

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Dialogue: moving from understanding to respect

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Last week, I reported from Istanbul on the topic of hospitality and understanding. Understanding was the goal of our community effort in 2012 called the Year of Interfaith Understanding. It is very important that we go beyond mere tolerance and even hospitality by getting to know others who may not share our worldview, cultural background and faith tradition.

As we noted in our community initiative, understanding comes from sustained conversation. Listening is as important as seeking to make one's own position understood. As our conversation proceeded with our colleagues from the universi-



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ties in Turkey, we did begin to understand their perspective in a way that was helpful to our own understanding in the areas of science and religion. But as this mutual understanding proceeded we moved to a new level beyond understanding — namely, that of respect.

THE NEXT STEP

While understanding is important in getting to know others more fully, the next step is respect for the other person, even though we might not agree. This can only happen when the conversation becomes a true dialogue.

The Aspen Institute recently published a report from its Inclusive America project titled, "Principled Pluralism." The project seeks "to encourage respect in the public sphere for the religious identity of individuals and groups, to foster positive relationships and informed dialogue between people of different spiritual orientations and to forge partnerships among religious and other organizations in service to the common good." The report also noted "it would be a mistake to assume religion is not a potentially explosive source of division in the U.S. society, as it has been and remains in many countries overseas."

A follow-up to this report was a presentation at Calvin College where the presidents of InterVarsity Christian

Fellowship/USA, Calvin Theological Seminary and Calvin College spoke to this goal of maintaining one's principles while being open to those who have different religious beliefs.

WORD FROM THE POPE

In a similar way, Pope Francis last fall met with participants from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. He made it clear dialogue does not mean giving up your identity as a Christian. On the contrary, the pope stressed "true openness means remaining firm in one's deepest convictions, and therefore being open to understanding others."

Professor Miroslav Volf from Yale University made a similar statement in his book "Against the Tide: Love in a Time of

Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities":

"It is because all major religions are not in essence the same that engaging in dialogues is worthwhile. ... Their adherents rightly argue with each other about the merits and truth content of their respective religions."

Some people oppose interfaith efforts because they fear watering down what one believes in order to find agreement. Principled pluralism and true dialogue respects each person as a child of God and deserving of respect. Dialogue is the vehicle for building respect, and it does not assume that we all agree. Rather, it holds out the promise of going beyond understanding to truly respecting the other person.

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