

# Venturing beyond my faith community

## A pastor's musings on interfaith engagement

April Yamasaki

For the last two years, I've been invited to participate in an interfaith forum hosted by the local Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at.<sup>1</sup> "As people of faith, I feel we should have some kind of relationship," the president explained

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when he first called me. He suggested fasting as an aid to peace as a topic that I and several other speakers could address from our different faith traditions. What's more, he offered to arrange the venue and publicity. We would both invite people to attend, and his group would provide a meal for everyone to share. All the arrangements went well, and it turned out to be such a wonderful evening that I readily agreed to take part the following year.

Last January, I spoke for the first time in a Catholic church, as part of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Instead of a week of services hosted by different congregations, the planning committee decided on a Sunday afternoon joint time of worship. The Catholic priest led the opening liturgy. A United Church of Canada minister read the invitation to confession. The choir director was from the Anglican church. Those who gathered for this unity service included members of churches of various denominations and no denomination, people who were regular churchgoers and those who were simply curious.

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1 The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at (AMJ) describes itself as an international revival movement within Islam. Founded in 1889, it spans 200 countries and has millions of members. See <https://www.alislam.org/library/ahmadiyya-muslim-community/>.

I felt both challenged and honored to preach the sermon on reconciliation, our chosen theme.

Apart from my pastoral ministry, I blog regularly on spiritual growth and Christian living, and I connect with many different people through social media. Some proclaim Christ and readily identify themselves as Christian. Some may be Christian but wear that label reluctantly or uneasily. Some have left the church, deeming it unnecessary or irrelevant. Some are from other religions, or no religion, or say they are spiritual but not religious. The religious plurality of the online world stretches as far as my Internet connection can take me.

But with my next sermon looming, an urgent call from a church member who is being evicted, a council meeting to prepare for, and other pastoral responsibilities, why engage in these other contexts at all? I have emails waiting from my sisters, and a day's worth of dishes on my kitchen counter, so why not simply attend to these matters close at hand? Church and household and a personal life with family and friends can fill every moment and more. Yet for me, the time spent in these other contexts is time well spent, both for my congregation and for me personally.

### **Nurturing the spirit of the congregation**

The week before my first interfaith forum, I got a phone call from someone in our wider Christian community concerned that the event might somehow represent a watering down of Christian faith. "How can you be part of this?" she asked. "They don't believe in the same God."

I tried to explain that instead of watering down my faith, this was an opportunity to share it. "Whenever we talk with someone who doesn't share our faith, that's actually a form of interfaith dialogue—whether that person is a neighbour, a co-worker, or even someone in our own family," I said. This event was simply an opportunity to do that in a more deliberate and formal way. "Will you be attending?" I asked her.

"Oh no," she said. "I'll be on my knees praying."

As I continued to prepare for the event, I prayed too—for God's leading and for clarity about what to say, for a readiness to listen with respect, for grace and authentic relationship among those who would be present. That evening, I spoke to the group of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and others who had gathered. I focused on our theme of fasting and peace, because that was our common ground for the evening. As part of that presentation, I shared Jesus's experience of fasting, his way of peace, and what it means to follow him as a Christian.

Among those gathered, I counted about twenty-five people from my congregation who came to listen and stayed for the meal that followed. Some had previous cross-cultural experience and were very much in favor of interfaith conversation. Some came with more caution and questions. But all of us appreciated the hospitality of our hosts, who provided water and appetizers for us, even though their Ramadan observance meant that



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they were waiting for sundown to break their fast, which had begun at sunrise. The atmosphere of welcome and mutual respect encouraged us to listen well and to be authentic in expressing our own faith.

I can't say this one event changed us as a congregation. After all, only a fraction of our church members attended, and it was just one evening. But I believe it did help to nurture our spirit—by providing a good example of proclaiming Christ in a plural context, in helping us reflect on and articulate to someone unfamiliar with the Christian faith what it means to follow Christ, in raising good questions about our identity as Chris-

tians, and in encouraging us to reflect on how to relate to people who do not have the same commitment.

"It's too bad that the woman who phoned you earlier didn't come," said one of the members of my congregation who attended the event. "She would have seen how this was an opportunity to share Christ in a positive way."

