



Interfaith Relations Newsletter

Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana
Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations

9/12: Seeking Forgiveness and Reconciliation

By Rev. Lyndon Harris

Five years ago, on September 11th, I was in my office when I heard a loud crack — a plane had collided with the World Trade Center towers. Having recently been appointed as the priest-in-charge of St. Paul's Chapel across Church Street from the World Trade Center, whenever someone asked the size of my congregation, I automatically replied, "60,000." That's how many people worked in the twin towers. What followed that day was a harrowing mélange of near-escapes, fear, heroism, and confusion. But the horror and heroics of 9/11 is only the beginning of the story which has been covered by every media outlet in the world.

Less public but equally important is the story of 9/12: the day we decided to get out of bed as individuals and as a community to respond to the acts of violence with hearts of courage and compassion as we sought to rescue survivors and, ultimately, to find the remains of the dead. 9/12 was a long day that lasted from Wednesday September 12, 2001 until June 2nd, 2002, when it was declared that recovery work at the World Trade Center site was finished.



Rev. Lyndon Harris hosting a barbeque on Broadway for the volunteers at Ground Zero.

On September 12th, I put on my boots and walked the mile and a half from our apartment in Greenwich Village to St. Paul's Chapel. Every step of the way my heart was beating in my throat, fully expecting to find St. Paul's demolished. Much to my surprise, when I first saw the spire of St. Paul's Chapel standing defiantly, it took my breath away. Although covered in debris and ashes that it was still standing was a miracle.

Over the course of the next eight-and-a-half months, we were privileged to serve over half a million meals, to offer chiropractors, massage therapists, podiatrists, grief counselors, food service personnel, and clergy to help the rescuers in a ministry that went around the clock day after day month after month. To me this nine month ministry at St. Paul's was nothing less than a glimpse into the truth of the Kingdom of God.

In addition to my duties overseeing the relief efforts at St. Paul's Chapel, I also made it a priority that every day I

would make "pastoral visit" into the World Trade Center site. As I walked through the site smelling the smells, hearing the sounds, seeing these overwhelming sights — twisted, gnarly steel and debris and the agonizing faces of the men and women doing the digging in the site, and as I said last rites and prayers and blessings over body bags and remains, the question kept coming to me, day after day after day: "How in God's name—literally—how in God's name do we end this cycle of violence, revenge, and retribution?"

The answer did not come to me quickly, nor was it easy. Over time the answer to my heartfelt, gut-wrenching question emerged as the word "forgiveness." Forgiveness had been at the heart of my faith all along. While I had been preaching about forgiveness for 12 years as a Christian pastor, Jesus' agonizing words from the Cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," suddenly had deep meaning for me. In the context of the devastation and the agony referred to as Ground Zero, I finally caught a glimpse of the message of the one to whom I had dedicated my life. Forgiveness. By choosing to forgive, we choose intentionally not to perpetuate the cycle of violence and revenge. By choosing to forgive, we stand in awe of the horrors that can happen to people in this world, and we decide neither to participate in them nor repay them. Gandhi once said rightfully so that "an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind." Forgiveness allows us to replace "an eye for an eye" with "an eye for a heart."

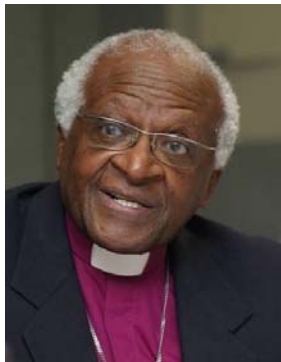
Forgiveness means that we take stock of what happened, grieve our losses and release our grudges and grievances. Reconciliation means that rather than repaying violence for violence we engage in non-violent strategies of engaging with people who have harmed us. Five years after the horrific attacks of 9/11, I am urging that we commit to a vision of 9/12 — to a vision of forgiveness and reconciliation.

[Rev. Lyndon Harris is developing a global Garden of Forgiveness network based on the original Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut, Lebanon. He envisions establishing such gardens in many cities throughout the world. To contact Rev. Harris for speaking engagements, or to find out more about The Garden of Forgiveness network, please call 646-458-2445 or visit the website at www.gofnyc.org]

Interfaith Relations Commission Updates

Forgiveness and Reconciliation at Congress on World Religions After 9/11

Meeting in Montreal from Sept. 11-15, the Congress will feature two panel discussions on “Forgiveness and Reconciliation” hosted by the Interfaith Relations Commission.



Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose work changed the dynamics of this discussion, speaking at a symposium entitled “Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religions Contributions to Conflict Resolution” at the Kennedy School of Government in October 1999 said: “People have tended to think of forgiveness as something nebulous... that tended to happen only between individuals and had really no significance for the body politic.” But now, “people are beginning to think of forgiveness and reconciliation as spiritual values that have more significance than they had previously recognized.”

The need for the healing of our national psyche is urgent, says Prof. Fred Luskin of Stanford University’s Forgiveness Project. Five years after the horrific events of 9/11, the people of the United States still debilitated by fear, need to understand forgiveness and reconciliation, he says.

The panel of various Christian perspectives, chaired by Rev. Lyndon Harris (Episcopal), and will feature Rev. Lydia Veliko (UCC), Fr. Tom Ryan (Roman Catholic), Rev. Dr. Tony Richie (Pentecostal) and Rev. Dr. Michael Ellis (AME Zion). The panel on various religious perspectives, chaired by Bishop Sudharshana Devadhar (Christian) and will feature Rabbi Dr. Daniel Brenner (Jewish), Dr. Thillay Naidoo (Hindu), Dr. Muhammad Shafiq (Muslim), Dr. Manohar Singh Grewal (Sikh).

Christian Theology’s Engagement with Religious Pluralism: Biblical Texts and Themes

An informal conversation with several Christian theologians a couple of years ago, began with the observation that many pastors serving in local churches are inadequately equipped to deal with the reality of the presence of neighbors of other religions. Graduates of many seminaries have not even taken a course in world religions, they observed. The difficulty is not merely a curriculum issue, they said, but that Christian theology as a discipline does not take religious pluralism seriously. Among their recommendations was to hold a consultation on the subject at the American Academy of Religion to engage Christian theologians to grapple with this issue more seriously. Over two hundred participated in our Special Topics Forum last year.

At this year’s AAR, our Special Topics Forum will deal with biblical texts and themes. The panel will include Amos Yong (Regent University), Marjorie Shuckoki (Clairmont Seminary Emerita), Gerald McDermott (Roanoke College) and Francis Clooney (Harvard University). Kenneth Cracknell (Brite Divinity School) and Wesley Ariarajah (Drew University) will offer responses to the papers. The AAR has invited us to become a Program Group next year.

Muslim-Christian Leaders’ Dialogue

Interfaith Relations staff and leaders of several Christian denominations are continuing to discuss initiating an on-going dialogue table of Muslim and Christian leaders. Having agreed on a Memorandum of Understanding between the Christian partners, we are now in the process of inviting the Muslim leaders to engage in a similar process. Rather than invite Muslim leaders to our (Christian) table, we hope to engage our Muslim counterparts in a conversation about initiating a common table. We are hopeful that we can have such a meeting before the end of this year.

Web-based Resources

Season of Prayer for Peace in the Middle East

www.seasonofprayer.org

With the encouragement of Religions for Peace – USA, a group of Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Christian leaders engaged in a conversation about how religious leaders should respond to the current crisis in the Middle East. We agreed to encourage our religious communities to take time from their regular worship times and faith observances for prayer and to engage with other religious communities in their neighborhood in joint events of witness for peace. The best in our religious traditions encourage us to pray not just the suffering of our own, but for the suffering of the “other,” we said.

In order to serve as a resource to our religious communities we launched a web site which contains prayers, scripture texts, litanies and other prayer aids. In addition to many religious leaders from the United States, world leaders such as the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have endorsed our effort.

Blogging...

www.nccinterfaith.blogspot.com

Dr. Eileen Lindner editor of the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* devotes the introductory article in its 2006 edition to “Postmodern Christianity: Emergent Church and Blogs.” She writes: “[T]he popularity of blogging may signal a maturing internet that is moving from an interconnected source for *facts and data* to an interconnected web of *ideas*.” (p.19)

Co-ordinating of those ideas is counter-intuitive to bloggers. But this is exactly what progressive religious bloggers did at their first such conference this June. By doing so, they hope to be more powerful alternative voice.

In my blog, I regularly write reflections on a current issues related to interfaith relations. Since one of my purposes of my blog is to hear from you, I encourage you to use the “comment” button and write your reflections as well.

The Future of Mission



The Multicultural Mission Resource Center of the Lutheran Theological Seminary organized the conference. Prof. H.S. Wilson is the Director.

