

ANSWERING THE CALL



The Interfaith Alliance's First Decade

We want to demonstrate that people of faith may hold different points of view on many issues. Together, however, we hold to two fundamental beliefs. First, we believe that religion must continue to play an active, relevant role in the life of America, as it has since the founding and establishment of this country. And second, we believe the groups which represent the radical religious right pose a serious threat to the American principles of tolerance and liberty.

The Rev. Dr. Herbert D. Valentine,
July 14, 1994, at the launch of The Interfaith Alliance

We join together out of deep concern for the soul of this great and good nation. We join together so that our combined voices might be a witness to our national heritage, which is enriched by many faiths and traditions that shape and inform the values of individuals and families. We come together to appeal to an inclusive and plural America to preserve and protect the best of our proud and national heritage.

The Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell
July 14, 1994

Dear Reader:

Ten years ago, the shared vision of a number of religious and political leaders gave birth to The Interfaith Alliance. Today, The Interfaith Alliance stands as the only national political voice of the interfaith movement in the United States.



On the following pages of this ten-year history of The Interfaith Alliance, you will see that growing this organization has involved traveling a sometimes rocky path. Our founders created an organization from an idea that set us to the task of countering a strong, well-funded national political movement. We have faced and overcome significant fiscal challenges. Along the way, we have refined an understanding of our mission to become a truly interfaith enterprise. While facing these and other challenges across the past decade, The Interfaith Alliance has established itself as an important voice on the national scene, linked closely to much-valued local Alliances that, similarly, have become influential voices in their respective communities.

This story of the first decade of The Interfaith Alliance and its work has been prepared by freelance writer and researcher Matthew P. Freeman, who reviewed publications and news clips, interviewed Board members and staff, then carefully culled through disparate and occasionally conflicting viewpoints to write this thoughtful, comprehensive piece. I am sure that you will appreciate, as do I, the care with which Matt did his research and the integrity with which he has written.

At its core, the history of The Interfaith Alliance is the story of an organization energized by a desire to counter the Religious Right political movement because of its harmful impact on the nation's public policy and religious pluralism. However, not without significance is the fact that we approached the challenge inherent in our founding vision not by merely shouting down the Religious Right, but by building an interfaith grassroots structure that would demonstrate by word and deed the folly of recognizing groups like the Christian Coalition as true representatives of all people of faith in the United States. We had a choice between joining the ranks of many fine organizations doing God's work by battling the Religious Right and seeking to develop an organization that, by its very existence, would



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demonstrate that people of faith and good will in this nation are not monolithic and not all from a narrow band of Christian churches. We chose the latter alternative: to build a new and different kind of institution, one that embodies our message and breathes meaning into our name.

All of us presently involved in The Interfaith Alliance are profoundly indebted to the founders of The Interfaith Alliance – Herb Valentine, Denny Davidoff, Albert Pennybacker, the late Francis Murphy, Arthur Hertzberg, Joan Brown Campbell, Frederick James, and a host of national leaders, staff and other Board members whose many contributions simply cannot be adequately described and applauded in this short summary of our development to date. Since I know the leaders of this movement well, I can say with confidence that we work every day to repay our debt to the founders of The Interfaith Alliance by nurturing this fine and wonderful institution as best as we are able, with their continued guidance and with the deeply appreciated support of thousands upon thousands of people of faith and good will across the land.

As we embark on our second decade of work, I am keenly aware that the issues that gave rise to the creation of The Interfaith Alliance are every bit as pressing today as they were ten years ago, and that the unique contribution we can make as an organization is more vital than ever. Better informed of our past, let us welcome the challenges ahead. Indeed, with gratitude for the accomplishments of yesterday, let us together pledge to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, as best we can, with the kind of resolve, creativity, commitment, and hard work modeled by those who accepted the challenge of launching this movement, whose tenth anniversary we celebrate this year.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "C. Welton Gaddy".

Sincerely,
C. Welton Gaddy, President

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Religious Right in the United States grew steadily in size and power, transforming itself from a poorly organized group of politically inexperienced clergy given to ear-catching bouts of rhetorical excess, into a sophisticated, if similarly extreme, politically-savvy movement. Toward the end of the 1980s, televangelist Pat Robertson asserted leadership of the movement, a byproduct of his failed bid for the Presidency in 1988. While Robertson's quest for the White House proved at times embarrassing, he did manage to assume the mantle of president of the Religious Right. With guidance from his political wunderkind, Ralph Reed, in 1989, Robertson consolidated his new strength within the movement, converting the mailing lists from his presidential campaign into the first real asset of his new political outreach organization, the Christian Coalition.

The Christian Coalition grew in strength and numbers through the early 1990s, pioneering stealth strategies in school board races, breaking new and dangerous ground with misleading voters guides, seizing great influence in the national Republican Party and outright control of some state parties, and capturing the attention of the media, politicians, and religious leaders alike. And it was not alone. A host of other Religious Right organizations, less noted by the media but every bit as tenacious, flourished in Washington and at the grassroots levels as well.

The first two years of the Clinton administration saw great division in American politics. Arguments over gays in the military, the president's budget proposals, and health care reform dominated the debate. At the same time, a new, personal, and vicious style of politics took root. Religious and secular right organizations launched massive direct mail campaigns vilifying the president and the

first lady in personal terms, and marketed videotapes with outrageous fabrications up to and including charges of murder and drug-running.

