

SPIRIT OF SERVICE

WITH DEEP HUMILITY AND LOVE, THE
SATHYA SAI ORGANIZATION OF AUSTRALIA
AND AFFINITY INTER CULTURAL
FOUNDATION THANK YOU FOR YOUR
CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORIC SPIRIT
OF SERVICE CONFERENCE HELD ON JUNE
14TH 2008, AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN SYDNEY.



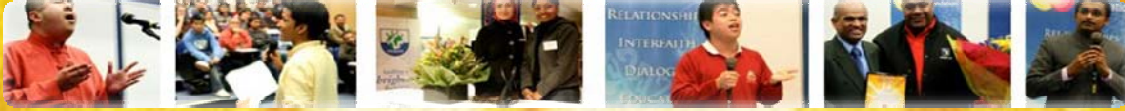
"The best way to find yourself, is to lose yourself in the service of others"



AFFINITY
INTERCULTURAL
FOUNDATION



SATHYA SAI ORGANISATION OF AUSTRALIA AND PNG



SPIRIT OF SERVICE CONFERENCE REPORT

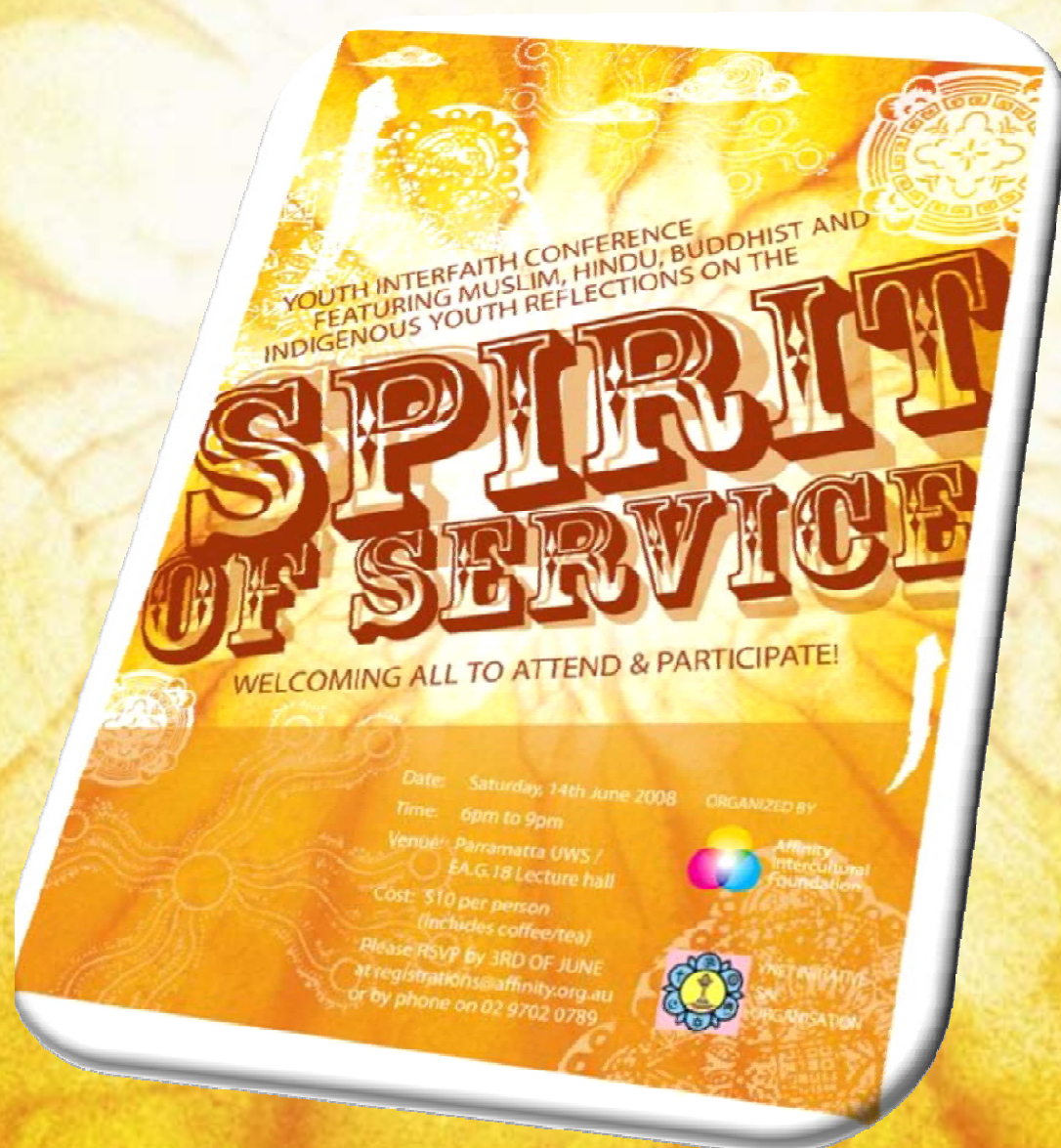
June 14th 2008 * University of Western Sydney *



