



Call to Unity: E-Journal

Resourcing the Church for Ecumenical Ministry

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Understanding Unity in a Religiously Diverse World

12th Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity

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It is a great pleasure to be here in Dallas, Texas to talk about Christian unity in a religiously divided world, to talk about faith --our faith and other faiths. As Christians we recognize religious diversity as a salient fact of the world in which we live, but we too seldom contemplate just what this diversity means for those of us who follow in the way of Christ, and what our unity means. We know Christian unity does not mean uniformity, but something deeper: a commitment that underlies and supports our diverse ways of being Christian.

Christian unity is the theme of the ecumenical movement. The modern ecumenical movement began in the wake of World War II as Christians came together from all sides of a war-torn world to affirm a common commitment. This, after centuries of fission and separation. This, after years of the horror of war. The old scars of Europe, the legacies of colonialism, and the denominational extravaganza of the United States have not made this work easy. Today, it is unclear how ecumenism, at least institutionally supported ecumenism, will develop as the future unfolds. Both the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in the U.S. face dwindling financial resources, and perhaps dwindling enthusiasm as well.

One thing we do know, however, is that the intra-Christian dialogue represented by the ecumenical movement is as important now as at any time in Christian history. The questions at stake are critical.

What does it mean to be Christian in the face of Christian diversity and, too often, deep division? What does it mean to and to gather in communities called "churches" at this time in human history? How has the communications revolution transformed the ways in which Christians relate to one another across the globe? How has a new agenda been set for all of us by the environmental crises that affect the rivers, the seas and the plains of the planet, and by the deep and deeper chasms that separate those who have far too much from those who have way too little.

These are some of the theological issues we all face. And we know that theology is most importantly in the hands and hearts of the laity, who constitute the vast majority of the world's Christian theologians: the people who read, study, go to church, listen, and think about what it all means as they negotiate the white-waters of life. That is theology, and it is not primarily the domain of that small group of people who call themselves theologians. They do a great service, to be sure. But the lion's share of Christian theological interpretation is in the understandings of the laity. So I congratulate Joe and Nancy Stalcup, the founders of this institute and this lecture series. There could be no more important venue for the cultivation of Christian thinking, and we have a lot of thinking to do.

My own introduction to the ecumenical movement was as a teenager, involved in the Methodist Youth Fellowship. I was a young person from the West, who went to college in the East, just weeks after marching in the March on Washington with a national Methodist youth group. In spring break of my freshman year, I lobbied for the Civil Rights Bill, again with Methodist students. And about this time, I was appointed as a youth delegate to the negotiations that brought about the creation of the United Methodist Church from the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church. I was never too sure what the issues were, to be frank.

My family in Montana was like many in the 1950s: we were part and parcel of what the sociologist Will Herberg called the "triple melting pot." That is to say, the whole of religiously diverse America began to evolve into three main groups: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. Each was becoming more homogeneous. By the 1950s, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans were all generally "Protestant." Irish, Italian, and French Catholics were basically "Catholic." Polish and German Jews were now simply "Jewish." When my parents arrived in Bozeman, Montana to settle down, they visited various churches, loved the teaching and preaching of the Methodist minister, and these two life-long Lutherans, each the immediate descendants of Swedish immigrants, all Swedish Lutherans, became Methodist. There was no ecumenical distress here.

In any case, my involvement in ecumenical church-merger negotiations came to an abrupt end at the end of my sophomore year in college. By that time, American involvement in Southeast Asia, in Vietnam, was on my mind. Buddhist monk Thich Qang Duc walked into the intersection in Saigon, sat in a posture of meditation, poured gasoline over himself, and burning himself to death. What did this have to do with our war? Did we know anything of the people in whose world we were fighting? That fall, I was on my way to India for a year of study, and Christian ecumenical issues were overwhelmed by a much broader and more urgent set of issues: how do I understand my own faith as a Christian in a world of Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs?

I would suggest that this is where most of us are today. These are our issues. They are not just issues of Christian unity, but of human unity and human relationship in a world fractured by religious division. They have been my issues for a good long time. To ask how we understand "unity" in a religiously diverse world is a critical question. It is our human unity that is at stake here. The deep connection toward which we strive today is our human connection. It is not about unity of belief or uniformity of practice. But it is about relationship in the context of global and local diversity.