By 1994, the Religious Right was at the peak of its power. Its grassroots organizing had not only come to be recognized by the media but feared by progressives. Robertson's lieutenant, Ralph Reed, had become the calm and collected media darling of the movement, supplanting his occasionally bombastic boss. And Reed had begun to deliver on Pat Robertson's promise to "take America back, one neighborhood at a time." Moreover, Reed and Robertson tied their organization to the hard right wing of the Republican Party, supporting and promoting Rep. Newt Gingrich's "Contract With America," a collection of right-wing platform planks wrapped in poll-tested rhetoric. With off-year elections looming that November, the

Christian Coalition was bragging of distributing tens of millions of its brazenly partisan voter guides in churches that fall.

From out of this swirl, in July, 1994 emerged The Interfaith Alliance, an organization of religious leaders determined to

deny the Christian Coalition and its Religious Right allies the undisputed use of God's imprimatur for their political purposes. The organization set out to reclaim the rich legacy of the prophetic voice of faith in American politics – the voices of the Abolitionists and of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his generation of civil rights leaders. Indeed, over the next ten years, The Interfaith Alliance established itself as the nation's leading voice for interfaith work in the public policy process, at first countering the extremist rhetoric and views of the Religious Right with the clear and prophetic voice of the broader faith community, and eventually building a lasting interfaith movement capable of reaching out to every person of faith and good will.



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Faith is a powerful moral force that can serve as solid grounding for the best in public policy. Over the past 10 years, The Interfaith Alliance has developed programs that demonstrate its belief in democracy and its conviction that we are all one people, one nation, one human family. I see The Interfaith Alliance as a vital partner in the on-going work of building the Beloved Community, a nation that is finally at peace with itself. Keep up the good work. Congratulations on a successful 10 years and best wishes for many more.

U.S. Representative
John Lewis (D-GA)

In a world of "spin" the most powerful messages still come from those who speak with the authentic voice of their community. As the progressive religious community reasserts its voice in the public square, The Interfaith Alliance is there--reclaiming the language of faith when others misuse it for partisan gain, and amplifying the progressive religious call for diversity and inclusion.

Dr. Bob Edgar
General Secretary,
National Council of Churches USA



In the Beginning

Motivated by the concerns and ideals of the progressive religious community, The Interfaith Alliance grew out of planning and outreach efforts by two political consultants, Robert Norris and Jeff Kleuter, and Jill Hanauer, a former staff member of progressive nonprofits and elected officials.

The three envisioned an organization that would counter the Christian Coalition's political organizing, says The Interfaith Alliance's first President Herb Valentine, a Presbyterian minister for more than three decades and the former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). But for many of the religious leaders who would form the organization's board, the motivation ran deeper. Valentine describes his own "catalytic moment." "It was February 1994 and the right wing was going nuts in the Presbyterian church and a number of other denomina-

tions...and instead of standing up to the right wing, [the General Assembly of the church] rolled over and played dead...I realized then that the Presbyterian church I knew from the 1950s and early 60s, that had been out front on a lot of social justice concerns, had lost its vision of a just society, was rolling over and playing scared. I saw that if we're going to do anything in the political realm, the church is going to have to go outside its bureaucratic systems."

In spring of 1994, Hanauer, Kleuter, and Norris began contacting progressive religious leaders and political operatives in Washington to begin piecing the organization together. Valentine remembers his first meeting with the group: "It was in a bar in Baltimore! They wanted to put together something to counter the right wing and contacted me seeking my advice. They'd pulled together a few people, and we brainstormed. [Eventually,] I traveled around raising money with some others, until we had enough money together."

Early on, the organizers spoke with the Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, then the general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., who had also been discussing the need for a vehicle to counter the Christian Coalition's claim to be the legitimate political representatives of people of faith. "We had had a number of meetings with several people over the course of a year or so," she said. "It was always my belief that whoever was going to counter the Christian Coalition should be in their own makeup diverse. One of the Christian Coalition's arguments is that we have to be a

Christian people, so it seemed important to us that an organization be created that was interfaith in nature – Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu – so that there would be such a voice on the landscape."

Two Los Angeles ministers who would later join the organization's board of directors were among those contacted in these early organizing days. The Rev. Dr. Gwynne Guibord, Ecumenical Officer for the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles and a past president of the California Council of Churches and later the chair of The Interfaith Alliance,

remembered a visit from Hanauer, whom she said came to Los Angeles to talk with religious leaders and others about the new effort. "I was in that very early meeting, and they were really trying to define themselves and struggling at it," she said. "The challenge was to find a way to be a voice

in response to the Radical Right Christian. That's when I became very interested in The Interfaith Alliance."

The Rev. Leonard B. Jackson, minister at Los Angeles's First African Methodist Episcopal Church, also remembered Hanauer's visit. "We met at a rally," he recalled, "and she told me what she was about and what The Interfaith Alliance stood for. I was very interested because it was similar to what we're doing here in Los Angeles. The main objective was to organize an alternate voice to the Christian Coalition. They had persuaded too many people that theirs was the only way to be a Christian and an American. Our goal was to dispel that myth, and to remind Americans that we all have a right to our own identity, to what we believe, and that we can still be good Americans and good Christians, without fitting into the Christian Coalition profile."

