshop. We were fortunate to have sponsored Morse Flores of the Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN) to attend and present the work of the young adult program. Following General Assembly,

we sponsored a two-day member retreat at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine of America in Granite Falls, Washington (USA).

Other agenda items included: development of a Chapter budget, completion of the website, planning a mailing to U.S. Unitarian Universalist congregations promoting IARF, re-organizing the U.S. Chapter newsletter, development of the Boston Area Action Council (BAAC) region, plans to co-sponsor a program regarding interfaith dialogue with Salem State College (Salem, Massachusetts, USA), and further exploring the possibility of marketing Reverend Frank Robertson's "One World" game now that it is no longer published by the Unitarian Universalist Association.

In December we reviewed and made recommendations for the proposed U.S. Chapter budget. During a meeting of a board subgroup, it was discussed that a project for the BAAC would be to develop a youth advisory board consisting of youth from different faith groups. We began working with a new newsletter editor who submitted a redesigned

format. After finalizing plans for a mailing in February 2008, we sent promotional materials to 300 U.S. Unitarian Universalist congregations. This March, in conjunction with the Peace Institute at Salem State College, we will co-host an evening program entitled, *Conflict Prevention through Constructive Dialogue*. Maggie Herzig of the Public Conversations Project will be our presenter. We continue to work on our U.S. Chapter website and hope to have on-line membership capability very soon.

Natalie Gulbrandsen's death last October reminded us, in turn, of her on-going support and commitment to the unique contribution of IARF to the international scene – mainly the importance of interfaith dialogue among its members. The Reverend Frank Robertson's death in February 2008, further highlights this unique role of IARF, particularly with his introduction of circle groups at our Congresses. We continue to feel the loss of these two supporters of IARF, and hope that their legacies will not be forgotten by its members.

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We are hopeful that a memorial lecture will be given in honor of Natalie Gulbrandsen, cosponsored by the U.S. Chapter and Meadville Lombard Theological Seminary, to be presented either at their facility in Chicago or at the Unitarian Universalist Association 2009 General Assembly.

We look forward to the coming Congress in India in 2010, and intend to do whatever we can to promote attendance and participation.

Respectfully Submitted,

Reverend Doris Hunter
&
Nyla McCulloch,
Co-chairs, U.S. Chapter IARF



Read the latest news from the International IARF office at

www.iarf.net

State of Religious Freedom in the U.S.

We are pleased to introduce this *State of Religious Freedom in the U.S.* column as a regular feature to highlight some of the accomplishments and limitations in the current state of religious freedom in the U.S., which it is our mission to protect and promote. We hope to provide you with some salient information and "food for thought." Out of necessity, articles will be relatively brief, but will point you to sources of additional information. Two such resources reporting on religious freedom around the world are: <http://iarfus.org>, <http://www.iarf.net>, and <http://www.uscirf.gov>.

We are grateful to live in a country where violations of freedom of religion are neither widespread nor egregious. However, continued vigilance is needed to make sure that the rights of citizens established in the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the U.N. Universal Declaration on Human Rights (Article 18) are protected. Below are two recent news items related to religious freedom.

Success Stories – Free Exercise of Religion

Defending Student's Right to Sing "Awesome God" at School

NEWARK, NJ – A favorable settlement was reached in a case seeking to uphold an elementary school student's right to religious expression. The Frenchtown, New Jersey, elementary school student wanted to sing "Awesome God" in a voluntary, after-school talent show. School officials refused to allow her to sing the song, saying it would give the impression that the school favored religion. "There is a distinction between religious expression initiated or endorsed by school personnel, and speech initiated by individual students," said New Jersey ACLU cooperating attorney Jennifer Klear, "The Constitution protects a student's individual right to express herself, including religious expression." For more information see: <http://www.aclu.org/religion/schools/25799prs20060605.html>.