I wished she had been there too, and the next week I was pleasantly surprised when she called me to find out how the evening had gone. "And no one interrupted you or harassed you for speaking about Christ?" she asked. "No," I assured her. "It was all very respectful."

Then she told me that one evening she had been at a Bible study at her church when a Muslim couple had come looking for help. She had invited them in, introduced them to her pastor, and said to them, "We don't believe the same, but I love you."

I had to smile at her story. In spite of her reservations about the interfaith forum, when she actually met a couple from another faith, she had

found her own way of expressing God's love. I couldn't help but think that her prayers and mine had both been answered.

### **Nurturing my own spirit**

A few years ago, I wrote an article on my twenty-two best practices in twenty-two years of pastoral ministry.<sup>2</sup> Many of these also apply to my experiences in contexts of religious plurality:

- *Do what you love*—which for me includes meeting a variety of people
- *Have a great support system*—including members of my church who pray for me regularly
- *Pray and read scripture*—for these provide good grounding for all of life and ministry
- *Invest in ongoing learning*—like talking to a pastor with more experience in interfaith dialogue, and turning to resources like the Religion Communicators' Council<sup>3</sup> and *A Journey Together: A Resource for Christian Muslim Dialogue*<sup>4</sup>
- *Experiment*—like being involved in my first interfaith forum, speaking at a unity service, starting a blog
- *Develop a thick skin*—so I am not undone when there are questions or disagreement
- *Run to Jesus*—in times of doubt and discouragement, when all my best practices fail me, and any time

To these and other best practices, I would now add

- *Interact with people of other church, religious, and nonreligious backgrounds*

While my own congregation takes priority in my pastoral ministry, interacting with others beyond the congregation adds another dimension that helps keep me fresh. It keeps me asking what I mean when I say I'm a Christian, and it keeps me humble when I meet people who have never heard the good news of Jesus or who were once part of the church and

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2 April Yamasaki, "My 22 Best Practices in 22 Years of Pastoral Ministry," *April Yamasaki: Writing and Other Acts of Faith*, April 6, 2015, <https://apriyamasaki.com/2015/04/06/my-22-best-practices-in-22-years-of-pastoral-ministry/>.

3 See their website at <http://www.religioncommunicators.org/>.

4 Gerard Forde, comp., *A Journey Together: A Resource for Christian Muslim Dialogue* (Wilton, Cork, Ireland: Cois Tine, 2013), <http://www.coistine.ie/images/stories/journeytogether/a%20journey%20together.pdf>.

have found it wanting. The faith and way of life that have become so precious to me are seen by many as odd, old-fashioned, and irrelevant. Their response reminds me never to take faith for granted but to treasure it, give thanks, celebrate, and share it where I am able.

A number of years ago I went to a city-wide gathering of pastors and other Christian leaders. I hadn't met the pastor of a neighboring church, although both he and I had been serving our congregations for some time. "Is Pastor \_\_\_\_\_ here?" I asked one of the other pastors. "We haven't met, and I'd like to introduce myself."

"Oh no," was the reply. "He's not here. You'll never see him outside of his church."

I was taken aback by the comment, but I suppose it was warranted, because to this day, we've never met. I've never seen him outside of



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his church, and I never have gone there to introduce myself. I have no idea why he stays so consistently within his own church, but I know how prone I am to stay within the comfort zone of my own congregation. After all, that's where I am known and loved, where my gifts are received gladly, where even when we disagree we speak the same language of faith.

Venturing beyond my community of faith can be challenging and downright scary. Yet it also nurtures my spirit in healthy ways: reconfirming and reinforcing my identity as a Christian, helping me grow in humility and thanksgiving, reminding me that God so loved not

just the church but the whole wide world. I'm energized by that awareness, and as I seek to engage the world around me, I also find many new connections between what I read online and what I preach, between the concerns of my church and the concerns of people in the broader community. This exposure too nurtures my spirit.

### **Nurturing the broader community**

In a world that is fractured in so many ways, where there is violence on a national and international scale, and a drive-by shooting on the street I

pass by every day on the way to my church, it is clear that many communities are bruised, broken, and in need of healing. Fostering interfaith dialogue and relationships is one way to work at that healing.