Denise Taft Davidoff, another founding board member and then the Moderator of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, agrees that countering the right wing in the political realm was crucial. "I'd always been concerned about the Religious Right," she said ten years later. "But the Religious Right in the mid-1990s was as blatant a danger and behavioral fire alarm then as it is today." She also saw in The Interfaith Alliance an opportunity to work with leaders of different faiths. "It was the whole idea of working with religious leaders from other communities. I was very attracted to working with Joan Brown Campbell, for example. I'd heard of almost everybody on the board."

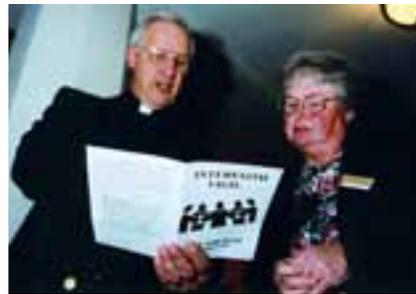


The Launch

The organization began with a media storm. Hanauer arranged a Washington news conference for Thursday, July 14, 1994. Advance coverage in national media made clear that the organization had struck a nerve. A morning-of-the-event story in the *New York Times* declared that “a broad coalition of mainline religious leaders plans to announce on Thursday the establishment of an educational and lobbying group intended to counter the Christian Coalition, the leading organization of religious conservatives. Organizers of the new group, The Interfaith Alliance, said there had been few people from religious organizations speaking out against the religious right...” The story quoted Valentine saying, “We really get quite upset with religious litmus tests and people of faith and religious conviction getting attacked because they don’t believe in certain things...”

Valentine also appeared on “NBC’s Today Show” that morning, where he debated Moral Majority Founder Jerry Falwell – who had returned to notoriety by way of an infomercial in which he marketed a video slandering President Clinton. Asked by the “Today Show” interviewer if the organization was intended to counter Falwell and the Christian Coalition, Valentine offered a more expansive vision of the group. “Well, it isn’t just to counter. It is a group of religious leaders from across the country, people who are long in the tradition of their various churches, Christian and Jewish... [These are] individuals who think religion is an important part of American life, and [that] religion has gotten, in a way, a bad name from these extremists. And we’re going to reclaim it for the people of America.”

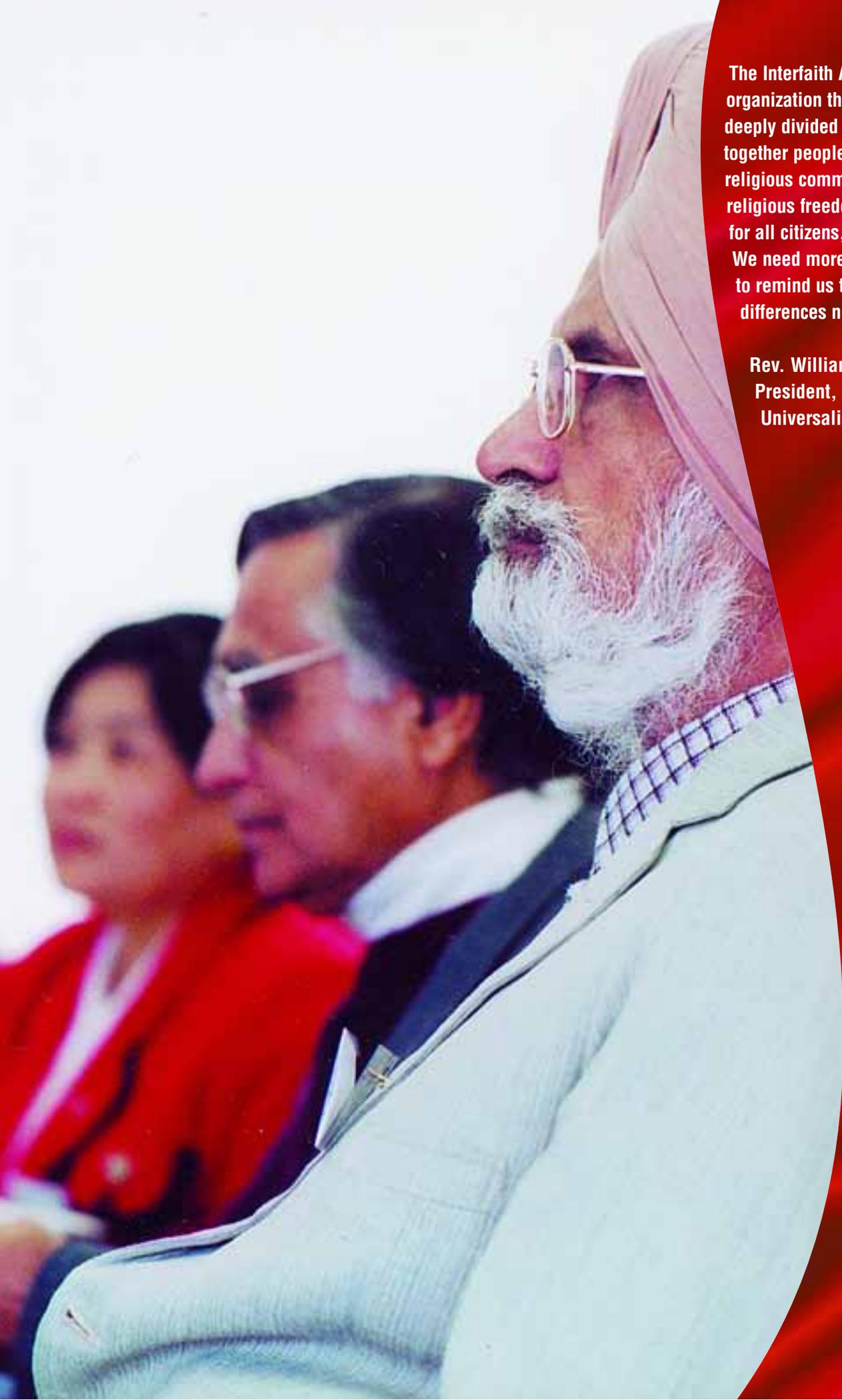
After the interview, Valentine left the program’s New York studio for a trip back to Washington and the formal news conference to launch The Interfaith Alliance. Meanwhile his fellow Board members received a short course in media relations from Clinton political advisor Paul Begala. Davidoff remembered, “Begala came over, at Jill Hanauer’s invitation, to work with us on media presence.... I was at once impressed and uncomfortable that he was coming to what was billed as a nonpartisan effort.”



