



Building an Inter



faith world

By Beth Katz, BS'00
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What images pop into your mind when you hear the word “interfaith”? Perhaps you envision a group of people from different religions sitting in a circle sharing the most intimate details of their faiths. Or maybe they’re holding hands, singing *Kumbaya* (or another campy folksong), their eyes glittering with tears, smiles etched on their faces.

While both images certainly describe two forms of interfaith activities, they are by no means representative of what constitutes interfaith work as a whole and are, in many ways, reflective of what the interfaith movement *was* in its early genesis of the 1970s and ‘80s rather than what it *is* today.

It began with *Nostra Aetate*

The Second Vatican Council propelled the modern interfaith movement in the United States when it issued *Nostra Aetate* in 1965.

This groundbreaking document transformed the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish community by repudiating the centuries-old charge that all Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. The document also

emphasizes the religious bond shared by Jews and Catholics, reaffirms the eternal covenant between G-d and the People of Israel, and dismisses Church interest in trying to baptize Jews.

It also affirms the Catholic Church’s relationship with the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim communities and encourages Christians to enter into dialogue with members of these religious traditions: “Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture.”

Nostra Aetate provided an unprecedented launching point for inter-religious dialogue and debate. Its impact sent a ripple through religious

communities around the world and caused some Protestant denominations to re-examine their relationships with other Christian denominations and with non-Christian religions. It also left many people — clergy, scholars and laity — wondering just what it means to implement such a bold call.

Many of the interfaith initiatives that followed emphasized the commonalities of various religious traditions — sometimes at the expense of some very important differences.

For example, a common practice in the 1970s and 1980s for fostering relations between Jews and Christians was to hold a Passover seder, a Jewish ritual meal through which the story of the exodus of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt into freedom in Israel is

◀ At left, Creighton alumna Beth Katz is director of Project Interfaith in Omaha.



Photo by the Associated Press

Pope Benedict XVI became the second pontiff in history to visit a synagogue, during a 2005 visit to Cologne, Germany. That same year marked the 40th anniversary of the Vatican's landmark document *Nostra Aetate*, which revolutionized the Catholic Church's relationship with the Jewish community.

retold and relived. Many Christians, in a desire to show solidarity with the Jewish community or to honor their "Jewish roots," began holding seders on their own and oftentimes overlaid this sacred Jewish ritual with themes corresponding to Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Ironically, this phenomenon of "Christian seders" has, in many cases, strained Jewish-Christian relations, as many in the Jewish community view it as disrespectful of their tradition and smacking of supersessionism (meaning that it ends up reinforcing the view that Christians have replaced the Jews as G-d's chosen people and to this effect Judaism is obsolete or incomplete).

In the 1990s, the interfaith movement in the United States continued to grow, spurred by the increasing plurality of religions in our country.

However, Jewish-Christian dialogues and encounters still dominated the movement. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks sparked a greater interest in Islam in this country and pointed to the need to work actively to include members from religions other than Judaism and Christianity in interfaith activities. Yet, the

call for engagement originally issued through *Nostra Aetate* still poses a challenge for many clergy, scholars and laity 40 years later.

In the face of rising Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant attitudes in the United States, engaging people on issues of faith and religious diversity is needed as much now as ever.

Interfaith misconceptions

Today, the interfaith movement is rapidly growing, building on many of the lessons learned from the first 40 years and redefining what it means to be in dialogue with others.

Project Interfaith (also known as the Malashock Project for Interfaith Affairs), which I direct, was launched as an affiliate of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Plains States Region (Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska) in December 2005 with the mission to "work with religious groups, educators and all members of the community to promote a deeper respect for and understanding of the religious diversity in our community." Our programs take many forms — from an interfaith architectural tour, highlighting a diversity of worship spaces, to a Jewish-Christian Study Circle that discusses deeper aspects of interfaith relations. In the latter, Jewish, Catholic and Protestant scholars and clergy co-facilitate the sessions and explore the different interpretations of shared sacred texts such as the Decalogue/Ten Commandments.

(More information on Project Interfaith can be found on the ADL Plains Region website at www.adlplains.org.)

