



THE GLOBAL  
PEACE INITIATIVE  
OF WOMEN

**Contact:** Millicent Fortunoff  
**Tel:** 917-306-3841  
[fortunoffm@ruderfinn.com](mailto:fortunoffm@ruderfinn.com)

**AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS MEET AND PLEDGE TO HELP RAISE  
NEW SPIRITUAL VOICE FOR NATION**

*Council of American Contemplative Elders Formed to Guide New Movement*

**November 12, 2008, New York**—Religious leaders from around the country and from across faith traditions met in Aspen, Colorado on November 5-10 to see how they can together support President-Elect Barack Obama and the new administration as they seek to address the nation's challenges. This gathering was an effort to heal the religious divides in the nation, divides that accompanied the political polarization the nation has experienced. Mindful of the enormous challenges ahead and the need for a new partnership between government and civil society, the 100 plus faith leaders who gathered expressed determination to support the Obama administration by mobilizing a new spiritual voice for the country, one based on inclusion, compassion, and a vision of oneness.

For the first time, there was an extensive outreach to those voices often not heard at such gatherings – Buddhist and Hindu religious leaders, as well as Sufis and Native American spiritual leaders. Included were those steeped in deep contemplative practice, as these leaders bring a much needed perspective. After days of joint prayer, meditation, discussion and reflection, there was agreement that we must find ways to join contemplative wisdom with compassionate action, that we must seek to marry these two critical components of religious life for the benefit of the nation. Among the moral issues deemed the most critical for the nation are helping Americans move beyond fear, working to develop of a more inclusive and caring economy and the re-establishment of respect and deep regard for our environment and natural resources. Over the course of the next several months, statements and position papers will be developed with recommendations on how to approach these issues from an inter-spiritual vantage point.

“There was agreement on the need to mobilize a new spiritual movement in the country, a process that would parallel the political changes now underway,” says Dena Merriam, Founder of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, and convener of the summit in Aspen. “Traditionally in most societies, there was a special place for spiritual elders, who offered a guidance vision for

their communities. Thus it was agreed that a **Council of American Contemplative Elders** would be formed as the guiding voice and face for this new movement, named the **Contemplative Coalition**,” continued Merriam.

Catholic leaders Father Thomas Keating, Father Joseph Boyle and Sister Joan Chittister were along the elders at the gathering who assented to help lead the Council. Also agreeing to lead were Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Reverend Joan Brown Campbell, Reverend Cynthia Bourgeault, Venerable Bhikkhu Bohdi, Reverend James Parks Morton, Acharya Judith Lief, Swami Atmarupananda, and the Hopi leader Grandmother Mona Polacca. The Council is still in development and additional names have been presented for consideration. The first act of the Council will be to send a letter to President-Elect Obama calling for a new dialogue between his administration and an inclusive group of religious leaders, working at the grassroots.

The Council will serve as a guiding voice for the Contemplative Coalition, which will seek to mobilize spiritual communities around a vision of religious unity and inclusion. “This coalition will base itself on bringing the wisdom that grows out of contemplative practice to our efforts to create a more just and compassionate society—in the areas of healthcare, education, and economic recovery,” says Merriam.

The religious leaders expressed the benefit of convening similar gatherings around the country to continue with the mobilization of new spiritual voices – a process that parallels the political process undertaken by Barack Obama in his campaign. A plan is being developed to reconvene in key locations around the country.

A key factor of this initiative is that it is being organized and led by women religious and spiritual leaders. It is the women who feel called now to assume a leadership role in mobilizing this new voice for the nation. The gathering in Aspen was organized by the Global Peace Initiative of Women, the only global interfaith organization conceived and led by women religious leaders from both the Abrahamic and Eastern traditions. Funding partners included Kalliopeia Foundation and the Fetzer Institute.

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#### **About the Global Peace Initiative of Women**

The Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) was founded by a group of women religious and spiritual leaders to provide a global platform through which women and men, working in partnership, can foster the spiritual values of global unity, peacebuilding and the development of all the peoples of the world. GPIW is an international network of women and men who come together to tap our collective spiritual wisdom to stimulate reconciliation and healing in areas of conflict and post-conflict, and to deepen understanding of oneness, compassion and the principles of ahimsa (non-harm) as central tenets of life. We believe that a shift in consciousness is needed, a change in heart and mind, if we are as a global community to meet the challenges of climate change, environmental degradation, poverty and hunger, violence and conflict. Central to our work is the belief that the feminine qualities of wholeness, inclusion, and integration have a vital role to play in facilitating this shift and bringing greater balance to our world. Thus we make great effort to draw upon the resources of women spiritual leaders as we seek to empower these vital qualities. For more information, please visit <http://www.gpiw.org>.