The news conference itself featured remarks from Valentine, as well as other members of the fledgling board, including the Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell; Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, former president of the American Jewish Congress and vice-president of the World Jewish Congress; Bishop P. Francis Murphy, auxiliary Bishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore; Rabbi David Gelfand, then Senior Rabbi of Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple in Cleveland; and Bishop Frederick James, presiding Bishop of the Washington area ministry of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Media coverage continued to be heavy with prominent stories in major and minor newspapers across the country, and considerable television and radio coverage at the national and local level.

Even in these first few moments of organizational existence, the dynamic tensions that would define the group’s first few years were in evidence. Davidoff’s worry that the briefing from a prominent Democratic activist would undercut the nonpartisan mission foreshadowed subsequent controversy over an early \$25,000 contribution to the group from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee for a program on civility in politics. Detractors would cite the gift as evidence that the group was a front for the party for years to come, even though Alliance leaders had requested donations from both parties. Similarly, the NBC interviewer’s assumption that the organization was intended as nothing more than a progressive version of the Christian Coalition touched on a question central to the mission and methods of The Interfaith Alliance: would it borrow pages from the Ralph Reed playbook, deploying faith as a political weapon? Or was a more expansive, more generous vision at work? Finally, the organization’s original board, and indeed its early vision of interfaith work, encompassed a number of Christian denominations, Unitarians, and Jews – certainly a larger vision of the faith community than the Christian Coalition’s, but still not one that acknowledged the great diversity of religions in the United States.



The Interfaith Alliance (TIA) is an organization that offers hope to our deeply divided world. TIA calls together people of faith from many religious communities to support religious freedom, ensure civil rights for all citizens, and to work for justice. We need more organizations like TIA to remind us that our religious differences need not divide us.

**Rev. William G. Sinkford
President, Unitarian
Universalist Association**

Early Days, Early Years

In those early days, “We needed to organize mainstream people of faith,” says Ken Brooker Langston, former director of education and religious outreach for The Interfaith Alliance. An ordained minister, Brooker Langston joined the staff in late 1994, after a television interview with Joan Brown Campbell inspired him to turn up on the organization’s doorstep asking to join the cause. “We brought on more religious leaders to have a board that represented the mainline religious community. And then people outside of Washington started to be interested, and we began to be a chapter organization.” Brooker Langston describes an organization that reflected the campaign backgrounds of its staff leaders. “Jill brought a kind of excitement – a campaign feeling, movement feeling,” he explained years later.

