

PRESS RELEASE
September 13, 2010

Rev. Amy L. Gearhart, Senior Pastor
Missouri United Methodist Church

Rev. Amy L. Gearhart is an Elder in the Missouri Conference of the United Methodist Church. She currently serves as the Senior Pastor of the Missouri United Methodist Church in Columbia, MO (204 S. Ninth, 65201), having just arrived to Columbia on July 1, 2010, and she is an advocate for interreligious and ecumenical relationships and dialogue in the work for an inclusive and diverse Church and community.

STATEMENT:

Throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, we are admonished to extend hospitality and neighborliness across conventional boundaries. Abram and Sarai were called to a new land to be live among strangers. Jesus of Nazareth offered living water to a Samaritan woman. The epistle writer proclaims, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

As the nations of our world are growing increasingly interdependent politically and locally, we are called into a new dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other religious traditions. In building relationships, seeking common ground, celebrating our unique cultures and traditions and fostering dialogue, we experience a new community that strengthens the unique convictions of our own religious traditions while creating a vision of community that celebrates and utilizes the unique gifts of all God's people for the common good.

Our United Methodist *Social Principles* (2008) convey some very practical, yet relational, strategies for building these relationships:

1. Identify the various faith communities in your area and begin to familiarize you congregation (faith community) with them.
2. Initiate dialogues with other faith communities, remaining sensitive to areas of historic tension yet open to the possibilities for deepened understanding and new insight.
3. Work in practical ways with persons of other faith communities to resolve economic, social, cultural and political problems in the community.
4. Together with persons of other faith traditions, plan community celebrations with an interreligious perspective.
5. Develop new models of community building which strengthen relationships and allow people to dwell together in harmony while honoring the integrity of their differences.

(Cited: *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church 2008*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008.)

المركز الاسلامي لوسط ميزوري

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-FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE-

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN ISLAM

In the name of Allah, the most Gracious, the most Merciful

Ever since 9/11, Muslim communities around the world, especially the American Muslim community have spoken out against terrorism in any shape or form.

The Noble Qur'an states "...if any one slew a person - unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people ..." (Al-Qur'an 5:32)

Recent events have brought to light the question of religious tolerance in our communities. As a Muslim community, we believe very strongly in mutual respect and tolerance of people of different faiths and denominations. The Noble Qur'an states "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you..." (Al-Qur'an 49:13)

Historically, Muslims and people of other faiths have not just survived, but thrived socially and economically. We can seek examples from when Jewish communities fled to Morocco at the onset of the Spanish Inquisition. We can look back further and see the example of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he made treaties with Jews, and joined forces to protect the city of Madinah against enemy attack.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, "On the Day of Judgment, I will dispute with anyone who oppresses a person from among the People of the Covenant, or infringes upon his

right, or puts a responsibility on him which is beyond his strength, or takes something from him against his will" (Abu Dawud).

The ideals of mutual respect and religious tolerance which are reflected in the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) coincide with the ideals that the United States was founded upon. American Muslims take pride in the ideals of liberty, justice and equality for all. American Muslims have been a part of American society since the founding of the United States, as a sizable population of slaves from Africa were Muslim. As such, an attack on America is an attack on us.

It is essential not to lose sight of this fact and understand that we as a society condemn and stand with everyone that condemns acts of terror. We hope and pray that the ideals of mutual respect and religious tolerance inform our judgments and decisions, and move us forward as a collective community towards a more amicable environment for our children.

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**We gather today to affirm a bedrock principle of our civil society:
Religious Tolerance, and the Constitutional principle of Religious Liberty.**

This isn't just about a Mosque, or the hateful stunt of threatening to burn books sacred to one religion. However, when vitriolic speech and the manipulation of fears translate into action, there are consequences of suffering and persecution. In the current wave of anti-Islamic misinformation and hysteria, we have seen attacks against persons and buildings, reminding us that it's time for people of good will to take a stand against intolerance. I welcome that so many faith traditions are standing in solidarity here today on this issue.

Those who would deny Cordoba House the right to build a Cultural Center in lower Manhattan, or suggest that Muslims can't be genuine Americans, have simply forgotten their civics lesson — if they ever learned them. I want to address not so much the specifics of current events, but rather the underlying principles in our American history.

Religious Liberty is one of America's gifts to the world. It is an experiment which was radical at its inception and, as with any liberty, requires constant vigilance to survive. Unique in the nations of the world, in our Constitution the nation's founders declared two principles about religion: (1) The State could not favor one and persecute others, and (2) Each religion, no matter how unpopular, was assured the right of "Free Expression." Many at that time considered it dangerous, not to have a unifying National Religion, and there are still those among us those who believe in a theocratic state. We still have neighbors who decry secular, religiously neutral government, and want favor given to their own, often claiming rights as a majority.

As a Quaker, I bring a particular perspective to this discussion: Members of our faith, in America, were the only group ever to officially be put to death for attempting to worship as they felt God led them. Massachusetts Bay Colony executed 4 Quakers in the 1660s for persisting in their preaching and praying, before the King stepped in and pardoned others similarly convicted. The Puritan Establishment in New England wanted religious liberty, but only for themselves. How quickly we forget the high stakes of religious intolerance, although in my lifetime the brutal fact of the Holocaust against Jews should be a stark reminder.

You probably know the subsequent story of Quakers under William Penn founding their own colony at Pennsylvania, extending religious freedom to all, regardless of how much they differed theologically. That, I believe, was the model for what is now enshrined in our First Amendment, to which we draw attention today.

