



The 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions

BY DAVID J. FEKETE

Over the dates November 1–7, I had the privilege of attending the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions in Toronto, “The Promise of Inclusion, the Power of Love: Pursuing Global Understanding, Reconciliation, and Change.”

My experiences there were extraordinary. I am not the same Swedenborgian I was before the Parliament. I understand my own tradition differently, understand religion differently, understand more fully all the richness that God's world has. I learned in general that encountering other religions is much more than intellectually inquiring about beliefs. I learned much about many traditions and perspectives. But it would be a mistake to think that one now understands a tradition into which others have spent their lives growing. The Parliament of the World's Religions is a taste, not a meal.

Attending the Parliament of the World's Religions was spiritually transforming for me. Such a compressed, intense exposure to leaders of other faith traditions must have a powerful impact on a seeker with an open mind. Nevertheless, reflecting on my experiences, I realize that however intense my exposure was, my grounding is in my own tradition. My own understanding has been given a good jolt in a positive

direction. Areas of my own faith that weren't working for me, have been adjusted by techniques from other religions that do work. I am enjoying seeing the world differently than I saw it before the Parliament. I am enjoying the world more than I had before the Parliament. I am enjoying my fellows here on earth better than I did before



The Sikh kiosk wrapped turbans on whoever asked them: Rev. Fekete and Vanessa, an interfaith friend from San Diego.

the Parliament. It will take some time before I fully integrate my experiences at the Parliament into my spiritual life.

I didn't expect to be so moved by the Parliament. I did expect to learn and celebrate, but not to be transformed. I will share meaningful experiences from those remarkable seven days. It is my story, but others may find meaning in it and may find inspiration to further investigate truths from the traditions I experienced by their own methods of spiritual questing.

With drum, song, and dance, representatives of the First Nations welcomed the 6,500 participants.

I attended the opening plenary session, presented by Indigenous Peoples. The MC exclaimed, “We made it through the night! It's a new day! Give thanks to the Creator for this day!” Then, in an offering that touched everybody deeply, two young Indigenous children recited a long prayer from the beliefs of their Nation, in the language of their own Nation. They recited prayers about creation, the plants, the stars, Grandmother Moon, Grandfather Sun, humans, animals—listing one by one what the Creator made. Not only were we attendees moved by these children, several of the Chiefs remarked on the potential for the survival of their nation that was embodied in these young children speaking their ancestral language, a language that was once against federal law to speak—even in the living memory of some of the Indigenous speakers.

Of the adults speaking, it was aged Chief Jim Dumont, Onaubinisay (Walks Above the Ground), who captured and held for forty-five minutes the hearts and rapt attention of the whole assembly. He said, “Everyone has the right to feel good about who they are.” And, “It's been a long time that we haven't felt that way.” Creation happened because the Creator wanted a place to send his thoughts to. The

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The Editor's Desk



Love and Faith

A theme of sorts emerges from this month's *Messenger*. Examining our own thoughts and actions in a quest to be better Christians, loving God and loving the neighbor in thought and action, opening our minds to a better understanding of other people and their religious beliefs—these themes emerge from Rev. Jane Siebert's "Letter from the President," Rev. David Fekete's "The Parliament of the World's Religions," Rev. Jenny Caughman's "The Value of Our Theology," Rev. Amanda Riley's "Pastoring in the Garden," and Rev. Jonathan Mitchell's "The Posada Without Borders."

Rev. Siebert looks forward to the new year, reflecting on what in her Swedenborgian faith she is most grateful for. She writes about her personal relationship with God, open-mindedness, and the polestar of loving God and the neighbor and invites us to embark on the same task.

Rev. Fekete takes us into the realm of (many) other religions of the world and discovers there tremendous insight into what his religion means to him and how the experience has changed

him. He confirms what Swedenborg tells us is the essence of Christianity, that loving God and the neighbor should be our highest priority, by observing how that essence is revealed and practiced in other religious traditions and how he might better practice it in his own life.

Rev. Caughman stresses the importance of acting out our love and wisdom, being careful not to cloud it with a purely intellectual understanding of our theology. She concludes that the best way that we, as individuals, can act in love and wisdom is through our personal relationships, pursuing good and truth even in the face of tremendous resistance in the world around us.

Rev. Riley is a Presbyterian minister serving the Garden Church in San Pedro, a Swedenborgian mission. Her willingness to serve in a Swedenborgian mission and the Swedenborgian Church's willingness to have her serve demonstrate what it means to put loving God and the neighbor above the divisions of doctrine. In her article, she delineates the ways in which her faith, through a Presbyterian lens, comports with essential Swedenborgian tenants.

Rev. Mitchell reminds us that we cannot separate our religious life from our civic life. There is a crisis at the southern border of the United States with Mexico, although there is much disagreement and dissension about

what the crisis is. Mexicans and Americans meet every year at a border fence between California and Mexico at the Pacific Ocean to sing together as part of the *Posada*, a Christmas tradition. The ugly politics surrounding the border have interfered with that tradition, but love of the neighbor shines through.

Navigating the thicket of conflict in the world and conflict within ourselves is difficult. The only way through the thicket is to focus on the guiding principle of love, which transcends the division and hatred in the world.

—Herb Ziegler

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Church Calendar

- **January 29:** Emanuel Swedenborg's birthday
- **June 29–July 3:** 2019 Annual Swedenborgian Convention, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN

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Letter from the President



The Year of the Lord: 2018–19
—*The Primacy of Spirit*

Dear friends and members of the Swedenborgian Church,

May 2019 bring blessings, hope, courage, and regeneration into your life and our world.

As I reflect on the year ahead, I would like to pause and share with you what I am most grateful for as a Swedenborgian. Traveling around the US and Canada, I have many opportunities to respond to the question, “What is unique about the Swedenborgian Church?” I often share what is in my heart right then, so the answers vary.

This letter to you relates to where I am today in my spiritual journey and looking forward to 2019. I encourage you to pause and reflect on the things within our Swedenborgian tradition that are important to you and help in your life. Tomorrow, next week, month, or year, the answer might vary, because we do not have a static religion. We have a religion that relates to life and our life is ever changing.

That is the first tenet for which I am grateful. Swedenborg’s writings can speak to me uniquely,

depending on my life at the current moment, opening the spiritual within the natural, connecting with the Divine everywhere and anytime, offering help for my daily life within the Word. There is always more to learn when I approach the writings with an open mind and heart. And these gifts are open to all of us. We do not need “experts” to explain things to us, although many times it helps.

I have this quote above my computer: “When the Word of the Lord is being read by a [person] who loves the Word, and lives in charity, or by a [person] who in simplicity of heart believes what is written . . . it is presented by the Lord . . . with inexpressible variety in accordance with all their state at the time, that every particular is perceived as if it had life . . .” *Secrets of Heaven* §1767 (Emanuel Swedenborg).

