

## 10 Years of the Festival of Faiths by Hilary Bogert

*This report was updated in 2009 to reflect the name change of the Cathedral Heritage Foundation to the Center for Interfaith Relations in 2006, though the report reflects research conducted by Hillary Bogert in 2005.*

In 1996 the Center for Interfaith Relations (formerly the Cathedral Heritage Foundation) of Louisville, Kentucky held its first annual Festival of Faiths to celebrate the religious heritage of the Louisville region. This interfaith event has since grown to be recognized by the United States Senate as a model for interfaith activity (1). This year marked the tenth anniversary of the Festival of Faiths.

### History

The Festival of Faiths is organized by the Center for Interfaith Relations. The Center (formerly the Cathedral Heritage Foundation) was formed in 1985 to oversee the restoration of the Cathedral of the Assumption in downtown Louisville. In 1991 they organized the first Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, and in 1992 they received a grant from the Lilly Endowment to begin a Museum of Faiths. The mission of the Center since 2006, when its name was officially changed, has been a “focus on interfaith understanding, cooperation and action” (2).

The Festival of Faiths is a week-long program consisting of events centered on a particular theme. Past themes have included “Song and Celebration,” “Healing Mind, Body & Soul,” and “Faith and Families.” The Festival also features many guest speakers and panelists. Among these speakers have been Deepak Chopra, Diana Eck, Robert Kennedy, Rabbi Harold Kushner, and Martin Marty. As one of its major outreach projects, the Center saw fit to write a mission statement specifically for the Festival. The mission is “to celebrate the diversity of our faiths, be grateful for our unity and strengthen the role of religion in society” (3).

As a research associate for the Pluralism Project, I attended the 2005 Festival of Faiths. While there I was able to participate in several Festival events as well as speak to participants about their experiences. This data was enhanced with information about the Festival of Faiths found on the Center’s website. The following event descriptions and participant reactions are based on my research at the Festival.

### 2005 Festival of Faiths

The 2005 Festival of Faiths was held from November 6-13. The theme was “The Faces of Faith and Cooperation,” and the Festival consisted of twelve events that addressed this theme. As part of the tenth year of the Festival, the Center for Interfaith Relations also started the Passports to Understanding Program to carry the work of the Festival on throughout the year.

### The Passports to Understanding Program

The 2004-2005 year marked the first year of the Passports to Understanding Program. The purpose of the program is to invite pilgrims (individuals/families) to enhance their understanding of various faith traditions by visiting area houses of worship (4). “Pilgrims” must visit at least three houses of worship on the list of participating communities and have their “passports” signed by the official guide for the community. Participants are encouraged to 1) visit the house of worship and speak to a guide about the house’s faith tradition, 2) attend a worship service, and/or 3) attend an official “Passport Event” hosted by the community. After visiting at least three faith communities, participants turn in their passports for a certificate of completion as well as a coupon from a local retailer. Pilgrims have the entire year to visit the houses of worship and redeem their passports. The length of the program is meant to extend the work of the Center for Interfaith Relations and the Festival beyond the one week in November.

### Interfaith Thanksgiving Service

The Interfaith Thanksgiving service, “Hope in the Face of Violence: A Community Celebration of Thanksgiving,” took place on Tuesday, November 8. The first service was held in 1991—before the Festival of Faiths was started—and continues to be a standard event at the Festival. The service was held in the Cathedral of the Assumption, and was attended by over three hundred people.

Monks from the Sera Jhe Monastery in India led the procession, followed by members of Louisville’s various faith communities. After a gathering prayer, the congregation sang an interfaith hymn, “O Wondrous Weaver, Weave Through Us.” The service also included readings from the sacred texts of different religious traditions, including the Qur’an, the Rig Veda, the Upanishads, the Hebrew Bible, and the Christian New Testament. The homilists for the evening—Rev. Dr. Kevin W. Crosby of St. Stephen’s Church in Louisville and Rev. Dr. Dean K. Thompson of the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary—emphasized the responsibility of people of faith to take a stand against violence and make the community a safer place.

