

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Council on Foreign Relations commits to religious diplomacy

By Fred Stella*President of Interfaith Dialogue Association, a program of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

It's been interesting. So many people with whom I shared the news that I was invited to participate in the 10th annual Religion and Foreign Policy Workshop — sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations — didn't seem to recall what CFR is.

Yes, you have heard of them. If you get your news from most any source, you've read or listened to one of their representatives chime in on one important international situation or the other.

Some think tanks like CFR seem to get more ink because of their ideological ties, but CFR

maintains a pretty fair balance. It is dedicated to being a prime resource on issues of foreign policy for lawmakers, schools, the press, religious leaders and those with inquiring minds.

It's important to note that an organization such as this would have a workshop/conference encompassing religion's role in world affairs. It indicates "we" have arrived — the "we" being those of us who have proclaimed loudly that interfaith education matters. There is really no downside to learning about how other cultures and religions affect our relationships on the world stage.

I know it's pipe dreaming, but if this were, say, the 20th annual workshop as opposed to the 10th, would we have blundered into Iraq? Would the voices then have been loud enough to shout down the propaganda that Hussein and Bin Laden were in league together, because too many policy

advisers would have known such an alliance was virtually impossible? It seems most of America had no clue about the balance of power between Shia and Sunni in that region.

It was a privilege to join such an august gathering of academics, policy wonks, clergy and (non-governmental organization) NGO leaders. Along with participants' varied vocations, the makeup of the participants also was diverse in terms of religion, gender, ethnicity and race. What also was impressive is the manner in which we saw much disagreement cushioned by a sense of collegiality not often observed in the public square.

ISSUES AFFECTING U.S.

This year's event concentrated on four issues affecting the United States: religion, diplomacy and global affairs, which dealt mainly with Islamism: faith,

justice and the global migration/refugee crisis; the democratization in sub-Saharan Africa; and religious and cultural dynamics in campaign 2016.

Each was quite stimulating.

Here's the thing — when you attend an event like this, especially as a guest of the organization, you feel a bit of pressure to contribute and have some impact. I'll admit I was a bit concerned about how I might do that, considering my impressive fellow participants.

Well, I did enter into discussions in both the panel presentations and breakout sessions. But there was one instance when I was able to share something quite concrete that others could take back home.

In the conversation about the refugee crisis, there was a general sense of frustration about apathy in cities nationwide about this issue. No one really had any

ideas about how to create more of a sense of compassion for the thousands who are in the midst of great suffering. It was then that I was inspired to share the fact that, in Grand Rapids, we were able to have 2012 proclaimed as the Year of Interfaith Understanding, then followed that with 2015 as the Year of Interfaith Service.

It is my firm conviction that those efforts led to a sense of solidarity among so many in the faith community that this past March we saw more than 400 members of congregations of all stripes turn out to discuss how Grand Rapids could become a more welcoming community.

This is a great lesson in being proactive in developing allies in the greater faith community. I was pleased to share it with my colleagues from across the country that day.

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