**WELCOM SPEECH**

**FOR**

**DONALD SMERAGLIUOLO**

Hello everyone and welcome to this year's World Congress of Spiritualists. We are thrilled to have all of you join us as we host this conference and provide the chance to participate in all of the exciting sessions and opportunities being offered for the next two days here at Lily Dale. This event is a great way for us to initiate our summer session and It's truly a privilege to see people from so many interesting and diverse areas throughout the world represented. I'm sure you'll all agree the energy around us is electric as we are filled with eager anticipation for all that we are about to collectively meet, experience, and learn. What's really exciting this year is that for the first time ever, this session will last for two days. I'd like to extend a special acknowledgement to Janet Nohavec for inspiring and organizing this year's event. We have several inspiring keynote speakers, among them the Rev. Bradley E. Gosselin, President of the National Spiritualists Association of Churches, David Bruton, Spiritualists National Union President, and Ann Luck, President of the International Spiritualists Federation, just to name a few. I think you'll agree that as we listen to the ideas and experiences shared by our distinguished speakers, our appreciation and understanding of our calling and practice will be even more profound. To all of the churches, societies and individual delegates from as far and wide as South Africa, Sweden, England, Scotland and Canada, we extend a special welcome and appreciate the effort you've made to be here with us. Thank you for allowing us to extend our hospitality to you during your visit to Lily Dale. This is a very special place and we are proud to share it with you. To all of you from around the US that are here to share this congress, we are gratified to let you know that this year we have an unprecedented \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ attendees representing \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ states!!! I think that's amazing.... And quite a foundation to establish as we continue to work together to strengthen the bonds of spiritualists thought the country and world. Of course none of this would be possible without the gracious support of the Lily Dale Assembly and it's Board of Directors, and to all of the volunteers who worked tirelessly to prepare supporting documents and mail invitations to all corners of our globe. As we experience more and more connection to our neighbors and counterparts from all different countries and walks of life, our outreach has the potential for unprecedented expansion. Of course no recognition of support from volunteers would be complete without heartfelt appreciation to Karen Rugar. Her devotion and organizational skills are nothing short of MAGIC!! Lily Dale is a beautiful oasis in the world, made all the more attractive and inviting with the presence of all of the banners and flowers you see around the property. We would like to applaud the thoughtfulness of all of the people who made such beautiful and substantial contributions. Even for those that have just arrived, I'm sure it is clear that Lily Dale is a special place- one that exudes heritage, respect, camaraderie and welcome.

For those of you that are new friends and are visiting Lily Dale for the first time, please allow me to give you a little background. In the early 1800's, a second renaissance of religious fervor emerged with lengthy tent revivals taking place throughout the countryside in the Midwest, NY state and other New England states. The theme of those meetings tended to emphasize the doom and gloom of strict Calvinist theory- so much so, that the area became known as the "Burnt Over Region." People began to rebel against archaic, strict religious doctrines that interpreted the Bible as tolerating slavery and the disenfranchisement of women among other ideologies. An uneasiness began to arise and like minded people started to rebel against those theories that did not represent who they were and what they truly believed. During the silent periods of their meetings, "free thinkers" began to experience spirit communication and after a few years and the public spirit communication with the Fox sisters, they became known as Spiritualists. About six miles from here was a village known as Laona which became the center of a community that held meetings in each other's homes. By 1855 that group became known as the Laona Free Association. In 1871 they began to organize summer picnics for the purpose of recreation and open discussion and the site, offered by Mr. William Alden became known as Alden's Grove. That landmark is now owned by Lily Dale and happens to be right across the street from our entrance gate, where the Leolyn Inn now exists. Mr. Alden was clearly a visionary and in June, 1873, he invited a spiritualist to speak, thus dedicating that grove to Spiritualism. There is a lot more to add to the fascinating history of Lily Dale and I hope you can find the time to explore the grounds as well as the story while you get to know why this place is so special. There is a word, "pentimento" that refers to the earlier layers of painting done on a work of art. As layers of paint attempt to cover those under layers, they all meld together in space and time on the canvass, providing depth and history. Lily Dale truly is a living work of art and its own unique layers of history and ambiance recall a time of discovery, communication, and understanding.

Our beautiful community has been in existence as a spiritual haven and headquarters for 135 years. It is a privilege to welcome all of you and we are eager to share our homes and heritage with you. We look forward to provocative insights and conversations all with the intent of acknowledging our common cause while advancing the understanding and evolution of Spiritualism. It is our intention that this World Congress be the first of many more to come and we appreciate your interest and support. Thank you all!