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10 Years After 9/11, Different Faiths Seek Harmony

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ATLANTA—It's always good to have friends in times of crisis. But it's even better to have friends all the time.

A panel of religious leaders encouraged faith communities to talk, learn and celebrate together.

More than 160, Jews, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus gathered in Atlanta Feb. 2 to mark the first United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week. Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, who is also chairman of the U.S. Catholic bishops' committee on interreligious affairs, was among the panelists asked to speak at the gathering.

Jewish Rabbi Analia Bortz, of the Congregations Or Hadash, Ahavath Achim Synagogue, recited a biblical verse, "Happy is the heart who seeks for God."

People should be constant seekers, trying to understand each other and God, she said. Spiritual knowledge should be dynamic, she said.

"We are here to respect our differences and celebrate our similarities," she said.

The Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta, a nonprofit born out of the Sept. 11 attacks to promote dialogue among different religions, hosted the six-member panel at the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta to discuss the U.N.'s proposal.

The U.N. General Assembly in the fall unanimously passed a resolution to recognize World Interfaith Harmony Week annually during the first week of February. The resolution, proposed by Jordan's King Abdullah, is a first at the U.N. because of its explicit mention of God and because it promotes interfaith

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relations by drawing attention to its theological basis.

The resolution reads in part: "Encourages all States to support, on a voluntar basis, the spread of the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world's churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship during that week, based on love of God and love of one's neighbour or on love of the good and love of one's neighbour, each according to their own religious traditions or convictions."

Speakers saluted the program as moving away from simply tolerating people who are different to encouraging good will among people.

On the issue of harmony between faiths, Buddhist Tiaun Michael Elliston, abbot of the Silent Thunder Order, Atlanta Soto Zen Center, compared it to playing in a jazz band. Each of the musicians has a role and players lead at different times and then fade into the background for the band to perform we Harmony teaches humility, he said.

Muslim Tayyibah Taylor said pursuing harmony stretches people to celebrate the human spirit. Taylor is the founding editor-in-chief and publisher of Aziza Magazine, the voice of Muslim American women.

"We give ourselves permission to look for the good in all of us," she said.

The different faith traditions have similarities, but also have differences that should not be ignored, she said.

On building relationships among faith communities, Archbishop Gregory told how Pope John Paul II 25 years ago invited representatives of world religion to pray in the Italian city of Assisi. The program was not universally applauded in the church, but it can serve as a model, he said.

"He took a risk. I think that's a virtue for all of us," he said.

Some may feel that it is risky to acknowledge that another faith or person has an insight that could make you see the world differently, he said.

"It's deciding to be a turtle and sticking your head out," he said.

Former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young said Sunday morning church services used to be the most racially segregated times in America, but later on Sunday sports fans of every race gathered to cheer on their teams. From music and sports to the arts, certain events transcend racial and religious differences, he said. Culture allows people to live together in peace, he said.

The effort to talk and listen to folks who think differently shouldn't be limited to nice lunches, said the panelists, but needs to be part of daily life.

On having an impact on the wider world, Young told a story of how Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said he admired the Good Samaritan for helping the downtrodden, but he didn't want to spend his time picking up people. Instead according to Young, King's goal was to "change the Jericho road" so people could journey in peace and the rescue by the Good Samaritan would no longer be necessary.



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