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Interfaith Voices: A 10-year anniversary

Tom Roberts | Jun. 6, 2012 NCR Today

It was only after, perhaps, the third speaker of the evening that the significance of the small gathering at Washington Hebrew Congregation began to sink in. The 75 people had gathered to celebrate ten years of the radio program Interfaith Voices.

The show?s product is a decade of civil, intelligent, sometimes deeply probing conversation across denominational and faith lines.

Interfaith Voices is the brainchild of Sr. Maureen Fiedler, a member of the Sisters of Loretto (and NCR blogger). Its home base is public radio station WAMU at American University in Washington DC, and it is currently aired on 60 public radio stations across the country. Fiedler, who holds a doctorate in government from Georgetown University, has built the program from concerns about religious tolerance following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center to a wide ranging weekly discussion of religious, ethical and public policy issues with the spectrum of religious leaders. Believers of every stripe -- Muslims, Sikhs, Catholics, Hindus, Protestants, Buddhists among them ? as well as those of no belief regularly weigh in on the issues of the day.

The awareness that dawned on me, having come from a day at the computer where our polarizations, religious and civic, were constantly on display, was that accord is not only imaginable. It is possible, across denominational and faith boundaries. This was not an event of cheap grace. And more than once it was emphasized that Fiedler?s effort on the airwaves had moved well beyond seeking ?tolerance.?

The attempt, instead, is to move toward understanding.

Admittedly, the small crowd celebrating the show?s success was of a fairly unified point of view. If anything, it was a demonstration that perhaps some of the most stubborn polarizations persist within our own families of belief or civic and political association. It was a crowd of a fairly liberal bent.

Still, the celebration was of something real and tangible.

The speakers included two rabbis, an imam who teaches at a Catholic university, an Episcopal bishop who happens also to be a woman, a feminist theologian, and, of course, Fiedler herself, who has been involved in interfaith and justice activities for most of her life as a woman religious.
The starting point for many of the speakers was 9/11 when the discussion was spurred by a sudden rise in anti-Islamic rhetoric. Rabbi David Saperstein, director and counsel of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, recalled the strong countervailing sentiment at the time among religious leaders: That no group should be characterized or stigmatized by the actions of a few of its members.

I couldn?t help, in my mind, tracing the origin of the evening back a few decades earlier, at least in the Catholic universe, to the Vatican II era declaration, Nostra Aetate, which gave Catholics a new view of other faiths and permission to reach out to those of other denominations and beliefs. Most significantly, it rewrote the Catholic understanding of Judaism, wiping out the charge of deicide and leading to a papal declaration, some years later,

that Catholics and Jews are brothers in Abraham.

A colleague has explained to me his understanding of the broad forces unleashed by the Second Vatican Council of the mid 1960s: at first a centripetal force that sends things scattering along paths of new ideas and understandings and then a reaction, a kind of returning centrifugal force, that wants to put things back in place. It is that latter tug, if his image is correct, that we?re living through at the moment.

But some of the changes exerted by that initial centripetal force won?t be corralled back in. So here we sat with Christians, Jews, Muslims, a group of Afghan musicians who claim inspiration from the Sufi Poet Rumi, a representative of Catholic women priests, a female bishop, people of a variety of Christian denominations, and assorted academics and journalists.
It would have been a scene impossible to imagine in my childhood. Some might see it as syncretistic or, worse, heretical. I have come to see such meetings as inevitable. As one of the speakers put it, seeking such understanding has everything to do now with our security as a global people.

It was purely coincidental, though thoroughly ironic given the nature of Catholic news in recent weeks, that during the past few months I have had the opportunity to spend some time in Africa with Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister (see story here [1]), a few days at DePaul University with Sr. Helen Prejean of the Sisters of St. Joseph (story soon to appear), and to celebrate the success of an interfaith radio venture with Sr. Maureen Fiedler.

All three have had a profound influence on the world, raising issues of justice and walking with people on the margins. They have convinced significant chunks of humanity to consider in a new light old presumptions ? about women and their rights, about the environment, about the state?s right to kill, about victims of horrible crime, about our suspicions regarding those of other faiths, about the big issues of peace and militarism, and on and on.

I confess to not knowing, really, what is meant by the term ?new evangelization.? I hear it used occasionally, and it seems to be a convenient catch phrase for those who want to give a certain papal legitimacy to this project or that. But I can never get a firm grasp on what exactly is meant by it.

I do, however, understand that the Chittisters and Prejeans and Fiedlers of the world have found rather ingenious ways to project some of the deepest and healthiest strains of Catholic teaching and tradition into the general culture. They are providing a valuable model in how to approach and actually speak with and, most important, listen to, others. Faith, and how it is lived in the world, is not, for them, confined to a tick list of orthodoxies. They, too, are doing things it would have been impossible to imagine nuns doing 50 years ago. I think we may be witnessing the way grace can work in the world in the 21st century.

I?ve made the point at greater length in my book, *The Emerging Catholic Church: A Community?s Search for Itself*, that amid what sometimes seems paralyzing polarization, great change has occurred and continues to occur in the church. So many of the women?s orders have discovered that religious life was not equivalent with eternal stasis. Having spent considerable time discerning such things, many concluded that they were being called to live their vocations in new ways. The world keeps changing, and so does the church. And neither will spin backward.

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[1] http://ncronline.org/news/global/peace-seekers-gather-kenyan-plain