The ritual action for the evening focused on the theme of peace-making. Fifty children were involved in the service to serve as a reminder that “we pledged to work to ensure that they live in a world without violence” (5). The Kol HaNashema, a teen choir from a local Jewish synagogue, provided the music for the ritual. Two young Hindu children lit the candles at the end of each row, and the flame was then passed from candle to candle throughout the congregation. These candles were then placed in sand at the center of the worship space to mark participants’ commitment to peace.

A reception followed the service in the undercroft of the church. Artwork from area children adorned the walls. Many of the people who attended the reception were family members of the children involved in the service. While some of the participants would attend other Festival events, this was the only Festival activity for many due to the time constraints on many families.

### Interdependence as Cooperation Lecture

On Wednesday, November 9, at noon there was a lecture given by Geshe Gelek Chodak about the Buddhist idea of interdependence as the foundation for cooperation. His talk centered on his belief that the foundation of cooperation starts within oneself. The purpose of religious practice, no matter what religion it may be, is to develop something positive within ourselves. That positive something is compassion. The Geshe stressed that as we cultivate compassion in ourselves, we are then able to use that compassion as the foundation for cooperation in the community.

This lecture, held downtown at the Actor's Theater during the lunch hour, attracted many people on their lunch breaks. According to participant Julie Cisne, "This was a free event, close to work, with a schedule that allowed me to participate, so it was very accessible" (6).

As an ongoing event, and one that accompanied this lecture, monks from the Sera Jhe monastery constructed a sand mandala in the theater. The construction was open for the public to view from Wednesday to Friday, and a deconstruction ceremony took place on Sunday to mark the close of the Festival.

### Children of Abraham Dinner

The Children of Abraham dinner was held on Wednesday, November 9. This year's dinner was held at the Louisville Islamic Center with an attendance of over one hundred people. Before becoming part of the Festival of Faiths, the dinner was held by the Louisville Islamic Center, The Temple (a local Jewish congregation), and James Lee Presbyterian Church. Many of the people who attended this year's dinner were from the original three groups and have continued to go to the event after its incorporation into the Festival. The dinner began with a vegetarian meal provided by the Islamic Center, during which people had time to converse with others at their tables. The event concluded with a service using Christian, Jewish, and Muslim prayers. There was a call to worship from each tradition, an interfaith litany of thanksgiving, and readings from the sacred texts of each tradition.

### Interfaith Prayer Breakfast

The Interfaith Prayer Breakfast was held on Thursday, November 10. This breakfast featured the presentation of awards as well as a keynote speaker. The monks of Sera Jhe provided the opening prayer for the breakfast, chanting in Tibetan on the front stage.

Two awards were presented at this year's breakfast. The first was the Faith Award, given to someone who has shown a sustained contribution to the community and who is led by their particular faith tradition. The Faith Award for 2005 went to Mr. Jay Davidson of [The Healing Place](#), an organization that helps those dealing with addictions. The Harmony Awards are given to houses of worship, community centers or organizations involved in ecumenical or interreligious activities. The Hands in Harmony Award, for ecumenical/interreligious service, went to [Hand in Hand Ministries](#). This is a global service organization that works especially with children in Central America and the

Caribbean. The Hearts in Harmony Award, for ecumenical/interreligious dialogue, went to [Highland Community Ministries](#), the oldest community ministry in the Louisville area.

Dr. Martin Marty then gave a speech entitled "Bridging the Interfaith Divide: Hospitality and the Stranger from Another Faith." He stressed that there is a divide between different faiths, and that this divide needs bridging. Hospitality to the stranger is a way of bridging this divide; otherwise we face consequences such as war and terrorism. What we need are "articles of peace" instead of "articles of consensus" (7). The Festival of Faiths, according to Dr. Marty, is a specific example of this kind of bridging. Marty criticized some interfaith activities as "merely celebrative, giving off signals that it mattered not at all what one believes, and how one practices the particular faith is of no consequence." But, he noted, Louisville's Festival of Faiths is an event that calls "people to open their doors and hearts and be hospitable, take courage, will and endurance, despite their differences and while recognizing those differences" (8).