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I appreciated the opportunity to speak at my first interfaith forum, but for me the highlight was visiting afterward over the meal. The local Sikh temple had done a fine job in preparing rice, chicken, dal, and other foods, with plenty for everyone. I sat at a table with our emcee for the evening, who was both a member of the local Ahmadiyya Muslim

Jama' and also an officer with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He pointed out his wife and daughters, who were busy helping with the meal, and we compared notes on some of the challenges of being a family of faith in a secular society.

Several other members of his group joined our conversation, and I learned that they were a minority group within Islam and had experienced persecution. Their concern for peace and interfaith dialogue had emerged out of that painful history. "Love for all, hatred for none," they said.

"The Anabaptist-Mennonite church is also a minority, in the Christian faith," I told them. "We also have a history of being persecuted and a deep concern for peace. We also believe that God calls us to love everyone and hate no one."

As we conversed around our little table, I felt that we were no longer strangers but neighbors in the same community, with common concerns for our families and for peaceful relationships. Even the concerns we had for our respective faith communities seemed remarkably familiar: How do we pass on faith to our children? How do we live out faith in our world today?

And yet we clearly had our differences. My understanding of Jesus as Saviour and Lord was foreign to them. They did not read the Bible, and I did not know the Quran. They had been fasting all day for Ramadan and only broke their fast when the sun had gone down—after 9:00 that night. In contrast, I had eaten breakfast, lunch—and even supper, because I knew that our shared meal wouldn't start until late.

Yet for all our differences, we all still live in the same city and we could nurture our sense of community by eating together, by sharing our

stories and our lives. Even if only for one evening, our time together was a sign of hope: instead of fear and suspicion there was listening and mutual respect.

### **Growing in witness**

I confess that I've never gone knocking on doors to share my faith, and apart from one brief stint with Campus Crusade for Christ when I was a university student, I've never spent much time handing out tracts. I often read a book instead of striking up a conversation with the stranger beside me on the plane. And yet I'm convicted by Jesus's great commission, which still stands for us today: "All authority in heaven and on earth



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has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19–20, NRSV).

I rely pretty heavily on that last part of verse 20. Jesus is with me—with us—"to the end of the age." That means Jesus is with us in the church and beyond it, among brothers and sisters in the family of Christian faith and in contexts of religious plurality. His presence gives me the courage to move beyond my own

church context, to reach out when I'd rather stay at home. His presence gives me the assurance that I'm not alone, that I don't have to make things happen, for all authority has been given to him.

I can't say that I've made any new disciples by participating in interfaith forums or speaking at a unity service or through my blogging and online presence. My job isn't to count the sheep, and that's a good thing! Yet I know from comments I've received that by God's grace I've had a small part in encouraging those who are struggling, in lifting up the weary, in teaching those who are wanting to learn and grow along with me.

That's why I wrote *Sharing Faith Stories*, a six-week Bible study recently released by Herald Press. I did not write it because I always share my faith easily. I wrote it because I'm wanting to grow in doing so, and I hope to

encourage others too. Early in this Bible study series, I recount this opportunity to proclaim Christ in a plural context: “One Friday afternoon, two young women came to my church and asked if they could see inside. Both were visiting from India, and they were so excited because they had never been inside a church before. They loved the red carpet, they loved the pews, they loved how big the sanctuary looked. And then one of them said, ‘But we have a question. Can you tell us the story of Jesus?’”<sup>5</sup> What a surprise and an absolute delight to share my faith with them!

Opportunities abound for proclaiming Christ in plural contexts—from interfaith forums to more personal interactions like this one, from real life encounters with people from other Christian denominations to virtual encounters online with people from various backgrounds around the world. I don’t know what other opportunities may come my way, but I hope to continue to grow in this witness.

Next year I would love to be involved again in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and my congregation has already indicated a willingness to host. I plan to continue blogging and interacting informally with people online, and I’m open to taking part in another interfaith forum, should the opportunity arise. And who knows? Perhaps I’ll meet other strangers seeking to hear the story of Jesus. Whatever and whenever opportunities come my way, I plan to be ready—because God so loves the world, because Jesus commissions us and is with us, because proclaiming Christ nurtures my spirit and the spirit of my congregation, and because it helps build healthy community.

### **About the author**

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5 April Yamasaki, *Sharing Faith Stories* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), 8.