

# Focus on Faith

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## Interfaith Dialogue - Finding Common Ground

I have recently been inspired by a trio of dedicated, courageous clergymen who call themselves the "Interfaith Amigos." These three gentlemen are close friends — one a Christian minister (United Church of Christ), Rev. Don Mackenzie; one a (Reformed) Jewish rabbi, Ted Falcon; and the third a Muslim imam, Jamal Rahman. Don Mackenzie is an acquaintance of mine from my college years in Minnesota. The Interfaith Amigos travel throughout the U.S. — and internationally — discussing the importance of and need for interfaith dialogue.

A small group of local people with a similar interest in beginning conversations about interfaith dialogue has formed to arrange a visit by the Interfaith Amigos to the Mid-Ohio Valley. Besides arranging for a presentation and workshops, they aim to arrange preparatory and follow-up discussions about interfaith dialogue at the local

level so that lessons learned can be sustained over time and internalized. I have been in communication with Rev. Don about arrangements for their visit to the Marietta area sometime in the next 10-12 months.

What is remarkable about these three friends is that each is passionate about and dedicated to his own faith tradition, yet equally passionate and dedicated to interfaith dialogue. Their first book (they are currently finishing their third book), *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith* (Woodstock, Vt., Skylight Paths 2012), provides a detailed account of the development of their friendship and their respective journeys into interfaith dialogue.

One of the challenges that this trio set for themselves and recorded in their book was to answer three questions about their faith: 1) What he is most uncomfortable about in his tradition. 2) What he is grateful for in his tradition. 3)

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What he wants others to know about his tradition. There are common threads among their responses to these questions.

Each is uncomfortable with the idea that his tradition is the exclusive path to spiritual truth. For example, the idea that Jews are the chosen people of God, that Jesus is the only means to spiritual enlightenment, or that the Qu'ran is the ultimate authority of God's word. Each of the trio expresses gratitude for the notion of love, compassion, and oneness, which lies at the foundation of their faiths.

Regarding what each wants the world to know about his tradition, Rev. Don makes the point that early Christianity was truer to

Jesus' teachings than many current interpretations; Rabbi Ted states that Jews do not need to be saved; and Imam Jamal makes the point that Islam is respectful of all religions and that jihad does not mean violence but "effort" and "exertion," that is, to overcome base attributes and enrich relationships with family, friends and community.

Their friendship and commitment to interfaith dialogue has led the three Interfaith Amigos to deeper discernment about their own faith traditions and to greater trust. This trust, built upon honesty and concerted effort to understand one another's belief systems, has allowed them to engage in sincere discussion of challenging issues, addressing the "elephants in the room," such as the treatment of Palestinians by Israelis.

Their mutual trust and enhanced understanding have led this trio to the shared

understanding that as religious institutions have evolved, they have focused more on their own survival and expansion than living out the inspiration and teachings of love, compassion, and diversity, which are part of these faith traditions.

Interfaith dialogue may be defined as collaborative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions at both the individual and institutional levels. Interfaith dialogue can lead to increased understanding and respect for other religions and an increased appreciation of shared values across different religious traditions — as long as participants can avoid the temptation to describe other faith traditions as wrong. If people of different religious faiths sit down for sincere and mutually respectful dialogue, there will be enhanced sensitivity to all people who profess a spiritual relationship with a higher being.

Such dialogue can result in a deepening of one's faith. It is this kind of dialogue that several of us feel can be launched in the Marietta area in order to bridge the divide among Christian traditions, which predominate in this part of the country, as well as to seek broader understanding of other faith traditions, such as Judaism and Islam, which have much less representation in our community but which are important for understanding many aspects of national and international affairs.

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