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Successful Experiences in Interfaith Dialogue: “For Just Such A Time As This”

To be or not to be an integral part of civil society; that is sometimes both a question posed by members of faith communities and a lens through which sectors of civil society view faith communities in western and northern parts of the world.

It is, however, a question that is disconnected from historical and theological realities. The faith communities of Canada and of the world, be they Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Baha’i, Shinto and sisters and brothers of First Nations traditions are not only a part of civil society but are grounded in divine imperatives to be so for the sake of the world’s peoples and indeed for the sake of the globe itself.

Throughout millennia, centuries and in recent years, faith communities, through their leadership and their presence on the ground in communities and nations, have been engaged in the issues of poverty relief, debt cancellation for developing countries, broad and just access to health care, the implementation of universal education and the care of creation. Given the global realities of governance, this has, in recent decades, meant engagement with the G8 and G20.

Since 2005, this engagement of faith communities with the G8 political leadership has taken on a new and very particular form. In parallel to the Gleneagles G8 political leaders’ summit, a religious leaders’ summit was held to bring together faith leaders who then agreed upon a statement calling for substantive progress in such vital areas as the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals. In each subsequent year since then, there has been an Interfaith Leaders’ Summit held prior to and paralleling the G8 political summits. Through consensus a statement focused on the dire need for addressing such issues as extreme global poverty, caring for creation and investing in peace and security has been signed on to by senior, accountable and representative faith leaders of the G8 countries and beyond and then presented to the G8 political leadership. The 2006 Interfaith Leaders Summit was held in Moscow and the 2007 iteration in Cologne. In 2008 there was such interest in the vital importance of the process that summits were held in both Osaka and Sapporo and in 2009, the Interfaith Leaders Summit was held in Rome.

In 2010, Canada, through the new and unique national body of the 2010 Canadian Interfaith Partnership, hosted the 6th Annual Interfaith Leaders’ Summit (World Religions Summit 2010: Interfaith Leaders in the G8 Nations). The Partnership and the University of Winnipeg hosted the faith leaders of the G8 nations and the regions of the world, thus including the G20 nations and regions such as Latin America and Saudi Arabia as well. Along with the statement of the faith leaders of all the world’s

religious traditions, a draft version of which was written in October 2009, the planning for the 2010 Canadian faith leaders summit included a public engagement campaign. This campaign, both national and international, presented a petition on the themes of the statement – Addressing Extreme Poverty, Care For Creation and Investing in Peace and encouraged timely dialogue and engagement on those issues with parliamentarians.

The work of the Canadian Interfaith Partnership was build upon and appropriately modified, according to national contexts, for the 2011 Interfaith Leaders Summit in Bordeaux and the 2012 iteration in Washington. The 2013 Summit, as the cycle of G8 political summits goes back to the United Kingdom this year is, at this time of writing, well planned and by the time of the presentation of this paper, two of its major elements will have already occurred. These include the Open Letter that will speak to the challenge of the 1000 days remaining for the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals. The Open Letter was signed on to by more than 65 senior faith leaders of the G8 countries and printed on April 5th, 2013 in the Financial Times. The other major element of the 2013 Interfaith Leaders Summit that will have occurred by the time of the delivery of this paper, is the Twitter campaign. With a goal of 2 million tweets and re-tweets, this global campaign aims to raise awareness, education and energy for action in the context of the 1000 days remaining for the term of the Millennium Development Goals. It is also very important to note in that context of the MDGs, which have consistently and persistently been a very strong theme of all Interfaith Leaders Summits, and the reality that the political G8 will be meeting in Germany in 2015, the final year of the MDGs, that German plans are already developing for an interfaith, international youth event to mark that crucial year.

BEST PRACTICES IN INTERFAITH DIALOGUE:

(These have been and are replicable by other countries and contexts.)

The 2010 Interfaith Leaders Summit in Canada built on the past work, the consistency and persistency, of the previous summits since 2005. It also added a substantial number of new practices to the process, ‘firsts’ in terms of best practices in interfaith dialogue, many of which subsequent summits have incorporated into their planning or are intending to so incorporate. This can be seen by the plans of the U.K. for 2013 and Germany for 2015 already discussed. These Canadian ‘firsts’, many of them very concrete, contribute to the further building of a culture of peace, coexistence and mutual respect among the whole of humanity, many of them involving youth or the building of working relationships which have not existed before, amongst faith bodies and/or other organizations which have not worked together before.