SPIRIT OF SERVICE CONFERENCE REPORT

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CONFERENCE PROGRAM



Launch of conference by Hon. Laurie Ferguson

Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services

Key note address: Mr Shane Phillips, CEO Tribal Warrior (Aboriginal)

Youth Panel:

Mr Sadiq Ansari (Muslim)

Mr Shiva Gounden (Hindu)

Mr Leonard Fung (Buddhist)

Performances:

Hindu TRAC: Rhythm Group

Muslim: Muhamed Cengic & Musa Hodzic

Buddhist: Yulianto Lukito

Home-Encounters Project Report

Makiz Ansari (Affinity) & Riona Moodley (YNET)

Panel Questions & Answers

Moving forward: Kolitha Wickramage (YNET)

Vote of Thanks: Mehmet Saral (Affinity)

HIGHLIGHTS FROM CONFERENCE¹

Conference MC's: Venkat and Tamkin

"The theme for the interfaith conference arose from a dream to rise above the barriers that exist between the various faiths and to serve each other. The tenant of all faiths is love, and the best way to reflect this is through the demonstration of love as service" - Venkat

(Venkat is a Dental surgeon and an active member of Y-NET and is a Hindu. Tamkin is a University student and is a youth member of Affinity Intercultural Foundation. She is a practising Muslim)

Opening Address: Honourable Mr Laurie Ferguson,

Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services



After acknowledgement of the traditional custodians the Honourable Minister congratulated the organisers of the conference, Y-Net and Affinity Intercultural foundation, for their initiative in forging meaningful interfaith work with young people from Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, Christian and Aboriginal backgrounds..

"There is both international appreciation and recognition regarding the apology made by the Prime Minister of Australia to the Aboriginal people. As a representative of the Australian Government in Kuala Lumpur, I was approached by several dignitaries who were keen to identify how to bridge the gap between different faiths and how to understand each other. I have a personal commitment to promote interfaith youth networks and also to increase the understanding and acceptance among all Australians".

"Australia is a united nation despite its multiple religious and ethnic groups. A mass survey of the general Australian population, mapping social cohesion in Australia revealed that 96% of Australians feel a strong sense of cohesion to the country and approximately 70% support immigration. The report on Social Cohesion in Australia highlighted that religion has emerged as a substantial force in Australia. Australia has an increasing number of religious groups, which has the potential to pose a threat to social cohesion".

¹ Please note these are not exact transcripts but from speaker's notes taken from the conference.

“The difference between each religious group is real and can be a threat and manifest as conflict if understanding is not promoted. Successful cohesion can occur through a process of integration where Australians chose to immerse themselves in a spirit of diversity, and yet maintain their religious identity. Though the shaping of this nation has not been without conflict, Australia has flourished despite this due to its great focus on integration and understanding”.

“Affinity and Y-net should be commended for their efforts in promoting interfaith dialogue and action”

Keynote speaker: Shane Phillips, CEO of Tribal Warrior organization



“Parramatta is an area which for many generations has been shared by various tribal groups, however it originally belonged to the Baramadigal people, the people of the eels”.

