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# Abrahamic faiths crack the door to deeper dialogue

By Jane Lampman, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / June 19, 2003

When Yusuf Muwakkil was invited to travel to Turkey last fall with a group of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, he says his first thought was, "Why go half way around the world to get to know each other, when we all live right here in Atlanta and don't do it?"

But in the current atmosphere of mistrust between faiths, the community leader at Al-Islam mosque decided he should try anything that might make things better. Now he calls the 10-day bus journey by 45 "pilgrims," 15 from each religion, one of the most important experiences of his life.

"When you see people strong in their faith willing to put their thoughts on the line and listen to others - even when the gloves come off - and then come out of that with strong relationships, it gives you hope," Mr. Muwakkil says in a phone interview. "Hope makes good things possible." Back in Atlanta, group members now get together often - inviting one another to gatherings, holding forums, giving talks at schools.

Since Sept. 11, most Americans have become starkly aware of the great gaps in understanding and heightened tensions among Muslims, Christians, and Jews at home and abroad. Recognizing the need to build bridges and to strengthen moderate voices, many are experimenting with new forms of what some call "Abrahamic dialogue."

The imaginative Turkey trip, sponsored by the Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta, put people in close proximity for an extended time. "I saw that about the third day, we went past tolerance and began to step into the area of appreciation, respect, and trust," Muwakkil says.

Other initiatives have sprung directly from the bestseller by Bruce Feiler, "Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths." They see the patriarch Abraham, to whom all three faiths trace their roots, as a possible source for finding common ground and understanding.

Last fall, Mr. Feiler and his publisher encouraged the formation of "Abraham salons" around the country by offering discussion materials to interested groups. Some 500 requests poured in within two months from libraries, bookstores, individuals, and religious institutions, he says, and about 5,000 have downloaded the materials from a website.

"People are craving hope, and this is a concrete step," says Feiler. "The themes of religion and violence and interfaith relations have only deepened in the past two years. There's a lot of hostility and mistrust, but also a sense among those interested that failure is not an option."

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