

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Using interfaith dialogue in conflict reconciliation

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We live in a world full of conflict. From religion to politics, we see people's differing positions become pretexts for argument, division and sometimes, violence.

Even in news coverage, we often hear "what bleeds, leads"; the media and general public seemingly are more interested in stories of drama and disagreement rather than those of peace.

But, as I suggested in my Insight two weeks ago, interfaith work is all about providing a counter-narrative to the role we usually see religion play in conflict. The interfaith movement proves how religion can bring people together in unity without uniformity, and understanding without total agreement.

While those of us at the Kaufman Interfaith Institute are

doing this on the local, grassroots level, we are a part of a movement where our colleagues

are promoting this peace and understanding on the global scale — combatting the misuse of religious extremism and violence through interfaith dialogue, conflict transformation and reconciliation.

Last month, we welcomed two guests to Grand Rapids who are leading such efforts: Sarah Snyder, of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme, and Bishop James Newcome, of Carlisle, England. Inspired by their individual projects in promoting understanding, they are embarking collaboratively on an exciting new project for reconciliation.

Rose Castle, the residence



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traditionally given to the Bishop of Carlisle, who currently is the Rt. Rev. James Newcome, will become an international center for reconciliation between conflicting groups, using faith as a bridge rather than a barrier. Located on the border of England and Scotland, Rose Castle has been a place where difference led to violence and conflict for over 800 years. It is for that reason Snyder and Bishop Newcome are changing the narrative; in Snyder's words: "It was a place built to resist the stranger, so we decided to reopen it as a place that welcomes the stranger."

Rose Castle's mission is grounded in a value found in all religious and non-religious traditions: hospitality. For Snyder and Newcome, this ethos is exemplified by Abraham welcoming three visitors to his desert abode. They will live this out by honor-

ing the dignity and distinctness of all human beings. They also recognize, though, that hospitality is a two-way street: It means one is willing to host, as well as be a guest of those of different religious or secular traditions.

Rooted in hospitality, their goal is to transcend mere accommodation to facilitate reconciliation between groups in conflict.

Through dialogues that emphasize story-telling and active listening, Snyder and Newcome have seen firsthand that conflict and disagreement become understanding and respect.

This is what Snyder calls conflict transformation; it goes beyond reconciling differences, to transformation of how the "other" is viewed. Emphasizing the process of listening and relationship-building, the individual or party who is often viewed as an "enemy" is humanized —

beginning the journey of reconciling conflict and transforming attitudes.

Within this process, reconciliation is both personal and communal; healing happens to the individual and the group when those in conflict bring together what has been broken.

As Desmond Tutu once said, "Differences are not intended to separate, to alienate. We are different precisely in order to realize our need of one another."

While you may not hear about it in the news, there are efforts to help us humanize and realize our need of one another happening here at home and all over the world.

To be a part of the story, visit interfaithunderstanding.org for more information on what's happening in West Michigan and rosecastle.org for more on the international initiative.

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