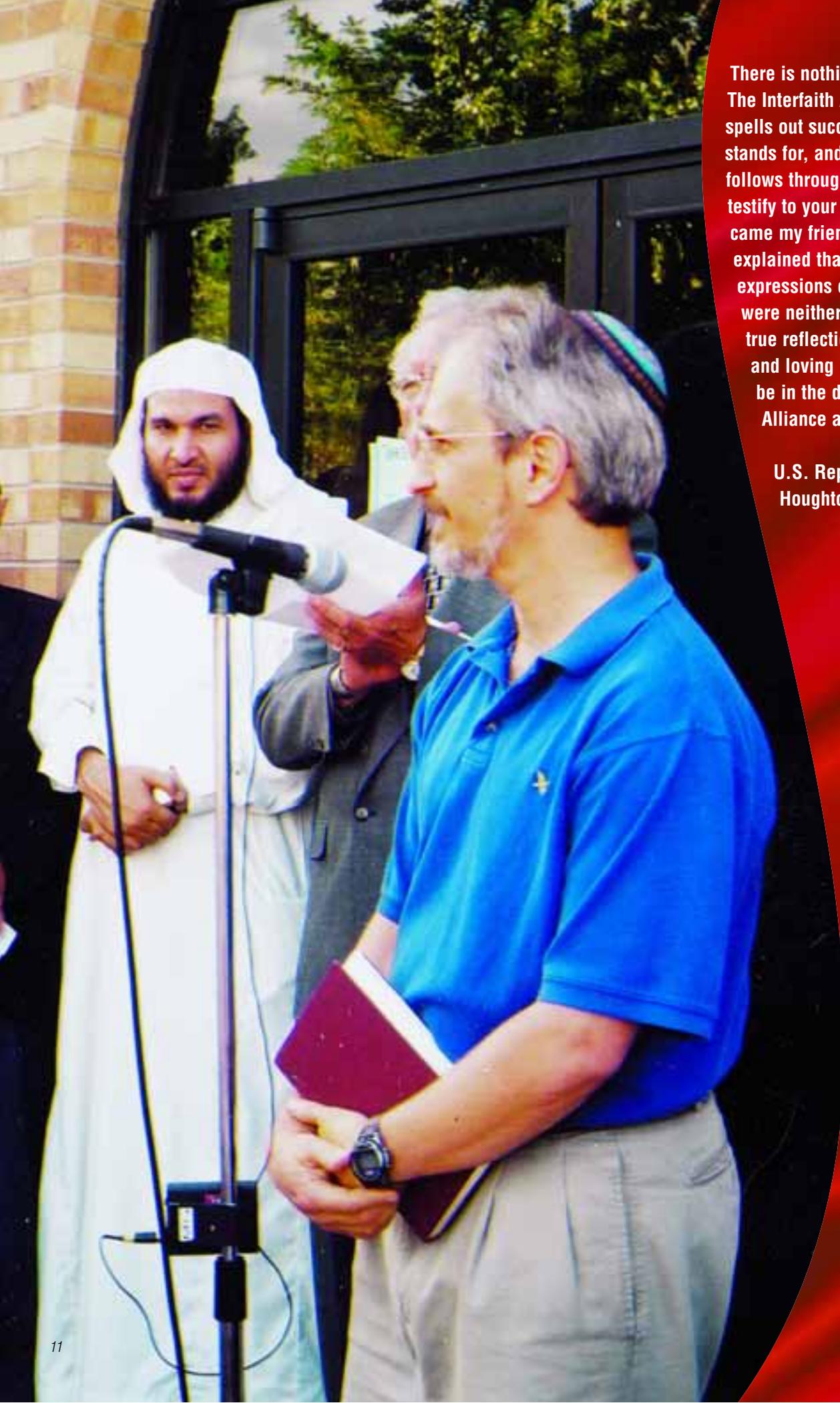
Indeed, the group functioned much in the mold of a campaign. Among its initial projects was developing an outreach effort to 2,000 religious leaders around the nation, urging them to refuse to distribute the Christian Coalition’s deeply slanted voter guides that fall. Reed and Robertson had vowed to distribute 30 million of the guides, the vast majority in churches on the weekend before Election Day.



In 1995, during off-year elections in a handful of states, and again in 1996, The Interfaith Alliance distributed voter guides of its own, although on a much smaller scale, and absent the distortions that typified the Christian Coalition’s. Consistent with its past criticism of the Christian Coalition’s practice of drawing churches into partisan politics, The Interfaith Alliance refused to distribute its guides in houses of worship, instead mailing them to voters.

That principled, but expensive approach, helped hold down the number of guides the group could distribute: peaking at 5 million in 1996, a fraction of what the Christian Coalition claimed. For that reason, “We were a pale reflection of the Christian Coalition,” said Greg Lebel, the group’s field and political director, who would later serve as interim executive director when Hanauer left, following the 1996 elections. “Our strength at that time was really in the field, where we had some really dynamic field organizations. . . . We didn’t really exist as a national organization that could move the agenda at that point. We were more of a clearinghouse [that could] tell the folks in Iowa what the folks in Washington state were doing.”

That field activity had been more the result of grassroots energy unleashed by the founding of the organization and its accompanying media coverage, than of organizing activity from the national office. In Arkansas, for example, local religious leaders came together under the new Interfaith Alliance banner to denounce the Religious Right’s use of religion as a political club in that state’s campaign. Similarly, in Virginia, mainline religious leaders banded together to form an Interfaith Alliance that set to work policing the Christian Coalition’s and other Religious Right groups’ work most evident in the Virginia governor’s race in 1997.