The Future of Mission conference at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia this June was a celebration of the 300th Anniversary of the Lutheran/Protestant missionary movement. In his keynote address, Prof. Andrew F. Walls, former Director, Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, University of Edinburgh reviewed the history of mission and suggested that the new millennium with its significant demographic and theological shifts, indicates the beginning of a next volume. In my response, I listed ten issues and questions to consider when writing of the next volume of mission history (*with acknowledgement to Dr. M. Thomas Thangaraj whose The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission [Abingdon, 1999] helped articulate my own thoughts.*)

phantly to an aircraft carrier to proclaim to the world that the Iraq war was won, the sign above him read – “Mission Accomplished!” Today, businesses print their “Mission Statements” in the front of the brochures. Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and others also have “Missions” and do “Missions,” and it is time we engaged with them in that conversation.

2. What is the purpose of mission?

Most Christians would say it is to “save” people. From what, you may ask. They may say from sin, hell, evil, degradation or dehumanization. To what? They may say, to a new relationship with God, heaven, an abundant life, fullness, wholeness – to salvation. If you ask Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and other religious people to define their mission, they will use different words and concepts but are likely to describe their mission somewhat similarly. And, of course, we would all be convinced that our mission is the right and true one, and that everyone else is mistaken and wrong!

3. Can we broaden the definition of salvation?

The Bangkok 1972 Commission on World Mission and Evangelism produced a document called “Salvation Today.” Based on the 1971 booklet by MM Thomas entitled *Salvation and Humanisation*, the document views salvation holistically and suggests that it is about individuals and communities reaching up to their full humanity. Such a broad definition provides an opportunity for other religious communities and many non-religious people to join in this conversation.

4. Who’s at the table?

When Christians gathered in Edinburgh in 1910 for a World Mission Conference, only 17 out of 1200 delegates came from outside Europe and North America. 80 years later at the 1989 San Antonio conference of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism some 70% came from outside Europe and North America. Now others need to be at the table. The questions of Mission, particularly if they are framed as struggles for full humanity, are also questions with which Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and those who do not subscribe to a particular religious tradition, continue to struggle.

1. “What is Mission?”

“Mission” is not a Christian word, but an English word. For instance, when President Bush flew triumphantly to an aircraft carrier to proclaim to the world that the Iraq war was won, the sign above him read – “Mission Accomplished!” Today, businesses print their “Mission Statements” in the front of the brochures. Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and others also have “Missions” and do “Missions,” and it is time we engaged with them in that conversation.

5. Rather than “Grand Narratives,” seek local narratives

Christian Mission of the previous generation was motivated by a “grand narrative” in which whole world would be evangelized. Today, Christians disagree about its theological necessity. Rather, we seek to promote local narratives — real human stories of struggle and pain as well as courage and hope. That’s where our theologizing must begin.

6. The post-colonial context.

With the dismantling of colonialism the state sponsorship of missions ended, so did missionary support for colonial statecraft. We need to look critically at the new mission movement that seems to usher in a new permutation of this old alliance of church and state, and that is corporation and state. Critics of the new missionaries in third world countries point out that what the new missionary movement is doing is nothing short of priming the pump for economic globalization..

7. The post-modern context

In the post-modern context of information democratization, elites find it hard to control information. This is leading to alternative narratives/histories. But, we still can’t hear the voices of the sub-altern communities. They don’t have access to computers, they speak in vernacular languages and their communication symbols are very foreign to us. How do we hear their stories?

8. There’s an intense consciousness of religious plurality.

This was true in Asia for centuries, but the west is just waking up to the fact of pluralism. The significant religious diversity in the U.S. is causing a great deal of anxiety among Christians who don’t have the theological tools to deal with this phenomenon. Christian theology must comprehensively addressed the question of religious plurality.

9. There’s a culture of fear and polarization

As against Fear, Fundamentalism and Fox (TV), we need emphasize Peace, Poverty, Planet Earth and Pluralism. We need to address the continuing polarization in the world today. The recent cartoon controversy, immigration battles and empire building advance the polarization. We need to work together with people of other faiths to stand against this.

10. We are not alone in this quest.

Today, governments and businesses are interested in inter-religious dialogue. The UN is convening religious leaders in a “Dialogue of Civilizations.” The governments of the Philippines, Kazakhstan, Senegal, Jordan are promoting this conversation. Business leaders are asking questions like: how can we bring religious values to the market place? This is a time of unprecedented opportunity.

