

Minister is on a mission

Marlboro woman wants religions to get back to nurturing

By Elaine Thompson
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MARLBORO — It was an unlikely group of roommates: a Presbyterian minister, a nun and a self-proclaimed witch.

But for Eileen L. Epperson, it symbolizes what her whole life is about.

"What I'm working on is not so much ending something as creating something like relationships between people of different religions, philosophies and points of view because that really is what turns me on and lights me up. That excites me," Epperson said during an interview at her Royal Crest apartment.

Epperson, a Presbyterian minister, shared a hotel room with a nun and a self-proclaimed witch in Chicago last week during the World Parliament of Religions. She said the experience has changed her life.

"I say religion has been abused and used to do harm," Epperson said. "Religions were never meant to do anything but nurture, and sustain, and challenge and empower. So I'm committed to having religions be doing their job."

The eight-day parliament was attended by 6,500 people from all over the world. And 150 invited

spiritual and religious leaders met to get to know each other in ways that could support future collaboration for world peace, the relief of suffering and preservation of the planet. The leaders also signed a declaration of global ethic.

Until there is an end to religious violence, there won't be world peace, Epperson said.

"There's just a potential for healing that's staggering with people of religious convictions coming together and joining hands. It can just ripple out everywhere," she said.

Epperson is executive director of The Religious Freedom Project, which is based in her home. The project's goal is to end religious violence by 2005.

"My intention is to create profound partnerships with a lot of people who can make things happen and enroll them in taking on this date for the work they're already doing," Epperson said.

"Visually, it was incredible. You saw yellow robes, beards, shaved heads, members of the goddess religion with long flowing dresses with stars and crystals hanging off them, white outfits and turbans of the shieks, the brown robes of Buddhist monks. Just visually, it was stunning," Epperson, 43, said of

her experience at the World Parliament of Religions.

"Given what I care about, it was like dying and going to heaven," she said. "There was for me a sense of joyful participation by myself, but what I saw was people excited about connecting with each other, and finding out about each other."

It was the second such world religion parliament. The first also was held in Chicago, in 1893, and was part of the Chicago World's Fair.

It was at the first parliament that members of eastern religious traditions were first invited to the West. It also was the first time women and blacks preached in a public forum, Epperson said. Thousands of people attended the parliament and listened to 400 religious leaders talk for 17 days.

The parliaments were supposed to continue. Another one was supposed to happen in five to 10 years, but didn't. Five years ago, members of the interfaith community in Chicago began making plans to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first parliament by holding a second one. Representatives of the interfaith community hooked up with the Institute for 21st Century Studies, now renamed the Millen-



Eileen L. Epperson of Marlboro attended the World Parliament of Religions.

ium Institute. The religious and spiritual leaders brought the knowledge of the interfaith dialogue. The Millennium Institute brought studies, predictions and scientific data about the state of the world, its people, and its resources.

"The purpose of the Parliament was to bring together peoples of different religious traditions to enhance dialogue and increase understanding," Epperson said. "But to also look at the state of the planet as religious people and see what we can do together ... taking on the world like it's our responsibility like religious people."