There are at least two important ways of understanding of our religious differences. The first is as co-citizens in communities that expect and require our participation in decision making –at the ballot box, in the school committee, in the neighborhood. This asks us to consider who "we" are –we who are citizens of Boston or of Dallas, or "we the people of the United States of America." There is surely no more important question than "Who do we mean when we say 'we'?" As people of a democratic society committed to underlying principles of freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of speech and association, our "we" must of necessity include people who are different from us in faith and who participate in a variety of religious communities.

The second way of understanding religious difference is as people of faith, in our case, as Christians. Who are we in relation to neighbors of other faiths? How do we understand their lives of faith? How do we interpret them in the context of our own faith, which to many seems to be exclusive? These are related questions, but they are different from the civic questions of our citizenship in a larger society. These questions call upon the resources of our faith –our understandings of scripture, the teachings of our religious leaders, and the experience of our co-religionists.

These ways of thinking about religious difference are, of course, intertwined –in ourselves and in our collective experience. Teasing apart the civic voice and the voice of faith is an important and ongoing task for all of us.

I was already eight years old and had memorized the Pledge of Allegiance when Congress passed legislation in 1954 adding the words "under God." My classmates and I in Longfellow School in Bozeman, Montana tripped over those words that so interrupted the more melodious flow of "one nation indivisible." But we did not trip over the concept. Nor did most Americans. In a rough and ready way, we knew what "God" and "under God" meant.

In the past fifty years, however, this has become much more complicated, and that is a matter of distress for some. America has become a multireligious society with a substantial and diverse Muslim minority virtually equal in size to the Jewish population, and growing Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain communities, along with new immigrant Christian communities, such as the Mar Thoma Syrian church. Today when we pledge "under God," we all bring different and contested conceptions of just what that means. We Americans --Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, Christian-- speak of God or gods in various ways, do not all mean the same thing, do not all have a theistic concept of God or, as with many Buddhists, do not use the symbol "God" at all. To add to the confusion, Keith Ellison, a Muslim, elected by his district in Minnesota to the U.S. Congress, was sworn into office on the Qur'an, a copy of the Qur'an that had been owned by Thomas Jefferson. And Hawaii's Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu elected to Congress, took her oath on a copy of the Bhagavad Gita.

The "we" of "We the people" has become more complex, uncomfortably so for some, surprisingly so for some, happily so for others. But for all of us, it is an ongoing challenge to pay special attention to the first person plural as we discern the currents of today's American identity crisis. Who do we mean when we say "we"? We are, of course, situated in multiple "we's." Which are our "we's" as citizens, as adherents of particular political parties, as members of various ethnic groups, as members of different religious communities?

How did we become as diverse as we are today? Here I would ask us to cast our minds back, again, to the 1960s. There were three great pieces of legislation that became the pillars of a stronger and more inclusive democracy: 1964 Civil Rights, 1964 Voting Rights, and the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The latter is sometimes not recognized as civil rights legislation, but it addressed a critical issue of fairness in American policy. As Attorney General Robert Kennedy put it in supporting this legislation before the House Judiciary Committee: "Everywhere else in our national life, we have eliminated discrimination based on one's place of birth. Yet this system is still the foundation of our immigration law."

President Lyndon Johnson signed the Act into law at the base of the Statue of Liberty. In doing so, he said, "This bill that we will sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions. It

will not reshape the structure of our daily lives, or really add importantly to either our wealth or our power. Yet it is still one of the most important acts of this Congress and of this administration [as it] corrects a cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American nation." As right as he was about correcting a "cruel and enduring wrong," he was not right about how important the effects of this legislation would be in reshaping the demographics of our society and in adding to America's wealth and expertise.

In the decades that followed, immigrants came from all over the world to the United States. Some who had come to the U.S. as graduate students were able to stay and use their talents here. They brought not only their economic ambitions and dreams, but their Bhagavad Gitas, Qur'ans, and images of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Over the past fifty years, these new immigrants have built mosques and Islamic Centers; Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist temples; Sikh *gurdwaras*, Hispanic and Vietnamese churches. They have introduced the rest of us to *iftars* and *bhangras* and chicken *tikka masalas*. They have negotiated new and multiple identities in the American context. Immigrants have discovered the leverage of religion and religious organizations in American civil society and the challenges of voluntarism in the creation of religious institutions. There would be no government support for their religious ambitions, other than the commitment to freedom of religious expression. And some of these immigrants, to be sure, would also describe themselves as secular. They have had quite enough of the dominance, even the oppression, of religion in their home countries and are relieved to be in a society that recognizes not only the freedom of religion, but the freedom not to be religious should they so choose.

