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Interfaith Dialogue on 9/11 Anniversary Tackles Challenge of Meaning-Making in Tragedy's Wake

[Read the group's joint statement, released Sept. 21](#)

September 11, 2004, New York City -- An Episcopal priest who achieved nationwide renown for his work at "Ground Zero" told an interfaith gathering Saturday that on this third anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, "we need to turn our attention to meaning-making in the wake of public tragedy, to connecting with humility, not hubris, with the suffering masses of the world who have been and are victims of terrorism, and to tackling head-on the issue of religiously related violence."

The Rev. Lyndon Harris was keynote speaker at the gathering, co-sponsored by the National Council of Churches USA and held in James Chapel at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Religious people representing Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Sikh and -- by videotape -- Jewish faiths participated in the dialogue on "Religion-Related Violence and Resources for Healing from Faith Communities."

The dialogue, said NCC Interfaith Relations Director the Rev. Shanta Premawardhana, "was part of a search for alternative, multilateral ways of addressing terror and to develop an ongoing agenda for continued interfaith relationships in New York.

"Participants' houses of worship continue to provide spiritual resources to help New Yorkers heal from the terror attacks of September 11, 2001," the Rev. Premawardhana said, "and interfaith organizations continue to provide direct services such as grief counseling, health services and training for disaster preparedness, as well as opportunities for religious leaders to build personal and institutional relationships through interfaith dialogue."

The Rev. Harris was recruited to St. Paul's Chapel, just across the street



from the World Trade Center, in 2001 to begin a new ministry to young people at the 18th-century chapel, but the 9/11 attacks a week before the formal launch of the ministry forced the cancellation of the plans. St. Paul's was closed to the public and opened to rescue and recovery workers, serving for eight months as a refuge from Ground Zero and offering meals, counseling and health services.

After telling his story of 9/11 and its aftermath, the Rev. Harris challenged the faith community not to squander "this rare singular moment in history that the post-9/11 context presents to build better relations among faiths and communities." For his own part, the Rev. Harris has left St. Paul's Chapel to direct a new project, the Sacred City Project, which describes itself as an interfaith effort to engage the diverse faith communities of New York City in the effort to rebuild the city in the wake of 9/11 and to strengthen its sense of community."

Respondents to the Rev. Harris' keynote address included:

* Rabbi Craig Miller, a project director at the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, who pre-taped his comments given that the 9/11 anniversary fell on the Jewish Sabbath. He said a lot of "spiritual capital" was created as people from many faiths worked together in the relief phase, and people of faith need to use that capital as a basis for rebuilding the city in new and different ways. "We can use tragedy as an opportunity to be repairers of the world," he said.

* Ms Nurah Jeter Ammat'ullah, founder/director of the Muslim Women's Institute for Research and Development. She noted the high price that Muslims have paid in the 9/11 attacks themselves, in Afghanistan and Iraq, in detention and other oppressions. She commented that while the public face of Islam is male, "in disasters generally women have worked across faith lines to alleviate suffering" -- something that is important to remember as we move forward.

* The Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki, head resident minister of the New York Buddhist Church - Jodo Shin Shu (Shin Buddhist Temple). He said 9/11 impelled the Buddhist community -- one not much prone to making public statements -- to work more closely together to get out their message of non-violence.

* Dr. Gurucharan Singh, professor emeritus, Marymount Manhattan College, a Sikh, who encouraged the faith community to consider the adoption of a common mission statement for building bridges across the religious fault lines, saying "as the Sikh religion teaches, religious conflicts are due to a lack of appreciation of God's own design in

religious diversity."

Besides the NCC and Union Theological Seminary, co-sponsors of Saturday's dialogue were The Interfaith Center of New York, Religions for Peace USA and New York Disaster Interfaith Services.

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**“Interfaith Dialogue Counters Violence in the Name of Religion”
A Statement by Religious Leaders Gathered on the Third
Anniversary of 9/11**

On the Third Anniversary of the tragic events that occurred on September 11, 2001, leaders and members of several religious communities gathered at the James Chapel of Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

The pain and agony of that horrific day are still with us. Our faith communities continue to provide spiritual resources to help the people of our city heal. Interfaith organizations continue to provide direct services such as grief counseling, health services, and training for disaster preparedness. In addition, they have made opportunities for religious people to build personal and institutional relationships through interfaith dialogue.

