



## *Uniting Nations in an Interfaith World*

By Paul Chaffee, Executive Director, Interfaith Center at the Presidio  
For the United Nations East Bay Peacebuilding Celebration – September 25, 2009 - Berkeley

We gather yearning for peace. Like many millions of others honoring peacemaking this month, we are dedicated to constructing a culture that graduates from violence as a change agent. We hunger for peace among nations, within nations and communities, in our own families, in our own lives.

Such hope seems fantastic, a pipedream, after hearing the news each day. That doesn't slow us down, though. If anything, reality's rough edges clarify the importance of doing better about peacemaking. Being in this for the long haul, let's begin with some historical context to what we are up to here, talking about peacemaking.

In America and Europe, religiously inspired pacifists began creating peace societies early in the nineteenth century. In 1815 the New York Peace Society became the first of its kind, inspiring similar associations across the country, culminating in the formation of the American Peace Society in 1828. In France, religious pacifists organized in 1820, and similar groups started popping up all over Europe. An 1895 New York Times article describes 300 peace societies around the world, and hundreds more flowered in the years that followed. But still no peace.

Then early in February, 1914, the industrial magnate, Andrew Carnegie, called together religious leaders from across the country. Carnegie was convinced that with their religious leadership and his money, they could construct international political agencies to guarantee world peace. He put \$2 million on the table, charging the religious hierarchs with being change-agents for peace. On that winter morning, he said: "After the arbitration of international disputes is established and war abolished, as it certainly will be some day, and that sooner than expected, probably by the Teutonic nations, Germany, Britain and the United States first deciding to act in unison, other Powers joining later, the Trustees will divert the revenues of this fund to relieve the deserving poor and afflicted." In other words, once you've handled war, use the rest of the money to end poverty.

Well now, the clerics went right to work, organizing a peace conference at Lake Constance, in southern Germany. They gathered by the lake on August 1. The next day, World War One broke out. After a prayer meeting, they scrambled out of Germany, and scattered back home, though some were able to make it to London and were instrumental in forming the Church Peace Union, an agency that for decades championed religiously organized peacebuilding.

Anyone who agreed with Carnegie's optimism 95 years ago, or does so today, just doesn't understand what we face. Yet there is considerable hope abroad today, and that is what I wish to explore with you. Let me continue with a more recent story.

Sixteen years ago the United Nations contacted the Right Reverend William Swing, Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of California, asking if Grace Cathedral could be used to celebrate the

upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations. Bill Swing immediately said “Yes,” they would be happy to host the celebration. But he was troubled.

The nations may have failed to bring peace to the world, but they have been trying hard for half a century. What happened to the religious community, the same community which inspired the original peace societies nearly two centuries ago? Why has religion done so very little by way of peacemaking? Bill Swing took these questions very seriously, gathering together the leaders who founded the United Religions Initiative. Today URI has more than 400 independent chapters, called cooperation circles, in 60 countries, each one committed to creating cultures of peace, justice, and healing. URI rarely makes it to the front pages, but remarkable stories are emerging.

Before going any farther, let us take a moment to remember how complex religion and spirituality are. We haven't the time to debate whether organized religion has inspired more good than evil. Or to explore the distinction between religion and practicing religion, or good religion and bad religion. Or even how easily the love of power can corrupt the power of love.

For now I'm content to say that religion, like every other social construct, comes with both light and shadow. My interest is in discovering the most useful, valuable ways in which the spiritual impulse for peace can be mobilized, in observing exemplary peacebuilding practices within all traditions and urging collaboration on behalf of the whole human family. Frankly, from this perspective, there is so much good news to report that I have to skim the surface.

The interfaith movement itself is a hugely hopeful development. Never have so many different religious communities lived so closely together in relative peace. Before US immigration law changed in the 1960s, interfaith meant Christian-Jewish, and world religion was what you studied in school. With new, non-racist immigration law in place, the floodgates opened. Interfaith came to include who your kids are dating, who drives the bus, or who your doctor is.

In 1993, a Parliament of the World's Religions was held in Chicago commemorating the very first public interfaith dialogue in this country a hundred years earlier, the 1893 World Parliament of Religions. How things have changed in a century - in 1893 only a handful of established religions were invited to the podium.

In 1993 all religious, spiritual traditions that came in the spirit of mutual respect were welcomed. Everyone did seem to show up, and in liturgical costume. Better than a Halloween party. For a week that hotel in Chicago in 1993 became a neighborhood with 200 traditions represented, just like San Francisco and Fremont today, just like Wichita and Tulsa today, believe it or not. Across the country, hundreds of church councils have morphed into interfaith councils. This wave of activity gained huge momentum after 9-11.

Two weeks after that terrible, pathologically inspired tragedy, 30 Muslims showed up on the steps of First Congregational Church San Jose at 11 on a Sunday morning. They told the ushers they were Muslims and asked if they were welcome. They were welcome! replied the startled ushers who took them inside. After worship, at coffee hour, the Muslims said, “We are your neighbors, but we don't know you. We think we should know each other.” Together they planned get-acquainted programs across the South Bay.

