



Muslims and Christians at the Muslim Children Education and Civic Center explore ideas of compassion, listening, and peacemaking. (Photo by Chuck Gibbons)

In the Footprints of Francis and The Sultan: A Model for Peacemaking
By Sister Martha Ann Kirk, CCVI

Twenty-one Muslim and Christian groups partnered to have an evening “In the Footprints of Francis and The Sultan: A Model for Peacemaking,” September 13, 2013. About 350 people gathered at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church and then about 150 more people joined the group in the second half of the program at the Muslim Children Education and Civic Center.

The program began with the film, *In the Footprints of Francis and the Sultan*, which shares a little-known story of the Fifth Crusade in 1219. St. Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malek Al-Kamil engaged in dialogue which eventually led to peace. Their example is an invitation to join in respectful dialogues with people of different faiths and cultures. Muslim women of the Raindrop Women’s Association provided a delicious dinner of Turkish food. The Institute of Interfaith Dialog (now the Dialogue Institute of the Southwest) initiated by Turkish Muslims with the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and Franciscans had cooperated in making the film. Dr. Noah Kasraie, an Education professor from the University of the Incarnate Word and a leader in the Shi’a Muslim community in San Antonio, gave an introduction for visiting a mosque.

Persons arrived at the MCECC in time for the evening prayer. Many Christians were seeing and learning for the first time that Muslim tradition has prayer many times a day. The evening was not only bringing together Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, other Christians, and Buddhists with Muslims of Sunni, Shi’a, and Ismaili branches, but the evening also provided wide cultural diversity. Sarwat Husain, vice-chair of the national Council of American Islamic Relations, said that the mosque is attended by Urdu, English, Arabic, Somali, Persian, Turkish and Punjabi, Pashto and Sindhi speakers. This evening was part of the San Antonio peaceCENTER Pilgrimage of Compassion. Susan Ives of their core team provided a handout of the Charter for Compassion for all and information where the text could be found in thirty languages. Moderating the discussion “Islam and Christianity are two of the great religions of the world” said Sarwat Husain, President CAIR-TX, SA, “this is the beginning

of the much needed dialogue between our two communities, to understand each other. This has been long overdue in San Antonio,” she added.

The Rev. Robert Woody of the Episcopal Church of Reconciliation shared ideas of compassion in Christianity citing the gospel story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus does not merely tolerate “the other” or the “outsider,” but Jesus indicates that people might learn from the good deeds of the other. A guest Imam Azeem Uddin speaking for the Muslim Children Education and Civic Center reflected on a Hadith, a teaching of the Prophet Muhammed, “Do unto all as you would wish to have done unto you; and reject for others what you would reject for yourselves.” He emphasized that compassion is a main idea in the Qur’an. Dr. Scott Woodward, Academic Dean at Oblate School of Theology, spoke of the Sultan and Francis respectfully listening to and learning from each other. Listening is an aspect of compassion. All were invited to join in interfaith dialogue with others while enjoying Pakistani and Middle Eastern desserts and Chai in the mosque pavilion, provided by CAIR-SA Youth.

Kezia Elias, a first year Graphics Design major at the University of the Incarnate Word, said, “Growing up in Indonesia, I had an established view in mind of the differences and conflicts between Christians and Muslims. I couldn't comprehend the possibility of unity, compassion and peace between both religions. I was very touched by the video and the event. There is no need for attempting to convert each other, we are more similar in faith than we realize.” Student leaders in the Pax Christi Organization at Incarnate Word High School, who had worked hard hosting the event, spoke of the joy of building bridges in this way. Such youthful enthusiasm gives hope for a future of more understanding and peace.

To learn more of the partnering groups who hosted the evening and to learn of the film, see <http://www.uiw.edu/interfaithservice/>. Karen Ball, the president of the San Antonio Pax Christi organization and a member of St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church worked with their pastor Father Larry Christian and staff Sister Rose Kruppa, and Mike Portele to provide additional space when the number of attendees more than tripled.