FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The International Religious Liberty Association is pleased to announce the International and National awardees for the 9th Annual Religious Liberty Dinner, to be held in Washington, D.C., April 5, 2011, at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel. The 2011 awardees are:

International Award: Gunnar Stålsett

Gunnar Stålsett has a distinguished career both as statesman and a churchman. He has fearlessly sought peace and reconciliation amongst people of all faith traditions, with a strong emphasis on human rights including freedom of religion and freedom of expression.

He is the former bishop of Oslo, in the Church of Norway, from 1998 to 2005. He graduated from MF Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo. During his church career he has worked as a teacher of systematic theology and served as parish minister. He was General Secretary of the Norwegian Bible Society from 1982 to 1984 and Rector at the Practical Theological Seminary at the University of Oslo from 1994 to 1998. He has served as a General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation from 1985 to 1994. He served as a member of the Norwegian Nobel Committee for 14 years, the last years as vice-chairman. He has been chairman of the Japanese Niwano Peace Prize Committee.

Before devoting his life to full time church work Stålsett had a brief political career. He served as State Secretary in the Ministry of Church Affairs and Education and as a deputy representative to the Norwegian Parliament from Oslo. He chaired the Centre Party from 1977 to 1979.

Throughout his life he has been a devoted champion for ecumenical and inter-faith work and served on the executive bodies of the World Council of Churches and the World Conference of Religions for Peace. He participates in several organizations engaged in issues relating to Islam and the West. He is a member of the Board of the Library of Alexandria. He is co-founder and Moderator of the European Council of Religious Leaders. In this capacity he is presently active in peace and reconciliation efforts in Sri Lanka, Burma, Kyrgyzstan and Kosovo. He is also a member of the Board of Experts of the International Religious Liberty Association.

He is the author of several books and holds a number of honorary degrees in Theology and in Laws. For his peace work he has received from the King of Norway the distinction as Commander of the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav, from the President of the Republic of Guatemala the Guatemala Grand Order of Quetsal and from the President of the Republic of Timor-Leste, the Order of Timor. It is our great honour this year to award Gunnar Stålsett with the International Award For Religious Freedom.
National Award: Kit Bigelow

As director of external affairs for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the U.S. for twenty-five years, Kit Bigelow had overall responsibility for the functioning of the Washington-based Office of External Affairs and of the Office of the U.S. Bahá’í Representative to the United Nations in New York. She retired from the position in June 2010.

Additionally, she had overall responsibility for the Bahá’í Refugee Office and the Office of Public Information until their integration into other agencies of the U.S. National Spiritual Assembly. Issues included human rights, religious freedom, the advancement of women, refugee affairs, sustainable development, media relations, and UN matters. She represented the National Spiritual Assembly in the promotion and protection of human rights, including religious freedom, the advancement of the rights of women, U.S. ratification of UN human rights treaties, and the elimination of racism. She advocated on these issues, often with other nongovernmental organizations, at the White House, the State Department, the Congress, and the United Nations.

She was responsible for informing the U.S. government and U.S. National news media about the persecution of the Bahá’í communities in Iran and other Muslim countries. She testified in numerous hearings and briefings before Congress on the oppression of the Bahá’ís in Iran and in Egypt.

For eight years, she was the co-chair of the national Working Group for U.S. Ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). She was actively involved in U.S. ratification of the UN Genocide Convention, the Convention Against Torture, the Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention Against Racial Discrimination. She was the representative for the Bahá’ís of the U.S. at the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. In March 2000, she served as a public sector adviser on the U.S. government delegation to the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

It is our great honour this year to award Kit Bigelow with the National Award For Religious Freedom.

About the Religious Liberty Dinner:
Every year, Washington gathers to attend the Religious Liberty Dinner. It is held to celebrate and bring attention to a central human right, the freedom of religion or belief, both in the United States and around the world. The Religious Liberty Dinner is attended by diplomats from more than 30 nations, along with representatives from the U.S. Department of Justice, the Congress, the Department of State, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the White House.

The Religious Liberty Dinner is co-sponsored by the International Religious Liberty Association, the North American Religious Liberty Association, Liberty Magazine, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For more information about the Religious Liberty Dinner please visit www.religiouslibertydinner.com or:
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