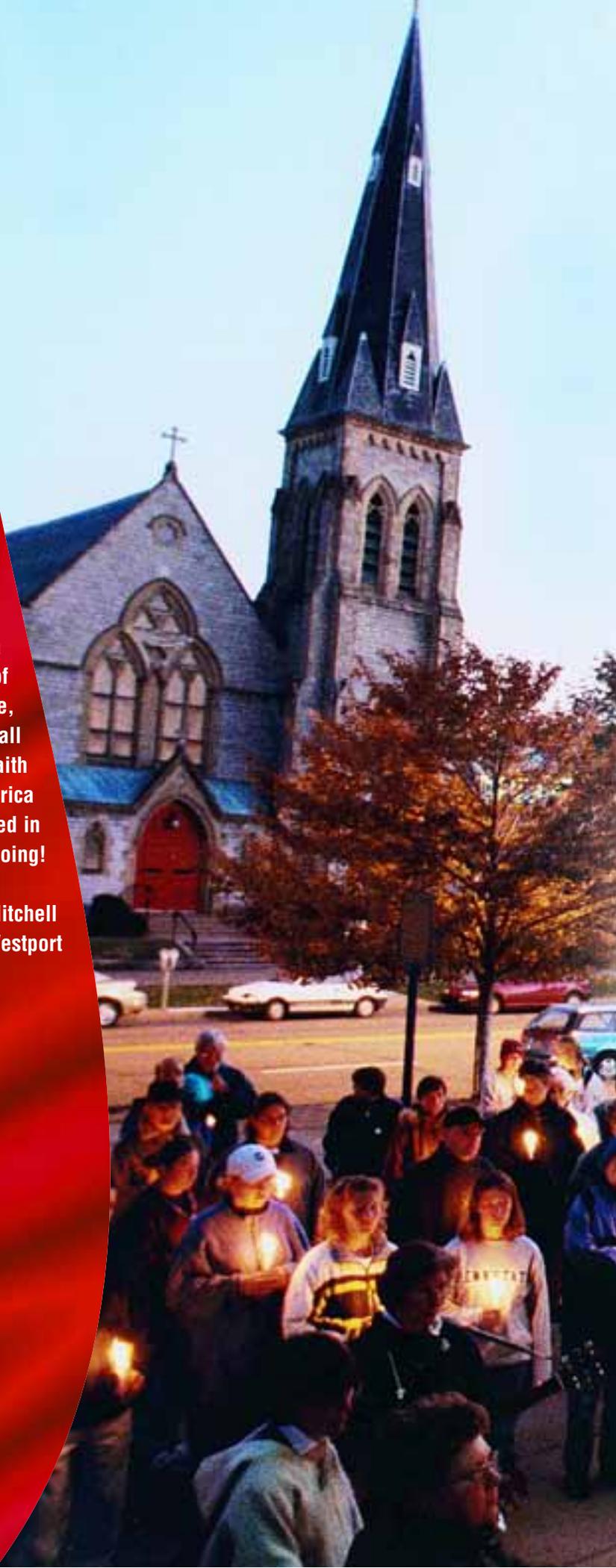


There is nothing complicated about The Interfaith Alliance -- it includes, it spells out succinctly those things it stands for, and, most importantly, it follows through. I can personally testify to your help . . . into a vacuum came my friends at Interfaith. They explained that the extreme expressions of an exact Christianity were neither the norm nor that of true reflections of most searching and loving Christians. I will always be in the debt of The Interfaith Alliance and Welton Gaddy.

U.S. Representative Amo Houghton (R-NY)

Congratulations Interfaith Alliance on your ten-year anniversary! The Interfaith Alliance continues to be a major force in the USA of promoting peace, acceptance, and kindness - through all religions. The Interfaith Alliance stands for what America could be - should be indeed in the world. Nice going!

**Bill Mitchell
President, Mitchell's of Westport**



Call To a Faithful Decision

Beginning in 1998, The Interfaith Alliance developed two new approaches to electoral politics. First, it invested considerable time and resources into analyzing and critiquing the Christian Coalition's voter guides in the media, with the hope of reaching voters who might otherwise be misled by the guides. "We decided... [to] say what's wrong with their voters guides – which was not hard to do," since they were filled with clear distortions, said Lebel. Second, the group took what Lebel called, "the honest person's approach, which was try to remind people it was important to cast an informed vote. Thus was created the *Call To a Faithful Decision*."

In the years following, the project came to be the cornerstone of the group's election-year efforts. Renamed *One Nation, Many Faiths* for the 2004 election cycle, the project began with outreach efforts to religious leaders around the country, who were asked to preach on the importance of informed citizen participation in the election. The Interfaith Alliance designated a specific weekend shortly before Election Day and provided a variety of materials, including sample sermons, homilies and meditations for leaders of houses of worship in diverse religious traditions.

At various times during the life of the election-year project, its components have included guidebooks for houses of worship, offering straightforward advice on the legal and ethical issues related to election-year activities by houses of worship; a companion guide for candidates on how and how not to address matters of faith during campaigns; a variety of study papers laying out the various faith traditions' views on specific issues; warnings in let-

ters and print ads about the Christian Coalition's voter guides; a call for candidates to agree to abide by a code of civility in the campaigns; and a community-by-community monitoring effort in which local Interfaith Alliances tracked local campaigns for improper use of religion on the campaign trail.

The overall objective of the project, as described by the organization in a 2000 newsletter to its members: to "encourage people of faith and good will to actively participate in civic debates; to educate themselves and inform their colleagues, families, and friends about the important issues facing local communities and society at large; and to thoughtfully exercise their right to vote. Integral to the *Call To a Faithful Decision* is opposition to people manipulating religion for partisan political purposes."



New Leadership, New Direction

Hanauer's departure in early 1997 came at a precarious moment in the life of the young organization. The board of directors turned to Lebel for interim leadership, and in a comparatively short period at the helm, he made important contributions. Chief among them was keeping the organization financially afloat.

Early on, the organization had formed a 501(c)(3) arm – The Interfaith Alliance Foundation. It could accept foundation grants, and the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock had been an important supporter. Similarly, staff had worked with consultants to develop a direct mail program, which had also helped generate funds. But as the organization moved into 1997, it carried a significant deficit on its books. Indeed, Lebel cites avoiding layoffs as one of his proudest accomplishments from 1997.

Key to keeping the organization financially afloat was assistance from a surprising source: television journalist Walter Cronkite. The former 19-year anchor of the “CBS Evening News” came to the organization by way of fellow journalist Terry Anderson, better known to the public for having been held hostage in Beirut by the Hezbollah from 1985 to 1991. Anderson served on an advisory board to the organization and put staff in touch with Cronkite. The former newscaster agreed to work with the organization and lent his name to a series of fundraising letters that would eventually recruit 70,000 new members to the organization over a two-year period. The Cronkite relationship goes beyond direct mail; in 1998, the organization inaugurated its annual *Walter Cronkite Faith & Freedom Award*, recognizing “people of faith and good will who stand up for religious freedom and demonstrate the healing and constructive force of faith and religion in American life.”

