

Imagine if the World could live as One

By Dana Evan Kaplan

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One of the most urgent tasks facing all the people in our diverse country is to talk to one another. For too long we have been discouraged and even threatened for doing so, and the elections of 1994 did not magically create avenues of dialogue which had not previously existed.

We – all of us – must work to build those avenues, along which we can meet, talk, and try to communicate. We all – as individuals and as groups – must involve ourselves in the building of a just and democratic society.

It is not sufficient to pay lip service to the “new South Africa”, a phrase which unfortunately is becoming a tired cliché. Rather, we must dialogue with each other and work towards a situation where that dialogue can lead to joint action to make our country a better place for all of its citizens.

Interfaith activities are an essential part of that dialogue. Positive interfaith interaction can help develop an atmosphere of tolerance and pluralism, which are both so important for the fostering of a caring atmosphere in society at large.

As reported in the media, my synagogue recently hosted Sir Sigmund Sternberg, Chairman of the executive of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

Sir Sternberg stated that he was convinced that nurturing religious tolerance was critical in helping society to deal constructively with conflict and tension between different segments of any population.

“Throughout the world, extremism is on the rise,” he stated.

“Since the collapse of communism it has become the greatest danger to world peace. And it is a terrible fact that religious fervor aggravates many of the worst conflicts in the world today.”

Sir Sternberg has urged the religious leaders of this country to dramatically expand our interfaith activities.

It is, he believes, a key to peace. There are considerable benefits to expanding interfaith activities, especially in reinforcing democratic change.

I applaud Sir Sternberg for his bold vision. Greater religious interaction can lead to greater understanding, which is in itself a positive result. Further, interfaith dialogue can lead to mutual respect and this in turn can produce greater harmony between individuals as well as entire groups.

Many troubles have stemmed from religious rivalry and thrived on ignorance and prejudice. We in South Africa in particular must learn a lesson from the divide-and-conquer strategy of the apartheid oppressors, and not allow negative patterns deliberately created under a repressive regime to continue – even after the government has stopped promoting such dissension.

We must seize the opportunity to reverse the trend towards religious segregation and begin to bridge the divide which separates Christians, Muslims, Jews, African traditional religions, Hindus and other faiths from each other.

A more esoteric benefit from interfaith is that it can show how our particular religious beliefs and practices fit into the broader scheme of religious experience.

It can highlight what we share with other faiths, as well as where we differ. It may be surprising to note how similar many prayers and rituals of other religions are to our own.

Another benefit is what such interfaith activities that have existed – such as Interfaith Forum chaired by Rabbi David Sherman in Cape Town – have done to fight the evils of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination between people of different religions. Particularly during the apartheid years, much of the fight against injustice was conducted through the vehicle of interfaith services.

There is no question that St. George's Anglican Cathedral in Cape Town has been the leader of such work for many years.

IN the past year alone, St. George's has held several interfaith services, in support of gun control, in memory of Joe Slovo, and in solidarity with the eight martyrs in Nigeria.

My congregation recently held a Shabbat Peace Service with interfaith participation by the Most Reverend Desmond Tutu.

It was gratifying indeed to see so many Jews – and many non-Jews as well – turn out for a prayer service with such a distinguished Christian clergyman in attendance.

Our mayor, the Reverend William D. Bantom, read out a prayer which was extremely appropriate:

“It is not enough to pray for peace. We have to work for it: to challenge those who foster conflict, and refute their propaganda; to ascertain and make known the truth, both when it

confirms and when it runs counter to conventional views; to denounce injustice, not only when it is committed against us but also when it is committed against others; to defend human rights, not only our own but also theirs; to insist that peace requires sacrifice – of pride, of wealth, or territory; to practice and promote the way of moderation, compromise and reconciliation; and to build bridges of respect and understanding, trust and friendship, across the chasms that divide humanity.”

The Archbishop spoke eloquently and with great humor. He cited the biblical sources of the obligation to seek out justice and to fight against injustice. The Archbishop remarked that if he and his fellow Anglicans took the ethical message of scriptures seriously and applied it to the struggle against apartheid, the “real fault” lies with us Jews – for having given such morally inspiring sentiments to the world.

The Archbishop added a number of humorous comments to his message of religious inspiration, and stood not only as a representative of liberal Christianity, but also as a representative of this country’s black majority.

We South Africans need to remember that God created humankind undifferentiated and established a covenant with us – all of us. That God began the human species with a single pair – Adam and Eve – is an early intuition that ethnicity is universal.

We have familial obligations to each other, no matter what race, color, creed or religion we may be.

For us to be truly human, we must strive to transcend all of the old barriers and divisions.