This leads right into the second blessing I find in my Swedenborgian regeneration journey. Questions are always welcome. Growing up in a traditional protestant religion, I was chastised for my many questions. I was told to just have “faith,” the faith of a small child. When I was introduced to the Swedenborgian tradition I was full of questions and still am. Often, fellow Swedenborgians will offer their answers with the premise, “This is how I understand it.” I am left in freedom to allow the answers to evolve along with my evolving spiritual journey; the guidance is to continue to search for truth and try to live by it.

We are left in freedom: “The Lord never compels anyone, for he who is compelled to think what is true and to do what is good is not reformed” *Secrets of Heaven* §1947 (Emanuel Swedenborg).

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The Value of our Theology

JENNY MARTIN
CAUGHMAN



In her report to the Board of Directors of the Center for Swedenborgian Studies, denominational president Rev. Jane Siebert wrote of a student's story being "a testament to the value of our theology in people's lives." As I reflected on this I realized that I believe that this has always been one of the main challenges for Swedenborgians (if not all people of faith): How do we put faith or theory into practice? How do we translate our theology into accessible, useful, relevant language? Yes, we believe Swedenborg's teachings are brilliant, yet we also believe that they are underutilized, under-understood.

Swedenborg teaches that the understanding can be raised up into heaven, beyond where the will or the whole person is. In this way the understanding can serve as a beacon, leading the way. That being said, it is the will which calls the shots—which influences just what the understanding perceives and understands.

I wonder if perhaps we have been overly focused on the understanding, exploring and explaining our theology in an intellectual manner. Swedenborg's writings lend themselves to being described and discussed theoretically, rationally. But what does this same theology teach us is the path of regeneration? True transformation lies not in our understanding, but in our will. It is what we want, our ruling love, which defines us. And as much as we like to pretend otherwise, our will is characteristically not governed by our rationality, but instead by our emotions. And very often by the

emotion of fear and therefore self-protection.

So what do we do? How can we work with this and help lead people to the heavenly, which is grounded in, and an expression of, divine love and wisdom?

I believe we need to strive to act heavenly; we need to be grounded in love and wisdom ourselves, or else we are simply

not credible ambassadors for our theology. What does this mean? It means behaving in ways very different from what we are seeing in Washington and in our culture: being more open to (i.e., loving) the truth than to proving our point or protecting our camp or perspective. It means caring about others even when they do not appear to care about us. It means being open to the truth about ourselves, what we truly believe and want (our internals) and not simply what we want to believe about ourselves or think we should want, or wish that we wanted. (This may mean daring to ask and admit to ourselves what the vulnerable, wounded, self-protecting aspect of ourselves is wanting, which is not easy to do.)

We, in our communities (our churches, families, places of employment) need to work to create atmospheres grounded in compassion and understanding rather than judgment, of help rather than persecution, of hope instead of despair. And we, as Swedenborgians, need to show how our Swedenborgian faith helps us to do this.

We need to tell stories—stories which demonstrate the power and relevance of our Swedenborgian faith, on ourselves and others. We need to tell stories which clearly show how we are better people—kinder, more generous, more compassionate, wiser—because of our understanding of, and living

of, Swedenborg's teachings. We need to show how we have been impacted by the reality of the spiritual realm, by the presence of God in our lives—how the reality of divine love, the accessibility of divine wisdom, have moved us to a better place: a place of greater joy, not just momentary happiness; a place of greater meaning, not simply superficial distractions; a place of integrity, not duplicity; a place of greater peace and joy.

The primary classroom and laboratory for this, I believe, is our relationships. If our relationships are grounded in love (genuine concern for the other) and truth (genuine desire to see and understand things as they are, not as we would wish them to be), if we are aware of our genuine intentions, then I believe these relationships will be more fulfilling.

How can we do this? How can we implement such attitudes?

Swedenborg tells us that in the heavens, angels are always facing the sun, they are always turned toward the Lord. If we want to grow in faith, if we desire to embody divine love and wisdom more fully, we too must face the sun, face the Lord. We must choose, each in our own unique way, to be receptive to divine love and wisdom.

What does this look like in our day-to-day lives? It is, like Swedenborgian theology, both complicated and yet, at the same time, very simple. When, as Jesus taught, we love God with all our hearts, minds, and strength, when we love our neighbors as ourselves, we open our hearts to both goodness and truth and we commit to embody these. We strive to put goodness and truth to use, to express them, to live them, even when, especially when, this is uncomfortable. When we seek to do good, to be open to and express truth, in a spirit

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of humility and compassion, then we are true ambassadors for our faith. Then we are turned toward the Lord. Then we are living, in accommodated form, as angels do.

What the Swedenborgian faith has to offer the world is a deep understanding of divine love and wisdom. For example, that we are not to do that which simply looks good, we are to do that which actually is good, even when it is not popular or culturally accepted (i.e., we must focus on the spiritual not the worldly), even when it may appear to not be in our interests (i.e., we must put love of God and neighbor first and foremost). What helps us to do this

is remembering that, from a spiritual perspective, the truth is always in our best interest. To believe this is an expression of deep faith and great trust in God.

So we strive to do what is good, keeping in mind the big picture, that which is good for our neighbors as well as ourselves. We endeavor to be open to both hearing and speaking, with humility and without blame or judgment, the truth. For in so doing we grow into the image and likeness of God, we grow into angelhood. In this we, and the world, are truly blessed. ☩

Rev. Jenny Martin Caughman is a trustee of the Center for Swedenborgian Studies. She is a Swedenborgian minister serving on the pastoral team at First United Methodist Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Church Bookkeeping Services Available

Rev. Susannah Currie, who holds a B.A. in Accounting from the University of Southern Maine, announces her availability as “virtual bookkeeper” for churches that seek to have their bookkeeping automated on QuickBooks accounting software. Churches need only email scans of their transactions monthly, and she will provide bank reconciliations, financial statements, annual donation reports for parishioners, W-2 and 1099 reporting, and assistance with budgeting for a nominal fee. The new year is the best time to start. References are available upon request. Contact revscurrie@gmail.com.

Teen Retreat in England—Summer 2019

Seven years ago, a five day International Camp for New Church teenagers was held at Purley Chase, England; for those who came along, amazing memories were made and lasting friendships were formed.

We feel it is time to do it again and want to invite you!

