

Launch of Religions for Peace European Women of Faith Network

The launch of Religions for Peace European Women of Faith Network took place on 13 November 2008 at the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium. The launch was attended by women from different faiths, organisations and countries throughout Europe, as well as representatives from the European Council of Religious Leaders, RfP Europe Governing Board, the European Union, United Nations and Members of the European Parliament. The theme of the launch was Women Against Poverty and Women in Action.



The Co-Chairs Ravinder Kaur Nijjar from Scotland and Yolande Iliano from Belgium welcomed the delegates. Messages of warm wishes and congratulations were received from the Moderator of the European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) Bishop Gunnar Stalsett, read out by Ingrid Joys, senior information officer of ECRL; and Jacqueline Ogega, the Director of Programs of the Global Women of Faith Network who were unable to be present.

Yolande Iliano opened the proceedings speaking of the great honour and opportunity this occasion presented, building on the past experience to help us understand the present and live the future. She spoke of the mission of the Network in embodying that role of womankind to transmit human values to our progeny and the transformation this role is currently undergoing. Nonetheless women typically remain discrete agents as mothers and wives, not craving limelight power or recognition.



Ravinder Kaur Nijjar spoke of how the launch of this network was like bringing peace into our own family at the same time to the wider world. She spoke of the founder of the Sikh movement born that same day of 13 November, whose message was to remember the one Lord at all times, earn an honest living, share what you have earned with the poor and needy, and selflessly serve the Lord and His creation. She stated that the current thinking of the need for conflict resolution and transformation was vital but there was a greater need for the spiritual transformation of society, the need to bring compassion, humility and love to the forefront. Love begins with the mother and teacher but we also need to reach out to others and widen our family and begin to see the whole human race as one.

Julia Maria Koszewska read out the mission statement for RfP European Women of Faith Network. Heidi Rautionmaa lead the meditation by ringing the Rovereto bell for Peace and reminded those present that we are living bells speaking and acting for peace and justice. A presentation followed showing the Golden Rule from the Sacred Scriptures from the different faiths and these were read out by women.



Erna Hennicot-Schoepges the Rapporteur on the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue launched the RfP European Women of Faith Network. She spoke of the need to seek alternative models to resolve conflict and help alleviate poverty. She said that women have

not just rights but also duties and they must overcome their inclinations to remain in the background. Women need to learn to speak out and become women of action. Women cannot just be observers of society and expressing aspirations but must take an active part in favour of the dignity, identity and individuality of each human being.

Mehrezia Maiza Labidi. Co-ordinator of IWCC spoke on behalf of the Global Women of Faith Network, bringing a message from Jacqueline Ogega and Dr William Vendley, the Secretary General of WCRP. She spoke of the need to be in the forefront of the fight against the ravages on the female population in health and poverty. Inter-faith dialogue was about faiths uniting in common action for those in need. She spoke of the Women of Faith Development Summit to end Global Poverty and the Women of Faith Development Alliance, and how empowering adolescent girls was the key to eliminating poverty.



Zerbanoo Gifford, International Woman of the Year 2006 and Human Rights Campaigner, gave the keynote address. She spoke of the importance of today's event, a network not just of women for peace but of all women spiritually. She stated that women had made huge progress regarding gender equality but were still held back in the major religions. She had encountered many incredible women throughout her lifetime but what were the secrets of the world's most outstanding women? She highlighted four key areas that the women had identified as attributable to their success- hard work, good education, an innate sense of service to the community (not just self-empowerment) and the importance of their religion and spirituality. She stressed that the women involved in the inter-faith movement today could be said to be the most outstanding as they have brought faith up-to-date in the modern period and embarked on action.

A display of spiritual movement by Kaiga Kayiganwa interfaith group then took place, Dr Maureen Sier then chaired the Women in Action part of the programme. Iris Maci and Maureen gave powerpoint presentations of interfaith activity around Europe, with concrete examples of action developed by women for peace throughout Europe. A question and answer session followed chaired by Nadine Iarchy. Dr Katerina Karkala-Zorba provided a synthesis of the afternoon. She stated that from all the presentations and speeches the message given was that: we are women, we are European, and we have Faith – but we are also a Network and moving towards Action. We need to be united, be empowered for a common cause, we

need young women to carry the banner forward and we need training for the future. Our inspiration comes from being many women together, and going beyond words.



Ravinder Kaur Njjar and Yolande Iliano then thanked all those present in making the launch a success and reiterated that the hard work starts now. They then presented the outgoing president of WCRP Europe with a gift for his tremendous commitment and hard work throughout his term. Jehangir Sarosh concluded the proceedings, noting that women indeed have a quite different way of working and that the RfP EWFN will command first priority attention from RfP Europe in future.



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