

 LATEST NEWS FROM THE FOUNDATION

Congress of World Religions in Kazakhstan

For the last two days I've been representing the Foundation at the III Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional religion in Astana, Kazakhstan. The Congress was launched in 2003 and meets every 3 years. The event brings together a mix of Religious Leaders, Politicians and International Organisations for two days of interfaith dialogue. Many of the world religions were represented: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taosim, Sintosim and Zorastrism.

The Congress is hosted by the Kazakh Government and they pull out all the stops in hospitality for the delegation, who travel from far and wide. The meeting is peppered with various excursions to museums, musical recitals and introductions to the country's rich cultural history. This is my second trip to Kazakhstan and once again I've not been brave enough to try their national drink of mare's milk, maybe next time.

But it's not all museums and mares milk, this gathering is intended to be a forum for interfaith dialogue based on mutual respect, tolerance and understanding. Significantly, however, there were many calls for the Congress to move on from interfaith dialogue to concrete actions. Rev Dr Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (Switzerland) spoke of the 'traffic jam of dialogue' and called for a shift from merely sending a message to making a difference. Another call to action came from Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Under-Secretary General of the UN, Director General of UN Office at Geneva who reminded the Congress of the Millennium Development Goals and the vital role that faith communities have to play if they are to be met.

In his address on day one, the Bishop of Croydon, Nick Baines (representing the Archbishop of Canterbury), warned of the power of words, the danger of hypocrisy and the need for religious leaders to become poets who hold out the promise of hope in ways that people can comprehend. He followed this with an intervention on day two to ask for honesty as a fundamental prerequisite for interfaith dialogue and action. To suggest (as many do) that religions do live together in peace in places like India, Iran, etc. is to entertain fantasy. The persecution of religious minorities is a serious matter and other speakers endorsed the bishop's call for this to be taken seriously in a future Congress. To read the Bishop's personal blog [click here](#).

Day two has seen this undercurrent take centre stage. While the speeches of those on panels has tended to focus on traditional forms of interfaith dialogue, with little talk of practical next steps, audience members have persistently demanded that mechanisms be put into place in order for the goodwill in the room to be passed on to those working at grass root levels."We must look towards ways in which we can work together to make a difference, either by advancing existing programmes, or through new initiatives" said one.

I hope that these calls to action, voiced at the III Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, are communicated far and wide by all those who took part. If they are then the Congress has the potential to do great things at the hands of its members, all of whom are clearly committed to the cause of interfaith action alongside dialogue.

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