

31st Niwano Peace Prize: Awarded to Dena Merriam, Founder and convener of the Global Peace Initiative of Women

The 31st Niwano Peace Prize will be awarded to Dena Merriam, for her leadership of the Global Peace Initiative of Women. The International Selection Committee and the Niwano Peace Foundation recognize Dena Merriam's determined and creative work for peace, and her deep commitment to making the spiritual dimensions of work for peace an integral part of a rich and diverse set of activities that address many of the most critical issues facing today's world. She is a global leader in bringing the voices and energy of women who are inspired by their faith together so that they truly form the nucleus of an unprecedented global movement. She works tirelessly to ensure that the insights of eastern and western religions come together in a wise balance. The Niwano Peace Prize honors Dena Merriam's service to humankind in the search for wisdom and for a more just and sustainable world.

Dena Merriam, an American citizen, founded the Global Peace Initiative of Women in 2002 and has been its leader since then. The organization was founded because Dena Merriam, bringing together a core group of colleagues, was concerned that women's roles were so little recognized in global interfaith movements and efforts. When she played a central role in organizing the path-breaking Millennium Peace Summit at the United Nations on the eve of the historic year 2000 General Assembly Forum, she saw that women, who are often the backbone of religious communities and who carry religious wisdom from generation to generation, were scarcely visible. This was also true at most other interreligious events. She therefore organized a global gathering of women inspired by their faith in Geneva in 2002. The Global Peace Initiative of Women (GPIW) was born there.

GPIW is centered on an appreciation for the important roles that women play in spiritual leadership, even though this is often quite invisible in formal settings. It reflects a determination to give voice and effect to those roles. GPIW works intellectually and practically. It links inspiration and insight to critical policy issues that affect peace and justice. GPIW builds on an understanding that is present in widely different religious traditions, that feminine qualities reflect deeply spiritual elements like balance, harmony, and healing. Thus GPIW shines light on women's spiritual qualities and work as a core mission.

GPIW, under Merriam's leadership, has engaged since 2002 in wide-ranging activities in many parts of the world. Women have always played central roles but men also are involved, and GPIW seeks a balance and an integration of women and men. The organization brings together people in war-torn regions, Iraq and Afghanistan, for example. It has brought young leaders, female and male, together to identify major areas of tension and seek common solutions that reflect the voice of youth. And it has focused increasingly on two sets of issues that are critical today: economic justice and protection of the environment. By seeking the inspiration of spiritual leaders Dena Merriam works to identify the moral foundations of a path forward. Bringing groups of religious leaders (female and male) to major world gatherings on environmental issues, GPIW emphasizes that the issues at hand are moral and spiritual and that solutions are possible if those dimensions are at the center of deliberations.

Dena Merriam is remarkable for her understanding and respect for a wide range of religious traditions. Raised in a secular Jewish tradition, she is deeply familiar with many traditions. She is determined to bring the insights and voice of eastern religions into global interfaith work.

Dena Merriam and GPIW are tireless in their work for peace. Meeting after meeting, visit after visit, are organized to bring people together, and to take inspiration from the encounters to new heights, and far corners of the world. Dena Merriam is fearless in speaking forcefully on sensitive issues but sensitive to nuance and implication. She works constantly and creatively to advance the common good.

Dena Merriam has touched many thousand people, helping to channel their spiritual consciousness and energy towards work for the common good of humanity. Hers is a broad vision of peace, as a common challenge for women and men, east and west, land and humanity. It is for this work and inspiration that Dena Merriam is honored by the Niwano Peace Prize for 2014.