

THE WASHINGTON COUNTY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (WCCC) – AS I REMEMBER

Rev. Don R. Stevenson

Ecumenism is about dialogue and cooperation between different branches of the same religion.

Nearly fifty years ago I moved to this area after a few years of ministry and grad school in the South. Eager to experience the new in this region of the country one of the first groups that I came to know was the WCCC. As the new pastor at Paramount Baptist Church, I was delighted to find and be a part of an ecumenical group that had interest in connecting with other variations of Christianity. The WCCC was precisely that. My file from the 1970's notes an organizational listing of active participants that included Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Mennonites, Unitarian Universalists, United Church of Christ, Church of the Brethren, not to mention other faith entities and affiliates like Church Women United, Habitat for Humanity, and Cooperative Church Nurseries.

The spiritual leaders of these congregations included Russell Butcher of the Presbyterian Church, Ben Jones (the artist) of Covenant Presbyterian, Bill Hogevoll and Bob Reginald of the First Christian Church, Bartow Harris of the First Baptist Church, Doug Bailey of the Episcopal Church, Dewitt Miller and later Dean Miller of the Church of the Brethren, Wilson Shearer of Otterbein United Methodist, Lawrence Strunk and Larry Fisher of Christ's Reformed UCC, Dick Masters of the Church of the Holy Trinity, Joe Davies of St Joseph Roman Catholic Church, et al. These individuals I remember with great fondness. They were astute, caring, and

wise spiritual leaders who exemplified the best of ecumenism. While there were other peripheral church councils in the county that were more geographically localized in the Williamsport, South County, and Hancock areas, the WCCC largely represented the Greater Hagerstown Area of institutionalized Christianity.

The WCCC met monthly, except in the summer, and it was not unusual to see up to forty clergy and laity from these churches and affiliates come together to enjoy each other's company and organize for community service. I was so very impressed with the oneness WCCC represented. While the members had different slants and perspectives about faith, to be sure, a dominating love, respect, and unity was equally important across denominational lines.

In the community the WCCC held a measure of power. I recall the WCCC Social Concerns Committee visited the management of an area radio station to protest a prevailing bias and prejudice in its programming. The meeting was successful, and the radio station altered its perspective. And, it was not unusual for WCCC members to attend Mayor and City Council meetings to voice common concerns.

At the annual meeting in 1999 I was honored to be elected WCCC's President for the ensuing year. I was keenly interested in continuing the work the previous spiritual leaders had modeled. One of my key objectives as President of the WCCC was that we begin listening to other religions that had an emerging presence in our community. Therefore, we initiated a program called "Interfaith Dialogues" on the first Wednesday of each month beginning in November of 1999 through March of 2000 in the old Argosy Room of the Tortuga. One advertising copy for these meetings read: "In our effort to better understand and deepen commonality between the many growing faith expressions in our community and

world, we invite all area residents to join the WCCC membership from 7:30 a.m. – 9:00 a.m. to learn about other religions. The more we grow in the Christian faith, the more we will understand and appreciate other pathways to God.”

Little did we know then, that an interest in other religions would be magnified by the tragedy of September 11, 2001 or “9-11”. These were and still are haunting numbers in America’s life, and we in the churches at that time were stunned and lock-jawed by what had happened. Additionally, we suddenly knew that we were ever so ignorant about the Abrahamic religion of Islam, from which Christianity also descends. We began to ask: “What do we now do as a Council, as a people of God? What do the churches of the WCCC do to speak to the pain and pathos of a devastating occurrence?” Indeed, there was a prevailing silence. Our tongues were stapled, so to speak. We huddled, decided to ring church bells at synchronized hours, open the doors of our church facilities for prayers, all in an effort to make sense out of the senseless. Truly, America’s 9-11 experience opened the eyes of WCCC Christianity, and helped it embrace an interfaith perspective.

THE BIRTH OF THE INTERFAITH COALITION OF WASHINGTON

COUNTY – AS I REMEMBER

Rev. Don R. Stevenson

While *ecumenism* is about dialogue and cooperation between different branches of the same religion, *interfaith* promotes dialogue, respect, understanding, and cooperation between differing religions.

Sitting beside Ron Bowers at a Hot Spots luncheon meeting on West Washington Street in the Frostburg State College Community Room in early December 2001 we began to talk about the community and the WCCC's response to the September 11th tragedy. Ron, having been a County Commissioner and one who was interested in the community's religious life was quite inspiring about connecting with our Islamic sisters and brothers to seek greater understanding. We referenced people we knew or could know in our community that might help us better understand the after-shocks of 9-11. We referenced the Jewish community and the Rabbi Janice Garfunkel, several Muslims we knew or knew of in the community like Dr. Shahab Siddiqui, Lu Yumlu, and a couple others of the Islamic faith. Ron and I continued in conversation, and immediately I made contact with Dr. Siddiqui, and he helped me gain a meeting with Imam Burmi of the Islamic Society of Western Maryland. I then had lunch at the Venice with Lu Yumlu, a frequent visitor with his Christian wife to our church. Each of these meetings helped me focus on how the WCCC might relate to the severing pain of 2001 and our ignorance of the Islamic faith and other religions as well.

I quickly prepared to present a proposal at the next WCCC meeting in February 2002, chaired by Rev. Ed Heim of St. John's Lutheran Church. Suddenly I realized that a new kind of spiritual togetherness was beginning to embrace a new agenda called *interfaith*. I excitingly proposed that the WCCC establish an Interfaith Coalition Committee that would seek out and develop an on-going connection with all other non-Christian religions. This proposal was unanimously approved by the WCCC body at its May 2002 Annual Meeting, as I remember, giving a formal birth to what is now the current Interfaith Coalition of Washington County. Several members of the WCCC showed interest in this new committee, principally

Rev. Ed Poling. As I edged closer to retirement, it was Poling who took the interfaith torch and cause and has carried it so very well.

My sincere hope is that the above recall increases the reader's understanding of what institutionalized Christian religion in Washington County Maryland was about since 1972, how it evolved and adopted an interfaith connection, and how all religions of our area can be connected through what is called HARC.

The above was written by the Rev. Don R. Stevenson, a part-time retired United Church of Christ minister and since 2004 has been an adjunct instructor in World Religions, Philosophy, and Ethics at Hagerstown Community College.

Religion is a social phenomenon that institutionalizes a particular set of beliefs about transcendence or a transcendent God. Spirituality, on the other hand, is an inner attitude of reverence that is independent of any particular religious group or cultural fascination.