***Where?* The camp will be held at Purley Chase Centre which is deep in the middle of the English countryside, a couple of hours North of London.**



***Who?* Anyone aged 13–20 is invited.**

***When?* The Camp will run from Sunday, July 28th–Saturday, August 3rd, 2019**

***What?* The Camp will be led by youth leaders and ministers from England and the USA, and our overall theme will be the book of Revelation and its relevance in our lives. We will have a huge variety of activities, such as day trips and walks in the local area, camp fires, table tennis, games evenings, “Olympic” sports on the lawn, and a talent show, to name a few.**

***Cost?* Purley Chase charges just £40 (about \$55) for accommodation and food. Donations are welcomed by those who are able to pay more.**

***Why should I come?* You will have the opportunity to make friends from around the world, relax in beautiful surroundings, take part in new and fun activities, and renew your excitement in being part of an incredible faith and church organization.**

For more information, contact Kurt Fekete, Swedenborgian Church youth director: kfekete@hotmail.com

Pastoring in the Garden

BY AMANDA ADAMS RILEY

My introduction to the The Garden Church and the Swedenborgian denomination came in October of 2014 by Rev. Anna Woofenden. She and I met for tea one afternoon in downtown San Pedro. At the time, we were both in the process of planting a church. She was working on San Pedro, and I was working in Playa Vista, a new community in West Los Angeles.

In the years that followed, the mission and vision of the Garden Church took root, and it has begun to flourish. It is truly a unique community. When it came time for Rev. Anna to move out of her role as founding pastor of The Garden Church, I ended up being one of the clergy she trained in her last months with the church.

Beginning in January, 2018, Rev. Jonathan Mitchell and I became the acting co-pastors of The Garden Church, and it has been a blessing to be part of a new, vital, and thriving ministry.

There is nothing quite like the Garden Church that I have experienced before. We are unashamedly a Jesus-following church—the word *church* is in our name. Every time the gates are open, there is a pastor in a clerical collar present. We are a progressive justice-seeking congregation working day in and day out to live the gospel by feeding everyone who is hungry in body, mind, and Spirit. We are truly doing the work of Christ, and it is well received in the community. I am grateful daily for the hours, dollars, and fervent prayers that Rev. Anna, the Swedenborgian denomination, and so many others put into this ministry that

is now a church, which I have the honor of co-pastoring for this time.

As you have likely gathered by now, I am not a Swedenborgian, I am a cradle Presbyterian. The Presbyterian roots in my family pre-date our immigration to America (eight generations ago), and date back to the sixteenth



Rev. Amanda Riley at the Garden Church

century. My great-great-great-great uncle founded a church, became a military chaplain, and fought in the revolutionary war. The church he founded in Statesville, North Carolina, was the church I was baptized in and in which my father was raised.

I grew up in Washington DC and Northern Virginia, received a B.A. in Religion and Political Science from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary. I was ordained in 2005. I completed a Doctorate of Divinity with a focus in New Church Development at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, in 2014.

My first call was to First Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I was part of a two-year program for newly ordained clergy with the aim of giving us a good start in ministry. After my two years there, I served as associate pastor at the First Presbyterian

Church in Fenton, Michigan. There, I worked closely with the youth, children's ministry, and mission.

In 2010 my husband took a dream job in the aerospace industry in Los Angeles. Our move allowed me time to finish a co-authored book titled *The Girlfriend's Clergy Companion: Surviving and Thriving in Ministry*. We also began our family in our first years in Los Angeles. We have two active boys who are now ages four and seven. Here in Los Angeles, I served as a parish associate at Brentwood Presbyterian Church in West Los Angeles before responding to a call to begin a new worshiping community in Playa Vista. In 2013, my colleague and I made the difficult choice to disband the new worshiping community once she decided that she needed to

return to Texas to care for aging parents. I then became parish associate at Covenant Presbyterian Church, a role I maintain alongside my role as acting co-pastor of the Garden Church.

While I am not a Swedenborgian, I have found myself at home in aspects of Swedenborgian Theology. In particular, at the Garden Church each week as part of our liturgy, we open the Word of God and place it in the worship space, showing the centrality of scripture. The Word of God is also central in Presbyterian theology. In addition, we talk about the Tree of Life in the book of Revelation and the call to work for more heaven here on earth. This concept resonates with me because we have something in the Presbyterian Church called the "Six Great Ends of the Church," or the purposes or goals of being church, and the sixth and final "end" is "The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the

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world.” The idea that both the Presbyterian (USA) Church and the Church of the New Jerusalem have similar fundamental beliefs, in God’s word and in comparable goals in the desire to bring or show heaven to our world, gives me great confidence.

Also, in the Presbyterian Church we have a dossier, which includes writing prompts, one of which says “Describe the ministry setting to which you believe God is calling you.” While reviewing the dossier, which we are asked to do periodically, I was surprised how well the call I’d articulated more than a year ago matched the work of the Garden Church. I wrote,

In the next church I serve, I hope to be part of a community that is committed to Christ, and to continually following God’s will. I am looking for a community where all people are valued as beloved children of God and where the membership seeks to know and grow as disciples of Christ. I am looking for a community which seeks to teach and nourish its members as well as reach out to those in need around them. I am praying for a call which will allow me to fully use the many and varied gifts God has given me, in conjunction with a congregation that is passionate about living out their faith in a diverse world.

The Garden Church is doing all of that and more; it is a bright spot in the middle of the block on 6th street and it is a beacon of hope to all who enter the gates, whether they come for a warm meal or simply out of curiosity. It is impossible to enter the gates without knowing deeply that something profound is happening here. It is more than an urban farm, it is more than a community garden, it is more than a place the hungry come to eat, it’s more than a place kids like to play

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The Posada Without Borders

On December 15, I traveled South from Los Angeles to take part in the “Posada without Borders,” right at the spot where the border fence between San Diego and Tijuana enters the Pacific Ocean.

For those for whom the *posada* tradition is new, *posada* is a Spanish word meaning lodging. In Mexico and other Latin American countries, for the nine days leading up to Christmas Eve, people reenact the story of Mary and Joseph as they seek lodging. After being turned away from several houses, and after a back and forth at the final door, they are let in for a great celebration. A *posada* can also be done as one-time event. My first *posada* took place at a church-run daycare center in San Diego. The children loved it.

This tradition of the Posada at the Border is twenty-five years old, and I got to talk to those who remember the early years of the event. I heard stories of people singing together on both sides of the fence while passing candy and tamales back and forth through the link—an expression of friendship between two peoples.

The 2018 Posada at the Border was very different. There are now two fences, the original one that runs along the international border line, and a newer one several yards into California. The strip in between is heavily patrolled. There is a small park, Friendship Park, right at the fence. Lately, it has been open for only a few hours on Saturdays and Sundays but now it has been closed altogether until further notice. We were there at a previously negotiated special event and were forbidden

by the border patrol to approach the fence. Often, as it was for us this year, you can access Friendship Park only by walking nearly two miles from Borderfields State Park.

In effect, the *posada* was reduced to two parallel events on either side of the double fence. You could just barely see that there were people on the Tijuana side—you could see them waving. You could just barely hear them singing.



Mexicans on the left and Americans, held back by a temporary fence, gather for posada at the fence between San Diego and Tijuana

Some of the American organizers had crossed the border to participate from the Tijuana side. On their cell phones they tried to keep us coordinated. But it was never clear how coordinated we actually were.

