

# Interfaith Affairs

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Since the first democratic elections of April 1994, the interfaith movement has been somewhat in disarray. It struggled, along with the rest of the anti-apartheid movement, to make the transition from a discourse of resistance to one of reconstruction.

In the three years following the election, both the vibrancy and the support base of the interfaith movement dwindled. It was held together by a small band of committed activists hampered by an undefined agenda and an unclear programme.

In 1997, however, new and exciting opportunities for interfaith solidarity emerged.

The first was the challenge that escalating crime and violence in the Western Cape was presenting to Muslims in particular, and the rest of the Western Cape community in general.

Secondly, an initiative by the ANC's religious desk, using the influence and stature of President Nelson Mandela, led to the formation of a National Forum for Religious Leaders. Last but not least, a petrol-bomb attack on the home of a prominent member of Cape Town's Jewish community led, ironically, to organised bilateral relations between the Jewish Board of Deputies and the Claremont Main Road Mosque.

## Inter-Religious Commission on Crime and Violence in the Western Cape

As a direct consequence of the overtly Muslim support base of the anti-crime group People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad), as well as the role of lay Christian pastors in the gang-led formation Community Outreach Forum (CORE), religion and religious communities have become profoundly implicated in the conflict that has plagued the Western Cape during the past year. In fact, it is our perception that the conflict has ignited sectarian and religious bigotry within sections of our communities on the Cape Flats.

In response to several attacks on the homes of alleged drug dealers which were attributed to Pagad, several mosques were singled out for fire-bomb attacks and at least a dozen innocent Muslims were murdered while going about their normal business. There was a widespread perception that Pagad was a Muslim organisation and as a consequence reprisal attacks targeted Muslims, whether they agreed with Pagad's militant tactics or not.

It is against this backdrop that religious leaders in the Western Cape have been challenged intermittently to intervene in order to defuse tensions and display inter-religious solidarity. An interfaith press release and a candlelight vigil were the most prominent of these interventions. However, the endemic nature of the conflict compelled religious leaders to go beyond ad hoc responses and search for a more sustainable strategic intervention. It was with this in mind that Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane called for the establishment of an inter-religious commission on crime and violence. This call was unanimously endorsed by all of the major religious leaders in the Western Cape at a meeting held at Bishopscourt on 1 October 1997. A task team was set up and the inauguration of a governing body followed on 27 November at the Athlone Civic Centre.

The governing body brings together almost all the major religious traditions in the Western Cape, including the Anglican and Catholic Archbishops, the presidents of the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) and the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Chief Rabbi, a Hindu priest and a leading member of the Bahai faith. The commission is certainly the most dynamic interfaith initiative the Western Cape has ever seen and it has been widely predicted that it will procure many positive spin-offs for the interfaith movement in general.

## National Forum of Religious Leaders

Responding to the call by President Mandela for religious leaders to lead the moral reconstruction of the new democratic South African nation, two national consultations of

religious leaders were convened in June and July. At the first, President Mandela himself addressed religious leaders and, at the second, a working group was mandated to work towards the formation of a national forum for religious leaders, with the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) as its secretariat. The working group formulated a vision statement for the forum which was widely scrutinised before its formal adoption at a meeting on 13 February 1998.

The National Forum of Religious Leaders portrays two major weaknesses, however. The first is that many high-profile religious leaders rush to support national initiatives but show little concern and enthusiasm for grassroots and regional interfaith initiatives. Cases in point are the Jamiat al-Ulama (Council of Muslim Theologians) of Gauteng and the Muslim Judicial Council. Both these religious bodies are well represented at the National Forum, but have no representation at regional WCRP chapters.

The second and perhaps more important weakness pertains to the question of the political independence of the forum. A key convenor of the forum is the Rev Cedric Mayson, who currently serves as co-ordinator of the ANC's religious desk. Moreover, Mandela's address at the first meeting of religious leaders held on 24 June 1997 in Johannesburg, overtly sought to garner support for the ANC from the religious sector. He referred several times during his address to the achievements of the ANC: "the ANC has a wide support base", "government and the ANC have created a framework", "the ANC recognises that social transformation cannot be separated from spiritual transformation", "the ANC stands ready to assist in this". Mandela also made a point of mentioning the establishment of the ANC's Commission for Religious Affairs. In a very real sense, therefore, Mandela's address smacked of political opportunism.