A second way in which 1997 proved to be a turning point for the organization was in its exploration of the possibility of adopting an issue agenda. Until then, the organization had shied away from specific policy positions on a number of controversial issues that were at the center of battles with the Religious Right, including gay rights, reproductive rights, and school vouchers. However prudent the decision to avoid those issues might have been in terms of avoiding disagreements in the faith community, it was a difficult stance for a progressive organization

to take in the swirl of daily give and take with the Christian Coalition and other such organizations.

That tension, Lebel recalls, “led to some very interesting and helpful discussions along the way about what this organization should look like and how it should fit together. But it was tough getting from day to day.” It became even tougher when the organization's state and local alliances began to address the issues in their communities, without the advance blessing of the national organization. The national organization gradually made accommodations with the alliances, while at the same time expanding its own issue agenda. Lebel



describes the evolution as being driven by staff. “We decided we were going to try to get the board to allow us to go out on the Employment Non-Discrimination Act [a measure to prohibit hiring and firing based on sexual orientation]. . . . So I started calling board members. Some were already there,” he said; others he coaxed along. Eventually the group issued a news release in September of 1997, declaring its support for the measure. Similarly, the organization would eventually come to oppose vouchers in public schools, and oppose the Federal Marriage

Amendment – prohibiting states from permitting marriages between same-sex couples – on religious liberty grounds. In all of the organization's communications however, it has been careful to note that people of faith and good will may fairly hold differing opinions on political issues, refusing to repeat the Religious Right's mistake of defining religious authenticity by political stances on certain issues.

The ENDA episode also marked an important point in the organization's understanding of its own role. “We came to the realization as a staff,” Lebel said, “that this organization had existed in its first year as ‘what we're not.’ ‘We're not the Religious Right; we're not trying to tell people that there's a certain way to live’ Like a campaign, you've got to move from what's wrong with them to what's right with us. We'd never made that shift. So a lot of this was really about trying to make that shift into who we are. So naturally the issue of issues came up. There were things going on, and we were just sitting on the sidelines.”

Also during 1997, the organization's board, led by then-President Rev. Albert Pennybacker and by his successor that December, Rev. J. Philip Wogaman, convened a search com-



mittee to identify Hanauer's successor. Their exhaustive search bore fruit, and in early 1998, Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy joined the staff of the organization as executive director.

With Gaddy, the organization's leadership was now anchored not in the politics, but in the faith community. "He brought real credibility," observed Ken Brooker-Langston, "and raised our visibility in the faith community. I think the faith community had the impression – because of our language and activities – that The Interfaith Alliance was really a political organization, and [so there was] some skepticism of its authenticity. Jill started to move us away from that; Greg took us even further, and Welton slam-dunked it."

Gaddy began making his mark quickly. One early and significant decision: abandon production of Interfaith Alliance voter guides, a move Gaddy described as a "significant course correction." The organization had produced the guides in its early years as a direct counterweight to the Christian Coalition's materials. But, Gaddy concluded that "the way to fight that is not with competition. First, we could never have enough money to compete with the Christian Coalition's distribution. And second, we needed to discourage houses of worship from distributing any voter guides at all."