“The inception of Tribal Warrior was by a group of elders who envisioned that they had a boat and they needed to train captains to man the boat. They chose young Aboriginal people who had several challenges in life, including poor literacy skills, who came from dysfunctional families, who had a background of substance abuse, and sought to empower them so that they may rise above these difficulties”.

“The aim of Tribal Warrior is to ensure simplicity and develop a simple connection which results in the creation of a sense of belonging, discipline and self worth. It is to teach Aboriginal youth from various backgrounds how to work as a team. These youth are referred from several sources including the Department of Community Service, the police, and their own relatives”.

The importance of acceptance is also highlighted by the journey of Tribal Warrior along the East coast of Australia. Prior to the journey it was anticipated that there may be doubts and

questions expressed by people, and a resolution was made that these would be addressed in a friendly manner over a 'cuppa' on the boat.

At one point in their journey on an island just off Coffs Harbour, they were greeted by a sea of people of different tribes and races, with hands interlinked forming a path across the small island. This revealed to the Tribal Warrior crew the extent of respect they had from these people.

The message is to share the love with each other.

A lot of Aboriginal children are angry and feel isolated. It is Tribal Warrior's aim is to show them that anger is their enemy, and that there is no need to foster such anger. The speaker requested that everyone demonstrate love and welcome these children so that they can overcome this emotion.

Darling Harbour where Tribal Warrior is anchored in place of work and love. Here Aboriginal children are shown the value of their Aboriginal culture and ancestry, so that they can be inspired and then spread this message further. The hope is that through knowledge and love, the men of this Earth can overcome anger and violence.

In conclusion the speaker stated in his Aboriginal dialect, "People I thank you for acknowledging our people."



Hindu Faith Speaker: Shiva Gounden



[Shiva was born in Fiji and migrated to Australia with his family in 1999. He is born into a Hindu family and has been a long time advocate of interfaith and intercultural dialogue and social service. He is a member of the Y-NET initiative. He states that he has travelled through the various ups and downs of life in a struggle to find himself, and has managed this through the art of interfaith service. He directs several volunteer service projects in Sydney].

What is Hinduism and what is its connection to service?

Though born into a Hindu family, I felt that I kept losing my path until I was taken up by Vedantic philosophy: To live life with perfect clarity of mind and purpose. Veda leads one to his or her true self.

The Vedas are condensed into an occurrence in history known as the Bhagavad Gita, of which chapter 3 focuses on service. Yoga is union with God. The three yoga's, Bhakti (devotion), Karma (self service and righteous action) and Gnana (knowledge) are intertwined.

The essence of Hinduism is oneness. Therefore Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Baha'i, Jewish and all other faiths are all one.

How do we experience oneness?

This is through the act of selfless service. The Gita states that 'if you do service with detachment and with devotion then you will find the divine.'

The path of service

My path of service commenced with homework help classes where I helped children from dysfunctional families with their homework and also inadvertently imparted basic life skills. I was given the opportunity to serve in terms of patience and the realisation that there are people who lack the luxury and resources that I possessed.

[Shiva highlighted numerous inspirational moments including: an 8 year old dyslexic girl who gradually began to overcome her learning difficulties and enjoyed studying well into the night; a student in computer class who continued to call him to further learn even once the classes had finished, however also asked him for coffee and to play basket ball; a 12 year old student who chose to help an 8 year old student in homework help class after noticing Shiva's predicament in trying to teach children of all ages, curriculums and abilities on his own]

I also joined the Shepherds of the Street, and outreach program organised by Kings Cross Wayside Chapel. This involved walking the streets from 9pm to 1am providing assistance to sex workers, people who were homeless and engaging in substance abuse.

[He was again inspired by a member of the team whom he later found out was also patient of the counselling service and had bipolar disorder where she experiences episodes of mania and severe depression. Her motivation for joining the Shepherds of the Street was that through helping others, and keeping herself focused and busy doing community work, she would be able to manage her mental health condition].

