

Talking, listening and perhaps ending religious violence



PHOTO BY PATRICK L. SULLIVAN
 Presbyterian minister Eileen Epperson will speak at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, Australia.

By PATRICK L. SULLIVAN

SALISBURY — Eileen Epperson coaches her clients in how to let resentment go. In December, she will be bringing a similar message to the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, Australia.

Epperson, a Presbyterian minister, works as a spiritual and life coach. She helps people get past, well, the past.

"I'm committed to helping people live extraordinary lives," she said over coffee at her Salisbury home.

Forgiveness, she added, is frequently misunderstood concept.

"It has nothing to do with the other person," said Epperson. Individuals feel that by forgiving they are somehow losing or condoning something.

Epperson compares a person who is stuck on what she calls "the Velcro of the past" to a hamster on a wheel, running furiously and getting nowhere.

"We can step out of that by declaring we are getting off the hamster wheel."

Her coaching practice evolved from her work as interim pastor in five churches in Massachusetts, one in North Carolina, a longer stint in Torrington, and her experience as a college, hospital and hospice chaplain.

In 1993, she attended the first modern-day Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago.

The event was inspired by the World's Parliament of Religions at the 1893 World's Fair, also in Chicago.

It had a lofty goal — to imagine a world without religious violence.

"The main thing was to get people talking," Emerson said. "At first, nobody

said anything, but by the end of the week they couldn't stop talking."

Subsequent parliaments have been held in Cape Town, South Africa (1999) and Barcelona, Spain (2004), with the focus on sustainability and peace. This year's event highlights the struggles of the world's indigenous peoples.

"I was always interested in different religions, I fell in love with the spiritual journey in different forms," said Epperson, gesturing to a large bookshelf crammed with works on different traditions.

"I'm a Christian but I love other traditions. We expand enormously when we see how others view things that are ultimate."

Asked if tempers ever flared at these gatherings, she laughed. "Only once that

I'm aware of, in Chicago."

Two groups — "not the obvious ones, either" — began to argue.

"Some native Americans who were part of the panel took over and got everybody in a circle," Epperson said. "It was remarkable."

"It's about building relationships, finding the common denominators, providing opportunities left, right and sideways."

In Barcelona in 2004, Sikh representatives from Birmingham, United Kingdom, "brought vats of cookware and food, bought fresh produce, and provided a free lunch every day of the conference."

Many of the Sikhs, mistaken for Muslims, had experienced problems with harassment and violence in the post-

9/11 period. But they provided what Epperson called "radical hospitality" to the conference.

"They served thousands of lunches and explained it was part of the Sikh tradition."

At Melbourne, 100 attendees will have a primary commitment to listen, and to help provide "an atmosphere of respect full listening." Members of "The Listening Project," including Epperson, talk twice a month by conference call.

"When you listen, people feel safe enough to say what they need to say."

So just as Epperson teaches her client how to let go of resentments, she hopes to contribute to a similar healing on a much larger scale.

"Let go," she said. "Create something new."