News



Members of the Cristo Rey Parish, Jain and Sikh community pose before the Parliament of World Religion Parade of Faiths, Sunday, Aug. 13, 2023, in Chicago. (AP Photo/Paul Beaty)

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More than 6,000 people representing scores of religions and belief systems are expected to convene in Chicago starting August 14 for what organizers bill as the world’s largest gathering of interfaith leaders.

For the Parliament of the World’s Religions, the week-long event marks a return to its roots – the organization was founded in Chicago in 1893. In the past 30 years, it has convened six times, most recently in Toronto in 2018.

Past gatherings have drawn participants from more than 80 nations. This week’s speakers and presenters will represent Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Baha’i, Hinduism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Indigenous religions, paganism and other beliefs.

This year’s theme is "A Call to Conscience: Defending Freedom and Human Rights," with a focus on combating authoritarianism around the world. Topics on the agenda include climate change, human rights, food insecurity, racism and women’s rights.

"We will take a stand for the rights we’re all at risk of losing," said the Rev. Stephen Avino, the organization’s executive director.

Scheduled speakers include U.N. Secretary General António Guterres, former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul and actor Rainn Wilson, a member of the Baha’i faith. The keynote speaker will be Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson.

Illustrative of the parliament’s diversity, its program chair for this week’s event is Phyllis Curott, a Wiccan priestess who as an author and lawyer has advocated for the legal rights of witches.

In a pre-conference statement, she assailed authoritarianism as "the most dangerous crisis confronting all of us today."

"This existential, expanding and global scourge is manifesting in tyrants and strongmen who commit crimes against humanity, suppress essential freedoms, subvert democracies and murder the truth with lies," she said. "They are fostering hate and the resurgence of antisemitism and Islamophobia, misogyny and racism."

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Numerous cultural and educational events are taking place to complement the speeches and discussions, starting with a Parade of Faiths on August 13 that celebrated Chicago’s diversity. Local faith, spiritual and cultural communities joined the parade, some accompanied by music and dance highlighting their history and traditions.

Among the upcoming events is "Guns to Garden Tools," featuring a blacksmith who will demonstrate how he melts down firearms to create gardening tools.

The parliament has no formal powers of any sort. And for all its diversity and global scope, it is not ideologically all-encompassing. Its participants, by and large, share a progressive outlook; conservative Catholics, evangelicals and Muslims — among others — have not embraced the movement.

Gene Zubovich, a history professor at the University of Buffalo, wrote about the 2018 Toronto gathering for the online news journal Religion & Politics.

"The Parliament can come off as an echo chamber of progressive faith traditions," he wrote. "Given the many religious tensions across the world, the real challenges of interfaith dialogue, and the self-selected crowd at Toronto, the universalist rhetoric could sound a little hollow."

However, he credited the interfaith movement for its evolution over the decades.

"Its leadership is much more diverse and inclusive," he wrote. "Its politics is attentive to Indigenous issues, women’s rights, and climate change."

Cardinal Blase Cupich, the Catholic archbishop of Chicago, is among the scheduled speakers this week. He has been urging Catholics in the archdiocese to engage in the event, saying it is in harmony with key priorities of Pope Francis.

The gathering "is an opportunity to live out the Holy Father’s teaching that a core part of our identity as Catholics involves building friendship between members of different religious traditions," Cupich said in a message to the archdiocese last month. "Through our sharing of spiritual and ethical values, we get to know one another."