It must be realised that though we feel that we might just be a drop in the ocean, without us the ocean would be less one drop.

[Shiva concluded by chanting the multifaith prayers in their respective languages]

He mentioned that he just said the same thing in many languages and that people may come from various walks of life but the one language that they all understand - is the language of the heart....that there are many religions but the one religion that creates an umbrella under which we can live as brothers and sisters is the religion of love. People live in different places, in different types of land but they all LIVE on this one planet we call earth. People are from different families but the ONE family that they all came together for this event is the family of HUMANITY.

Human + unity = Humanity

Do whatever you do with true devotion and with a true heart, and the divine will take care of all.

Affinity speaker: Sadiq Ansari

[Sadiq was born in Afghanistan and grew up in Australia. He is a Youth Director of Affinity].

“Service is not just about talking, it is about listening. The basis of service is the spirit that lies at the foundation of that service. People have the means to serve however in this time they lack the motivation.

Why as human beings should we serve?

As human beings we must serve. It is not simply a good thing to do. It is a duty and a responsibility. If we do not engage in service then we are held accountable for that.

As human beings we believe in living off the service of others. We believe that everything serves us: animals, plants, earth and people. What do we give back though? In physical terms we do not give anything back. However we are required by sheer virtue to give everything back.

Service must be a duty, not a hobby. It stems from our very humanity. The belief that God exists, and that he has put us on this Earth to serve is powerful. Without this belief that God had created you to serve, you will not serve.

A verse from the chapter that is the Heart of the Quran states: The unbelievers say to those who believe, if God had intended to feed them (poverty stricken people) would he not have done so. This is a question asked by those who refuse to do service, or do not see the merit in it. It is a question that stems from arrogance.

Therefore the key to service is right belief and motivation: the willingness to serve.

Islam obliges its people to serve. 2.5% of their wealth must be given to those who are in need. However this is only the bare minimum. The prophet has stated that in a society where there are people in need, those who have the means must help them. Thus the responsibility falls to those who have the resources to assist further.

We must do service with love. When you do service you give what you love.

Service is where our own success lies. When we do service to others we derive pleasure. As stated by the Imam: if you feel depressed then ask what you are doing for others who are in similar or worse situation. When you do that, then you will feel better knowing you have the opportunity to serve.

We need living examples of service now. A collective, global effort it required.

We need to strive in our personal lives and see how we can serve those less fortunate than us. We need to serve the needy, spread education, remove hatred and bring peace. This is the Jihad that the prophet and servant of God has left us.

Buddhist Speaker: Leonard Fung



[Leonard is a Buddhist Youth Leader of "BLIA-YAD" (Buddha's Light International Association Young Adult Division) and is a university student. His speech commenced with an outline of Prince Siddhartha's life story, the triggers which led to him leaving his family and throne to undertake a spiritual journey culminating in his enlightenment].

Buddhism's principles are based on the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that life is made up of suffering and pain. Therefore we must realise this. The second truth is regarding the cause of suffering which arises due to selfish desire and greed which is endless. The third truth focuses on the end of suffering. It is up to each individual to use their own initiative and take this into consideration. The fourth truth states that the way to end suffering is to follow the Noble Eight Fold path which includes right understanding, thought, speech and livelihood.

Buddhism as a whole is based on a spirit of service, for Buddha gave up all the comforts provided by his father, and went to search for the truth.

Attachments in life will hold you back and this includes in regards to interfaith dialogue. Dialogue is the key to bringing all faiths together: the religion of love.

Buddhism welcomes everyone, and allows them to learn about its teachings and core principles. They can be applied so that each person can be a better person, so that a Christian may become a better Christian, so that a Muslim may become a better Muslim and so on. The spirit of Buddhism is universal.

The Buddha advised each individual to follow the teaching, not the person who gave the teaching.

We should follow the people around us that inspire us. Buddhism is not a text book. Take it into yourself and mould it to suit you.

We need to contribute to this society and country because the world supports us as human beings and so we need to give back to the world. When you serve others you learn from them and from the act of serving. This is the most valuable lesson in life.

