



## The Fifth Bi-Annual Meeting of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, Oxford (UK), March 2012

On the final day of the meeting, leaders were asked to reflect on what had been accomplished. They were asked to consider three questions:

- 1. What does Interreligious Friendship mean to you?***
- 2. How do you practise Interreligious Friendship?***
- 3. What messages and practices of Interreligious Friendship can you take back from this meeting to your community?***

Some chose to respond independently to each question while others integrated their answers.

### Imam Plemon El-Amin

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#### Another Hero

I'm in Oxford, England, this week with the Elijah Interfaith Board of World Religious Leaders focusing on the theme of 'Friendship Across Religions'. This Board of sixty includes Archbishops, Cardinals, Swamis, Chief Rabbis, Sheiks, Monks, Nuns, Grand Muftis and even the Dalai Lama. Tomorrow, we will meet and dine at the London home of Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks.

I'm here among this august crowd because of my hero, Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, whose work and wisdom earned him the Board seat that I have humbly occupied since his death in 2008.

Thirty-seven years ago, Imam W Deen Mohammed awakened my life and the lives of hundreds of thousands to the depth, broadness, practicality and spirituality of the Quran, the Prophet Muhammed, the Muslim life in particular, and religious life in general. With God's Help and Guidance, he single-handedly dismantled the secretive, separatist and peculiar self-help organization founded and led for 42 years by his father, the Hon Elijah Mohammed. Imam Mohammed transformed the 'Nation of Islam' into an authentic Islamic community of God-conscious Muslims regardful of both their global and American identities. He said, 'The future of American Muslims will be well-served when we serve the best interests of humanity. We must work for a productive mind that will enter and affect a change of the soul not just for one people, but for the benefit of all people'.

One of the esteemed religious leaders who is here in Oxford with this Board, Sheik Muhammed Nur Abdullah of Sudan, was asked yesterday what was his first in-depth interreligious experience. He said that for five years in the



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1980s he worked under Imam Warith Deen Mohammed in Chicago, and the Imam introduced and inducted him into the spirit and practice of interfaith work and friendships. Imam Mohammed would often say, 'Stop trying to get together as Muslims, Christians and Jews; trust, respect and appreciate our common essence and get together as believers and true human beings.'

I followed and studied under Imam Warith Deen Mohammed for 33 years. I assisted him directly and travelled the US and the world with him for nearly 20 of those years, sitting with such dignitaries as US Presidents, Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela, Governors, Mayors and multitudes of ordinary people. He was always the same humble, reflective, insightful, humorous, wise, God-conscious and regardful of both the individual and collective soul.

Several months before his passing in 2008, he asked me to once again represent him at that year's Elijah Interfaith Board meeting in Amritsar, India, hosted by the Dalai Lama. I asked him was there any particular message he wanted me to deliver. He said, 'Yes. Tell them that our differences are a strategy from God.'

Enough said.

Closing Paper on Interreligious Friendships:

Personal Observations and Recommendations

I think we need to address interreligious friendship on at least four crucial levels:

1. Between religions
2. Between religious leaders
3. Between adherents and
4. Among the general populace.

Here in Oxford, our focus has primarily been on the religious leaders and, to a lesser degree, on the adherents of the various faiths.

We have concluded that religious leaders can, should be and are, in quite a few of our cases, friends (although some leaders had difficulty naming friends of different religions.) The common experiences, responsibilities and ethics made friendship across religious lines desirable and reasonable to most leaders. However, the question of whether or not their religions can find harmony, support, mutuality, understanding and compassion, between the various beliefs, practices, traditions and scriptures was not addressed. Of course in the midst of many similarities, there are stark differences, but I think both must be given serious attention if we expect the friendship of the leaders to have longevity, depth and substance.

Our gathering gravitated to the idea that the more engaged and adherent was/is in his/her own religion, the stronger an interreligious friendship could become. It was concluded that the best candidates for cross-religious



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relationships were those NOT dissatisfied with their faith, and therefore secure in their exchanges with the other. It was also clearly decided that the open or hidden desire to instigate conversion was unacceptable in sincere interreligious friendships.

The fourth area which was not addressed was the status of this type of friendship as it relates to the casual member of a religion or, for that matter, the general religiously-aware population. Personally, I envision great difficulty in bringing the conversation we had this week to general populations or even congregations. My experience has convinced me that friendship can supersede even religion if opportunities for either heart-to-heart or mind-to-mind or soul-to-soul exchanges are made. Choosing friends is certainly a complex process of thoughts, feelings and experiences beyond my ability to explain even if perhaps I think I can grasp it. But what I do know, give any random group the time and opportunity to exchange, and people will pick and choose friends with little regard to religion. And it is later, when they realize their friend is so likeable to some extent because of the impact and influence of their particular faith, that the other becomes open, amenable, and respectful of the religion of his/her friend. That's what works, even with leaders, personal interaction, exchange, and familiarity.

May we keep up the good work of Elijah and let's think about the subject of 'Sacrifice' (which is involved with friendship) as a future focus.

Thanks for all you do.