Today if you go to our website, [www.interfaith-presidio.org](http://www.interfaith-presidio.org), and check out the Update & Calendar, you'll typically find 30-40 interfaith related events coming up locally. Beyond North America you find the same ferment. In Islamabad one United Religions Initiative circle is made up of travel agents, concerned that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians all stay safe as they travel in south Asia. In the Middle East, throughout Africa, in South America, all over Asia, interreligious relationships have started to take a role in the larger culture.

Ten years ago Harvard's Diana Eck wrote about a new religious America. Today its safe to say, a new religious world, a world newly ready to join hands in picking up the cause of peace. This is all brand new. But we've learned quite a bit already about the elusive goal of peace.

- The first learning comes with the huge value-add the interfaith movement offers the rest of the culture: that is, vital interfaith relationships and communities help free religions from their worst propensities – such as declaring absolute truth claims, requiring blind obedience, or justifying any means for your 'sacred' end. Charles Kimball's award-winning *When Religion Becomes Evil* (2002) details why developing 'an inclusive faith rooted in a tradition' is so important for all of us in the quest for peace.
- We've learned in dozens of different contexts that peacemaking is all about relationships, relationships among people who once were strangers to each other or even enemies. Mohammad Abu Nimer, a Muslim, Cynthia Sampson, a Christian Scientist, John Paul Lederach, a Mennonite, Aaron Tapper, a Jew, Joseph Montville, an Episcopalian, are among the leaders taking us into new arenas, new disciplines for engendering peace.
- We've learned to honor, even celebrate our differences, while sharing core values about issues like peacemaking, the end of poverty, and caring for the Earth
- We've learned that peacemaking has to do with establishing mutual respect. If respect is firmly grounded in a person or in a relationship, you unleash something very powerful. Without it, there is little chance for making a real difference for peace.
- We've learned the critical importance of inclusivity, hospitality, and service – deep values whether you are talking authentic American diplomatic relations or organizing a neighborhood interfaith event. Issues like listening, non-violent communication, and forgiveness have become skill-sets we're all working to learn.
- We've learned what is required to create safe space, where you can be who you are, without fear, where you can explore serious issues and new friendships with wonderful people who come from a million miles away spiritually, culturally, and historically. We've discovered, with great joy, that these exotic new friends in fact are clearly recognizable members of the family, brothers and sisters to be loved.

Interfaith activists tend not to change their affiliation. We treasure each unique tradition, we do not allow proselytizing, and very few of us ever convert. We appreciate rather than judge one another, an attitude that tends, counter intuitively, to deepen one's own faith and practice. Already these relationships are helping foster a new inclusiveness in the culture.

A recent massive Pew poll suggests that three out of four United States citizens do not think they have the one and only authentic map to reality. The idea that there might be more than one way to God is not a problem for three-quarters of us. Consider what your own grandparents believed, and reflect on the sea-change this development represents globally.

This new reality is already a significant influence in growing a healthier, more peaceful global culture. No one can promise what Mr. Carnegie hoped for in 1914, but thousands of faith and interfaith groups around the world, with hundreds of millions of members, are making breakthroughs with the strangers in their lives, and joining hands to make a difference.

A serious barrier in this country has been the mistrust between religious progressives and secular progressives, who, if we were more friendly and collaborative, would become more effective in meeting our shared goals. But note this: when civil authority breaks down, our differences tend to disappear among those who really want to help. In the City of Richmond, in West Oakland, and San Francisco's Bay View Hunter's Point, civic leaders, clergy, NGOs, and the philanthropic community are all connected these days, working together. Similarly, the global interfaith movement is strongest in places like Uganda, Pakistan, and the Philippines, where leaders develop strong interfaith relationships and programs in the toughest circumstances.

When URI had its first African summit, in Kenya, the most popular workshop at the interfaith gathering had to be repeated. The subject - *Activities for Women and Children During Armed Conflict*. They heard the story of how women from various backgrounds in a village market implemented a plan to save the children whenever and whoever attacked their village.

Would that we had that kind of cooperation and collaboration before violence breaks out. That is the challenge today, isn't it? That a UN peacemaking day should include an interfaith perspective is a sign of promise, it seems to me. It starts to mend the hidden fractures among the community of people that really care about peace, but don't know their most obvious partners in the quest.

Like so many others, I'm delighted to hear that the United Nations is considering a Decade for Interfaith Dialogue. It is overdue, a terrific idea, and could help build important, transformative alliances in the pursuit of peace.

So let me repeat my gratitude for being invited. Let this be the beginning of a tradition in building stronger relationships. Let us work ever more collaboratively on the UN's Millennium Development Goals - something that is already happening here and abroad. To return to where we began, all of us yearn for peace, and together we have a better chance of seeing it dawn.