

Dear Friends,

Greetings of love and peace.

A soft golden light sits low on the western horizon and a pale blue sky fades upward into a deeper blue into the growing blackness of night above the lights of Melbourne with all its tall, mostly glass buildings rising high above the peacefully flowing Yarra River.

I am sharing an apartment with Yoland Trevino, Marites Africa and Shakun Vaswani from the Philippines, and Raul Mamani from Argentina, on the 22nd floor of a glass building, which Swami Agnivesh has labeled “The Edge” because the walls are floor-to-ceiling glass, leaving you the feeling that you are floating above the city, but also at the edge of a deep precipice. Rev. Heng Sure and many Dharma Realm Buddhist Youth share an apartment on the 30th floor.

Melbourne is a fascinating, international city. Much of the area we are in has been built within the last ten years or so – tall buildings that rise, on either side of the Yarra River, like rivers into the sky, reflecting light and the motion of the clouds that move in and out during the day. When you walk along the river promenade, you see people from all over the world, most of them, surprisingly, speaking with Australian accents. There is a bridge over the river with metal sculptures and plaques showing all the countries that have contributed immigrants to Australia since World War Two.

In this context, the diverse people gathered for the Parliament stand out only because their sometimes exotic religious dress, or because they are wearing their Parliament identification badges.

This Parliament’s theme is – Making a World of Difference: Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth. It is much smaller in numbers than either the Cape Town or Barcelona Parliaments, and seems much calmer to me and purposeful. That may be because the

convention center that houses the Parliament is mammoth, so you never feel crowded or particularly rushed. Melbourne is very relaxed and so is the Parliament – none of the security that made getting in and out of previous Parliaments a challenge.

What's the same as previous Parliaments is the enormous number of workshops – detailed in the Parliament program that is 400 pages long! There are five program slots during the day. Each one having as many as 29 programs to choose from.

The major themes of the Parliament are:

- €€€€€Healing the Earth with Care and Concern
- €€€€€Indigenous People
- €€€€€Overcoming Poverty in an Unequal World
- €€€€€Securing Food and Water for All People
- €€€€€Building Peace in Pursuit of Justice
- €€€€€Creating Social Cohesion in Village and City
- €€€€€Sharing Wisdom in the Search for Inner Peace

In addition, there are the following program clusters:

- Local to Global Interreligious Movements
- Partner Cities Network
- Islam in the Global Context
- Women in Leadership
- Youth
- Family
- Media and Religion
- Interreligious Education
- Human Rights
- Peace Building
- Nuclear Non-Proliferation
- Disaster Relief

Everyone seems to have a different strategy for determining what to attend. A priority for many is supporting one of the 40+ workshops given by other URI leaders.

It is a joy, walking through the sprawling convention center, to see so many URI leaders and so many old friends from many years in the interfaith movement. One thing is clear. URI is held in high esteem. I have had many people come up to me and thank me for the good work URI is doing and marvel at how URI is growing.

This afternoon, John Taylor, former Director of the World Conference of Religions for Peace and a respected elder in the global interfaith movement, told me how impressed he was by URI's development. He said he reads our newsletters with great interest. He also noted how positive he felt it was that the WCRP, the Parliament and URI are working collaboratively on the project to get the UN to declare a Decade of Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace.

This afternoon, as I was attending an impressive workshop offered by Don Frew and Raul Mamani on Lost and Endangered Religions, Yoland chaired a workshop on the UN Decade proposal.

And in and around and through all the workshops are informal conversations to catch up with old friends, and impromptu working sessions with other URI leaders. In the morning, Amir Farid Isahak, SEAPac Trustee, and I will have breakfast with a member of the Steering Committee for the World Congress of Muslim Philanthropists. I'll have lunch with Ralph Singh, an old friend and devotee of Baba Virsa Singh, who has developed a wonderful interfaith curriculum for children. Then I'll share dinner and reflection time with Rev. Heng Sure and the Dharma Realm Buddhist Youth.

And so it goes at the Parliament of the World's Religions.

It is a privilege to be here representing URI's remarkable global community.

Love,

Charles

The Rev. Canon Charles P. Gibbs
Executive Director
United Religions Initiative
P.O. Box 29242
San Francisco, CA 94129
1.451.561.2300
www.uri.org <<http://www.uri.org>>