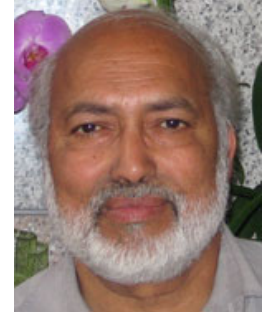


Printed in ALL ABOVE PAPERS, August 1, 2005,

United We Pray

By Iftekhhar Hai

Seoul, Korea: Determined to promote world peace, religious leaders from 20 denominations and 23 countries converged last month in Seoul, South Korea -- the digital capital of the world, the city that never sleeps.



Throughout the year, we members of the United Religions Initiative are electronically connected, tirelessly sharing daily accounts of religiously-motivated violence in our areas and asking each other to denounce it publicly and pressure governments to help stop it.

Founded in San Francisco eight years ago by Episcopal Bishop of California William Swing, URI has helped bring the Darfur crisis to the world's attention through letters to newspapers, and is trying to bring India and Pakistan to the negotiating table. My job is to Islamically condemn violence, ask local Muslim leaders to give fatwas and financial aid, to support our position and repair the damage.

We also work with grassroots organizations in our respective countries to eradicate extreme poverty, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality, improve health and environmental sustainability.

Global mission

While many at this year's weeklong meeting were moved by the pilgrimage to the Freedom Bridge at the North Korean border, to me, the most important event was the election of new board of directors. With a Central American Mayan woman as chair and an African Orthodox Christian as vice-chair, a peaceful revolution had taken place, shifting power from the American domination that took URI through its incubation and "growing pains" stages.

From the inception, Bishop Swing wanted this organization to be truly representative of people from all over the world. The future of URI depends upon what people of the world want; most of them are have-nots and disenfranchised, not the Western-educated.

The victory was celebrated that evening with beautiful dances from Korean artists. The next morning, at 4 a.m., the Buddhists gathered in their temple to meditate and rid themselves of the desires of the

worldly gods: wealth, power and greed. We prayed together and asked questions on how to achieve "nirvana."

Seeking enlightenment

The Rev. Heng Sure, a monk, said, "The heart is the center of our being, bring harmony within your own mind. It is only then harmony can be achieved outside. Stop worshipping false gods, like wealth and power. Do not put your trust in money, but put your money in trust."

Dr. Amir, a sufi from Malaysia, said, "We can only achieve our vision of a repaired and transformed world by pooling the best of our respective teachings and talents in partnership and shared endeavor. Only full and effective partnership can end conflict and bring peace, with opportunities to ponder together the wonder of creation and the mystery of God."

And finally, the Rev. Charles Gibbs, URI executive director, ended the session by quoting Edmund Burke, one of the few members of the British Parliament who defended the American Revolution: "The only thing necessary for evil to succeed is for good men to do nothing," and, I would add, "and to attack those fighting for justice."

The ending ceremony was very moving. Everyone holding hands, gently moving around in a circle and singing, "May Peace Prevail on Earth."

The meeting confirmed what I already know, and what I hope San Mateo County residents also believe. We are all globally connected, we cannot live in isolation. We must speak out against injustice and violence and find peaceful ways to resolve conflicts.

Iftekhar Hai, a South City resident, is president of the United Muslims of America Interfaith Alliance.

Next week's columnist: Rev. Vail Weller, Unitarian Universalist Church of San Mateo