He concluded his speech stating, 'whatever background we are from we all need each other.'

Home Encounters Program – an interfaith dialogue project between Muslim and Hindu youth



[Home-encounters is a project that commenced in 2003 as an interactive dialogue between Muslim youths and youths from different Christian denominations in the comfort of their homes. This was then expanded in 2008 to a dialogue between 6 Muslim and 6 Hindu youths in an open and friendly setting. Common themes expressed by each of the speakers include: love, unity, understanding, acceptance, connecting people and universality of faith].

Makiz is a post-graduate student at Sydney University and a inspirational youth leader of Affinity intercultural organization. She is a Muslim youth. Riona is a practising Sydney lawyer and is the dynamic State representative for Y-NET in NSW. She is a practising Hindu.

A short film showing the Home-encounters sessions was screened. Below is a snippet of their presentation:

What is interfaith dialogue and where does home encounters fit in? It is to understand others from their point of reference. People are afraid of difference. We are here to tell you that difference is good. We may disagree on certain point however we are not disagreeable with each other. Home Encounters seeks to promote a culture of understanding and respect for the differences that exist with each faith group, and yet seek to embrace that very difference.

Thus through this journey of understanding and respect, service will also become enduring.



Makiz and Riona.

Please go to: www.homeencounters.org.au/ to find out more information on this dynamic project!



Questions to the Interfaith Youth Panel

An interfaith youth panel was convened by the MC's and the panellists included the Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim youth speakers.



1. What is your inspiration to do service?

Shiva

He was initially lost and searching for a means to connect with God, including in a prayer room, church, mosque and was unable to find this. However he felt this connection when he first served food to a man who was homeless and hungry, who was once a double PhD, however secondary to a brain injury following trauma was now on the streets. Shiva stated that service is one way to have passion in your life.

2. Other than personal pleasure, what drives you to do service?

Sadiq

Service is about connecting yourself and God. When you serve others you realise that you are served and that it leads you to God. Therefore what God has given you, reflect on it, and consider what you can give to others, and thereby fulfil your duty as a human being.

Leonard

When you do something it is persona by sheer virtue that you are doing or saying it. Therefore, when you given something to someone, then it is no longer yours for it has been taken by them and modified or interpreted by them to suit themselves. A smile costs nothing and can be given freely.

Shiva

Any type of service is amazing. However his current passion is to work with children, especially those with disabilities, and giving them the motivation that they can also learn and share their knowledge.

3. What do you see as the main obstacle for serving humanity?

Shiva

My own mind. I think too much while serving.

Leonard

It's about dialogue. If we can't communicate that's a problem. There is a sense of frustration when unable to understand what someone is saying. This highlights the importance of the language of the heart.

Sadiq

Human beings lack an understanding of what service is. It is not in human beings nature to serve. We need to realise that service is there for our benefit. By serving you gain more from it. No one has ever become broke, by being charitable.

4. When doing service and your motivation drops how do you increase it?

Shiva

By remembering the saying, 'A sinner has a future and a saint had a past.' You can question as much as you like. However when motivation drops, I realise that I have the opportunity to serve, and that knowledge is a motivating factor.

Leonard

If you don't put 100% effort to serve others, it will come back to you. The Buddha does not strike fear in any body. He is 'cool'.

When a person is unmotivated it passes on to people around them. Therefore look externally to the people around you and let them become your motivation. Go and connect with someone to recharge the batteries.

Sadiq

The drive of every human being is to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. Most people serve to be selfless, however in that very process become selfish as it feeds their ego. Remind yourself constantly that you have a purpose. You often don't serve because you want to do something fun instead: the temptation of paradise.



Vision Forward

Closing remarks: Kolitha Wickramage

[Kolitha is a UN humanitarian aid worker and public health consultant/researcher who works in the war zones of Sri Lanka. He is an advocate for joint inter-faith/cultural social service projects and is a member of the Y-NET national initiative]



What is the root cause of conflict?