From either side, we sang in Spanish alternate verses of the traditional *posada* song. From the Mexican side came Joseph’s pleas for lodging. From the American side came the reply, “No, we have no room for you, go away.” During the final blessing we reached out our hands toward the border. I wanted to cry.

How powerful the forces that would separate us have become! How important that we continue to reach out in friendship to the people who live to our South!

—Praying for a better day,
Rev. Dr. Jonathan Mitchell,
Co-pastor of the Garden Church in
San Pedro, California

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stars are where his thoughts landed in the primordial darkness. Then there was Earth. The birds took seeds and scattered them all over the Earth. They bloomed into plants and trees and flowers. When the Creator saw this beautiful mother, what his thoughts looked like, adorned in water, plants, flowers, and animals, the mother was so beautiful, the Creator cried. Humanity wasn't created until the Creator imaged how beautiful humans would look. Then the Creator mixed earth from Turtle Island (North America) and formed humanity as a vessel. Then he filled the vessel with his thoughts. Then he made our heart beat in time with the heartbeat of the Creator. And humanity was born. When we were created, the Grandfather said, "I have given you everything you need."

As is always the case at these kinds of gatherings, you can't do everything—there are multiple seminars going on at the same time. And it most certainly isn't possible to write everything about seven full days of religious experiences in a *Messenger* article. (Extended essays can be found on the *Our Daily Bread* Facebook page: <https://tinyurl.com/ourdailybreadFB>.)

The seminars were divided into ten categories: 1) Justice, 2) Women's Dignity, 3) Global Ethic, 4) Next Generation, 5) Countering Hate and Violence, 6) Sacred Space, 7) Indigenous Peoples' Program, 8) Climate Action, 9) Interfaith Understanding, 10) Science and Religion.

Kyrah Malika Daniels, a Haitian Vodou priestess, holding a Ph.D. from Harvard and teaching at Boston College, led a talk about art and sacred knowledge from the Haitian Vodou perspective. She began by dispelling the belief that Vodou is about blood, sacrifice, orgies, witchcraft, zombies,

and other disparaging ideas. Vodou is about the interconnectedness and harmony of all things—spirits, plants, and human community. They derive energy from community. "We are, therefore I am." Much of the knowledge is "secret"—which means disguised from imposed colonial Catholicism. Vodou was brought to Haiti by African slaves. Catholic colonialists imposed their religion on the inhabitants, but Vodou appropriated Catholic saints and understood them to be Vodou spirits. So, when a Haitian turned to a saint for aid or protection, it was really to a Vodou spirit they were praying. Even Virgin Mary has an equivalent Vodou goddess to whom she corresponds.

I was moved by Isaac Day, Thunder Bird, who spoke about the meaning of a sweat lodge. His "sweat" was constructed about an experience he had. Isaac told us that there is life after death. "You can believe me!" he said, "I've been there!" He has traveled to the spirit world several times. On one visit, he saw a brook. He told us that the love he felt from the brook was overwhelming; all the people in the room times 100 still wouldn't be like the love he felt from the brook. He looked at the brook and said, "You're nice." And the brook said back, "You're nice, too." Isaac then saw his grandfather, who had raised him, sitting next



Kyrah Malika Daniels, Harvard Ph.D., professor at Boston College, Vodou priestess

to him. It felt nice. Isaac told his grandfather, "It's nice here, I'd like to stay." But his grandfather said that Isaac wasn't ready—he had lots to learn, lots to do. Isaac Day has prayed at the White House, the UN, and here with us. His voice felt full of the love he had experienced in the spirit world, and he brought it to us.

I closed out my first intense day by attending an Indic ritual dance. In my saturated state of mind, I thought it would not be taxing to watch a dance. Dr. Padmaja Venkatesh (professor and dancer and Tantric master) opened by stating she received the gift of dance from a previous life; she was dancing at age seven. She prefaced her dance with an explanation of the significance of dance from the Hindu tradition.

Her theatrical voice rose and fell as her eyes flashed or became measured while she explained both *Tantra*—the union of the Hindu god and goddess Shiva and Shakti—and dance as an emblem for life's transient nature, we saw different characters enacted and vanish in the dance, and we were re-



Dr. Padmaja Venkatesh lectured and danced

minded that all the roles we play here are transient—how we all come forth from the primordial sound (the Hindu sacred texts were heard and written as poetry), the Word, how through meditation, dance and yoga we find the true

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life force that is transcendent—lines between self and other and dancer dissolve, and we are united in the joy and bliss of the dance. The God Shiva is depicted in the form of a dancer; dance is the highest form of worship in that it unites the physical, emotional, psychological, and metaphysical. The dancer performs the highest sacrifice when she yields totally to the dance and sacrifices the ego—all this will be in the dance we are about to witness. I was exhausted before the dance began.

She performed two dances of about ten minutes each. As she danced, she dramatized a narrative, shown in facial expressions, poses, and actions. We live through these characters in life as we experience the many roles we live through, which are transient. We are only actors, we are not to get attached to our roles, even as the dancer moves from role to role on stage.

A small group of us went to dinner. Along the way, I was introduced to the traveling companion of my friend from San Diego. Her friend was a delightful and witty woman who had heard of Swedenborg—her church brought in speakers to talk about Swedenborg, as the next life is central in her faith tradition. I asked her what tradition she comes from and she replied that she is of the Unification Church, which is commonly known as “Moonies.” She locked eyes with me and joked she could give me the “thousand-mile stare” and brainwash me. We have many preconceptions, indeed prejudices, about other religions until we meet actual people who espouse them. That is often the case when others meet Swedenborgians for the first time, too.

Earlier that day, a youth came up to me with a flyer announcing a performance they were putting on with a



“Faith in Us” Youths began with their backs turned to us

group called, “Faith In Us.” They said that through art they were trying to interest their fellow young people in interfaith, which we all know is lacking. I had to see it. Six teens with their backs turned to the audience spoke in the first person, telling stories about young people killed by terrorist attacks—deeply moving stories—stories from all over the world and many different faith traditions. They then turned to face the audience and, still speaking in the first person, told us who they are and what they are doing. They performed a musical number called, “Sands of Time,” with powerful poetic words about interfaith. Then, passing the microphone back and forth, one by one, they recited prayers representative of the three Abrahamic faiths they belonged to, “Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. When they concluded with songs from their traditions, ending by performing together John Lennon’s “Imagine,”—“And the world would be one.”—there wasn’t a dry eye in the audience.

The Parliament of the World’s Religions isn’t just seminars. There are crafts, schools, art, and other representations from the many cultures and religions at the Parliament. I went to the exhibit hall to look at crafts, books, jewelry, shawls, clothing, and many kinds of merchandise from the 220 distinguishably different faiths at the conference. The exhibits room was vast, and a friend from home and I meandered around for a couple hours.

