

Remember to tune in to BBC Radio 4's Sunday service this weekend at 8.10 am or on the internet for the next week

Greetings from the Alliance of Religions and Conservation

Last week saw the culmination of two years of work, where ARC in partnership with the UNDP helped many faiths develop long-term plans of environmental action. Regardless of what happens at Copenhagen the faiths will be spending the next years rolling out some of the most profound civil society programmes in the world.

There are dozens of different traditions – to date 31, from nine major world religions – whose plans were launched last week in a grand ceremony at Windsor Castle, hosted by HRH Prince Philip, our founder, and with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon the special guest. Mr Ban gave a keynote speech: his speeches are always carefully prepared, and this was no exception. So it was moving to watch him, last Tuesday, look up several times, lean forward, and speak from his heart, away from the script. You can read it, or hear it here:

<http://www.windsor2009.org/page14.htm>

“We have know-how, we have resources, but only largely lacking is political will. You can inspire, you can provoke, you can challenge your political leaders, through your wisdom, through your power, through your followers. Together let us walk a more sustainable path, one that respects our planet, and provides a safer, healthier, more equitable future for all of us.”

Link here too for Prince Philip's memories of the beginnings of ARC and this whole movement at Assisi in 1985, and for his welcoming of the faiths as they announce their plans to help protect this fragile planet: <http://www.windsor2009.org/ARC-UNDPWindsor2009-SpeechbyPrincePhilip.pdf>

After the announcement and speeches came a vegan banquet – the first ever such banquet served at Windsor Castle, and one which gave rise to much happy joking on the radio comedy programme The News Quiz. For ARC, developing our own eco-purchasing policy, the English cobnuts and Portobello mushroom risotto and locally grown organic roasted vegetables not only embodied the very wide range of faith rules about eating (most of which, although not all, we catered for) but also symbolized the role of faiths in promoting the beauty of simple living, and of treading gently on the earth. Indeed the whole three day meeting was vegetarian and as local and organic as possible, which begs questions about the food that will be provided at the Copenhagen summit.

The heart of the event, however came on Tuesday afternoon at the Castle, with a beautiful series of performances, prayers, readings and music on a special stage in the Waterloo Chamber. It is hard to describe how moving this was unless you witnessed it – each faith was represented by a moment in which nature itself might be said to have come alive – whether a fantastic new gospel version of the Dream of the Rood (an Anglo-Saxon poem imagining what the tree that made the cross might have said – link here for a Youtube recording by the New Psalmist Baptist Choir <http://www.windsor2009.org/page11.htm>) or a dramatic reading of the Conference of

the Birds, in which the hoopoe announces the crisis, and the birds realize that the journey will be long, but that it can be solved.

The BBC was there all day with an outside broadcast team, and some of this can be heard this Sunday on Radio 4 at 8.15am – in what promises to be an extraordinary Sunday service in advance of interfaith week, to hear those amazing performers, a section from Ban Ki-moon’s speech and a moving homily from the Bishop of London, about why faiths can and should be leaders on environmental action.

If you weren’t already involved in the Celebration, then you might have read about it, heard about it on the radio, or seen it on TV already - we are just compiling the list of media who covered the celebration, which so far fills 19 pages of A4, astonishing coverage for a good news story, especially one about two subjects that some media sometimes find quite difficult: faith and the fragility of the natural environment.

The plans, and a list of the new commitments, will be put up on our website by early next week. I will leave you with a quotation from the Qur’an: Surah 55:3-9.

“The firmament – He raised it high, and set the balance of everything, so that you, humanity, may not upset the balance. Keep the balance with equity, and fall not short in it.”

As our Celebration was coming to an end last Wednesday at Windsor, I had a brief conversation with one of the many religious leaders who were attending, representing his faith as it launched a long term action plan to care for the environment. “This week has been so exciting,” he said. “And the best thing for me is that I have come to realize that we are not alone in this.”

Whether you came to Windsor or whether you did not, you are part of a growing community of people who are engaged and interested in these things.

Best wishes!