#### *Acting on Faith* Film Screening

Every year a film screening is included in the Festival of Faiths. The event consists of a film followed by discussion. Last year's Festival screened the film *Bonhoeffer*, and this year's film was [Acting on Faith: Women's New Religious Activism in America](#), released by Rachel Antell and the Pluralism Project in early 2005. The film was well-received, and a panel of speakers led the discussion afterward. This panel included Mushim Ikeda-Nash, one of the women featured in the film and a writer for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship's magazine [Turning Wheel](#); Dr. Ursula King, visiting professor at the [University of Louisville](#); and Janene Shakir, coordinator of community programming for the Peace Education Program. The moderator of the panel was Dr. Mary Ann Stenger of the University of Louisville. The discussion consisted of questions from the audience, which the panelists then addressed. Much of the discussion at the session focused on issues of race as well as the experiences of women and families in particular religious traditions.

#### Faces of Cooperation within the Christian Community Luncheon

The Faces of Cooperation luncheon was held on Friday, November 11, at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. The keynote speaker was Dr. Robert Edgar, general secretary for the National Council of Churches of Christ. During lunch, Dr. Edgar spoke about the poverty and environmental issues of the modern world and stressed that we must look beyond our denominational differences in order to fix these problems. Edgar, who served in the House of Representatives for twelve years, spoke about the need for people of faith to take action and inform their representatives about these problems. Only then will more action be taken to correct these poverty and environmental issues.

#### Faith and Cooperation in a Nuclear Age Panel

On Friday evening there was a panel held at the Cathedral of the Assumption addressing the topic of "Faith and Cooperation in a Nuclear Age." The panel featured three guest speakers: Dan Poneman, special assistant to the president from 1993-1996 and a specialist on nuclear issues; Thomas Graham, a United States ambassador at the forefront of government issues concerning nuclear weapons; and Robert McNamara, Secretary of

Defense from 1961-1968. The moderator of the panel was Dr. Robert Edgar. The evening began with a performance by Zade Dirani, a 25-year-old Jordanian composer whose composition served as a moment of centering before the panel began. His piece was especially poignant given the violence that was occurring at the time in his home city of Amman, Jordan.

Mr. Poneman spoke first about his views concerning the situation of the world in regards to nuclear issues. He pointed out that while nuclear weapons cause terrible destruction, nuclear power provides electricity for many parts of the world. He also noted that there need to be better measures taken to ensure the safe disposal of nuclear waste. His major point was that people of faith could bring moral clarity to the issues surrounding nuclear proliferation. People could reach across walls that divide nations through religion, and these kinds of bonds must be created in order to prevent antipathy about issues like nuclear proliferation.

Mr. Graham was the second speaker, and he emphasized that people of faith must make nuclear proliferation an issue of central importance. He admitted that only governments could get rid of nuclear weapons, but that people of faith could step forward and urge their governments to do so. He also noted that trust in the United States among the world community is gone, and that we must regain that trust and engage in the international rule of law, through initiatives like the International Criminal Court and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This, according to Graham, is a moral imperative.

Robert McNamara was the final speaker for the evening. He pointed out that it has been fifteen years since the Cold War ended, and we still have two thousand nuclear warheads on high alert (meaning they can be launched with a fifteen minute warning). This, according to McNamara, is immoral and illegal. He stressed that every faith community must ask what it could do to stop nuclear proliferation and must take a stand against it. For McNamara, there is nothing more demanding of people of faith than to push the world's governments to get rid of nuclear weapons because "it's absurd, immoral, and demands your attention."

#### The 3rd Annual Mayor's Neighborhood Summit

On Saturday, November 12, the Neighborhoods Department for Metro Louisville hosted the third annual Mayor's Neighborhood Summit. While this was not an event explicitly connected with the Festival, it was referred to in the programs and schedules of Festival events as something participants might be interested in, specifically the workshop entitled "Faith Communities and Neighborhood Associations."