“One of the most important root causes of conflict is prejudice. Pre-judging the other, whoever the ‘other’ maybe...ethnic other/religious other/gender other/sexual orientation other/social class other... leads to in its most extreme form the manifestation of violence...Be it the ethnic war in Sri Lanka or Cronulla riots in Sydney.

Society today also as intra-ethnic and intra-religious conflict. Basically religions of the same tradition fighting against each other. Look at examples from Northern Ireland, Sunni and Shia conflicts in Iraq etc. Such violent conflicts are interwoven in seeds of prejudice, poverty, greed and lack of values.

“The seeds of prejudice lie deep within the soils of our mind”.

“In times of war, you can do as much humanitarian work as possible, you can have as many United Nations treaties, conventions and peace keeping forces. Though important these measures will not address the root problems of prejudice and discrimination”.

“The seeds of conflict exist even during times of relative peace.....so we must maintain a culture of dialogue using the vehicles of inter AND intra faith/cultural dialogue, and more importantly service projects where diverse groups are involved”.

Experience from the field. During the 2004 Tsunami, I was witness to a monumental human tragedy. When we face such tragedies, I believe that we are reduced to what is our core humanity. We are made naked. We are stripped of our pretences and the ego coats of self-image. We are exposed. I remember standing next to a catholic priest, a LTTE cadre, a UN consultant and a government official as we watched the exposed bodies of 300 people on a coastline. We lost all labels of religion, labels of ethnicity, labels of political ideology etc.. We were stripped bare and made naked. For we are all connected with that one vulnerability...humanity. We are all human. Before we add on our “identity coats” of religious ideology, cultural identity, socio-economic status that define and/or divide us. All but shattered. Shattered in the reality of a common fragility. We all went and started taking measures in burial of the 300 bodies. It is a powerful reminder of the theme of human unity.

By being a part of this forum, you have individually and collectively help peel away this layer of prejudice through understanding. That is the power and beauty of today.

This is a unique event for three reasons. Firstly, it is a confluence of the rivers of Abrahamic faith and Eastern faith. First of its kind. The fact that Aboriginal spirituality has also been featured in the program is also powerful. Secondly it is driven by young people, not the heads of institutions or of major religions. It's the youth who are driving the agenda. Thirdly it is a beautiful marriage between two dynamic organisations Affinity and Sai youth who have become partners in friendship and action. Legacies of service are built upon foundations of trust and friendship. The future is bright!

But we need to transform the rhetoric of interfaith dialogue into meaningful action. How?

Today you have been given two gifts...an opportunity to be part of a legacy of peace building in society here in Sydney. First gift is the Home Encounters project...which provides you with a model that you can use for achieving meaningful dialogue. It doesn't matter if you're a youth leader or a member of society. Put your hand up and you too can form a home-encounter group wherever you are in Sydney and be the agents of peace-building. It's very simple to set up and there's lots of support to draw upon.

Secondly is the Parramatta homeless project. A project that seeks to involve youth of various religious or cultural youth movements to undertake an innovative project at Parramatta Park.

You have been given these two gifts to forge a legacy of love...Love in action...

Vision forward

Closing remarks: Mehmet Saral

Mehmet is the dynamic president of the Affinity Intercultural Foundation. He is a Muslim youth leader, a loving father and works as an IT professional in Sydney.

"This is the first time that Affinity has hosted an interfaith event with its Hindu and Buddhist brethren. It is indeed a landmark event! We are very excited about this.

Why did this conference not include a focus on Christianity? Since the inception of Affinity, it has worked with and hosted Abrahamic conferences, and many organisations have continued on this path though it may have been pioneered by Affinity. Therefore this year was a pioneer to establish dialogue with Eastern faiths. This will hopefully continue as a yearly event. Next year we will aim to include all faiths including the Abrahamic faiths in a truly dynamic interfaith youth event!

The Spirit of Service Conference Committee



Back row [From Left to Right]: Aranie, Shiva, Mishant, Sharangan (Y-NET National convenor), Niro, Mehmet (Affinity President), Venkat, Neville, Kolitha, Sadiq.

