

Inter-faith Bridge building
Hon. David Kilgour
Emunah Canada fundraising event held by Rachel Kizell Chapter
Ottawa
18 November 2012

Permit me to congratulate Barbara Crook, Emunah Canada and each and every one of you on your assistance to a humanitarian cause over many years. You have enhanced the lives of Emunah's yearly group of about 5000 children from very difficult circumstances by giving them access to soup kitchens, schools, dormitories, etc. across Israel. From what I understand, the government funds only half the expenses, so Emunah members in many countries raise the remaining funds.

Inter-faith bridges come in many shapes today. At one end of the spectrum are penal laws, such as Canada's, which soundly bar incitement of hate against any identifiable spiritual or cultural community. At another are heroes like the late Shahbaz Bhatti, minorities minister in Pakistan at the time of his murder.

A few years earlier, he led some Christian aid workers after an earthquake struck the country. They found a house where the roof had fallen and a man was trapped underneath. Bhatti helped him get out and then noticed slogans written on the walls, such as "Kill the infidels". Bhatti asked what sort of facility it was. The



answer was in effect that it was a training location for Al-Qaeda. The man asked, "And you came here to save my

life?" "Yes", Bhatti replied, "Christianity is all about saving lives." For him, it was also about speaking up for all of Pakistan's religious minorities until the day of his death.

We Christians should be following Bhatti's lead wherever we can, especially if it is true as reported that about two-thirds of the people persecuted for their religion across the world today are Christians.

Canadian journalist Geoffrey Johnston summarizes the link between religious intolerance and political violence: "Those countries that do not actively protect religious minorities or prosecute the perpetrators of religiously-motivated violence are ultimately undermining their own security. A climate of impunity emboldens militants, who eventually turn against the state, using violence..."

If spiritual communities everywhere stand shoulder-to-shoulder when members of any faith community are being persecuted, lives can be saved. For example, about two decades ago hundreds of Edmontonians of many (and no) faiths demonstrated at city hall concerning the persecution of Muslims in Bosnia. Later, many of us did the same at the Alberta legislative assembly over the persecution of Christians elsewhere. Thousands of Canadian soldiers joined the NATO peacemakers that went into the Balkans to protect Muslim citizens. The love of God and of neighbour is in Jewish, Christian, Muslim and many other faiths' spiritual teachings. Love of God is love of neighbour; love of neighbour is love of God.

Tonight, permit me to focus on bridges built through giving deserved praise, educating for a peaceful future, and remembering the core tenets of all world religions. Sheila Musaji, founding editor of *The American Muslim* (TAM), described in a recent issue numerous developments that give hope to all of humankind. Allow me to mention just a few of the positive ones she and others have observed:

New Ground



In 2006, the mayor of Los Angeles convened a task force to bring together Jewish and Muslim leaders. What emerged was 'NewGround: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change'. In 2011, NewGround became independent and is now housed within LA's Human Relations Commission. Over time, it has created opportunities for Muslims and Jews to make

strong, positive relations between them the norm, not the exception.

Last spring, the fourth NewGround 'Congregational Fellowship' event occurred when members from Temple Emanuel and King Fahad Mosque participated in a

fellowship designed to build relationships, break down stereotypes and provide skills to take the experience back to their communities.

The Muslim-Jewish High School Leadership Council has also been created to offer LA students the opportunity to build leadership skills, create friendships across faith boundaries and have an impact on important social issues.

NewGround could well become a national interfaith model for temple and mosque collaboration.

www.muslimjewishnewground.org/

Foundation for Ethnic Understanding (FFEU)



Rabbi Dow Marmur

In late 2011, Dow Marmur, rabbi emeritus at Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple, wrote a column titled "Bridging Religious Divides." Concerned that tensions between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East could affect Canada, he welcomed the initiative of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding (FFEU).

In cooperation with representative bodies throughout the world, including the Canadian Association of Jews and Muslims, FFEU has initiated interfaith "twinning events" involving thousands of members of both faiths. In Toronto and other North American cities, for example, Muslims and Jews have organized projects to feed the hungry and the homeless.

Joint projects make it possible for participants to get to know each other and help to reduce prejudice and stereotyping. Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of FFEU, notes that the results "reinforce our efforts to build a global movement of Muslims and Jews committed to communication, reconciliation, cooperation and understanding."

