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The Center for Interfaith Reconciliation

No issue seizes public interest more than the relation between Islam and Christianity. Daily headlines offer fresh accounts of violence, or setbacks in the search for peace. Conflict between Palestinians and Israelis has been joined by hostilities in Iraq and Afghanistan and incidents elsewhere. September 11, 2001 left lasting images of destruction. "The clash of civilizations" defines how many Christians and Muslims view each other.

Yet the world's future hinges on the relations between these two religions. Representing nearly two-thirds of the world's population, both Christianity and Islam are growing. For Americans this is clearly visible. While the majority of Americans are Christians, the Muslim population increases steadily. Cities such as Richmond, Virginia, which had little Muslim presence a few years ago now count thousands of Muslims. It seems the clash of civilizations is coming home.

The American Muslim population is intent on proving themselves to be loyal citizens, and most Christians want good relations. But anxiety is apparent among both. Christians wrestle with negative images of Islam and Muslims worry about gaining respect. Though Muslims and Christians increasingly encounter one another, how relations can be beneficial is unclear.

In some localities there are warm conversations between Christians and Muslims and in a few places practical cooperation. More often churches and mosques silently coexist, allowing potential for misunderstanding. To be silent is to risk the triumph of alienation. Tension between religious, racial, and ethnic groups is not a new reality in America. But the specter of Muslim-Christian tension threatens to overwhelm communities already facing profound divisions. How can Muslims and Christians reconcile to build better local community?

The Work of the Center

There is an opportunity for Muslims and Christians to join in charting new patterns of public life at a grassroots level. The key is to engage members of mosques and churches as leaders together in their localities. The Center for Interfaith Reconciliation strengthens local community by building understanding and creating opportunities for cooperation. Reconciliation is the ability to live together constructively while respecting differences. It surfaces in the context of mutually beneficial activities. Reconciliation becomes concrete when people of faith become actively involved.

The Center for Interfaith Reconciliation promotes practical forms of reconciliation in three ways: education, immersion, community development.

- Education: Offers classes, speakers, and conferences.
- Immersion: Entails in-depth experiences with Muslim cultures, primarily through group trips to predominantly Muslim countries.
- Community development: Involves the creation and management of forums and projects by which Muslims and Christians in a locality address the needs of their area.

Launched by St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia in 2006, the Center invites broad participation in shaping interfaith discovery and respect between the world's largest religions. One of the largest Episcopal churches in the Diocese of Virginia and the Episcopal Church, St. Stephen's has a history of encouraging reconciliation locally and beyond. Significantly involved in community development work for the Richmond area, St. Stephen's also has extensive international experience. In recent years St. Stephen's has worked in the Dominican Republic with several teams of parishioners performing work projects each year. New ties to the Middle East and to South Africa now broaden the church's international work.

Mission

The mission of the Center for Interfaith Reconciliation, a non-profit, community based organization, is to build mutual understanding and trust between Christians and Muslims in Virginia through education, cross-cultural immersion, and initiatives to improve our community together. We recognize our shared love of God and neighbor that calls us to live together constructively with respect for our differences.

Vision

The Center for Interfaith Reconciliation will create new forms of cooperation between Muslims and Christians in Virginia and new linkages with Muslims and Christians in the Middle East. The Center will unite education in interfaith understanding with practical forms of discovery and cooperation.

Distinctive Approaches

The Center for Interfaith Reconciliation is set apart by its emphasis on first-hand experience. Christians and Muslims learn about one another by immersion in each other's cultures in the United States and elsewhere. On the basis of discovery, they develop mutual understanding that is expressed in practical forms of local involvement through their mosques and congregations.

Recent Activities

Over the past year highlights of the Center's activities have included:

- Leading seven Episcopal clergy and two representatives of the Cambridge University Interfaith Programme to Egypt, Oman, and Qatar.
- Conversations and planning sessions with Richmond Muslim leaders.
- A fact-finding trip to Jordan hosted by Prince Ghazi bin Talal.
- Participation in the Fifth Doha Interfaith Conference, Doha, Qatar.

- A "Discover Islam" class at St. Stephen's Church with up to 75 attending.
- Leading a dozen members of St. Stephen's to Oman, Jordan, and Qatar,
- Work with Muslim leaders on development of "A Common Word" and with Yale University faculty on the Christian response.
- Bringing a variety of international speakers to Richmond.
- Sustaining conversations with: Akbar Ahmed, Prince Ghazi, Islamica magazine, Qatar University Interfaith Center, Al Amana Centre in Oman, VCU staff in Doha and Richmond, the Cambridge University Interfaith Programme, and various Episcopal and Muslim leaders.
- Media contacts included: Al Jazeera; Newsweek magazine, The New York Times, The Washington Post, and WGBH, Boston.

Vision for 2008

- Further immersion trips with lay leaders from various churches.
- Develop a plan for cooperation with Muslim leaders in Richmond.
- Participation in the Doha Interfaith Conference.
- Develop means of local Muslims and Christians reading their Scriptures together, in collaboration with Cambridge University and the University of Virginia.
- Develop an in-depth connection to Anglicans and Muslims in Jordan.
- Explore models of interfaith youth engagement.
- Create patterns of collaboration which allow the Center to develop a broader base of participation and support.

The Difference We Can Make

There is both widespread curiosity and uncertainty about Islam among American Christians. A desire for good relations is matched by misunderstanding. Images of Islam as a religion that shares Christianity's roots and offers profound faith and spirituality are overshadowed in the public eye by images of extremism. But together Muslims and Christians can make their local communities better places to live and so spread understanding and cooperation. The Center for Interfaith Reconciliation looks to encourage common initiatives that improve public life.