A discussion of such best practices in interfaith dialogue focuses on the building of The Canadian Interfaith Partnership itself. As the General Secretary of The Canadian Council of Churches, as a leader with decades of interfaith experience, I was able to bring together the then 22, now 25 denominations of The Canadian Council of

Churches with senior, representational, accountable leaders from the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i, Buddhist, Sikh, Shinto and Indigenous communities and senior, representational, accountable leaders from a wide variety of faith-based organizations such as World Vision, the Ridd Institute for Religion and Global Policy at The University of Winnipeg and the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Such secular organizations as The Mosaic Institute and the broad University of Winnipeg, the physical host of the Summit, contributed to all aspects of planning and strategy. Of great significance is the fact that what my position enabled me to do was to issue an invitation to these bodies to join in a Partnership, with a consensus model of decision-making, whose purpose was to jointly host the 2010 Interfaith Leaders Summit in Canada. The 47 bodies so invited accepted the invitation. To have a planning, hosting body so large, so diverse, so representative of both the global faith traditions and the nation is a 'best practice' in the context of planning and hosting a unique, one-time national event that aims to be broadly known within both the faith communities and civil society generally.

The Partnership continues its work having gone on from planning and hosting the 2010 Summit to overseeing a national project bringing local and regional faith groups together with their Members of Parliament for the purposes of education and action on the Millennium Development Goals. At the time of the writing of this paper, the Partnership is now in the process of building an Interfaith Council for Canada, something that has yet to exist in our country. In a very important sign of the new strength of interfaith relations in Canada, the chairing of the Partnership, after being held for three years by me as the General Secretary of The Canadian Council of Churches is now being held by the senior representative of the Baha'i community with significant interest being expressed by a senior Muslim representative to chair the next three year term, 2015-2018.

A broad and substantial part of the education and advocating for change through interfaith efforts has also been effected through the Partnership's work in building, coordinating and maintaining of what is called the International Continuence Committee. This is a global body comprised of the organizers/representatives of the faith-based bodies who have coordinated the full round of eight interfaith leaders summits occurring in the countries hosting the G8 meetings. The International Continuence Committee has met in person on a number of occasions, has considered such globally important questions as what constitutes a 'faith group' and how that term is to be defined, continues in email conversation and serves as a vehicle for the dissemination of crucial information. Its most recent function was to encourage, implement, educate and advocate around the 2013 U.K. plan just described.

In this context of both best practices and successful experiences, in interfaith dialogue, the 2010 Canadian Interfaith Leaders Summit was the first of the series of faith leaders summits since 2005 to include significant youth participation. The Canadian Interfaith Partnership membership for the two and a half year planning process leading to the Summit and for the subsequent year of the national interfaith events process included several of the Tony Blair Faiths Act Fellows as regular

members. In parallel with the 2010 Summit, a separate but related youth summit was held, bringing together 100 youth, of a wide variety of faith traditions, primarily from the host city of Winnipeg. This ensured that there was youth involvement at all of the international, national and local levels, with emphasis on the building of long-term relationships of engagement and joint endeavour in Winnipeg. There were also thirteen official youth delegates as part of the International Summit who participated in the discussion and consensus-building of the Statement and who also, using a variety of forms of technology and informal process, encouraged and challenged the rest of the delegates to build grassroots support for the content of the Statement in their home contexts. The continuity of this youth engagement can be seen in the fact, mentioned above, that for 2015, the final year of the Millennium Development Goals, when Germany will once again be the host country of the political G8, the Germans have already begun to plan an international, interfaith youth event. It is clear from this very successful experience that not only must best practices in interfaith dialogue include youth participation but that the most effective way is to provide a double-track way of doing so. It is crucial in interfaith dialogue processes to both include a separate youth forum, planned and run by youth leadership and to have youth actively around the table of the full event.

