

Mercy Sisters at Parliament of World Religions

At least 40 Sisters of Mercy of the Australian Institute attended the recent Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne (December 3-9, 2009). According to Cheryl Camp RSM (Townsville), Australian Sisters of Mercy already occupy a space in interfaith action, but perhaps now is the time to occupy a space at the level of national and international Mercy discourse. Read Cheryl's report.



The mission of the fourth Parliament of the World's Religions, held in the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre on the Yarra River, sought to cultivate harmony among the world's religions and foster engagement with the world's guiding institutions to try to achieve a more just, peaceful and sustainable world. Among the five to six thousand people present, at least 40 Sisters of Mercy from Australia attended some of the 662 programmes held during the week of intense interfaith interaction.

The days started with different religious observances followed by inter-religious and intra-religious programmes, symposia and performances which covered seven major themes of healing the earth, indigenous peoples, overcoming poverty, securing food and water for all, building peace in the pursuit of justice, creating social cohesion and sharing wisdom.



Three Sisters of Mercy appeared on panels of presenters: Rosemary Crumlin RSM (Parramatta) on "The Torah through Paintings and Poetry", Wendy Flannery RSM (Brisbane) on "Signposts of Engaged Spirituality: Faith and Interfaith Initiatives for Building a Culture of Peace" and Patricia Blundell RSM (Brisbane) on "Being a University Chaplain in the 21st Century", "Breaking Barriers: Global Women of Faith Network" and "Women of Faith Network, Religions for Peace, Australia and New Zealand".



Mercy participants gained much from the experience. Anne Tormey RSM (Perth) valued insights into Islam as a result of the presentation of very fine Islamic scholars and appreciated the values from other traditions such as their emphasis on inner peace as a prerequisite for outer peace. She sees that the mobilisation on current world crises will come from the religious traditions with their inherent respect for life.



Margaret Broadbent RSM (Melbourne) carries from the Parliament within her a vibrancy and renewed hope that as we listen to one another with open hearts and minds we can work together to reconcile our world. She congratulated and celebrated the 'young' with their visions and commitments to building a better world.

Margaret Moore RSM (Melbourne) attended a very dynamic strand of workshops to do with globalisation and world poverty. She was struck by the strong interest in social justice, and by the complexities and deeper awarenesses of what lies beneath the desire to try to 'make a difference' on a global level – in the light of the commitment of so many countries to the Millennium Development Goals. She felt that there was a huge commitment to what was called "the knowledge drive" in terms of faith-based groups and the breadth of development work. There



was a desire expressed – a challenge really for good practice in the field where it is most needed: What is being done? How is it being done? Are there new partnerships that could be formed? There is need for tools for translating into action. Education was seen as the single most important answer to global poverty – and this is where faith communities can respond well.



Monique Nyland RSM (Melbourne) found it inspirational to see representatives from 80 nationalities and more than 220 faith traditions striving to interact in harmony to seek peace, compassion and justice for the world. She supported the message of the Dalai Lama who reminded us that if we are to be true to our reflections and deliberations, we must take action on the issues raised during the week.

Some of the presenters sent messages of encouragement. Joan Chittister OSB appeared on a number of panels including those on poverty, gender relations, female aspects of the divine, interfaith leadership and the Charter of Compassion. She recalled her previous visit to Australia and enjoyed meeting Sisters of Mercy. She said that she still wears the gift of a 'pin' given to her by, from memory, the Adelaide Mercies.

Ambassador to the Vatican, Tim Fischer, said he admires the work of the Sisters of Mercy in Australia and overseas. His work as government representative includes fostering interfaith dialogue and he encourages us to do this "interface". He also asked for our support in a coming announcement about Blessed Mary MacKillop.



Geraldine Doogue met some Mercies after the live recording of a *Compass* programme. She delighted in recalling the names of Mercy Sisters who had taught her and said that they had made an indelible impression on her which still remains today.

A Muslim scholar, Dr Chandra Muzaffar in a private interview, and the Dalai Lama in the closing plenary gathering, both echoed the concern of a participant of a previous Parliament. If Parliaments of the World's Religions are not followed up by action that serves the larger cause of humanity, then they are just social affairs.

Australian Sisters of Mercy already occupy a space in interfaith action, but perhaps now is the time to occupy a space at the level of national and international Mercy discourse. This could raise consciousness, provide co-ordination, and harness "Mercy power" for the mission of interfaith dialogue which is to foster harmonious relationships between people of the different faith traditions in order to live peacefully together and to act together on current issues and crises.



The observation that many of the Parliament's panels consisted totally of men is also a call for us as women to take our place in interfaith discourse and action.

From: Cheryl Camp RSM (Townsville), December 2009.

Find out more about the Parliament of the World's Religions (Melbourne, 2009).

Visit www.parliamentofreligions.org