This workshop was led by a panel of three Louisville citizens involved with community ministries in the area. These panelists were Stan Esterle of [Highlands Community Ministries](#), Rev. Ron Loughry of [Fern Creek/Highview Community Ministries](#), and Norma Mason-Stikes of West Louisville Community Ministries. The major emphasis of the panel was that neighborhood associations and faith communities must talk to one another and work together. The panelists noted that every street in Metro Louisville is covered by a United Ministry. These ministries provide services for anyone within their

community in need, regardless of religious affiliation. While some of the United Ministries are interfaith, the majority of them are Christian. The panelists also pointed out that the ministries do not evangelize or proselytize.

One attendee asked about how the United Ministries, many of which are dominated by Christian churches, are meeting the needs of the new non-Christian immigrants in the region. Mr. Esterle noted that after 9/11, Highlands Community Ministries realized that their interfaith dialogue could not be restricted to Christian-Jewish conversations. He said that they now have a four-way dialogue among Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Highlands area. The goal for Highlands Community Ministries in 2006 is to expand these dialogue meetings to have one for two hundred middle school students, one for two hundred high school students, and another for two hundred college students. He emphasized the need to reach out to the youth of the community and encourage interfaith dialogue.

#### Night of 1,000 Stars

The Night of 1,000 Stars, held on Saturday, November 12, was a black-tie service and dinner hosted by the Center for Interfaith Relations to honor those who have made lasting contributions to the Louisville community in the realm of ecumenical and interfaith work. The evening began at the Cathedral of the Assumption with an interfaith service featuring readings from sacred texts and music from different ensembles. After the candles everyone received at the service were lit, the congregation processed across the street for the dinner, awards presentation, and dance.

#### Participant Reactions

Several people who attended various Festival events thought that it was an important program for the Louisville community.

Janardhanan Also has attended the Festival for four years. A member of the Hindu Temple of Kentucky, he usually attends Festival events as a representative of the Temple. He believes the Festival is important because it showcases the diversity of faith practices in Louisville but also stresses their commonalities. He also pointed out that “the Festival is a ‘living example’ of the Hindu belief that there are many paths to the same goal and this Festival emphasizes many voices with the same message.”

Chandrika Srinivasan, also a member of the Hindu Temple of Kentucky, has noticed positive changes in the Louisville community because of the Festival of Faiths. This year was her first at the Festival, and she attended because her daughter Neha was a participant in the Thanksgiving service. She thinks the Festival is important because Louisville is the perfect size to try this kind of exercise, for one can notice change from the Festival more easily. She also believes that the Festival creates a sense of hope in the community. She has lived in Louisville for ten years, and said that people are more respectful of others because of this event.

Sheilah Miles is a member of a local Jewish congregation, The Temple, and the wife of The Temple’s rabbi. For her the Festival is important because “we are brothers and

sisters in the same community who must work together to make it a better place.” She has attended the Children of Abraham dinner over the years and has found that more people attend the dinner now that it is incorporated into the larger Festival, a growth which she believes is good for the community.

Jean Hawxhurst is pastor of Fourth Avenue United Methodist Church and has been attending the Festival for three years. She finds the Festival to be important because we must learn about and understand one another if we are to live in a community, and the Festival facilitates such learning. She has noticed increased awareness in the community because of the Festival. When asked how many of her parishioners attend the Festival, Ms. Hawxhurst replied that many in her congregation attend Festival events.

Janet Fauver has attended many Festivals as well, and is a member of Christ Church (Methodist). She said that because this Festival gets the community national attention, it displays to the nation the importance of acknowledging and becoming informed about other faiths. She believes there is more awareness in the community due to the Festival. Her only complaint is that the Festival events do not involve the schools, for she believes informing young people about different faiths is an important task in any community.

George Strunk, the pastor of Christ Church (Methodist), was attending his first Festival event. He thinks the Festival is important because our society is becoming more global. He has not noticed any changes in the community because of the Festival, however.

Sister Pat Kenoyer of the Sisters of Loretto was also attending her first Festival of Faiths. She thinks the Festival is important because, in her opinion, “the future will be interfaith and unless we are provided with places to talk and pray together that future won’t come about.” She believes this is especially important given her perception of the attitude of the United States to the rest of the world. When asked if she had noticed a change in the Louisville community because of the Festival, she noted that she only recently moved to Kentucky from Kansas City, but didn’t see how an event like the Festival of Faiths could help but make an impact in the community. After the Festival ended, Sister Kenoyer looked forward to spreading the message of the Festival into the smaller communities.