For all it's Texas-exceptionalism, Texas is no different from any other part of the country in the changes this state has experienced. Indeed, with its booming metropolis cities like Dallas and immigration "gateway" cities like Houston, Texas has in many ways been ahead of the country in encountering the new and more complex religious, cultural, and racial diversity of our country. A glance at Texas newspapers, tells us of the Hindu Diwali celebrations in Amarillo in the panhandle, the open-house held for Latinos at the Dallas Central Mosque, the Texas Buddhist Association's retreat center in Waller County, the temporary ordination of a young Thai teenager as a monk, the Vietnamese New Year or Tet Observances in San Antonio, the San Antonio police department's special education sessions on Islam, the celebration of Guru Nanak's birthday by the Sikh community in Austin, and the Muslim celebrations of Eid al Adha with prayers in the George Brown Convention Center in Houston.

Indeed, on an evening drive down Abrams Road last night after dinner, my host, Robert Welsh, and I dropped into the Islamic Center of North Texas, where a graduation exercise has just taken place. As people poured out of the main doors into the parking lot, we ventured inside and were greeted warmly as

strangers. We were shown to the office in the lobby and given an impromptu tour of the Islamic Center, which provides not only prayer and education space, but also sports facilities, girls and boys basketball teams, a volunteer medical service, and speakers for churches and schools.

I know that Texans, like Muslims, have their own stereotypes to overcome. Two decades ago, a 1993 special issue of *Texas Highways* featured a cover photograph of a young Hindu woman in a traditional mirrored red Indian dance costume for its extensive cover story, "Texans: Who we were, Who we are." The theme of the whole magazine was that from its Native American and Hispanic roots, Texas now includes people from all over the world, most recently immigrants from Asia. "As they put it, *"Texans wear jeans and kimonos, ten-gallon hats and fezzes, huaraches and Western boots."* The articles detailed the history of the Chinese and Japanese communities that settled in Texas early in the 20th century, the arrival of Hindu and Muslim immigrants from South Asia during the oil boom of the 1970's, and the flood of Southeast Asia immigrants in the wake of the Vietnam war.

This has not been a wholly celebratory history. On the downside of the register, we certainly could collect the instances of racism and prejudice. We could take note of a dozen fires set by arson in Hindu homes around Houston a few years ago, the vandalism of a mosque in South Plains outside Lubbock, the firebombing of an Islamic Center in Denton, a Dallas Suburb, shortly after 9/11. The list could go on. But I believe that more serious than scattershot acts of prejudice, ignorance, and violence are the sustained, organized groups now focused on creating fear of "radical Islam." Two groups that are worth knowing about have links and chapters here in Texas: *Stop the Islamization of America* and *Act! for America*. Both are highly organized, have their own "research" base, and participate in Washington lobbies focused on stopping "the growing threat of radical Islam to America."

And what are the counter-forces to this kind of negativity, even here in Texas? Surely, they are the various forms of interfaith initiatives that have brought people together across lines of difference. For example, the people of the Interfaith Center of Dallas started an interfaith coffeehouse a few years ago called "Brewing Community with Every Cup" to help people from different religious traditions meet and learn about each other's faiths. The head of the nonprofit group, stated, "Once you make friends with someone from another culture or another faith tradition' it's hard to hear degrading remarks about other groups without having a different perspective." The center also holds monthly dinners where speakers discuss their religious or faith tradition and learning can take place as all participants articulate who they are in their own voice.

One of the initiatives I have found most innovative is one that began in Texas. Perhaps it began with Roy Spence, an Austin "purpose-based" advertising executive who was deeply disturbed with the competition

between religions, and especially the claim to be the one true faith. He took to the road and decided to put together what became a beautiful book, photographic portraits of *The Amazing Faiths of Texas: Common Ground on Higher Ground*. About the same time, Houston Mayor, Bill White, was reflecting on the remarkable faith communities of an increasingly diverse Houston as they mobilized to respond to Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Yet to White, like Spence, what seemed to be omnipresent in the news about religion was interreligious violence and tension. Surely there was more to be said than that. He had seen it for himself. And so, with the support of the mayor and the organizational skill of the Boniak Center for Interreligious Dialogue at Rice and the Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, the Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues were launched. It began with 20 host homes and 250 people in 2007, expanded to 850 people in 75 host homes in 2008. By the third year, the Dinner Dialogues had expanded to nine other cities –and not surprisingly the big coastal cities, but places like Oklahoma City, Chicago, Raleigh-Durham, Harrisburg, Syracuse, and Greenville.