By contrast, the Inter-Religious Commission on Crime and Violence was explicit in announcing its independence from political parties. At times, however, the relationship between the commission and the government has been a point of contention, particularly between Muslim delegates and SACC president Bishop Dwane, who expressed concern that the commission should not be antagonistic towards the government. The eventual consensus on the commission's political strategy read as follows: "The Commission shall encourage and support government initiatives to fight crime but shall exhort and challenge the government when it perceives the government not to be fulfilling its responsibilities and duties."

### Jewish-Muslim relations

A day after the 12 July march on the Israeli embassy in Cape Town by about 2 000 Muslims protesting a Hebron settler's depiction of Prophet Muhammad as a pig, the Newlands home of Jewish book centre owner Mr Ivan Maron was petrol-bombed and extensively damaged. The bomb attack was accompanied by threats to a Jewish old-age home and a Wynberg synagogue. These incidents were roundly condemned by religious leaders associated with the Claremont Main Road Mosque. This led to a number of meetings between the Jewish Board of Deputies and members of the Claremont Main Road Mosque and the WCRP. However, a plan to convene an interfaith solidarity meeting to condemn the incidents had to be abandoned as a result of controversial correspondence between Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris and MJC president Sheikh Nazeem Mohamed.

The MJC had previously called on the Chief Rabbi to condemn the Hebron poster and he obliged. In the wake of the petrol-bomb attack, the Chief Rabbi questioned the MJC's conspicuous silence on the incident and cautioned them that their silence might be construed as condoning violence. Sheikh Nazeem took offence at the tone of the letter and consequently turned down a request to participate in an interfaith solidarity meeting.

Notwithstanding this misunderstanding, relations between the Jewish Board of Deputies and progressive Muslims continued to develop and ultimately led to the former becoming an important role player in the formation of the Inter-Religious Commission on Crime and Violence. As a result of Jewish participation in the commission, bilateral relations were significantly broadened to include Majlish Shura al-Islami, the Islamic Council of South Africa and senior members of the MJC.

### Conclusion

The year 1997 saw a flurry of unprecedented interfaith activities. The challenge for religious leaders is to ensure that a broader range of leaders and the rank and file are drawn into this initiative. There is a risk that the benefits deriving from interfaith solidarity may not filter down to the grassroots. The interfaith candlelight vigil was one initiative which sought to bridge this gap. The vituperative response it evoked from certain sections of the Muslim community was extremely disappointing.

Another challenge confronting the interfaith movement is to transcend the extrinsic motivations on which interfaith solidarity is sought. It appears always to be external factors which provide the impetus for interfaith co-operation. For example, what draws people from different faiths together may be the need to fight crime, moral reconstruction of our country, damage control of provocative attacks made by radical factions on members of other faiths. In order for the interfaith movement to become self-driven and mature, we need to find intrinsic reasons from within our own faith commitments for promoting good relations with people of other religions. Intrinsic motivation continues to be the most elusive goal for the South African interfaith movement.

It is true to say that the WCRP grew in response to the need to fight a common enemy, apartheid. There are numerous other examples the world over of interfaith co-operation developing in response to situations of conflict. But it is intrinsic reasons that need to precede extrinsic reasons for authentic interfaith co-operation. Why must we always wait for conflict and violence to overwhelm us before we feel the need to develop healthy interfaith and cross-cultural relationships? If intrinsic reasons were to precede external ones, we would not only be contributing to the resolution of existing conflict situations, but we would also be going a long way towards preventing their occurrence in the first place. In fact, a far more genuine and permanent interfaith movement could emerge.

This is the major challenge for the interfaith movement in the democratic South Africa. Now that apartheid is being dismantled, we need more than ever before, to find intrinsic motivations. Only in this way will the interfaith movement transform itself from an ad hoc arrangement into a permanent body with long-term relevance for our new nation.