

REPORT ON THE SYDNEY PRE-PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS EVENT – 2 August 2009 at Old Government House, Parramatta



More than 250 Sydney Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Protestants, Moslems, Jews and members of the Baha'i faith gathered together on Sunday, August 2 at Old Government House, Parramatta in a lead up to the Parliament of the World's Religions which will be held in Australia for the first time in December. The Parliament in December will bring delegates of all faiths and religions from around the world to Melbourne and as excitement for the December 3 event builds, the Ecumenical Council of NSW decided to hold a Pre-

Parliament in Sydney. "We saw the event at Parramatta on Sunday as a chance for different groups in Sydney to get in touch with one another and build on what was already there," said the Rev Dr Jonathan Inkipin, General Secretary of the NSW Ecumenical Council. "It was also an opportunity to hear one another's voices and to discover the wide range of religious organisations involved in interfaith work." While many religious groups knew some of the other groups working in this area, most were unaware of just how many different groups were involved or whom to contact to join in the work themselves, the Anglican priest says, adding that with Sydney, Australia's most vibrant and multicultural city filled with diverse people of different faiths and religions, meetings such as the one last weekend were important.



Taking the December Parliament's theme of "Making a World of Difference, Hearing each other, Healing the earth," the event on Sunday included a forum on faith and ecology, a sacred music concert by acclaimed Jerusalem-born singer, Dhalia Dior, award-winning Russian violinist, Leo Novikov, Australia's internationally renowned opera singer, Helena Sindelar and the acapella Gospel singers Pambazuka.

The keynote speaker at the event was Larissa Behrendt, Professor of Law and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at UTS and recently named as Person of the Year for 2009 by NAIDOC. "She is an extraordinary person and we not only wanted someone of her calibre but the organisers wanted to highlight the important contribution made by indigenous people to Australia," Dr Inkipin said.

The Executive Director of the Council for the Parliament for World Religions is Rev Dirk Ficca. Based in Chicago, USA, Rev Ficca also addressed the conference and talked about how religious ideas of interdependence can provide a basis for worldwide teamwork in addressing global concerns from poverty and hunger to cross cultural violence and the environment.

Later, a panel chaired by ABC Radio National's Rachael Kohn gave the young people a chance to



air their own views, including several students who are involved in interfaith activities at various Sydney universities, vowing to combat all forms of racism and prejudice. Glen Falkenstein, a member of the Student Representative Council at the University of Technology, Sydney and a representative for Sydney's Jewish community, said that much of the discrimination on campus came not from other religious organizations but from extremist political groups who sought division

and suspicion as a way of effecting change. Gurkiran Singh, a Sikh Australian student said while religions cannot always agree, they can be harmonious and can learn to trust one another. Zuleyha Keskin, a young Muslim representative from the Turkish Islamic Community agreed and said interacting with those from other faiths had made her not only "a stronger Muslim," but "a better Muslim"" She also credited a Catholic Bishop on an interfaith pilgrimage for encouraging her to practice reflection, an aspect of her faith she said she had neglected.



The Pre Parliament, was organised by a steering committee made up of representatives of the Ecumenical Council, the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney and interfaith groups such as Affinity Intercultural Foundation, Buddhist Council of NSW, Brahma Kumaris, Baha'i Council of NSW and ACT, Catholic Diocese of Parramatta, Columban Mission Institute, NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, Ramakrishna Sarada Vedanta Society, Sikh Council of Australia, Uniting Church Synod of

NSW and ACT, Women's Interfaith Network, World Conference of Religions for Peace and the Zoroastrian community.

"It was a festive event and filled with the sort of excitement and hope we will see when the Parliament of the World's Religions meets in Melbourne in December," says Dr Inkpin said.



*Report from Catholic Weekly -
Photos from the NSW Ecumenical Council*