Guests can register on the Internet and hosts agreeing to provide a simple, nutritious vegetarian meal for ten to twelve people. The guests are, for the most part, strangers. They are not asked to explain the features of their faith. Rather, the dinner table discussion is launched with a stack of cards that ask questions about one's own faith, not to be answered as an expert, but as an individual. For instance:

- Faith sometimes changes as we grow older. Are you the same spiritual or religious person you were ten years ago?

- Where do you see acts of compassion in the world around you?
- What do you pray for, and how do you understand it if prayer is not answered?
- What is the role faith or spirituality in your life at work?
- Many faith communities believe that there is one message God wants us all to hear. Do you believe that? What is that message from your perspective?
- Today, as in the past, people of faith are persecuted for what they believe. What would you do if your faith were forbidden?

A moderator is present to facilitate the discussion, structured in a way that creates a safe space for all to share and listen. In a dinner hosted by a Muslim woman, she said, "As the host, the most memorable part of the evening for me was when someone talked about the fear they have of Muslims. I've never seen myself in that way. Confronting our fears slows us to begin the process of understanding each other." One of the participants wrote, "It's one thing to read about Islam. It's quite another to sit down to dinner together and talk." A Houston researcher studying the project said that 57% of the participants had never been involved in anything interfaith before.

The Dinner Dialogues are not meant to create new organizations, but simply to create new relationships. These threads of connection and friendship strengthen ties between the people of different faith traditions and become part of the fabric of a Texas city.

On the whole, interfaith initiatives in America's cities and towns are not connected at all with city government or the mayor's office. They are citizen led and as diverse as the places they come from. I can report on some of these initiatives from American cities, recognizing that this is but the tip of a movement that is as wide as the U.S. and as under-reported as such things are the world over. For much more information and inspiration, look at the "[Interfaith Infrastructure](#)" on the Pluralism Project website. As we think about new efforts toward connection in the context of America's new religious diversity, where will we find guidance and inspiration? The Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues is certainly one instance. But let's look at some others.

In Louisville, Kentucky, a whole city celebrates an annual Festival –a [Festival of Faiths](#). It was launched in 1996 by citizens of Louisville and supported, at first, by the Cathedral. Over the years, it has become a major weeklong civic event to highlight and better understand the religious communities of Louisville. It includes citywide events, with speakers, breakfasts, dinners, and arts performances. One year, the speaker might be Mary Evelyn Tucker, who has launched a major initiative on the world's religions and ecology. Another year it might be Geshe Gelek Chodha, the Gelugpa Tibetan teacher of the Kadampa Buddhist Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. There might be an Israeli-Palestinian youth choir on tour, or a Sufi singer. The week of programming includes a Passport to Understanding program that extends that week into a year of visiting in one another's places of worship to learn first-hand about religious communities other than their own. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhist, and Baha'i centers will all be hosts to visitors during the upcoming year. The Passport program provides just the needed impetus to move people from thinking about visiting a religious community to actually doing it, crossing the threshold. Chanrika Srinivasan of the Hindu Temple of Kentucky told us that she has experienced positive changes in the Louisville community because of the Festival. "I have lived in Louisville for ten years," she said, "and people are more respectful of others because of this event." The Louisville festival packaged its approach so effectively that other cities –like Greenville, South Carolina and Kansas City, Missouri-- have replicated it.

Kansas City capped off its own Festival of Faiths with a remarkable dramatic ethnography, *The Hindu and the Cowboy*. After careful interviews with people of faith in Kansas City, the author composed a drama with professional actors in the roles of the new immigrants in their city. A college student from Kansas City talks about what it was like being a Muslim in New York after 9/11. A Holocaust survivor

