



## Setting the Stage for an Emerging Interfaith Movement: A Report After One Year

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**October 2004**

**T**o the question “What do you do?” that people often ask me, I have developed a simple answer: I build relationships with people of other faiths and I help other Christians to do the same. I am currently developing another component to this answer, which arises out of my observation this year that in many parts of the United States and indeed around the world, there is emerging an interfaith movement that is beyond the scope of what we have typically imagined. The Interfaith Relations work of the NCC, I hope, would include setting the stage for this emerging movement.

### The Emerging Interfaith Movement

In July, I joined over 8,000 leaders and participants of various religious traditions that converged on Barcelona for the [Parliament of the World's Religions](#). This was the fourth Parliament,



*My long-time friend Swami Varadananda of the Vivekananda Vedanta Temple, in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, is a trustee of the Parliament.*

and the third in recent times. Prior to the parliament some 400 religious leaders from many parts of the world gathered at the ancient monastery

at Montserrat for three days of conversation that culminated in expressions of simple and profound acts that lead to interreligious understanding.

There were other world conferences as well. The Community of Sant'Egedio gathered religious leaders in Milan this September. Dr. Bob Edgar, our General Secretary, attended this event for us. This is a Roman Catholic community that brings religious leaders together mainly to address poverty. At this meeting, Walter Cardinal Kasper, one of Roman Catholicism's foremost theologians spoke passionately about how in addition to poverty religious communities must address violence.

The world's political leaders also have begun to deal with this question. Addressing the WCC's Faith and Order Commission gathering in Kuala Lumpur, in August, the Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi introduced himself as "a Muslim who wants to initiate a dialogue with his Christian friends." He stressed that such a Christian gathering "in a Muslim country" gave him "great hope that, together, we can fight the perception that religions are at war, and that civilizations are colliding." Abdullah added, "What we need more than ever today is a concerted effort to initiate interfaith dialogue."

Kazakhstan, which 2 years ago brought together leaders of native and tribal religions is planning another event next year. The president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, recently gathered religious leaders in the United States to plan for a Christian-Islamic dialogue to be hosted by Senegal in 2006.

In addition to these world leaders, I find people across the US being attentive to interfaith realities. This is true in education, health care, politics and business. I've had conversations with leaders in each of these fields who are eager to seek ways to engage with the interfaith reality.

Someone said that there are two movements in the world these days: globalization and interfaith. Indeed, we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. The opposition we see by those who pull back toward cultural homogeneity, religious exclusivism and political unilateralism is a sign of a systemic pullback toward homeostasis that confirms this hypothesis. I believe that it is critical for the church to position itself to lead in this arena.

## Why Engage in Interfaith Relations?

I typically have 3 answers to this question.

First, we are now living in the most religiously diverse country in the world, according to Prof. Diana Eck of Harvard's [Pluralism Project](#). She makes this claim in her book *A New Religious America*. It is very necessary that Christians know how to relate to their neighbors of different faiths and it is necessary that pastors know how to teach their congregants how to do so.

Second, since 9/11 most people in the United States realize that they know very little about the world's fastest growing and the second largest religion, Islam. Many also realize that they know very little about the other religions. Since the violence we experienced is related to religion it is imperative that we understand this complex religious world. Prof. Charles Kimball of Wake Forest University in his book *When Religion Becomes Evil* makes a strong point that the only counterpoint to religion-related violence is people of different religions working together for peace.

Third is a theological answer. If God created the whole universe and all creation is under God's providence, surely that includes religious traditions as well. If I can say that God's revelation can be seen in the beauty of nature, that same argument can be made for seeing God's revelation in poetry of the *Bhagavad Gita* (Hindu Scripture). But if I were to say that God's revelation is not in the *Gita*, isn't that much more a statement about my God, than it is a statement about the *Gita*? On the other hand, if I do accept that God's revelation is in other religious traditions and do not study those, am I not missing something of the grandeur of God's revelation? Let me hasten to add that such an inquiry does not take anything away from my commitment to and inquiry into God's special and particular revelation in Jesus Christ.