We recognize that while terrorist acts and interpretations we give them may draw some religious communities together, too often they tend to drive our religious communities apart. It does not have to be this way. We want to stand together in a meaning making response. We want to see one another as our own best selves, even as we face and seek to overcome our own worst selves as a human community.

We are people of faith, representing Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh traditions. While we are each deeply committed to our particular religious traditions, we reject self-righteous and exclusive ways of thinking. In an atmosphere of deep respect and reverence, we have listened to each other's concerns and agreed on common questions and agenda items for continuing our conversations. We want to demonstrate that through multilateral dialogue hatred can be overcome.

We are glad to learn that our concern for the inclusion of representatives of religious communities in the planning for the rehabilitation of the World Trade Center site is being considered. We affirm the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation's recent effort to include religious voices in the planning and encourage their

continued inclusion in the development of the site. This, we believe, will enable them to address religious themes that are obvious in the 9/11 tragedy. We also urge that a hospitable inter-religious sanctuary or sacred space of meditation that can reclaim the edifying and healing power of faith be included in the plans for the new site.

Signed by,

(Religious affiliations and institutions are listed for identification purposes only and do not imply institutional endorsement.)

- Rev. Dr. Frances Adeney, Presbyterian Church USA
- Ms. Nurah Jeter Ammat'ullah, Muslim Women's Institute for Research & Development
- Rev. Williard Bass, Alliance of Baptists
- Rev. Stanley Bhasker, Presbyterian Church USA
- Dr. Michael Birkel, Society of Friends
- Rev. Pedro Bravo-Guzman, Association of Independent Evangelical Lutheran Churches
- Juanita Bryant, Esq., Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
- Mr. Adem Carroll, Islamic Circle of North America Relief
- Rev. Dr. Robert Cathey, McCormick Theological Seminary
- Rev. Rothangliani Chhange, American Baptist Churches in the USA
- Rev. Dr. Bob Edgar, National Council of Churches USA
- Ms. Dhilanthi Fernando, Alliance of Baptists
- Ms. Alice Fisher, Congregation B'nai Jeshurun
- Mr. Peter Gudaitis, NY Disaster Interfaith Services
- Rev. Lyndon Harris, Sacred City Project
- Mr. Tom Hartman
- Rev. Bud Heckman, Religions for Peace USA
- Rev. Dr. Joe Hough, Union Theological Seminary
- Ms. Moushumi Khan
- Dr. Antonios Kireopoulos, National Council of Churches USA
- Ms. Sue Kopp
- Ms. Deidre Lee, National Council of Churches USA
- Rev. N.J. L'Heureux, Jr., Queens Federation of Churches
- Rev. Susan Lockwood, NY Disaster Interfaith Services
- Ms. Christy Lohr
- Rev. Dr. Peter Makari, United Church of Christ/ Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Ms. Marjorie Markus
- Ms. Bridget Moix, Friends Committee on National Legislation
- Dr. Lucinda Mosher, The Episcopal Church
- Rev. T.K. Nakagaki, New York Buddhist Church
- Dr. Eric Nelson, The Thich Nhat Hanh United Buddhist Church

- Sister Betty Obal, Loretto Community
- Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, National Council of Churches USA
- Rev. Dr. Tony Richie, Society for Pentecostal Studies
- Ms. Joey Rodger, Quaker
- Dr. Gurucharan Singh
- Ms. Stacy Smith, Union Theological Seminary
- Ms. Jessica Stammen
- Rev. Max B. Surjadinata, United Church of Christ
- Mr. Josh Thomas, Union Theological Seminary
- Dr. Christiane Tietz-Steiding, Union Theological Seminary
- Mr. Harpreet Singh Toor, The Sikh Cultural Society, Inc.
- Ms. Sarah Vilankulu, National Council of Churches USA
- Mr. Moise Waltner, Interfaith Center of New York
- Rev. David Waugh, Metro Baptist Church, New York
- Rev. Marcel Welty, National Council of Churches USA
- Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Zikmund, National Council of Churches USA, Interfaith Relations Commission

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[Return to NCC Home Page](#)