Front row [From Left to Right]: Makiz (Affinity Youth leader), Tamkin, Rahile, Riona (Y- Net state co-ordinator).

Missing from the photo: Krish, Omar and Veena.

CONFERENCE FEEDBACK

Surprised by Joy: Reflection By Reverend Graham Long



On the 14th of June this year I attended a interfaith meeting where the topic for discussion was service. I have no idea really what I expected the meeting to be although I had a vague fear that it would be a lifetime of talking jammed into one protracted meeting. Be-fore the meeting I met and chatted with one of the guest speakers and I noticed the length of the notes he was speaking from which left me feeling a bit uneasy. Our conversation was interrupted by several nervous reviews of his notes. I suggested that he "speak from the heart" and assured him that most people would not be looking for a long treatise and that it was better to make a quick impact than to turn people off with long and complicated arguments. With a theme like "service" I thought we were about to get a practical lesson in how to listen in humility to some people who with good hearts would struggle to put their thoughts into words.

It's a funny thing but I found myself whispering "amen" more often than I ever seem to do at a gathering of my own religious tradition!

What followed was the surprise of the year. Each speaker, one after one, spoke from the heart without notes. Most passionate and least reliant on any kind of note was the young guy that I was talking to before the meeting. He and each speaker engaged the audience with the truth that life is to be found through service to others.

A guy who worked with Aboriginal people, a Buddhist, a Muslim and a guy from Hinduism spoke of how the Divine is to be found in the service of human beings. It's a funny thing but I found myself whispering "amen" more often than I ever seem to do at a gathering of my own religious tradition. Each speaker spoke of how they had learned to find life through serving people. Each one shared that such service was the key that unlocked the heart of the Divine.

The second half of the programme was mostly musical which proved to be a great way to celebrate the truth that was setting us all free that night. I walked into that room that night wondering what kind of dialogue we would be entering into and I left at the end of the night, knowing that I was surrounded by brothers and sisters. The words of Jesus rang in my ears, "in as much as you do it to one of the least of these, you have done it unto me".

Some excerpts of what people had to say about the conference:

We really appreciate your hard work. There's no doubt that the efforts you guys put into these projects will lead to greater unity and understanding between people.

Riaz Lalezhari (Baha'i Youth)

Just wanted to drop you a line to say how amazing last night was. Everything that happened was so vivid in my mind, the speeches, the vows, the whole atmosphere in the room was alive and I could just feel the love and the wanting to connect with each other. Your dedication to the youths in today's society has moved me to work harder and strive for better things for those in need. Let's do this all over again. Omitofo.

Leonard Fung (Blia-yad Buddhist Leader)



I'm deeply humbled by the positive energy generated at the event last night! And I really felt a deep sense of interconnectedness with everyone there even though I only met them so briefly! Again, thanks so much once again for giving me the opportunity to be involved with your conference. Rejoice in kindness and may love be pervasive! Sadhu. (Appreciation)

Sin Sin (Mitra Buddhist Convenor)

I really enjoyed the night as it opened my understanding of other faiths and also maybe even the real understanding of Islam. I really liked what was said about all the basic values are taught by all faiths and also the experiences of community work that make it practical. I hope I can now join in and do more of this type of unifying work by young adults.

Rahile (Islamic Youth)

I really like what the youths are doing today. I have been working in a jail for 20 years now and really all this just gives me more ideas for the helping those who have just made one or two silly mistakes that have caused them to suffer long periods in the correction centre. As a Chaplin I have to work a lot with youths and really it gives me pleasure to meet the youths at the conference and see the amazing similarities between both just the degree of mistakes that they pay consequences for.

Chaplin Graham Lyall (Amitabha Buddhist Association)

Conference Stalls

Various Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Climate Change youth groups/organizations displayed their Community Service and Welfare related projects at the Spirit of Service Conference...here is a sample of photos!





Musical Performances

HINDU TRAC Rhythm ensemble



Muslim Performance



Buddhist Performance



Audience Members