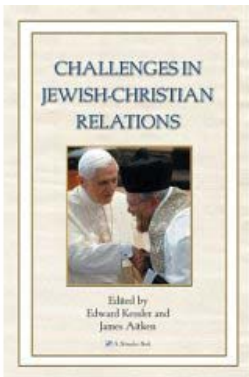
Resources for Interfaith Relations

Teaching and Learning Strategies for Religious Leadership Formation



The diaspora of peoples from around the world to the United States, requires their religions to adapt to the pluralism of this new environment. Traditional doctrines and practices of training clergy and religious leaders are changing in creative ways to address this. "How does your religious tradition prepare its clergy and religious leaders to relate with people of other faiths?" we asked a panel of leading scholars from Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Afro-Caribbean and Christian (Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant) traditions. Their reflections are published in the current (April 2006) issue of *Teaching Theology and Religion*, a professional journal for educators of Theology and Religion. Kathleen Talvacchia and I served as Guest Co-Editors of the issue. The gathering of these scholars would not have been possible without the able assistance of Lucinda Mosher. The journal is available in most theological libraries. You can read the summaries of the articles at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion at <http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/journal/april06.html>

Challenges in Jewish Christian Relations



James K. Aitken and Edward Kessler co-edited book is useful to all of us who engage in Jewish Christian dialogue. The essays address a variety of topics: how we view the past (including the holocaust), the role of Israel, Orthodox Christians and Catholic agendas, international relations (particularly Europe), women's voices, the significance of Dabru Emet (Jewish statement on relations with Christians) and reflections on the future of Jewish

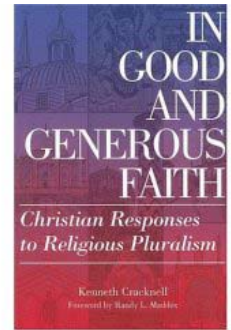
Christian relations in the midst of a wider interfaith world. It also contains a large bibliography. Ed Kessler is the founder and Executive Director of the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge, UK, and James Aitken is an honorary fellow at the same center. (Paulist Press, 2006)

Revelation: Catholic & Muslim Perspectives

Participants of the Midwest Catholic Muslim Dialogue co-sponsored by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Islamic Society of North America, having met in interfaith dialogue for 8 years, have now produced a document on Catholic and Muslim Perspectives on a question that is foundational to both religious traditions: Revelation. Presented as a text from a dialogue for dialogue, the authors wish that the material will be used by churches and mosques for enhancing Christian Muslim relations. ([USCCB Publishing](http://www.usccb.org), 2006)

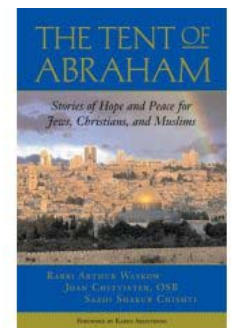
In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism

Kenneth Cracknell who now teaches as Brite Divinity School is an experienced ecumenist helping Christians to deal with the theological challenges that religious pluralism brings. Exegesis of the text with skill, he presents a different take on the questions Christians often ask. Through five packed chapters: Salvation history as encompassing all the peoples of God, Christology as the universal presence of the Word, the ethic of friendship, the spirituality of religious pluralism, and bearing witness through dialogue, he deals comprehensively with the subject. Appendices contain two articles, one on WCC's theology and policy of Interfaith Relations from 1938-1999 and the other on the The Bossey Declaration: Religious Plurality and Christian Self-Understanding. ([Pilgrim Press](http://www.pilgrimpress.com), 2006)



The Tent of Abraham: Stories of Hope and Peace for Jews, Christians and Muslims

Rabbi Arthur Waskow, having worked for sometime in bringing together Jews, Christians and Muslim under the "Tent of Abraham" has now produced a book, co-authored by Joan Chittister, OSB and Murshid Saadi Shakur Chishti. The "other's" interpretations of the ancient story you always knew is always fascinating. But when it is laced with contemporary analysis and stories of hope, it becomes a delight. The book is a resource for anyone who wants to engage in building relationships with the religious "other." Included also is a section on a "Resources for Practical Use in Abrahamic Peacemaking," which many who are attempting to build such relationships will find useful. ([Beacon Press](http://www.beaconpress.com), 2006)



Contact Us...

Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana
Associate General Secretary for Interfaith Relations

National Council of Churches USA
475 Riverside Drive #880, New York, NY 10115
Phone: 212-870-2560 Fax: 212-870-2817

E-mail: shanta@nccusa.org
Blog: www.nccinterfaith.blogspot.com
Website: www.nccusa.org/interfaith