FFEU Chair, Russell Simmons adds, "The fact that year after year more Muslims and Jews are joining the conversation speaks volumes."

In March, FFEU brought together twenty Imams and Rabbis from Latin America at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The historic meeting marked their first occasion for shared dialogue to promote understanding between the two communities.



Latin American rabbis and imans

Tzedaka-Sadaqah Project (TSP)

Undergrad Ben Rosen co-founded The Tzedaka-Sadaqah Project (TSP) at the U of Western Ontario in 2009. When he and his Jewish and Muslim friends volunteered to serve hot meals to London's homeless through a United Church 'Out of the Cold' program, he realized how much the two faiths had in common, particularly their shared value of charity.

TSP spread to the University of Toronto, where students prepared lunches for the Scott Mission, a drop-in centre for Toronto's homeless. Sponsored by U of T's Multifaith Centre for Spiritual Study and Practice, the event was part of a



program in which Muslim and Jewish students gave presentations on the roots of social action and interfaith work in their respective traditions. Inspirational quotes by Jewish and Muslim leaders...were also shown.

TSP is now at the University of Ottawa. Student Azim Kasmani says it has opened his eyes to the commonalities between Judaism and Islam.

We went to a couple of Shabbat dinners for Muslim and Jewish students ... we have a lot more of the same goals and ideals than you'd think.

Rosen, now a medical student at McMaster, stresses,

. . . the only time Jewish and Muslim students encountered each other was at some heated political rally ... mostly negative encounters. So we figured that if we're going to focus on the things that divide us, we have to pay equal mind to the things that unite us.

Arab-Jewish Dialogue in Winnipeg

The Arab-Jewish Dialogue (AJD) group was formed in Winnipeg in 2006 by Ab Freig, a Muslim from Egypt, and Howard Morry, a Jew. Their non-profit initiative, dedicated to encouraging positive relations and respect between local

Arabs
is now



and Jews,
going
national.

Howard Morry and Ab Freig

Says Freig:

Most conflicts can be resolved if people dialogue.... I'd like to promote better relationships and trust between Arabs and Canadians, especially when a conflict erupts....

I hope one day... that Arab countries and Israel harmonize and establish a free trade agreement Peace is possible, if both

parties are genuinely committed, without imposing preconditions and obstacles that hinder negotiation.

Morry adds:

I hope we can be a catalyst for Jews and Palestinian Arabs predicated on mutual respect, acceptance and recognition, where both sides have accepted...the right of the other to promote, protect and maximize its own culture and peoplehood. We need not only the Palestinians and Arab states, but people around the world to accept the right of Israel to exist and to no longer delegitimize it....

Conclusion

Some wonder about the role of approximately 2.1 billion Christians in interfaith bridge building. Rabbi Marmur notes,

in order to preserve and develop its promising achievements, the Muslim-Jewish dialogue needs the participation of Christians to act as witnesses and catalysts to help separate the political situation in the Middle East from the challenge of living in peace with each other here.

He is right. The world's Christians must do more to bridge build in every country where we are permitted to exist. We all worship the same God and, as the late much-loved Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen said, "Love unites all...It is in the heart of God that we can come to the full realisation of the unity of all..." We are all equal members of the human family.

Marmur cites as a helpful model the U.K's [Three Faiths Forum](#) (3FF), which builds understanding and relationships between people of all faiths by running education, engagement and action programmes that bring diverse communities together and create new models for interfaith cooperation.

He concludes,

Instead of wars..., we must... teachings of our good serving faithfully



vainly seeking to fight proxy ourselves... live up to the respective traditions by being neighbours, thus both God and (our) country....

Finally, a quote from a New Delhi in 2003 by His Khan, spiritual leader to Muslims, and Canada's citizen.



speech delivered in Highness, the Aga 15 million Ismaili latest honorary

In ... troubled important to.. pluralistic society. Tolerance, openness and understanding towards other people's cultures... values and faiths are now essential to the very survival of an interdependent world. Pluralism... is vital to our existence.

times...., it is honour a vision of a

It is, of course, an even greater challenge to keep these ideals in mind in the face of the current violence in Israel and Gaza. However, the Aga Khan's words still resonate:

Never ... more so than at the present time, must we renew with vigour our creative engagement in revitalizing shared heritage through collaborative ventures....

Thank you.

Sources:

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