A Cause for Concern – Government Funded Religion

A Narrow Vote for Religious Freedom

WASHINGTON – In a narrow vote on House Resolution 1429, misleadingly named "Improving Head Start Act of 2007," the body rejected a motion that would have removed civil rights protections prohibiting the hiring of teachers, staff, and volunteers based on their religious beliefs. The provision was rejected by a very close vote of 222 to 195. Americans won a narrow victory for civil rights and freedom of religion this time, but this provision will be reintroduced next year. With votes that close, your participation is important. For more information and to learn how you can help see <http://www.aclu.org/religion/schools/29511leg20070420.html>

Ishmael's Story

by Richard A. Kellaway

Ishmael (not his real name) is an Iraqi. He is an American citizen; a thoughtful, kind, and gentle person. I knew him for several years before he returned to Iraq. Three year ago when he told me that he was going back to Baghdad, I was amazed! Why, I asked? Because it was his duty to care for his elderly father was his reply. I was concerned for his safety. While he was there we communicated from time to time, always realizing the importance of keeping messages simple, and to never say anything that might compromise his situation.

I did learn that he feared leaving his home, that it was safe to go out only at night, and that he traveled hidden in the trunk of a car. Amazingly, while there he managed to find a bride. The wedding pictures he sent had been taken at a small, secret reception. Then, no news for months.

When I did finally contact him again he was living in Dearborn, Michigan, the largest Muslim community in the nation. He said he had two goals: to work for the U.S.

government as an Arabic translator, and to bring his new wife to America. Neither has happened. His wife is still in Baghdad. The word is that it may be years before she is granted a visa despite the fact that her husband is a U.S. citizen.

His application to work as a translator has been rejected. While no formal reason has been given, he has been told unofficially that he will not be hired because he is a Shi'ite Muslim of Iraqi origin. If true, this is a blatant example of the denial of religious freedom. This is also very foolish. Our government desperately needs native Arab speaking translators, particularly those familiar with Iraqi idioms and dialects. He wants to serve his country, and he would be a great asset to our nation. Instead, his religion makes him suspect and untrustworthy.

This is a personal story, only one snapshot of a larger picture of religious discrimination. But, whenever I hear a zealot declaiming about the menace of "Arab terrorists," I think of Ishmael and his eagerness to serve his adopted nation. Is it any wonder that our enemies continue to grow in number?

A Communication from the Consultation for Interfaith Education

by Rev. Orlanda Brugnola

The Consultation for Interfaith Education (CIE) is beginning to prepare for the next Parliament to be held in Australia in December 2009. Everyone is encouraged to consider attending the Parliament in conjunction with the CIE. The conflict resolution work being done by practitioners in the Pacific Rim is far ahead of what is occurring here, so there is much to learn from them.

During the previous Parliament, held in Barcelona, in Spain, 2004, the CIE presented one of the "best" (as rated by their Parliament) three-day seminars at the Parliament of the World's Religions. Morse Fores and Ramola Sundram were two of the presenters participating in the seminar.



Upcoming Activities of Interest

- IARF Council Meeting
March 12 – 14, 2008
- Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly
June 25 – 29, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida
IARF U.S. will have a booth in the Exhibit Hall and plans to hold a reception for members and friends of IARF.



United States Chapter
International Association
For Religious Freedom

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See our ALL NEW
website at:

www.iarfus.org

A Salute to the Memory of the Reverend Frank Robertson

by Rev. Doris Hunter

We who shared memories of Frank will never forget his gentleness and his grace. He blessed the day with his appreciation of religious education, and how it could change the lives of children and adults when taught with the spirit of an open mind and heart. He loved participating in the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) and taught us that interfaith dialogue with others from different religious traditions was the beginning and end of the quest for peace. He created the circle groups concept for our IARF Congresses, giving our members who spoke different languages and different faith traditions the opportunity to come together to share family photos and to speak about our lives in a very personal way. Barriers were broken down as we looked at photos of each others' families and listened to stories about their everyday lives.

Frank wrote poetry and painted delicate pictures of flowers that grew in his garden. Along with his partner of 36 years, Rick McDonald, he continued to welcome visitors to their home in Plymouth, Massachusetts, even after his retirement from active ministry. Some of us on the U.S.



Chapter board of the IARF visited there last summer to play the world religions game that Frank had created for the World Religions Curriculum that was published by the Unitarian Universalist Association. It was a joyous occasion. Frank insisted that we all "win" and reach the goal of "One World." On reflection, this was not a game for Frank, but was always his wish for all of us. How can we thank this gentle spirit for the gifts he gave us during his life? The answer is, of course, to work for peace and to welcome the stranger to sit down, show a family photo, and share his or her story. It is as simple as that!

**U.S. CHAPTER
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