



## 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.



### Rev Dr Katharine Henderson

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I now see the invitation to come to this conference as a sign of interreligious friendship, and I'm grateful to have been here. The meta-frame take away is that all of us gathered here under the banner of Elijah and all of our efforts at home are truly part of an international multifaith movement that can change the world. For all of us toiling in our separate "vineyards," it is essential to reframe our activities through touching others who feel the same. So, this conference has allowed us to experience a sense of belonging to each other as "friends," who belong to God—members of the household of God. Our interfaith efforts are the attempts to make the world "homespace," to reclaim God's good creation for God. For me to be together in this way is to glimpse the realm of God. It has been particularly valuable to extend my friendship broadly to include Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus from around the world since much of my work at home is more focused on Abrahamic traditions.

**1.** Interreligious friendship is not abstract or theoretical but made manifest through story. The stories of interreligious friendship—Sikhs feeding Hindus, religious leaders in Sweden interpreting Halal dietary laws or Jewish circumcision, an Imam in India speaking about other religious traditions in his sermons thereby giving space to the other in his sacred space; the story of how fasting was the motif that enhanced and renewed the faith of two men—these are the ways we see God's spirit working through us in the world. Could it be that we are on the cusp of a new religious age where God is revealing GodSelf in a new way, particularly through interfaith friendships writ small and large, as religious leaders and people take one another's part, work on one another's behalf in re-creating/re-claiming public/civic space for God's purposes of love, understanding and justice?

Which gets me to the insight that was a thread through our small group the whole time: Do the religions need each other? Are we sufficient unto ourselves (as religious groups/religious individuals) or do we need the others to truly know God. In Christianity, God's love comes to us through God's grace as gift given, but others are often the vehicles or means of God's grace and love. As Srivatsa said of his relationship with Muslims and all they had contributed to the aesthetic/beauty of his own celebration rituals: "This has benefitted me in the whole of my



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being. It has made me aesthetically complete.” And, this is my experience too, right down to my own reconnection to the church after a profound atheist period in my youth, when the religious other in the form of a Benedictine priest in Germany reconnected me to my faith through giving me access to the Eucharist, through the beauty of worship.

It is why to this day I am profoundly moved by the worship and prayer of other traditions—I can access God as truly or sometimes even more so through the strangeness of another’s worship space/ritual as my own.

2. How can I practice interreligious friendship? I practice this all the time every day on many levels because of the work Auburn does and because interreligious work is my vocation. What I realized from being here and reading the papers provided is that friendship of any kind is at risk today because of the press of our daily lives, of our addiction to technology (which can aid or inhibit friendship). The ideal of friendship outlined in the book—through which one is led into a deeper relationship with God—takes enormous time, space, concentration, deliberate focus and attention. Because I work on macro change a lot (like Israeli-Palestinian issues or Islamophobia in America) I am going to intentionally begin a micro-interreligious friendship exercise and cultivate one or two special and particular interreligious friendships, perhaps including text study and certainly focused, deep conversation.

3. What can I bring back to my community?

- A realization through conversation with my small group that what we are trying to do at Auburn to promote the role of religious leader in the public square is something others around the world are also working on. That the invisibility of the religious leader around pressing public issues is at risk—an afterthought for the press, for politicians—that all of us are trying to carve out this space for ourselves and it is something we can try to help each other with. The context and reasons for invisibility may differ from context to context but in some way we are all wrestling with the same thing as we try to amplify God’s message of understanding, respect, compassion and love.

- Elijah Institute has taken up space now in my imagination which means that I can try to leverage Elijah’s partnership, role and identity in and through Auburn’s work and contacts. I can think about potential partnership now in a way that could potentially help leverage Elijah’s visibility in our context. This would include our existing multifaith partnerships, seminaries in North America and the world of theological education, as well as more grassroots connections and multifaith efforts.

- We are working on similar efforts at Auburn around media attention. I hope I can continue to be helpful to Elijah Institute as it tries to craft a media strategy that is both possible and effective.