

April 8, 2010

An Open Letter to my South Bay Interfaith colleagues

Friends-

I am truly sorry not to be with you all today at this significant transition time in the shape of interfaith cooperation in the South Bay, but due to a previous business commitment, I must be in Charlotte at this time. I did want to share some of my ongoing (and evolving) observations on the interreligious scene and be clear about my personal commitment to work with you all to take us all into the next stage.

In 1972, Lil Silberstein, the director of the Silicon Valley office of the National Conference of Christians and Jews gathered together a group of Jewish and Christian clergy for dialogue. That group might well have marked the beginning of organized inter-religious dialogue and cooperation in our Valley. I have been a part of the group since around 1974, and was privileged to serve as the coordinator in early 1989 and again from 2002 until Bruce Bramlett arrived.

Over time, the group expanded to include a wider spectrum of religious groups, and a greater diversity of leadership. The NCCJ became the SVCCJ, and then again SVFACES. Out of the Religious Leaders Dialogue group came the South Bay Interfaith Steering Committee that planned the Community Interfaith Circle of Palms gatherings in 2005, 2006, and 2007, and then later the Partner City Group that gained recognition for Silicon Valley as the Inaugural Partner City of the Parliament of the World's Religions.

As Bruce Bramlett has shared with us, the Board of SVFACES determined that it can no longer provide leadership for the Religious Dialogue group. SVFACES will continue to be present "at the table" but must reprioritize the use of its limited resources. Bruce's position as Coordinator of Interfaith Relations will end as of June 1st.

This change provides a significant challenge and opportunity to reshape interfaith relationship building in our area. How should we organize our relationships? What should our interfaith community look like? What kinds of activities should it provide? How can we best carry forward the legacy of the past 38 years of dialogue and cooperation?

There are several signs of change at present—

- Several of us went to the Parliament of the World's Religions gathering in Melbourne last December to represent Silicon Valley and our effort to become a **Partner City**—part of a worldwide network of cities working for interreligious harmony and with other "guiding institutions" in the community—government, non-profit, educational, and private sector—for the good of the whole of our area. Since that time, the Partner City Team* has met several times to consider the overall picture of interfaith cooperation in this valley.
- Presently, the **Interfaith Council on Economics and Justice**, a group which has long been involved in community concerns, has been reorganizing itself under the leadership of Rebecca Kuiken to become more truly interfaith.
- **ING**, the Islamic Networks Group, has taken intentional steps to expand their educational efforts into an Interfaith Speakers Bureau. During this past year, they have been hosts to two Faith Acts Fellows from the Tony Blair Foundation and Interfaith Youth Core, who have been working on developing interfaith service projects involving local young people.
- **Carry the Vision**, the community interfaith conference on non-violence is in the process of becoming an independent non-profit organization

And all these changes are accompanied by ongoing efforts at interfaith cooperation in many ways and many places throughout our valley. But one thing we have noted in our partner city process and in other discussions is that there is no organizing center to our activities. The South Bay Interfaith Steering Committee, which developed the three “Circle of Palms” community gatherings began to function as a communications link and coordinating council, but never got quite structured enough to be sustainable.

In recent weeks there were efforts to call us together to respond as a community to some issues of concern, however, nothing happened. A few things that I noted were:

1. There are times when a joint response from the religious community would seem appropriate. However, we have no process for determining what issues deserve such a response, no process for creating such a response, and no regular channels through which a response could be distributed.
2. Not everyone who has been a part of the Interreligious Leaders Dialogue sponsored by SVFACES is interested in being a part of such a process of developing and disseminating statements.
3. We don't have a clear way of carrying on discussions on issues of concern among the broader religious community.
4. We don't have an effective way of sharing potentially useful information with one another.
5. It is important not to take partisan positions on issues. We have no process for filtering proposals.
6. There is ongoing confusion between at least two interfaith entities: SVFACES' dialogue group and South Bay Interfaith.

I would suggest that we have perhaps achieved a level of maturity in our relationships and a complexity in our communities that a working group be created to explore what the shape of a stronger Silicon Valley interreligious organization ought to be—one that would enable people in our religious communities and in the larger community to join together for service, for education, and for sharing the riches of our diverse faith traditions.

If such an organization could be established, I think it would be a fitting legacy of the foundation laid throughout these many years by the Interreligious Leaders Dialogue group.

Grace and Peace,

D. Andrew Kille
Interfaith Space

*Partner City Team members: Rev. Bruce Bramlett, County Supervisor Dave Cortese, Rev. Ann Hayes, Rev. Ellen Grace O'Brian, Rev. Dr. D. Andrew Kille, Joy-Ellen Lipsky, Delorme McKee-Stovall, Rev. Aimee Moiso, Dr. Philip “Boo” Riley, Girish Shah, Rev. Margo Tenold.