

## Interfaith Dialogue: Balm for a Polarized Culture – Dr. Daniel Kroger

The story is told of a Chinese warlord who sent his lieutenant into battle with the exhortation to “destroy the enemy!” Instead, seeing that the odds were against him, the lieutenant sent a delegation and was able to bring back an agreement of peace. The warlord, incensed screamed, “I told you to destroy the enemy!” “I did,” replied the lieutenant, “I made them my friends.”

Several years ago, at the invitation of Rabbi Michael Birnholz of Temple Beth Shalom, Jackie Cole, religious education director, and I at Holy Cross Catholic Church both in Vero Beach, Florida, began an interfaith dialogue that involved around twenty-five members of both congregations. We had gotten to know one another and had been engaged in sharing knowledge about each other’s origins and beliefs. We decided that it was time to experience more. So we chartered a bus to take the dialogue on the road to Miami. There we toured the [Catholic Cathedral of St. Mary](#) and, after lunch, went to the [Jewish Museum of Florida](#) which is housed in a former synagogue on Miami Beach. We gathered to listen to the docent who, among other things, pointed out the mikvah, a place for ritual bathing for women. In his talk, he referred to its similarity “for the baptism of Catechumens.” Curious that he would know such terminology, Rabbi told the docent that we were a group engaged in interfaith dialogue. The docent, obviously moved by this revelation, paused and said, “In that case, let me share a personal story that only a group such as yourselves could fully appreciate.

My mother, sister and I were on a train in Italy trying to escape the Nazis. By mistake, we later learned, the Allies bombed the train and I got separated from my mother and sister. I was very little and very scared. I remember that someone found me and somehow, I made my way to a Catholic monastery. It turned out that they had sheltered many Jews during the war years. One day, I was in the sacristy, where priests got ready for Mass. There were several wardrobes where they stored the vestments the priests would wear. Suddenly someone came in to warn the Abbot, the head of the monastery that Nazi soldiers were coming. He lifted me up and pushed me into the top of the wardrobe and told me to be quiet. The Nazi officer came up to the Abbot and shouted, ‘I know that you have Jews in this place!’ I heard the abbot’s reply, ‘Yes, there is one up on that wall, hanging on that cross.’ I heard a gunshot and thought that the abbot was dead. After a while I heard some footsteps and then I heard the abbot say, ‘It’s okay, he only shot next to my ear to scare me, you’re ok too!’ That priest saved my life and later I was reunited with my mother and sister. We Jews lived because of people of your faith – thank you!”

That docent was moved by the presence of an interfaith group. I wondered how others, so involved, would share the value of their experiences. Rabbi Michael immediately referenced the docent incident and then referred to Isaiah 2: 1-5, “All nations shall stream toward it (the mountain of the Lord’s house).” He said, “A dialogue, like ours, is comprised of stories and traditions from each group.” And then he added, “When they come together, the whole is larger than its parts. In the stories, texts and artifacts we learn to appreciate the best of each tradition.”

Retired Lutheran pastor, Jack Deihl, who organizes the local Ministerial Association takes it further, “In our polarized world it is easy to hate groups, it is NOT as easy to hate individuals whom we get to know over monthly lunch gatherings. Over the years we have come to realize that it is less a matter of right and wrong; it’s more about appreciating being different.”

Presbyterian pastor Les Koerselman told me that “a dialogue encourages us to review the other side and to interact with it. Sometimes insecurity makes us want to ‘circle the wagons.’ In dialogue we can lay down emotional hangups. To use a football analogy, are you a wide receiver or a tight end?”

Catholic priest, Fr. Pat O’Neill, who was coordinator of Interfaith Dialogue for the Archdiocese of Miami said, “Pew Research reveals a decline in people who identify with organized religion. If we continue to emphasize our differences, what keeps us apart, no one will go to church.” He also referred the groundbreaking work that came about as a result of Vatican II and “now we have sixty years of engagement with people of other faiths, engagement that draws us closer to our one Father in heaven.”

Jewish congregant, Larry Wapnik found that interfaith dialogue was integral to his efforts to create a local monument to the memory of [The Four Chaplains](#) who were aboard the World War II troop transport *Dorchester*. The chaplains represented four different faith traditions: Jewish, Catholic, Methodist and Reformed. Larry told me, “These individuals comforted the sailors, performed ceremonies for the sailors and gave their lives to save the sailors when the ship was torpedoed. We could not have created the memorial, had it not been for our local interfaith work.”

Muslim Imam, Derrick Peat considers interfaith dialogue as a “safe platform to discuss differences of opinion in a civilized manner.” His experience began as a student at the University of Florida. “That safe place helped us to build bridges of support like working to feed the poor in a soup kitchen staffed by members of our group,” he told me.

My co-worker and fellow leader of our Jewish-Catholic dialogue, Jackie Cole relishes the “friendships we made with our Jewish brothers and sisters. We still pray for them and with them in times of need and engage with many of them socially,” she said. Some of our members joined the group because they, like Maryanne, had friends who were Jewish or others who had relatives who were married to Jewish people and they wanted to learn more about that faith. Maryanne told me that the dialogue helped to “broaden her horizons” and she is better able to “pass on insights to others to help clear up confusions or preconceived notions.” Maryanne was on that bus trip and she remarked, “I still remember the story of that docent...”

*If you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go TOGETHER – African proverb.*