There is also a parallel 'children's' component to the Summit process that has been encouraged and inspired by the Canadian Interfaith Partnership. The Millennium Kids initiative is planning a major gathering of children, with leadership given by those children born in the year 2000, the year in which the Millennium Development Goals were initiated and agreed to by the United Nations. Many schools have already agreed to participate in that major gathering, bringing their students to attend. In the years leading up to and subsequent to the major gathering, there have been many MDG events held in schools, mosques and temples, events including education and engagement in the MDGs. There is a 'down-loadable' song on YouTube and even a Millennium Development Goals game both of which have proved very effective in grassroots education and engagement. In a very recent development and in conjunction with the focus of the 2013 United Kingdom Interfaith Leaders Summit, the Millennium Kids initiative hosted a press conference on the April 5th 1000 day countdown to the end of the Millennium Development Goals. The press conference was co-hosted by Canada's national broadcasting body and included much active and even musical participation by children as awareness about the Millennium Development Goals was raised.

Understanding the current global context of communications and technology and very important in any discussion of the best practices in interfaith dialogue, the Canadian Interfaith Partnership created a website. The website, faithchallengeg8.com, not only detailed the Summit itself but also collected, for the first time anywhere in the globe, all the statements of all the summits since 2005. The website was both a preface to and an important organizing tool of the 2010 Interfaith Leaders Summit. At this time of writing, it still serves as a very important archive and resource, not only of the statements but also of all the documents created and used for the national, yearlong, Canadian inter-faith project, which grew

out of the hosting of the 2010 Summit. The premise of archiving all the statements of the Interfaith Leaders Summits since 2005 has been copied by other organizations. The Canadian interfaith project, also detailed on that website, brought together local and regional interfaith groups with their members of parliament to talk about the importance of the Millennium Development Goals to the welfare of the world's peoples. That project thus operated on two important levels, bringing members of different faith traditions together for a common purpose and then bringing that group together with parliamentarians.

The Canadian Interfaith Partnership also employed numerous other technological methodologies in its hosting of the 2010 summit, for the dual purposes of enhancing the visibility of such a unique interfaith gathering and to continue to build a culture of peace, coexistence and mutual respect amongst the whole of humanity. The Summit was live-streamed, the keynote speeches recorded and archived on the faithchallenge8.com website and social media engaged. More traditional forms of media were also utilized – press releases, radio and television interviews, to the extent that the Canadian Interfaith Partnership members and numerous of the global delegates, particularly those from Africa, could not accommodate the volume of requests for interviews. Best practices in communications in terms of interfaith dialogue will, of course, vary depending on the nature of the event but for a public gathering and process, a wide variety of technical and communications methodologies, including social media need to be engaged. It is through FaceBook and Twitter that the next generations of interfaith dialogue leadership may be found and surely, building to such a next generation is the best possible practice in interfaith dialogue.

That is not to say that there are not challenges in the engaging of media and technology for successful interfaith activities. With such a new way of working and communicating, with such a rapidly changing and developing field, constant assessment is necessary. Between the writing of this paper and its presentation, the April 5th global Twitter campaign, already discussed, will have taken place. Its strengths, challenges and effectiveness will be assessed by its initiating body the Church of England and it is to be hoped that the results of that assessment will be available at the time of the presentation of this paper.

Given the rapidly changing nature of communications and technology, what the Canadian experience in the use of media for successful interfaith activities can say to date is that there are some particular challenges. One of which is most certainly the way in which current technology and media tend to favour short 'sound bites' over statements of depth, complexity and nuance. It is very easy for a 'sound bite' to be taken out of context as it is passed from one vehicle to another and is commented upon and re-commented upon as it travels. Another challenge is the current media/technology preference for visual images, often over the spoken word. What makes for a good visual image may or may not really reflect the process, the discussion and the fine arts of compromise and consensus. A third and related challenge may be the availability of information or partial information. It has

happened on occasion in Canada that sectors of a faith tradition have heard only parts, 'sound bites', so to speak of the depth of interfaith dialogue processes and practices and have misunderstood the full weight of the conversation and relationship. Awareness of these possibilities and of the strategies for encouraging them in positive directions requires necessary and frequent assessment.