## Theological Education

Many churches and pastors who want to engage with the people and institutions of other religious traditions are inadequately prepared to take on that challenge. A recent *Christian Century* report (9/21/2004) entitled "Most Faiths Unfamiliar to Protestant Clergy" affirms this. Few seminaries teach the theology and practice of interfaith relations. The Interfaith Relations Commission has

a task group working on developing a theology that arises from the context of this interfaith reality.

The international ecumenical movement has worked at these theological questions for almost a century. Wesley Ariarajah, my friend and mentor in this field, and the former director of the WCC's sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, ably documents this history in his *Hindus and Christians: A Century of Ecumenical Protestant Thought*.

While the earlier theological models were Christological, the more recent conversations are based on soteriological or liberation paradigms. Prominent theologians Paul Knitter, whom I came to know recently and Sri Lanka's Aloysius Peiris, whom I've known for a long time, have been foremost proponents of the latter position. More recently however, one of our colleagues in the Interfaith Relations Commission, Amos Yong, made a significant contribution proposing an approach to the theology of interfaith relations through the Holy Spirit. His 2003 book is entitled, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions*.



*Theologians Paul Knitter and Wesley Ariarajah sharing a light-hearted moment with me.*

The Commission also wants to address this question from the other end of the age spectrum. Understanding that 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders must also be equipped to relate to their Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist friends, we are hoping to begin conversations with NCC's Education and Leadership Ministries Commission about how to impact Sunday School curricula.

In addition, with the help of our colleagues in the Communication Commission, we are hoping to monitor and encourage interfaith programming on TV and other public media.

## Interfaith Relations and Public Policy

Today, interfaith conversations are laced with issues of public policy. Interfaith services are one format we use to highlight issues of justice and peace.

On January 30th, our poverty mobilization initiative helped to bring about 4,000 people to a summit in Columbia, SC, where poor people directly questioned the presidential candidates. That evening at an interfaith service at the Washington Street United Methodist Church, eight religious traditions participated, highlighting their perspectives on poverty. In March, an interfaith service in Washington DC featuring Peter Yarrow (Peter, Paul and Mary) highlighted due process for detainees of Guantanamo Bay. Families of the victims of 9/11 and families of Guantanamo detainees lit a candle of peace. On the Thursday of the Memorial Day weekend we again gathered for an interfaith service in Washington that honored **all** those who died in the war in Iraq: not only the US soldiers, but Iraqi civilians, because we said, in God's sight, "All Life Is Precious." Similar services were held in about 30 locations around the country.

When the Abu-Ghraib prison abuse scandal broke we brought together an imam, a rabbi, a Protestant clergyperson and a Catholic nun, to record a TV ad in which they said: "As Salaam Alaikum. As Americans of faith, we express our deep sorrow at abuses committed in Iraqi prisons. We stand in solidarity with all those in Iraq and everywhere who demand justice and human dignity. We condemn the sinful and systemic abuses committed in our name, and pledge to work to right these wrongs." In order to raise funds for this we sent out a call to our email lists. Other e-advocacy networks picked up the cause and in two weeks we had a list of about 100,000 emails and raised some \$60,000, enabling us to broadcast the ad on Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya networks. Today, [FaithfulAmerica.org](http://FaithfulAmerica.org) is becoming the e-voice of the religious community and has over 120,000 email addresses.

The connection between interfaith dialogue and public policy is demonstrated best in a new phase in Jewish Christian dialogue. On May 4<sup>th</sup> representatives of Christian communions and Jewish organizations came to the table to listen to each other's stories and build trust. Unlike previous dialogues, this one included Middle East policy professionals because it was clear we could not ignore the politics of Israel/Palestine. A second

dialogue in that series was held on October 20-21. An action by the Presbyterian Church (USA) in July calling for a process that could lead to divestment from companies doing business in Israel challenged us. Despite significant differences, vigorous debate and passionate expressions of pain from both sides of conflict, at the end of the meeting participants expressed a sense of accomplishment that we had indeed built trust and collegiality.

Next year, we will explore starting a similar dialogue with the Muslim community.