from Poland speaks of the terror of being rounded up and the horror of the concentration camps. A Hindu couple from Kansas City tells the story of building the first Hindu temple in Shawnee, KS. They came often to check the temple site during construction, especially after the community found a piece of beef nailed to the door, a deliberate slam against vegetarian Hindus in beef-country, U.S.A. In the following months, the couple, if they came late in the afternoon, would often see a man mounted on a horse riding in the distance. One day they saw the man dismounted, picking up what seemed to be trash from the site. They approached, apprehensive, and asked him who he was. He was a Shawnee Indian, and this land used to be part of their tribal land. When he found that a Hindu temple was now being built, he wanted to be sure, he said, that it would be safe, that the same thing would not happen to the Hindus as happened to the Native Indians. Last night, he said, someone had come and dumped the wastebaskets of a local hamburger chain on the property, an overt gesture of disrespect for the Hindus. He was here, now, to pick it all up. And so, the title, "The Hindu and the Cowboy," a drama enacted in schools and sanctuaries around this increasingly cosmopolitan city.

Syracuse, New York, is not a large city, but it is cosmopolitan in the modest way that so many cities are, with a new diversity that spans the globe. There, shortly after 9/11, a Presbyterian woman brooded about rumors that Muslim women were feeling unsafe leaving their homes. She had attended an adult forum at her church right after the September 11th attacks, and there a young woman spoke of having seen a Muslim woman at the grocery store who looked anxious and nervous. The young woman had wanted to reach out to her in some way, but was uncertain of what to do or say. She did not want to intimidate the woman or aggravate the fear in the Muslim community. At this forum, the young woman told her Christian group, "Thinking about it later, I still don't know what I should have said." Realizing that she did not know what to say either, Betsy felt certain that somebody had to do something. She started with the Interreligious Council of Central New York, and then the local Islamic center, and then Danya Wellmon, a Muslim woman involved in the center and women's affairs. She invited Danya for coffee in her kitchen. After hours of conversation, each decided that the next move would be to invite nine friends to a meeting. Before long Women Transcending Boundaries was born. The group kept meeting, and kept growing. In their discussions, they took hold of critical issues including the alarming arrests of local Muslims in upstate New York, the impending war in Iraq, and their own life cycle issues --birth, marriage, and death. They began to look beyond Syracuse as well, linking their local concerns to those of women around the world and raising money for a school in Pakistan, for Women for Women projects in Afghanistan.

Many of the issues faced by local interfaith initiatives and projects are not of their own choosing. Issues present themselves and, like it or not, they become the microcosms in which we grapple with much larger

issues. A Danish newspaper publishes a cartoon Muslims consider denigrating of the Prophet and it becomes an issue for Muslims and the communities in which they live the world over. A University president at the College of William and Mary has the cross in the historic chapel moved to the sacristy to make the space more comfortable for students of many faiths and touches off a major campus dispute. A mayor's leadership of the National Day of Prayer on the first Thursday in May explodes in her face when a Hindu woman asks to participate. We do not pick these issues, but they arrive on our doorstep nonetheless. This is where what we call "interfaith" discussion often begins.

The fact of diversity is here –right here in just about any place you live in the U.S. today, including in the cities and towns of Texas. What we make of it as citizens and as people of faith is up to us. All over the country, we live too closely with new neighbors to have the level of ignorance that most of us still have. The local questions interest me, because most of the religious and interfaith encounters in today's world do not take place at the global level of Dalai Lamas, Popes, and Swamis, but in the neighborhoods of our immediate world. Most of us don't get a chance to be bridge builders to world peace, but we do have the opportunity every day to build the bridges of relationship and understanding that make a huge difference at the local level. As few years ago, the faith communities of a suburb of Dallas called Plano got together for a blood drive. "We can't bring peace in the Middle East," they said. "But we can sure make a difference in Plano if we work together." To that I would add, Amen. We can make a difference in Plano or in any community you can name, if we work together.

Changing our world one relationship at a time, one community at a time, one city at a time –this is the very definition of a movement. I believe that the moments of interfaith engagement I have mentioned here --in Texas and elsewhere-- are powerful representatives of the way in which moments become a movement. Hydra-headed, but with common purpose. Pluralism is not just diversity or difference pure and simple. Diversity is a complex and powerful fact of the world in which we live today. Pluralism is one way of appropriating and engaging that fact: creating through relationships a web of connection, rather than acquiescing in the isolation of difference.

In Austin, Texas in the weeks following the September 11 attacks, hundreds of citizens showed up for the Sunday afternoon open house held at a local mosque. Many, perhaps most, had never been to a mosque in America before. A woman interviewed by the *Austin American-Statesman* put the matter plainly and succinctly for many Americans when she said, "The time of not getting to know each other is over."