

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Religious voices call for solidarity during crisis



Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

Note from Douglas Kindschi: Today's Insight was first published in March of this year as we first began to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, eight months later, we have reached more than 250,000 deaths in our country, with deaths now over 1,000 per day. We are running this Insight again with some minor changes as we seek to understand our situation and responsibility from a religious perspective. It is still my hope that it can bring us together.

Who would have guessed that it would take physical separation to bring us together? That a microscopic virus would be the common enemy that nations would come together to defeat? It is not the first time in history that there has been a worldwide health challenge that threatened the survival of millions. The first documented major plague began in 542 CE during the reign of Byzantine emperor Justinian I.

At its height, 10,000 people were dying each day in Constantinople (today's Istanbul, Turkey). The infamous Black Death in the 14th century killed an estimated 25 million people in Europe, almost a third of the continent's population. About 100 years ago, the so-called Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 led to over 20 million deaths. Thanks to modern science and medicine, we have a much better understanding of how these pandemic crises work, and we know more about how to respond and reduce the spread of the virus and mitigate deaths.

While we must physically separate (social distancing), we have worldwide media, excellent communication and even social media to keep the world informed of the situation and what must be done in response.

Religious communities also have a major role in responding to the crisis. It is good to note some of the historical responses as well. Julian of Norwich, an English mystic from the Middle Ages, gave her famous response to the plague that was ravaging Europe: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and every manner of thing shall be well."

A religious faith helps us put things in perspective.

The famous 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr helped put things in perspective in his book "The Irony of American History." He wrote, "Modern man lacks the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management." Yes, there are things that happen not only beyond our control, but often beyond our ability to make meaningful. Niebuhr had served as a pastor in Detroit for 13 years, from 1915 to 1928, before his 30-year career at Union Theological Seminary as professor of applied Christianity. He called Americans to a sense of humility about "the virtue, wisdom and power available to us for the resolution of history's perplexities."

We are drawn into historical situations where "the paradise of our domestic security is suspended in a hell of global insecurity." While he was writing about a different crisis, the Cold War of the mid-20th century, he might have been describing the crisis we face today when the entire globe shares the insecurity and fear of the pandemic. But Niebuhr would want us to act.

He is also famous for his Serenity Prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

Yes, this is a time for action in ways we can change the course of the coronavirus, wisdom to know what to do and acceptance of what is beyond our control. Another famous religious leader and Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, also combined action with acceptance.

In 1527, a deadly plague hit Martin Luther's town of Wittenberg. Some were calling for mere acceptance of what was happening as God's will, about which they could do nothing. In a lengthy letter to fellow pastor and friend Dr. John



Members of City Impact, a faith-based organization from Cedar Springs, sing and pray for residents and staff at Metron of Cedar Springs nursing home on April 1.
MLive.com files

Hess, he addressed the question, "Whether One Should Flee from A Deadly Plague." Luther writes: "I shall ask God to mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance inflict and pollute others and so cause their death as a result of my negligence."

Sounds like advice coming from the CDC nearly 500 years later.

Richard Rohr, a widely recognized ecumenical teacher, Christian mystic and Franciscan monk, sees our current situation as an opportunity for our coming together. He wrote, "If God wanted us to experience global solidarity, I can't think of a better way. We all have access to this suffering, and it bypasses race, gender, religion and nation." He calls it a "highly teachable moment."

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former chief rabbi of Great Britain, also saw hope in our situation. In an interview on BBC he said, "We're coming through this feeling a much stronger sense of identification with others, a much stronger commitment to helping others. This, in a tragic way, is probably the lesson we needed as a nation and as a world."

In a similar way, Pope Francis calls us together, saying, "We do not have to make a distinction between believers and nonbelievers; let's go to the root: humanity. Before God, we are all his children." He continued this call for solidarity in reminding us that "humankind is one community ... there will no longer be 'the other,' but rather 'us.'"

Cardinal Blase Cupich asked Catholic parishes in Chicago to ring their church bells five times a day, as a means of calling all to unite in prayer during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Our hope is that people will have the experience of being united in prayer, especially at a time when we are isolated," he said. "We invite our neighbors throughout the archdiocese to join in pausing and lifting up in prayer all affected, so they will know of our support."

So, with Cardinal Cupich, and also with our Muslim neighbors who are called to prayer five times each day, let us ring the bells or say a prayer to bring us together. Let us pray for the heroes in the health community who risk their lives each day to preserve our health. Let us pray for those challenged by the virus and for all mankind, that we might learn from this crisis that we are more alike than different — and that we need each other.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

"If God wanted us to experience global solidarity, I can't think of a better way. We all have access to this suffering, and it bypasses race, gender, religion and nation."

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan monk and ecumenical teacher