WTB Monthly Meeting -  February 9, 2014

World Interfaith Harmony Assembly

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Liverpool

 Over 400 people gathered on a cold, snowy winter afternoon to celebrate the diversity of our community through song, dance, prayer and poetry. The 4th annual World Interfaith Harmony Assembly, co-sponsored by InterFaith Works of CNY and WTB, was hosted by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on Bear Road.  As we arrived, their members guided us to the kitchen area where we added our goodies to the array of refreshments church members had prepared.  Before and after the program, people were encouraged to imprint their hands in paint on a banner that would be sent to the United Nations,  the organization that established World Interfaith Harmony Week in 2010. The theme of this year's program was the golden rule...highlighting the common goal of loving and respecting  oneself,  one's neighbor,  and  the wider world.

A tone of tolerance and harmony was set even before the official welcome. Dr. Joan Hillsman at the piano sang  "If I can help somebody my living will not be in vain, "followed by the Syracuse Chapter of the Gospel Music Workshop of American singing *The Harmony Song.* Beth Broadway, Executive Director of IFW , welcomed us commenting that we build who we are through our faith traditions; Edith Washington, VP of WTB, noted that WTB was formed after 9/11 with a mission to build harmony among women across different traditions. She asked us to think about what it is that we have in common, that binds us to each other,  and to celebrate our oneness . Andrew DeLuca spoke briefly on behalf of  Rep. Dan Maffei .  The dual Masters of Ceremonies -- Thomas  Kerr of the hosting LDS church and Rev John Werner of John the Baptist/Holy Trinity Parrish (last year's hosting church)--moved the program along briskly with personal touches. Between presentations  high school students from the Syracuse Chapter of Seeds of Peace read  versions  of the Golden Rule from various faith traditions. They added so much to the theme and helped the program flow smoothly as one group left the stage and another set up.

Fourteen faith traditions shared parts of their culture and beliefs. The Sikh Foundation of Syracuse opened the program presenting a hymn "Ek Pita Ekas Ke Hum Barak" written by their 5th guru. Dressed in traditional clothing, Singh Dhamoon played harmonium and Baljit Kaur Atwal played the tabla and sang.  The audience was given a translation of the hymn which spoke to how to realize and find God.  Next, a combined group from neighboring congregations Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church and Congregation Beth Sholom-Chevra  sang an interfaith song from each tradition. These congregations traditionally celebrate Thanksgiving together, so they sang Psalm 33 "how good it is for brothers to dwell together in peace." They also did a gentle, prayerful, ecumenical Taize hymn. Taize started after WW II and is about music dissolving barriers. "Where charity and love prevail there is God." Next, members and youth from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community spoke about muslimsforpeace.org; they  displayed a huge Golden Rule banner "Love for All Hatred For None" which was greeted with spontaneous applause.

The celebration team of Unity of Syracuse sang some uplifiting music. The first song celebrated people who make life a better place for others;  the second,  *Lean on Me,* hit a truly responsive note as members of  the audience joined in.  Three members of the Bhutanese-Nepali Hindu Community performed in traditional dress with harmonium and drums. They have been in this community five years and celebrate their journey.  They stressed that we all sit down and look up at the same stars overhead and we are all a product of mother earth as well. Their song was about the love that makes us strong from the inside--the love of God.  Following this, Suzanne Roupas, wearing a long flowing cape and representing the Goddess Path/Wicca, spoke about the close connection between the divine feminine and the cycles of the year. She performed a ceremony that cast a circle of protection and harmony using the four  cardinal directions (East-air, renewal, dawn; South-passion, voice, birth, fire; West-ocean, life-giving, blood, compassion, tears; North-place of the ancestors, the wise ones.)

The program continued with a talented girl from Islamic Society of Syracuse performing "Forgotten Promise" sung in Arabic and English.  The Baha'i Faith Community of Syracuse spoke of their belief that all religions are divine in origin, and stressed that  Baha'i believes that male and female have equal rights ; all humanity is one.  A group of children said prayers in both English and Spanish, and their spokesperson led the audience in a song. "So powerful is the life of unity that it can illuminate the whole world."  Next a representative the Church World Service spoke about its mission to spread the love of God by serving those in need. This group sponsors Crop Hunger Walks and is inspired by the motto "We walk because they walk." This theme was mirrored by the three young ladies from the Alleluia Choir of Liverpool 1st Methodist Church who sang a moving rendition of "You'll Never Walk Alone."

Five members of the Zen Center of Syracuse dressed in orange robes recited two Buddhist chants,  parts of which were done in English.  Buddha said the whole of my teaching is love and compassion, and the chosen readings reflected this.   A large group of students from Syracuse University,  Oy Capella Syracuse University Hillel, sang two amazing a capella numbers: *The Hope* (the Israeli national anthem) and *One Day* (a day when there will be no wars.) A group of 16 young people from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints read one of their  13 articles of  faith and sang a lovely Mormon hymn.    Rev. Tiffany Steinwert, Dean of SU Hendricks Chapel , spoke about the 2014 SNAP Challenge. She stressed that 50% of Syracuse children go hungry and the need at local food pantries is rising. The SNAP challenge asks people to try to eat on the $29.40 that food stamps pays a person per week and donate the rest of the money they would have spent on food to a food bank.  After a closing blessing, Dr. Joan Hillsman led the audience in singing "Love, Peace, Joy;" some people joined hands and snaked around the room as they sang.

The warmth of acceptance and fellowship continued as people greeted each other around the refreshment tables, and young people from the host church escorted people to through the snow to help them clear off their cars and head home safely.

Respectfully submitted,

Barbara Bova,

WTB Sunday Secretary