On February 24, 1890, Chicago received the electrifying news that their city was selected – over New York – to host the 1892 World’s Fair. [Which was delayed until 1893.]

A flurry of plans and proposals had proliferated through the city. One enthusiastic proposal was different from all the others. It was put forth by Swedenborgian lawyer Charles C. Bonney. He wrote:

“The crowning glory of the 1892 World’s Fair should not be the exhibits then to be made of material triumphs, industrial achievements and mechanical victories of man, however magnificent that display may be. Something higher and nobler is demanded by the enlightened spirit of the present age.

“Statesmen, jurists, financiers, scientists, literati, teachers, and theologians” would meet in conjunction with the proposed world’s fair to discuss everything from religion to international law to "the practicability of a common language."

Bonney advocated that the fair be more than just the exhibits; it would also have “Congresses” or “parliaments” – including anthropology, labor, medicine, commerce and finance, literature, history, art, philosophy, science… and religion. He was put in charge of all of the World Congresses. He was especially committed to the Parliament of World Religions. He said its purpose was:

"To unite all religion against all irreligion; to make the Golden Rule the basis of this union; to present to the world in the Religious Congresses, to be held in connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893, the substantial unity of many religions in the good deeds of the Religious Life; to provide for a World's Parliament of Religions, in which their common aims and common grounds of union may be set forth, and the marvelous Religious Progress of the Nineteenth Century be reviewed; and to facilitate separate and independent Congresses of different Religious Denominations and Organizations, under their own officers, in which their business may be transacted, their achievements presented, and their work for the future considered."

This was the first time in history that an attempt had been made to bring together religions of the world in “absolute respect” for each other. [See George Dole’s With Absolute Respect: The Swedenborgian Theology of Charles Carroll Bonney (Swedenborg Studies)
Charles C. Bonney was born in Hamilton, New York on September 4, 1831. He attended Colgate University, and got a law degree. He taught for a while, and then moved to Peoria, IL where he founded a school. In 1852, he became a lecturer in education at Peoria College, and he played an important role in setting up the Illinois state school system.

While living in Peoria, he attended a New Church service. He was impressed, and continued to attend while reading the works of Swedenborg. The theology confirmed his own conviction that the religions of the world should all be respected and honored. He wrote:

“In this church I was taught the fundamental truths which made a Parliament of World Religions possible, upon which rested the whole plan of the religious congresses of 1893, and which guided the execution of that plan to a success so great and far-reaching that only the coming generations can fully comprehend and estimate its influence. … [Genesis by Bonney]

Bonney moved to Chicago in 1860. In 1866, he became a judge of the Supreme Court of Illinois. Bonney was president of the Illinois State Bar Association in 1882. He was also active in the American Bar Association, serving as Vice President in 1887, and became a candidate for the Supreme Court of the United States.

He is especially remembered for his role in establishing the first Parliament of the World's Religions, at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, where over 200 "World's Congresses" or "World's Parliaments" were held. Bonney was president and oversaw all of them.

The Parliament, which ran from September 11 to the 27th. Today it is recognized as the birth of the interfaith movement.
In addition to the large Parliament of World Religions, there were smaller congresses for various religious faiths and denominations. There was a meeting of the Church of the New Jerusalem. One delegate was Sarah Hibbard, daughter of Richard De Charms. New Church Life in 1893 quoted the start of her remarks:

"We are assembled here as an integral part of this Congress of Religions. From all parts of the world, representatives of creeds, both ancient and modern, have come together to exchange thoughts on the various ideas concerning God, and the relation of His creatures to Him. The papers which will be presented will draw their inspiration from the source of Divine Truth as it may appear to each writer, whether he be Hindoo, or Chinese, Mahometan or Christian. Our thoughts as expressed must likewise be drawn from the source of our religious inspiration."

Another Swedenborgian delegate was Ellen Spencer Mussey. She practiced law before women could be lawyers. She was active in suffrage before women could vote.

"...there are women to whom their evident use says: 'You cannot walk in the common highway. ... You must pass alone, through the forest. You must climb this mountain. You must descend into that dark and hidden valley."

She loved her experiences at the Parliament, of which she said it was "the most enlightening soul event of the century."

Selma Ware Paine also loved being a speaker at the Parliament.

There she said:

"...there are women to whom their evident use says: 'You cannot walk in the common highway. ... You must pass alone, through the forest. You must climb this mountain. You must descend into that dark and hidden valley.

Afterward attending the Parliament, she began making speeches to women's groups.

Other Swedenborgians were involved in the fair itself. It was largely planned and developed by Swedenborgian architect Daniel Burnham and became known as the White City. It was an opportunity for famous painters of the time to display their art, including Swedenborgian George Inness. One of the exhibits at the fair was for a machine that could write Braille. Young Helen Keller was a visitor at that exhibit.

Visitors at the fair include Theodore Dreiser, Helen Keller, Houdini, Tesla, Edison, Joplin, Darrow, a Princeton professor named Woodrow Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt, Lillian Russell, and an elderly lady named Susan B. Anthony."
In so many ways, this fair was the door-way into the Twentieth Century. The U.S. wanted to host a World’s Fair in 1892 to honor the 400th anniversary of the Columbus discovering America. Chicago, striving to overcome its association with stockyards and the great fire, put its heart into getting the commission over New York. They wanted to show how much the U.S. had achieved since 1492. Achievements at the fair included:

- Westinghouse’s first large demonstration of alternation current to illuminate the fair grounds.

- A guy named “Ferris” invented a huge wheel of steel cars to let people ride up high, round and round.

- Foods introduced at the fair included: Cracker Jacks, Cream of Wheat, Hershey’s Chocolate, Juicy Fruit Gum, Aunt Jemima’s Pancake Mix, Shredded Wheat, and Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer named for the award it won.

The fair was such a transition into the 20th Century in so many ways. The Parliament of World Religions was such an opening of interfaith understanding in the West.

Imagine to have heard the talks given at the Parliament, and appreciate the sense of “oneness” that was felt as so many religions came together for the first time.

I find thinking about the Fair and Parliament is an affirmation of my faith. I feel the sense of so many Swedenborgians before me who have been involved in creating a better world and reaching out to share with other faith traditions.

These are aspects of our faith that I find especially enriching – knowing that we today are part of a long and useful tradition.