



## Religions for Peace - USA July 2007 E-Newsletter

### What's New

#### From Our Executive Director...

##### **Interfaith Academies for Religious Leaders: Success!**

Last month, June 2007, from the 13th to the 27th, Religions for Peace-USA was proud to administer its first "Interfaith Academies for Religious Leaders." Two academies were planned: one for emerging religious leaders and another for religious professionals. Overall, the academies were successful beyond RFP-USA's hopes and expectations.



We at RFP-USA knew we had developed a good program - visits to a number of religious sites and worship services, lectures from leaders in the fields of religious and interfaith studies, and trips to a museum and baseball game, just in case people were getting weary with all that self-discovery. What we couldn't count on and couldn't predict was the human element. We took people from all over the country, the youngest only 19 and the oldest, well, a bit older. They came from different ethnic backgrounds and different religious backgrounds; some were becoming ministers, some already were, and some just wanted to understand the people back in their communities and in the wider community of the United States.

We took these people, put them in a seminary in Missouri, asked them questions like, "How could you describe your faith to someone who has no comprehension of its vocabulary?" and then watched to see what would happen. Incredibly, people didn't need much encouragement before they started sharing things that, in some cases, they had never said before, and certainly not in a group of 35 virtual strangers. For two weeks the participants ate together, prayed together, watched movies together, exercised together, and played a little ping pong together. And the entire time they were talking, talking, talking.

At the end of the experience people embraced, some shed a few tears, and all exchanged addresses. The academy participants were all kind, and they all wanted to learn about faiths not their own. They were fertile ground for dialogue, and gave an example of what dialogue could be: mutual respect, without a sacrifice of commitment to one's own faith. They saw the beauty in the lights and flowers ringing the deities at a Hindu temple, were moved to tears at a young man's Bar Mitzvah, and were soothed in the cool silence of a Buddhist meditation room. These experiences helped them understand the perspectives of other people, while prompting them to ask hard questions of themselves. Snap judgments were talked out; even positive reactions were analyzed. Together, they discovered what they thought, and why.



All in all, we at RFP-USA have no reservations about calling these first Interfaith Academies for Religious Leaders a success. We hope that all the participants in our academies can say the same, and that others can find hope in the example they have created.