When we celebrate America as "The Land of the Free," we may forget our epochs of pervasive religious prejudice leading to persecution. Here in Missouri there is the shameful, if often forgotten, episode of "The Mormon Wars," when the Governor called for extermination of that religion, driving adherents from the state. The 19th century frequently had anti-Catholic riots, and I can remember the hostility toward John F. Kennedy who, it was feared, as a Catholic would turn the nation over to the Pope. Any Jewish person you talk to probably has tragic stories of family members facing discrimination in this country, and genocide in the Third Reich. Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahai's, Native Americans -- all can tell of facing either official or popular hostility for practicing their faith.

The mindset which promotes burning the sacred books of another faith differs only in degree from promoting the burning of houses of worship. And it can be but a small step toward burning people, if one believes they are of the Devil, and one is an agent of God's vengeance.

So, today, we join in affirming the core value of Religious Tolerance. By definition, our varying faith traditions have points of disagreement in our understanding of what God is calling us to. However, we must respect the ability of each to pursue our religious practices without harassment. To do otherwise is to be profoundly un-American.

*David H. Finke,
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Chair, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Mid-Missouri Chapter*

In the historic tradition of Baptists, such as Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams, who made personal sacrifices in the fight for separation of church and state and in the tradition of Martin Luther King, who made personal sacrifices for the rights of all humanity, I humbly state that people of all faiths, and those who claim no faith, must live together in tolerance and love. As a Christian minister I do not believe that we are called to burn the holy books of other faiths, protest the building of places of worship, nor to verbally or physically attack those who believe differently than we do. These behaviors and attitudes do not reflect the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Reverend Bonnie V Cassida
Bethel Baptist Church

Press release, September 13, 2010

When I retired from the appointive ministry in 1995 and moved back to Columbia, I felt there was a strong need for unity among the different religions. Not a structural unity but finding a human unity within our relationships with others that provided freedom of faith expression in a peaceful and respectful context.

Uel Blank and I are co-chairs of the Columbia Faith and Education Collaborative an affiliate of the Friends of Peace Studies at the University of Missouri. Our steering committee plans ways to advance a culture of peace through dialogue and justice in the Columbia community. The steering committee has representatives from Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu faiths. From our beginning we have held annual community conferences with an emphasis on peaceful dialogue among different faiths and training the participants in a variety of dialogue methods and techniques.

One such conference was on "Seeking a Common Ground among Diverse Religions." That conference found that compassion and service to humanity was a common ground and planned an interfaith picnic, an interfaith blood drive, and an interfaith Habitat for Humanity work project. These events provided an opportunity to discover new understandings and relationships with one another and engendered open fellowship and conversation that led to a deeper respect for one another and our differences.

I believe that since World War II we have developed a "Me" culture that turns us inward instead of outward. We are more interested in what is in it for me than what is best for the common good. We have seemed to develop a more hateful culture than a helpful culture.

One of the barriers to religious cooperation is our suspicion that the other religion believes it is the only true faith when we think we have the only true faith. We reinforce that suspicion when we do not take the effort to truly understand the other faiths. We need to sit down with others to let them explain to us their basic beliefs as well as share our own in civil and peaceful dialogue.

In addition there are times to speak out, not against other religions, but against those of our religious faith who lash out at different faiths, or whose actions are contrary to our own faith understanding that we are all brothers and sisters to one another and desire peace in the human family. I speak universally, though I believe in God revealed through Jesus Christ, not all faiths believe in one God and some in no God. We must have respect for our differences, for only those who trust their own faith will be free to dialogue with others of different faiths and come to respect who they are.

Respectfully, Reverend O. Otto Steinhaus

I am Inder Khurana and a member of the Shanthi Mandir and the Hindu Community in Columbia.

Hindu religion recognizes the importance of staying connected with the Supreme power. It emphasizes that the way to maintain that connection is to spread the message of harmony, peace, and prosperity in the Universe. The basic idea is that there is unity in diversity. There are different paths to reach God. One can pursue different faiths and religions. But the power behind these faiths and religions is that ultimate source – the Supreme power.

I am reminded of a shloka from the Bhagvad Gita, which makes the point that many rivers merge into an ocean. Each river may be different. They may follow different paths. But their destination is the same – the ocean. I think this analogy fits well to the uniqueness of each religion and their goals of achieving self-realization.

I firmly believe that our Columbia Community is strong in that there is interaction and exchange of ideas among individuals of various faiths. Uniqueness of each religion is respected. Tolerance and dialogue contributes to better understanding. President Obama put it well when he said, “As Americans we are not –and never will be - at war with Islam.” What he was calling for was tolerance. I am proud that our Columbia Community exhibits that tolerance. This forum is just one example.

Inder

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**Statement by the Human Rights Commission,
City of Columbia
Adopted September 26, 2001**

In light of the recent tragedies in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania, the Human Rights Commission reaffirms our commitment to uphold the laws of Columbia, of Missouri, the Constitution of the United States, and the spirit of what is best in Columbia: We remind all of us of the evils of discrimination based on religion, national origin, race, and our other protected categories.

We have noted with dismay the scattered -- and yet serious -- incidents of intergroup harassment, and applaud our Police Department's stated policy of providing protection to all. Our investigative staff stands ready to pursue complaints of discriminatory behavior in violation of our Human Rights Ordinance.

It is manifestly clear to us that no one group should ever be held responsible for violent and fanatical acts undertaken by some members of that group.

Therefore, we call upon our fellow citizens to work creatively and with diligence to enhance the diversity of this community, and to provide an example of how a rich variety of groups may live in harmony and mutual respect.

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