### **How to Replicate the Festival of Faiths**

The success of the Festival of Faiths as an interfaith event has prompted many communities to request help from the Center for Interfaith Relations in organizing similar events around the country. In early 2006, the Center for Interfaith Relations produced a “how to” handbook, which was available online.

### **Funding**

For many communities, the toughest challenges of hosting a Festival of Faiths are likely to be financial. Matt Hayes, former executive director of the Center for Interfaith Relations, explains that in Louisville, the Festival is part of CIR’s operating budget, and so fundraising is not a concentrated effort. This does not mean, however, that community groups and individuals are not essential to funding a successful event. Throughout the year, CIR keeps track of the amounts donated to the organization. Then, each year before

the Festival, CIR sends out a letter informing those groups and individuals who have donated a certain amount of money that they are eligible to sponsor a particular event or day. Other groups will donate gifts in kind to CIR for use at the Festival--everything from printing services to event space. Some groups, such as the local Young President's Organization, will pay the travel and lodging expenses of some Festival guests. Hayes emphasizes that these relationships are what allow the Festival to go on. The only attempts to recover costs of the Festival occur at ticketed events, such as the Interfaith Prayer Breakfast or the Children of Abraham Dinner.

### Volunteers

Volunteers are also essential to the Festival of Faith's success. Landon Whitsitt, former program director for CIR, notes that many volunteers get involved with the Festival because they have friends who are involved. Many of the volunteers, according to Whitsitt, are between 35 and 45 years of age and generally have a fair amount of free time. There are, however, those volunteers who don't necessarily have much time but are nevertheless passionate about the Festival.

### Challenges

When asked what the biggest challenges of putting together a Festival of Faiths are, Whitsitt believes there are two. The first is simply the logistics of running such a big event: making sure people are where they need to be, when they need to be there. The second major challenge is making sure that each program focuses on the annual theme of the Festival, but does not overlap with other programs.

### Conclusions

The Festival of Faiths has been praised nationwide as a premiere example of interfaith work. According to Martin Marty, many people “develop a low threshold of boredom for those [interfaith events] that confine themselves to joint worship, thinned-out theologizing, smiles, and similar expressions of goodwill.” To him, Louisville’s Festival of Faiths is a definite exception (9).

**Endnotes** (*Many of these endnotes were accessed on the former website of the Cathedral Heritage Foundation, and some of the original content may no longer be available online. When possible, the URLs have been changed to reflect the content on the new website of the Center for Interfaith Relations.*)

1. Center for Interfaith Relations. “History.” <http://www.interfaithrelations.org/About-Us/History.aspx> (Accessed October 14, 2005).
2. Center for Interfaith Relations. “What We Believe” <http://www.interfaithrelations.org/About-Us/What-We-Believe.aspx> (Accessed October 14, 2005).
3. Center for Interfaith Relations. “History.” <http://www.interfaithrelations.org/About-Us/History.aspx> (Accessed October 14, 2005).



4. Cathedral Heritage Foundation. "Passport Program." <http://www.cathedralheritage.org/events/passportprogram.asp> (Accessed October 14, 2005).
5. Cathedral Heritage Foundation. "Festival of Faiths 2005: The Faces of Faith in Cooperation." <http://www.cathedralheritage.org/events/festivaloffaithscalendar.asp> (Accessed October 14, 2005).
6. Cisne, Julie. Personal email correspondence. November 30, 2005.
7. "Articles of Consensus" attributed by Martin Marty to John Courtney Murray. Speech given at the Interfaith Prayer Breakfast, November 10, 2005.
8. Marty, Martin. "Bridging the Interfaith Divide." The Courier-Journal, November 6, 2005.
9. Marty, Martin. "Interfaith Louisville." Sightings, November 25, 2002, [http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive\\_2002/1125.shtml](http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2002/1125.shtml) (Accessed November 7, 2005).