We came upon what was an imposing portable Hindu temple with golden statues and pillars, where *Balasons*, young girls who were brought up in a temple, were saying prayers of healing. They were dressed in orange; I suppose technically it is saffron. You could get “scanned” by the third eye of the Balasons, who would diagnose you and heal you. The whole thing was frightening to me. How does one approach the Balasons? What do you do when you get up there? What was all this? What could a teen know about me or the world? I was really skeptical. Furthermore, you were supposed to kneel in front of the Balasons, and I don’t kneel in front of anyone.

Next day, I returned to the Nithya



Nithya Balason healers

Spiritual Healing Shrine, as I discovered it was called. Not without a fair amount of skepticism but balanced with an open mind, I asked one of the attendants about the Balasons and what their religious training was and who they were. She told me that the healing was called *Nithya*. A male in white Indian clothes came up and, when I told him I was going to write an article about this, gave me lots of information. This sect are worshippers of ParamaShiva (Lord Shiva). Their Guru is His Holiness Paramahansa Nithyananda. The Balasons have had their third eye opened by the Guru. They would scan you, find any illnesses, and heal you while sitting cross-legged.

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I decided to take the plunge.

After filling out a medical waiver, I stood in line to be healed by the Balasons. Today, people were sitting in front of the Balasons instead of kneeling. That, I could do. My turn came.

The young Balason carried herself with authority and confidence. She told me about a significant psycho-spiritual issue that had been dominating my life. And then told me about a second one. She was dead-on. She closed her eyes and prayed a short while and said, "The healing is done." She was right. Right about everything about me—a stranger—and about the healing. What she said to me was not the kind of general thing that would apply to anybody. She spoke of important issues I had, that I needed to hear articulated to make me understand their importance and to feel the release when they were articulated. "Of course," I thought. She saw me with her third eye—me, a skeptic.

This is not my religious tradition. I don't know anything about the Balasons' training, about Guru Paramahansa Nithyananda, about the whole nature of Gurus and their followers, or even what the third eye is. But I do know myself. And I know what the Balason said about me. I feel like the Samaritan woman who said to her villagers about Jesus, "the woman went back to the town and said to the people, 'Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did'" (John 4:28-29). I am not commending nor denouncing this sect to anyone. All I know is what it did for me. From a profound skepticism, I left a believer.

While I was listening and watching, I was learning that approaching world religions is not only a matter of thinking about doctrines. It is also a matter of participation. As a Swedenborgian, I thought at one time that learning

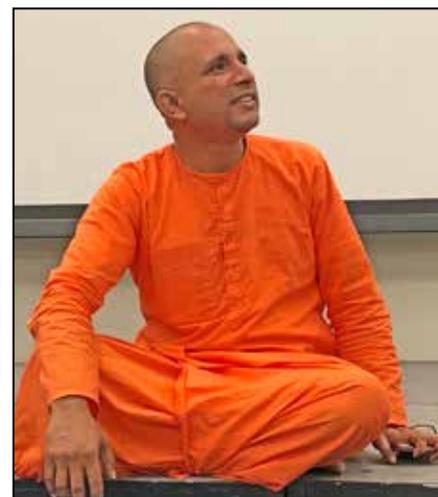
about other religions was learning their doctrines. And that approach is common to many Protestant religions. The Parliament showed me otherwise.

I began another day with a highly cognitive lecture on the idea of harmony in Chinese Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist schools. They share a general approach to harmony. The image of soup opened the discussion. The contrasting elements of soup—fire and water, sweet and salt, vegetable and meat—symbolize their conception of harmony. A quotation captures the essence of this metaphor. "If water be used to help out water, who could eat it? Sameness is of no practical use." Harmony brings new things into existence and is constructive. Sameness does not and is destructive. I thought of Swedenborg's *Divine Providence* §4, "A form makes a unity more perfectly as its constituents are distinguishably different, and yet united."

The Chinese world view consists of a balance between heaven and earth, individual and society, and among differing psychological tendencies such that one kind of emotion doesn't become too strong. In their system, all happiness takes place in a context and is relational. Happiness is always with others, with the earth and Nature, and with heaven. Without others, without the earth, and without heaven there can be no happiness. With these ideas of harmony, it would seem an easy move for the Chinese to adopt an ecological world view. "Survival of the harmonious versus survival of the fittest." And in fact, the term "Ecological Civilization" (not "Industrial Civilization") has been put into the very Chinese Constitution.

After this exhilarating cognitive adventure, I next entered the experiential world of Hindu Vedanta (Upanishadic) meditation. We all lay on the floor with our eyes shut for an hour and a half and first were led through bodily

relaxation. We were asked to feel our heels touching the floor, our hips touching the floor, our shoulder blades touching the floor, our heads touching the floor—and even sinking into the floor with their weight. Then we concentrated on the space between where our heels, hips, shoulder blades, heads



Swami Yatidharmananda led us through a Vedanta meditation

touched the floor—not body, not floor, but between. At this point I began to feel very light, almost weightless. Then, we were led to concentrate on infinity in the image of the ocean and being surrounded on all sides by the ocean. This yielded to universal consciousness—not body, not mind, but consciousness. And then universal peace, which filled every cell in our bodies. We are universal consciousness, a reflection of universal consciousness; we are universal peace, a reflection of universal peace, "That Thou Art!"

Back on earth and in my body, I entered a lecture hall to hear the Star Teachings from an elder of the Mi'kmoq Nation. When I went to the seminar, I thought I was going to hear some ancient First Nations lore and stories. I was waiting the whole time for the Star Teachings. Instead, Elder David Sanipass's wife opened the seminar by telling a story. She said that David

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had encouraged her to go to the bank with a twenty-dollar bill and change it into single dollars. Then she was to start giving away the dollar bills. She went to a grocery store and tried to give the cashier a dollar. But the cashier exclaimed, "I can't take that! I'd get fired! But you could go to the next cash register and give it to the woman in line there." So she did. Then she went around the store giving out the dollars. In the long run, giving these dollars out got people talking about why she was doing it. It transformed the whole atmosphere of the store. While she was telling her story, I was waiting for the Elder to start talking. And I was waiting for the Star Teachings.

The Elder did speak. He opened with a 24,000-year-old story about Creation. There was a great bird who had the most wonderful song. Since humans couldn't speak, the bird was going to give them the gift of his song. But the bird's grandfather came to earth in the form of an old man and coaxed the humans into talking. The bird got mad, thinking himself duped, and decided to hide his song in a cedar tree at the centre of a swamp. He returned to the swamp later, but couldn't find his song.

David, the Mi'kmoq elder, asked his father if that was a true story or just a legend. His father told him to go to the swamp and listen to a tree. He did, but a woodpecker kept pecking at the tree. This bothered young David because it was interfering with the song he was trying to hear from

the primordial Great Bird. But when a woodpecker pecks a tree, he makes holes in it, like the holes in a flute. Young David missed the song.

