



Hawkins and Kluga represent Common Ground-USA at U.N. commemoration

by Deborah Hawkins, New York, NY

Deborah Hawkins and Lori Kluga on behalf of Common Ground-USA, New York City Chapter, attended the 2nd annual Interfaith Celebration of Commitment to the Work of the United Nations: Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This event was held on September 16, 1998, at St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Ave. at 51st St. in Manhattan. Lori and I inadvertently took V.I.P. seats in a pew near the front in which we were fortunately able to remain for the duration. This put us directly under the magnificent "Muslim" dome of the church and close to the speakers who were yet to make their formal entrance. Paper handbook copies of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were distributed to attendees before and after the event. The one hundred and thirty-five organizations co-sponsoring the event (including Common Ground-USA) were listed on the back page of the program.

Our attention was soon riveted to the Procession of Religious Leaders by the Shumei Taiko Ensemble, a taiko drumming group. Taiko drumming is a unique musical art based on ancient Japanese ceremonial custom and performed today by only a few groups worldwide. Performers combine precision drumming with synchronized dance movements around the instruments (depending on the occasion and/or compositional format). Their instruments are mainly large two-sided kettle-type drums resting on raised

platforms sometimes accompanied by flute or smaller drums. In one moment the pomp, protocol and pageantry associated with heads of state and grand affairs came together as the drummers began to beat a steady cadence and international religious leaders in the ceremonial dress of their respective native lands came down the center aisle. The attendees rose from their seats and stood until everyone was seated at the altar. Many of the guests seated around us wore native dress as well.

Beginning with a call to Worship on the Conch by Swami V. Bua of the Indo American Yoga Society, welcome, invocations, greetings and a child's recitation of a portion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, individual readings and prayers were then offered by Jewish, Buddhist, Native American, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, and Jain religious leaders.

All this before His Excellency Kofi Annan gave his remarks! This part of

the program was followed by Shinto prayer, Benedictions, Silent Prayer and Word of Thanks. The most interesting Benediction was offered by Chief-Queen Mother, Aburi-akuapem of Ghana. The Retiring Procession was again accompanied by the Shumei Taiko Ensemble. The Ensemble performed a brief concert as congregants dispersed. As a supporter and enthusiastic fan of taiko drumming, I was delighted that this group was an integral part of the program. As for the overall event, I felt that I had been afforded a unique experience, offering a sense of encouragement that the mission of such a large and often criticized institution was indeed quite important and reminded of the tremendous commitment of so many individuals and groups to its basic tenets.

(Editor's note: Deborah Hawkins is the incoming chairperson of the Metro New York chapter of Common Ground-USA.)