One stereotype of interfaith work, which I work to refute, is the idea that our ultimate goal is to get people of different faiths to agree on major theological issues, at the expense of the beliefs and practices that make our religions so distinct and rich.

Clearly, one of the main lessons that successful interfaith organizers and practitioners have learned from the past 40 years is that the key ingredient to creating healthy, meaningful interfaith relations is to build trust and respect — not necessarily agreement — among individuals and communities.

Another misconception about interfaith work that I encounter is that such work weakens or dilutes one's faith. Nothing is further from the truth.

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In order to fully participate in interfaith experiences, one must have a solid understanding of one's own beliefs and religious tradition. While it is true that for many people interfaith interactions often cause them to reflect, investigate and sometimes question their own beliefs and traditions, such study also frequently leads individuals to develop a deeper understanding of their religious identity and awakens a desire to learn more about their own traditions.

My own experience

This was certainly true for me when I encountered my first significant interfaith experience as a young Jewish woman attending Creighton University.

Creighton was my first experience with



an overtly Catholic, religious educational environment. I still vividly remember sitting in the requisite “Theology 101: Christianity in Context” course and learning for the first time about the basic theological tenets of Christianity.

Sure, I knew about many Christian cultural icons such as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, having grown up in a predominantly Christian society, but I realized that I was completely ignorant about the actual theology of the religion.

For many of my classmates, I was the first Jewish person they had ever met. As I frequently asked questions about Christianity, many of my peers asked me about my Jewish faith.

I realized from their questions just how shallow my knowledge of Judaism was. This, in turn, motivated me to learn more about Jewish teachings and traditions and eventually led me to embrace Judaism not because it was the religion in which I was raised but because it was the religion in which I chose to practice as an adult.

My own spiritual development was furthered by Creighton’s Campus Ministry, which encouraged me and several other students to form an interfaith student group to create programs that would educate the Creighton community about the religious diversity on campus. Many of the friendships forged with fellow students and faculty through my interfaith work at Creighton remain today.

Through my current role with Project Interfaith, I am privileged to work with Creighton as it continues to grow its commitment to interfaith work that is rooted in its mission: “Members of the Creighton community are challenged to reflect on transcendent values, including their relationship with G-d, in an atmosphere of freedom of inquiry, belief and religious worship.”

Through partnerships with Creighton’s scholars and centers, we are able to draw on Creighton’s tremendous resources to enhance our programs and, in turn, we help connect Creighton with the larger community on these issues.

Building an interfaith world

In a world where people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs are increasingly connected through technology, economics, marriage and work, we cannot afford to overlook the one aspect of diversity which is so central to how people view the world and their roles in it: religious diversity.

Building a world that is respectful and inclusive of religious diversity (including the freedom to not subscribe to a religion) requires a commitment from individuals and institutions of all faiths and backgrounds.

On the individual level, it demands that one develop a strong understanding of one’s own religious identity and beliefs, as well as work proactively to educate oneself about the beliefs and practices of others.

Cultivating relationships with people from different faiths — through interfaith programs or other avenues — allows us to know and appreciate both the universal and unique aspects of our religious traditions as well as the tremendous diversity in belief, customs and practice that exists within each religious tradition.

On the institutional level, we can begin by understanding and respecting the twin rights of religious freedom and separation of religion and state that are enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Within the workplace, we can develop policies, procedures and practices that foster an inclusive environment for religious diversity and equip staff with the skills and knowledge necessary to serve a religiously diverse society.

Empathy, resolving conflicts in a peaceful and productive manner, and soliciting input from diverse stakeholders are skills that need to be developed and nurtured and are critical to empowering people to thrive in a diverse world.

I believe that there is a genuine hunger to learn about the religious diversity in

our community and our world. I think that this hunger will only continue to intensify as our communities become more diverse and as our world becomes further interconnected.

Indeed, today the term “interfaith” is more powerful and relevant than ever. It engages us — clergy, scholars and laity — to find new, innovative ways to answer the ambitious goals posed by the Catholic Church through *Nostra Aetate* 40 years ago. Let us, together, answer that call.

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