David told two more stories. When he was young, David had been authorized to give the Catholic last rites. Once, there was a woman pinned in a car that had overturned. David climbed into the car and gave the woman last rites. All the while, gasoline was dripping onto his shirt, and the first responders tried to get him to leave the overturned car before it exploded. "No," David said. He stayed with the woman until she went into infinity, back to the stars.

His last story was the longest. It was about a bear hunt. Feeling excluded from the other elders at a story-telling gathering, because he didn't have

white hair, David went to an elder for advice. "Go on a bear hunt," the elder said. David decided he would shoot the bear with a camera. Trying to photograph a bear, despite the dangers, occasioned many hilarious adventures. The story ends with David running from the bear which he awoke with the flash from his camera, running through the forest and getting bent double by running into a fallen tree and then climbing another tree to escape

the bear. But the bear sniffed and followed him through the field, climbed up the tree and stared him face to face. The bear talked, "You lost your camera when you ran into the tree in the forest, I came to return it to you." So saying the bear climbed down the tree and walked into the forest. Shaking with fear, David discovered that the film had all fallen out of the camera.

When he got home, David looked in a mirror and saw that he had white hair! He held the whole lecture hall in rapt attention. In the telling of his story, David had carried us all into a special collective experience of love and interconnectedness.

By the time the bear hunt story was over, we'd run out of time. David said he would now give us the Star Teaching. All he said was, "Don't let the moment end now. Bring this message out into the world." I was left to wonder what the Star Teaching is. What I came up with, and I'm not sure I got it right, was that David's wife's story about giving away dollar bills, and the story about staying with the woman in the overturned car, and the story about the bear hunt were all the Star Teachings. It is a teaching about love. It is a teaching about going out of our way to bring love into the moment, onto earth. It was about the power we have to make the world a more loving place, the power we have to transform every encounter, every moment, into a moment of love.

I was personally and professionally transformed by my experiences at the Parliament of the World's Religions. And I had many more experiences. After the intense seminars, the guided Vedanta meditations, the Indigenous Peoples' stories, the Nithya healing I underwent, I came away a different person. It will take some time to integrate everything I learned with my own Swedenborgian faith tradition. For learning something new, even personal transformation, doesn't mean abandoning what we know about religion. Rather, it means accommodating and integrating it.

I've been practicing my understanding of the Star Teachings lately. I've been buying food for homeless men, confronted convenience store clerks who didn't understand why I was doing



*Elder David Sanipass
and the Star Teachings*

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it, meeting the barista at my local coffee shop, trying to make all my relations a real human interaction, spreading the message of love, the Star Teachings as I understand them.

I knew these teachings from my Christian background. But for some reason, they never spoke to me the way they did when David Sanipass spoke. Hadn't Jesus said, "Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. . . . But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High" (Luke 6:30–35). For some reason, it took David's stories to energize me to act.

The Parliament of the World's Religions isn't only about different religions. There are also practical issues such as the Parliament itself and how to strategize about making it relevant.

Tuesday began with a real issue of relevance. I attended a workshop on intergenerational communication. We broke into small groups and paired older people with younger people. We were given discussion questions. One young man made a point I think we all know, but haven't explicitly articulated—young people have a different perspective on the world than do old people. For this reason alone, their voice matters, their wisdom is important. When we asked what strengths young people bring to the table, almost with one voice came the response, "Technology." I told a story about the teens at Paulhaven summer camp getting me onto Snapchat as an example of positive interactions between the generations. A young man at my table who is majoring in religion and digital media asked me what I post. I asked him if he meant what I post personally to the

teens? He replied, "No; what does your church post." "Nothing." (*Let one who has ears hear.*)

A fascinating contradiction surprised me. The young people at my table agreed that atheism is chic today and informed me that students in their religion departments and world religions classes are ninety percent atheists. Thinking about engaging young people in religions and interfaith initiatives, we all came to the conclusion that social action, such as feeding homeless and climate initiatives, brings young and old together—persons of different faiths, and atheists too. Conversing about doctrines and interfaith beliefs does not inspire, does not bring people together.

It was lunch time—what better time to partake in the Sikh Langar? Langar is a free ritual meal Sikhs offer at their temples or at any Sikh function. There is a theology behind the free meals. In India, there was (is?) the caste system. The caste system is a hierarchy with Brahmans at the top and untouchables at the bottom. Members of higher castes are not allowed to eat with members of lower castes. To undo the effects of caste, Sikhs offer a common meal for everybody: untouchables, Brahmans, doctors, lawyers, carpenters, garbage men . . . Swedenborgians. With everybody sharing a common meal, artificial social distinctions are eroded.

As I was eating the rice, soup, dal (a curried yellow lentil puree), and pita bread, a younger man from New Mexico struck up a conversation with me. He was originally a Lutheran, now searching for a new spiritual tradition. He is learning from an Indigenous healer in Mexico. We talked about the difficulties that can arise when white people want to be let into the world of First Nations' spirituality. He said that he had been cultivating this relationship over a five-year period. He encouraged me to continue in my own efforts,

holding out the possibility of rejection. I recalled a comment that the Vodou priestess had made, "Why do we imagine that we have the right to another's religious system?"

Preceding the formal opening, I had delightful conversations with a few people in the convention centre lobby while we were looking over the 380-page program guide. A couple from Washington told me that they were from the Unity tradition, among other interfaith groups. I asked them how their church was doing. "If by 'church' you mean what is tied to a building, that might be questionable; but if you mean 'church' as a movement, I'd say it's doing wonderfully well." Already, I'd learned something. From my own tradition, I thought about what the New Church really is.

A person in one of the impromptu groups that had gathered noticed that I had "Rev." on my name tag. She asked me what faith tradition I came from. This afforded me the opportunity to once again, as with so many other religion conferences, introduce Swedenborg to people who hadn't heard of him.

On another occasion, I had a delightful conversation with the former Episcopalian Bishop of California. His title, which I noticed from the business card he handed me, is "Right Reverend." He began our chat with the words, "I used to be important!" We then launched into a side-splitting conversation about ecclesiastical titles. I mentioned that I had attended a service at Westminster Abbey which was led by a "Very Reverend." The Right Reverend said that meant he was dean of the cathedral. We talked about how one addresses personages like the Very Reverend. One calls them titles like, Excellency, Your Grace, or in the Orthodox Tradition, Metropolitan.

The conversation drifted to "high

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church” and “low church.” One Anglican church was using candles inappropriately. They were directed to stop using candles because they were not high church. I asked, “You mean that the Church tells you whether you are high church or low church?!” The Right Reverend said, “It isn’t mentioned. It’s something you just know without being told.”