A Canadian 'first' in the Summit process, initiated by the Canadian Interfaith Partnership, as a way of encouraging conversation on such challenges as those just discussed, was the media event that preceded the 2010 Summit. It was designed to be a professional development event, bringing together media representatives of various faith traditions. The media representatives discussed and developed strategies to encourage reporting on faith-based events in the secular press. The results of that conversation continue to develop with initial steps taken in January 2013 towards the formation of a Canadian chapter of the Religious Communicators Council. As interest and competence in interfaith dialogue continues to expand, it is crucial to give practitioners of various parts of that dialogue – media, artists, musicians, lawyers and specialists in particularly focused areas such as human rights, the opportunity to engage with their colleagues and counterparts in ways which not only build network but deepen particular areas of expertise.

The Canadian Interfaith Partnership, in the planning of its 2010 Summit to challenge and inspire the G8 and G20 has made a substantive move forward in the advocating for change through interfaith efforts in Canada. It did so by creating the opportunity for representatives of the faith traditions and faith-based organizations to build a significant relationship with the G8/G20 office ahead of the political summits. The Chair of the Interfaith Partnership had been in conversation with the G8 political Sherpa since the 2007 Interfaith Leaders Summit in Germany. The faith communities of Canada and the world were challenged by the Sherpa to communicate and work well ahead of the G8/G20 summits if they truly intended their voices and message to be heard by the political leadership of the globe. This was and is a very significant learning for the globe's faith communities, one that has continued to play a very important role in the planning of subsequent faith leaders summits to parallel, challenge and inspire the political summits. Faith communities must raise the moral and ethical bar in global conversations on the Millennium Development Goals and other key issues but they must do so conscious of the need to build relationships with and understand the processes of national and global governance institutions. That is the way to enhanced effectiveness for the sake of the vulnerable people of the world. As a result of this challenge to the faith communities by the Canadian G8 Sherpa, the draft of the 2010 faith leaders statement was released nine months before the Summit so that both the global Sherpas and political leadership and the media could consider it seriously.

In the planning of the 2010 Summit and continuing on in every subsequent year, the Canadian Interfaith Partnership has built unique and first-time relationships and collaborations. Included in relationships and collaborations with what might be called 'secular organizations' is The G8/G20 Research Group, the world's leading

G8/G20 academic research group, which has membership in the Canadian Interfaith Partnership. In 2009 and 2010, at the behest of the Canadian Interfaith Partnership, the Director of the G8/G20 Research Group, Dr. John Kirton spoke in various interfaith gatherings across Canada, on the topic of the Millennium Development Goals. The Partnership was aware that many Canadians had very little if any, knowledge of the MDGs. The five regional gatherings at which Dr. Kirton spoke thus had the dual purposes of providing education on the MDGs and their importance for the whole of humanity and solidifying and enhancing regional interfaith relationships. It was only two weeks ago that an article was submitted to the G8/G20 academic publication on behalf of the faith communities that make up the Canadian Interfaith Partnership and beyond. That marks the fourth time that such a widely distributed and completely secular publication, which reaches 10,000 policy and decision-makers, has included a faith-based article. It marks a very important initiative in building relationships with broad civil society and educating such civil and academic society in terms of the concerns and concrete expertise of faith traditions in such areas as environmental justice, a major theme of the sequence of Interfaith Leaders Summits.

During the preparations for the 2010 Interfaith Leaders Summit, during the process of the Summit itself and in an enhanced way in subsequent years, there has been and continues to be much dialogue with academic researchers interested in the relationship between religious values and life's issues. The involvement of the G8/G20 Research Group has been discussed above. What is also of long-term and global significance is the work of the sociologist Dr. Sherrie Steiner. Dr. Steiner has followed the summit process closely and with academic rigour since 2010, has conducted many interviews with delegates and organizers of summits and on the basis of her research, has written a number of peer-reviewed articles on the summit process and the effect of 'soft power' on global decision-making. Her work, in partnership with me, as the former Secretary General of the 2010 Interfaith Leaders Summit and the Professor of Dialogue Theology at the University of Winnipeg, has received an AAAA standing from the Social Sciences Humanities and Research Council of Canada. Dr. Steiner has been invited to present on the summit process and the work of the Canadian Interfaith Partnership at an up-coming international conference in Finland. She will be incorporating the process as it is enacted in the United Kingdom in 2013, as it is expected in Russia in 2014 and as it is enacted in Germany in 2015 into her published and peer-reviewed writing.