This is Track Two Diplomacy. If Track One is diplomacy by politicians Track Two is by religious leaders. We think Track Two has significant potential for success. Religious leaders often command a higher level of moral authority, and often, stronger public support through their congregations. This is still a relatively new idea, but is being tried in several areas of conflict.

## Sri Lanka and the Anti-Conversion Bill

When I visited Sri Lanka in July, I walked into a controversy initiated by the introduction of an Anti-Conversion Bill in Parliament. This issue has



*Ven. Omalpe Sobhita, Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and Member of Parliament, who introduced the Anti-Conversion bill in Parliament, had lunch with me at the Sikh Guruduwara during the Parliament of the World's Religions. The scarf is a traditional head covering worn at places of Sikh worship.*

arisen because of aggressive evangelistic methods used by recently arrived

Christian groups in Sri Lanka. It is alleged that these groups bribe people to convert.

While this bill seeks only to criminalize unethical conversions, in reality, it has the potential of legitimizing already rampant anti-Christian violence. It also is likely to cause grave harm to religious liberty and interreligious harmony in Sri Lanka.

An article I wrote critical of the bill was published in the Sri Lankan newspaper *The Sunday Observer*. The full text is found on our website: <http://www.nccusa.org/interfaith/ifrhome.html>

## The Interfaith Relations Commission

All of this work is possible because several of the NCC's 36 communions appoint representatives to the Interfaith Relations Commission. It also includes several invited members. This Commission has now been in existence for over eight of the 33 years we've been working on Interfaith Relations. The Interfaith Relations Commission meets twice a year, to bring the issues of our communions to the table, to theologially reflect on interfaith relations, and to support my work.

Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund of the United Church of Christ chairs the commission and is now joined by Rev. Rothang Chhangte of the American Baptist Churches as co-chair. I am deeply grateful to these colleagues for their commitment and support.



*Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund posed with me at a recent Commission meeting.*

My work fundamentally is to support and resource the member communions of the NCC to be engaged in interfaith relations. To that end, this year I led workshops at the Episcopal Diocesan Ecumenical Officers meeting and at the Alliance of Baptists Mini-Convocation, led Bible study for the United Methodists' General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, spoke at an Interfaith Conference organized by the Episcopal Church and preached in several churches. An article I wrote for the Alliance of Baptists newsletter is entitled [Interfaith Relations: A Theological Necessity](#). In this coming year, I will seek more opportunities to speak, preach, lead workshops for communions and local churches, and write for denominational newsletters and web sites.

### Next Steps: Taking Interfaith Relations to Local Communities

Having been a local pastor and interfaith leader for a long time I know the importance of emphasizing interfaith dialogue in local communities. The following programs we are now planning have the potential of making a significant impact across the country in the next 5 years or so.

## 1. Interfaith Dialogue Training

Critical skills for effective interfaith dialogue include learning how to:

- \* listen without thinking of what to say next,
- \* suspend judgment,
- \* appreciate others' beliefs,
- \* be self critical, and
- \* be aware of insights arising from dialogue.

We are now ready to start a pilot project of training in these skills that, if successful, we will take to local communities across the country.

## 2. Church Study Groups on Islam Based on Marston Speight's "God Is One"

Dr. Speight's 1989 book was re-published in 2001 with a study guide following the national clamor to learn about Islam. Now with the help of the Discover Islam Foundation we will encourage churches across the country to start six-week study groups on Islam. A pilot project featuring up to 100 churches will start in January. We will evaluate how the participants' knowledge of Islam increased, how their attitude toward Muslims changed, and whether an institutional relationship between the church and mosque was explored.

## 3. A Catalyst for Local Interfaith Work

An interfaith dialogue event in New York on the third anniversary of 9/11 provided useful agenda items for on-going interfaith work in New York. A recent meeting with interfaith leaders in Columbus, Ind., and a speech at the public library there served to encourage the local interfaith community to organize. I will seek similar opportunities to be a catalyst for interfaith work in local communities.

I thank you for continuing to encourage and to be engaged in the work of Interfaith Relations. Without the strong support of NCC member communions, including financial support through cognate funds, and the encouragement and financial support of many friends, this important work cannot go on. Please call or write for more information.

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