He got back to the subject of titles. He said that he was in Istanbul meeting high churchmen of the Orthodox tradition. Someone was whispering in his ear, telling him how to address the distinguished priests he was meeting. One was, “Your excellency.” Another was, “Metropolitan.” Then a priest with a beard and mustache came up and The Right Reverend was told he was to be addressed as “Bad Attitude.” I laughed, but not sufficiently, so the Right Reverend had to explain, “He meant, ‘Beatitude,’ not Bad Attitude.” Now I really laughed. The Right Reverend went on, “I couldn’t even look at him with a straight face after that.” I asked, “You mean that really happened!? It wasn’t just a joke?” “Yes, it really happened.”

The Right Reverend said he was good friends with the Archbishop of Canterbury. The very Archbishop who had performed the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Dianna Spencer. Later, on a visit to the US, the Archbishop wanted to see the Liberty Bell. Dressed in a suit and tie, not in his clerics, the Archbishop was waiting in line to see the Liberty Bell, and an American struck up a conversation with him. “I can tell y’all are from England. Great country. I watched the royal wedding on TV. I had a great view with the cameras and all. Did you get a good look at them?” The Right Reverend replied, “It was as if I was standing right in front of them.”

Asked what denomination I was with, I said Swedenborgian. The Right Reverend told me that he lived in Pacific Heights, just a few blocks from the Swedenborgian Church in San Francisco. I didn’t lose a minute before I informed the Right Reverend that Robert Frost had been baptized in the San Francisco Swedenborgian church. No one at the table had any idea.

I couldn’t believe that I was having this conversation about titles in such a light, funny way with one who actually held one of them. I think of Episcopalians as being staid and formal, and I think of Episcopalian bishops as being even more so. I had no idea I would meet such a hilarious, personable guy as I found the Right Reverend to be.

Meeting people can be better than reading books, if one has an interest in different religions. Experiences like the above only happen at interfaith gathering such as the Parliament of the World’s Religions, or another organization I like to attend called North American Interfaith Network. Reflecting back, just meeting so many interesting, inspiring, delightful people in seminars or informally in hallways or exhibit spaces is something special about interfaith events. The Parliament is not only seminars, lectures, and guided meditations. It’s engaging personal encounters, too, like the Right Reverend or my acquaintances from Washington, to mention just a few of many.

Back home, at a casino of all places, I was wearing the Tibetan prayer beads I bought in the exhibit hall where I met the Right Reverend. A casino employee we had gotten to know over time asked my girlfriend about the necklace, since she hadn’t seen me wear them before (and they are unusual and striking). This afforded me the opportunity to talk about the Parliament. When I mentioned guided meditation, which I experienced there, our friend said that she would be interested in that. She

added some remarks about a drumming circle she goes to, led by an Indigenous woman I hadn’t met, nor was even aware of. There are also courses by donation in Indigenous Medicine offered by a Shaman, and guided journeys (which I took to be what I understand the Vision Quest to be), our friend added.

I had been trying to learn about Indigenous spirituality, and meeting with only moderate success. Was this Shaman a way in? In any event, a new experience opened up to me, in the drumming circle and Shaman course here in my own town! This, just by meeting and talking at a public venue about the Parliament of the World’s Religions. One just never knows about people, does one?

That ended the Parliament of the World’s Religions for me. I learned much about many traditions, rituals, experiences, and perspectives. But it would be a mistake to think that one now understands a tradition that others have spent their lives growing into. Equally true, it is a mistake to replace one’s own tradition, which one has practiced all one’s life, for the sample of another tradition. The Parliament of the World’s Religions is a taste, not a meal. Nevertheless, it can be transformative. I am not the same Swedenborgian that I was before the Parliament. I understand my own tradition differently, understand religion differently, understand more fully all the richness that of God’s world. ☸

Rev. David J. Fekete, Ph.D., is pastor of the Church of the Open Word in Edmonton, Alberta. He represents the Swedenborgian Church the National Council of Christian Churches. His participation at the Parliament of World’s Religions was funded in part by the Swedenborgian Church..

The first Parliament of World Religions, which took place in Chicago in 1893, was organized by Daniel Burnham, a Swedenborgian.

General Council Fall Meeting

BY KAREN CONGER

The weekend of November 9–10, 2018, the General Council of the Swedenborgian Church (General Convention of the New Jerusalem) met for their fall meeting at the Cenacle Retreat Center in Chicago, Illinois. President Rev. Jane Siebert presided. Treasurer Jennifer Lindsay presented the proposed FY 2019 Budget for discussion. She informed the Council that the budget is balanced and that both restricted and unrestricted funds from FY 2018 show a surplus.

At business sessions at the annual convention in San Jose this past summer, a new committee structure was adopted, with standing committees taking the place of support units. The

The Council is instituting a new practice: every church and ministry within the General Convention will have a liaison from General Council assigned to it. Liaisons will contact their respective churches and ministries in the fall and spring of each year to keep them apprised of General Convention information and activities and will be a “listening ear” for their concerns and ideas.

Annual Convention 2019 will be held at Valparaiso University, in Valparaiso, Indiana, a beautiful campus with lovely worship spaces. The Council of Ministers will meet from Wednesday, June 26, through Friday, June 28, and the convention will open on Saturday, June 29, closing Wednesday, July 3. The Annual Convention Planning



(L to R) Carl Helm, Rev. Jenny Caughman, Jennifer Lindsay, Rev. Gard Perry, Stan Conger, Karen Conger, Rev. Jane Siebert, Debbie Dolley, Rev. Thom Muller, Barb Halle, Tom Neuenfeldt, Rev. Betsy Coffman

Council broke into ad hoc committees to discuss the focus and expectations of the Standing Committee for Financial Accountability, the Standing Committee for Communication and Information, and the Standing Committee for Education and Resources for Spiritual Community.

Committee is excited about the way things are developing and, in particular, to announce that the keynote speaker will be noted theologian Rev. Matthew Fox. Look for further details as next summer approaches. ☩

Karen Conger is the recording secretary of General Council.

Letter from the President

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There are so many reasons I cherish being Swedenborgian, but for this letter I am holding to three. And the third relates to the importance of our idea of God and how this affects our life and interaction with our “neighbors.” Many Christian writers today seem to be trying to undo some of the teachings of the past, like the idea of God as a judge or puppeteer, causing harm to people or condemning them to hell because they didn’t believe the “right way.” This has turned many people away from Christian churches and, sadly, away from a life of continuing to search for a higher power. It just doesn’t make sense, nor does it portray a divine being in which one would want to believe.

In our tradition of Christianity, based on the Word and informed by the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the Divine is always love, always wanting what is best for us, leading with love and not with condemnation, allowing us to find our way to God. Swedenborg explained the deeper sense of the words of Jesus in the Gospels so that we can intimately connect with this loving incarnation of God. Jesus the Divine Human is not merely one of the three personhoods of God, but rather fully God.