A very different element of a successful experience in Interfaith Dialogue can also be seen in the Canadian Interfaith Partnership's integration of some very significant cultural experiences into the dialogue context. As the 2010 Summit was physically being held on the treaty land of the Indigenous, First Nations Anishnabe peoples, the delegates of all faith traditions from the G8 countries and G20 regions were welcomed according to the music, words and drumming of the Anishnabe. There was a tent with a sacred fire burning throughout the Summit and Anishnabe official delegates. All delegates were also present for a performance of the world-acclaimed oratorio "I Believe", a modern oratorio with roots in the Holocaust but which speaks

of all past genocides and makes a powerful witness to the dignity, worth and names of all persons. The oratorio “I Believe” was written by a Ukrainian Catholic Christian. These were not the kind of information-sharing dialogue practices that have been common in Canada in past interfaith events – talking about festivals, holy days and social justice initiatives, important as those are. Rather, these cultural opportunities and experiences both dug deeply into the roots and beliefs of faith traditions even if those roots and traditions were difficult for others to completely understand and raised up the opportunities for all those present to see themselves and the joys and challenges of their faith in the light of the joys and challenges of other traditions.

And a final note about the successful experience in Interfaith Dialogue in terms of the delicate use of words and language, particularly the words and language used to refer to what so many traditions call ‘God’. It is fairly easy to arrive at common terminology for the addressing of world hunger, poverty alleviation and climate change issues but harder to determine how faith traditions, in their diversity and yet working together in best practices, will refer to the foundation and centre of their faith. At the 2007 Summit, it was determined that all the faith traditions gathered could use the term ‘Divine Imperative’ for the transcendent reality which impelled and mandated them to active engagement with and for others. That term was not the first choice for all faiths but one that they could live with in the deep spirit of relationship. The Canadian Interfaith Conversation has continued to build on that understanding and the term ‘Divine Imperative’ continues to be used. It is an essential learning that best practices in such areas as the use of language in interfaith dialogue may prioritize relationship and push the boundaries of understanding around what is acceptable compromise and what is not according to the theology, practice and polity of faith traditions.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude any discussion of the past and the present is to speak to the future. The continuity of the work of the Canadian Interfaith Partnership in the on-going series of Interfaith Leaders Summits has been made clear in this paper. The influences of the work of the Partnership, particularly through many Canadian ‘firsts’ in best practices and successful experiences in interfaith dialogue on present and future summits has also been articulated. Interfaith Dialogue continues to develop locally, regionally and globally and what can be seen as future elements of the work of the Canadian Interfaith Partnership include not only the development of a Canadian Interfaith Council but the growing momentum of youth and children’s interfaith dialogue involvement and the ongoing, developing relationship of faith communities with both political decision-makers and secular organizations, a relationship which includes learning from and about each other’s priorities and ways of speaking and working. Future elements of the work of the Canadian Interfaith Partnership will also include ongoing engagement with academic study and processes, the continuing refinement of accountability in representation, the use of the consensus model of decision-making and the growing ability of the faith communities to speak

both with concrete expertise and common language so that the faith communities of the world can continue to engage all constituencies of the world.

In the scriptural texts that are shared by both Judaism and Christianity there is a story of a woman called Esther who finds herself in a situation in which she can make a tremendous difference. In spite of doubt, fear and trepidation, she discovers the courage and the resources both within herself and in the context around her to make that difference. It is in fact said to her within the story that perhaps she is in the position that she is for the ultimate purpose of making that difference, perhaps she is in the position that she is "...for just such a time as this." (The Book of Esther 4:14b)

Surely that is the ultimate goal of any best practices and successful experience in interfaith dialogue, to make a tremendous difference to the peoples of the world and the very globe itself. Surely that is why we are all here at just such a time as this.

The world-renowned and articulate theologian Dr. Hans Kung, has declared that, "There will be peace on earth when there is peace among the world religions."

To paraphrase, with some audacity, Hans Kung, there will be peace on earth when there is peace among the world religions, a broad, creative and inclusive peace that brings justice for all people and for the earth itself.

Respectfully submitted:
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