



August 13, 2002

2002-191

## **Episcopal Church welcomes delegation from Muslim World League to New York**

**by James Solheim**

**(ENS)** A high-ranking delegation representing the Muslim World League visited with Episcopal Church leaders in New York during a national "good will" tour in mid-July, laying the groundwork for what participants hope will be a continuing dialogue.

Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold welcomed the delegation to the Episcopal Church Center, describing his visit to Rachel's Tomb near Jerusalem several years ago. As he stood in quiet prayer, it occurred to him that the mingled prayers at the tomb could be a metaphor for the relationship among the three Abrahamic religions--Christianity, Judaism and Islam--and the common history they share.

H.E. Dr. Abdullah Al-Turki, secretary general of the league and a member of the High Council of Scholars in Saudi Arabia, said that the league's visit was an "opportunity to extend cooperation and mutual understanding with other faiths." He added that members of the delegation also hoped to "clarify misconceptions" and emphasize that "Islam is a religion of tolerance and understanding. We should be talking about cooperation instead of conflict so that we can have peace in the whole world," he said.

Dr. Jamal Badawi, president of the Islamic Information Council in Toronto, said that the religions should not argue "except in the best possible way." While Islam and Christianity share the same Lord "there are important theological differences in their understanding and interpretation." Yet he argued that it is important to establish common ground at the beginning of any dialogue because then "hearts are opened and it is a healthy way to start."

### **Going beyond courtesies**

Badawi said that, in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and the Pentagon, there has been a campaign of "Islam bashing," with allegations that Islam is not a religion of peace. He expressed a hope that, through dialogue, it will be possible to deal with such questions, going "beyond courtesy and get into difficult issues."

Al-Turki added that there are people in all religions who exploit religion but "cooperation will make it difficult for them to create conflict." He said that "when non-believers attack any religion they attack all religions."

During the open discussion, Dr. Christopher Taylor, an Episcopalian who teaches religion and Islamic studies at Drew University in New Jersey and one of a dozen ecumenical guests at the meeting, said that he sees two different problems--an ignorance of Islam but also a lack of respect for religious pluralism that has developed in much of the Islamic world. In response, Badawi said that the issue was not really one of tolerance but the acceptance of religious realities. He pointed out that Spain, for example, was more accepting of a variety of religious practices than any other

civilization. He argued that the media often ignores the persecution of Muslims while exaggerating the persecution of Christians.

### **Sharing common ground**

The delegation was welcomed to the Diocese of New York by Bishop Mark Sisk who noted the commonalities between the two religions but added, "We share important history, some of which divides us, but ancient and equally important parts of which draw us together." He said that the two religions share "our belief in the One God who is eternal and almighty, the One God who is known and who is yet beyond all knowing. At this difficult time in the history of our city, nation and world, we must work hard to keep dialogue alive--to keep active our search for common ground and shared concerns."

In looking forward to future dialogue, Sisk said that it was important to him that "all people, of whatever race, culture or religion, be treated equally and fairly before the law. I see it as just as important for me to take this stand on behalf of Muslims in our country as I do for Christians. Therefore, as part of our dialogue that I hope will unfold over the years, you can expect, often, to hear me inquire about the treatment of Christians in your countries," he said. "It is terribly important to all the leaders of our church that we assure the safety of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and their ability to worship peacefully." He asked members of the delegation to "help us achieve this important goal."

Bishop Christopher Epting, deputy for the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, said that "this is simply an example of the kind of thing our new work in interfaith education makes possible. It is one way to 'wage reconciliation,' which is what our presiding bishop and the House of Bishops has called this church to be about."

Dr. Lucinda Allen Mosher, who coordinates the Interfaith Education Initiative (a joint project of Episcopal Relief and Development and the ecumenical office), said after the meetings, "What was significant to me was that--even if just for a few moments--we were able to move the conversation from the very formal, very measured, to the deeply heartfelt."

The Muslim delegation included leaders from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nigeria, India, Canada and the United States.

---

—James Solheim is director of Episcopal News Service. Neva Rae Fox, director of communications for the Diocese of New York, contributed to this article.

---