My choice as a Christian is to try to live like Jesus. Because we have the Gospel stories of how Jesus lived and what he taught, and the inner sense as opened by Swedenborg, we have the guidance to try to follow the greatest commandment Jesus gave us: to love the Lord my God with all my heart, and with all my soul, and with all my mind and to love the neighbor as myself. We don’t have to complicate it with atonement theories, blood of the lamb—what you have to believe or say to be ‘saved’.

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Passages

Deaths

Bobby L. Buchanan passed away at the age of 87 on Dec. 8, 2018.

Bobby received a BS from Western Kentucky State College, attended Harvard Graduate School, received a Masters in Mathematics and Physics from Northeastern University, and became a Registered Professional Engineer. He joined the Air Force in 1953 and was honorably discharged as a Captain in 1962. He worked as a theoretical physicist and, in 1992, founded Technology Expectations, where he served as president until his retirement in 2006. Bobby published over forty scientific papers and held three patents.



Bobby married the love of his life,

Joan L. Huntley. Residents of Carlisle, Massachusetts, for sixty-one years, they raised five children. He had a passion for antiques, chess, basketball, scrabble, and vodka martinis. He found entertainment challenging his grandchildren with complex math formulas and riddles. A self-declared “provocateur,” he enjoyed asking questions no one else dared to—this was always done with his never-forgotten southern charm and infectious smile. Bobby was preceded in death by his beloved daughter Brenda.

Bobby was a member of the Boston Swedenborgian Church until it resigned from the General Convention. He held many leadership positions in the church and in the Massachusetts New Church Union. He was a trustee of the Gray Fund until his death.

He is survived by his wife, Joan; children Buck, Beth, Belinda, and Bonny; sister Shirley; brothers Gale and Ricky; ten grandchildren; seven great-grandchildren; and many cousins, nieces, and nephews.

Rev. David Rienstra entered the fullness of the spiritual world on November 10, 2018. He had retired in 2001 after a quarter-century in ministry with the Swedenborgian Church of North America.

Ordained in 1978 at the annual convention in Kitchener, Ontario, he gave his ordination address, “Heeding the Call,” to commemorate the occasion. He had already been leading the Fryeburg church as a student pastor for a year while concluding the last of his studies at a distance, and upon ordination he began ordained ministry there where he served another ten years.



Along with his then wife, Carole, and daughter, Katie, he moved to the St. Louis area in 1987 to take up the ministry at Church of the Open Word, which had adopted the tag “Garden Church” due to its Wayfarers Chapel-inspired glass chancel, which gives a view of a walled garden. The chapel was already popular for weddings when David and Carole spearheaded a multi-year project renovating a large-scale outdoor garden surrounding the church to enhance the garden theme and beautify the neighborhood.

In addition to his congregational leadership ministries, David served General Convention in many capacities. In 1993, he was chosen to be one of three theme speakers on the future of the church, giving an address entitled, “Who Are We and Where Are We Going?” He also answered the call to serve as Chair of the Council of Ministers and on General Council, the Sunday School Association, the Ministerial Placement Committee, the Growth and Outreach Committee, and as an officer for both the Maine and Illinois Associations. ☩

Letter from the President

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For me, Swedenborg ties Jesus’ teachings with the Old Testament words of Micah, when the prophet simply explained what the Lord requires of us: “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” This leaves us open to find God in the way that resounds with who we are and the unique way God created us. What beauty, what freedom, what blessed assurance. There is no one way to walk with my God.

My thanks to the Lord, to Swedenborg, and my personal spiritual journey that has led me to this point. May you find blessings as you reflect on the treasures that your faith tradition has opened for you and may you continue to find more,

—Rev. Jane Siebert

Pastoring in the Garden

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or an outdoor classroom for the neighboring high school; it is more than a church; it is more than a place to get local sustainably grown produce; it is more than a community gathering place; it is more than a model for sustainable farming practices. It is all of these things but, most of all, it is where people from all walks of life come together to feed and be fed in body, mind, and spirit and to live the experience of church together.

For my part, I am thrilled to walk with this faith community as we all go about the important work of feeding and being fed. ☩

Rev. Dr. Amanda Adams Riley is acting co-pastor of The Garden Church in San Pedro, California, alongside Rev. Jonathan Mitchell..

About the Swedenborgian Church

Emanuel Swedenborg was born January 29, 1688, in Stockholm, Sweden. Although he never intended a church denomination to be founded or named after him, a society was formed in London fifteen years after his death. American groups eventually founded the General Convention of Swedenborgian Churches.

As a result of Swedenborg's spiritual questioning and insights, we as a church exist to encourage that same spirit of inquiry and personal growth, to respect differences in views, and to accept others who may have different traditions.

In his theological writings, Swedenborg shared a view of God as infinitely loving and at the very center of our beings, a view of life as a spiritual birthing as we participate in our own creation, and a view of scripture as a story of inner life stages as we learn and grow. Swedenborg said, "All religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." He also felt that the sincerest form of worship is a useful life.

Swedenborgian Online Community

The Swedenborgian Online Community is a vibrant space for worship, exploration, learning, discussion, conversation, and community. It serves spiritual seekers of online worship, spiritual wisdom or inspiration, knowledge of Emanuel Swedenborg or Swedenborgianism, or online community. It serves both those new to Emanuel Swedenborg's writings and the Swedenborgian Church and those who are part of the Church but live too far from a congregation to participate in weekly services and community. It offers a panoply of exploration and participation.

Following is a sample of the many avenues for exploration and participation at SwedenborgianCommunity.org.

- Book Club is reading and discussing Emanuel Swedenborg's popular work, *Heaven & Hell*, his fullest report of his experiences in the other world. In it he describes heaven, hell, and the world of spirits that lies between them and how these should inform our living.
- Multimedia worship services (text sermon, scripture, and music videos) stream live on Sundays at 9 PM EST.
- Interviews with both Swedenborgian and non-Swedenborgian ministers and others

How You Can Help

This year we continue our journey with each other, striving to connect Swedenborgians and others across the world with a shared vision of love, diversity, and affirmation. Help us to continue this mission with your much needed generosity and support!

Our yearly budget includes these needs: part-time minister's salary, tech support, and more.

You can serve so much by giving a little, helping us continue to make inroads into hearts and minds. With enough giving, who knows? We may be able to expand our ministry, uplifting and connecting more of you in deeper ways!

You can donate at <https://tinyurl.com/SC-onlineDonate>.

—Rev. Cory Bradford-Watts

- Discussions of current and historical topics of interest to the community

You can watch and participate in all of these activities live on Thursdays at 9 PM EST. View the schedule at <http://swedenborgiancommunity.org>. You can join live discussions at <http://swedenborgiancommunity.org/worship> or watch previous sessions on our worship page or on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/SweboComFB>. 