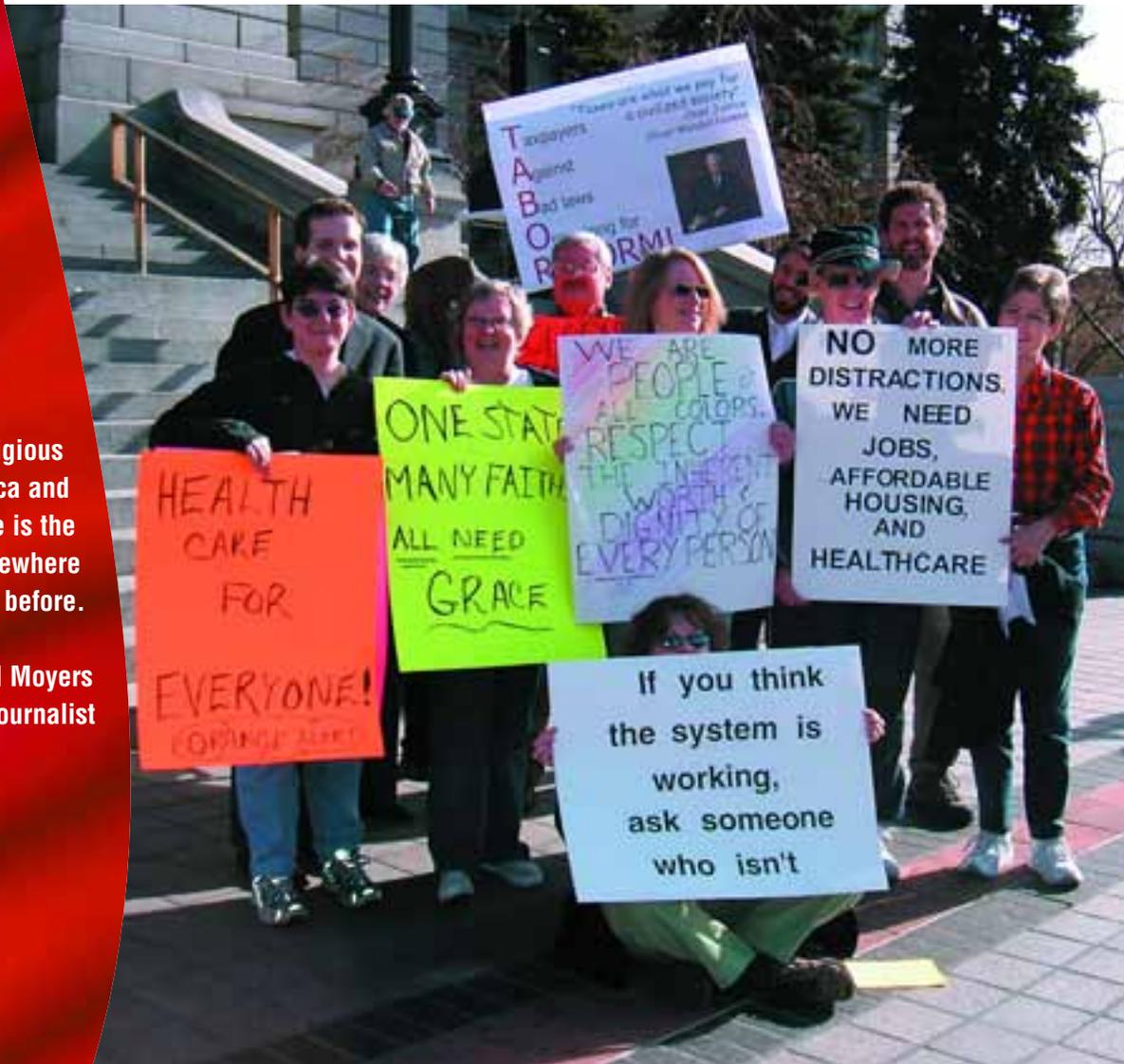
On the fundraising front, Suzie Armstrong, then development director but later to become vice president when Gaddy became president, observed that he made an immediate impact in terms of access to the foundation community. Soon after Gaddy arrived, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution on the role of women in American life – by Gaddy's description, on "wives being graciously submissive to their husbands." He remembered, "we put out some information that I was a former Southern Baptist leader [prior to its takeover by fundamentalists], and some of our first really good media hits came on that subject. And then we parlayed that into more opportunities."

Armstrong observed that the "money followed the media. We finally got a meeting with the Ford Foundation and became one of their grantees. That was a big step up and really our entrée into the foundation world.... That's when the 501(c)(3) took off. From 1998 to 2001, its budget went from \$200,000 to more than \$1 million. In a number of cases, doors opened for us because of the visibility because Welton had been on the 'NewsHour with Jim Lehrer' and other such programs."



We are entering a new religious landscape in America and The Interfaith Alliance is the advance party taking us somewhere we have never been before.

Bill Moyers
Television Journalist



Supporting the Grassroots

In 1997, the organization sponsored a national meeting of local Alliance leaders in Washington – the first such gathering of affiliated organizations. It was a meeting that the organization's founders never would have contemplated, because they had not anticipated the grassroots outpouring that the organization's very existence would create. Indeed, by most assessments, the state and local Alliances grew too quickly for the organization to develop a program to support their work adequately.

By 1997, the national organization had identified the problem and resolved to address it. So staff organized the first "National Leadership Gathering" of local Alliances as a training session on political skills. Positive feedback prompted the organization to repeat the event the following February and to make it an annual affair. Armstrong remembers the 1998 session: "It was incredibly tough. They figured out that the national office didn't have as much money and power as they'd hoped.... Welton had been hired two weeks before, and was there.... At the end, we asked for feedback, and one by one, they lit into us! 'We want representation on the board, and shared membership dues, and to be involved in the day-to-day program activities.' It was their first foray into wanting a piece of the national identity. And that was both welcome and frustrating. But it was the beginning of a still ongoing discussion about how that partnership works, and it's something that comes up every year. In fact, we started having field representatives on the board, and formed a committee out of that session, which keeps us focused on grassroots needs."

The Rev. Dr. Dan Rosemergy of The Interfaith Alliance of Middle Tennessee had a similar recollection of the 1998 National Leadership Gathering: "I'll never forget the first one Welton attended. We had deep concerns about a number of issues – staff support, local Alliances not being invited to the table, the absence of local input into long-range planning, even setting the issue agenda. So five or six of us met with Welton, and then we asked for a meeting in Washington. We spent two days with Welton and staff, laying out our vision for building the Alliances, trying to underscore that the strength of the Alliance is not only national, but state and local. And I think Welton was committed to our goal from the very beginning."



Rosemergy subsequently became one of the first local Alliance leaders to serve on the national board of directors.

The search for the best possible relationship between national and local entities continues. Rosemergy observed that the national organization's support for local Alliances is now a strength of the organization. "There have been at least three very significant things that make an important difference. First is increased availability of staff to us locally, and particularly Welton. He's been here several times, and there's no doubt that having him here draws attention to our work. We

can't do alone, what we can do with a national organization. Second, the resource materials from Washington have gotten better and better, and the proof of that is that we use them! Third is our own increasing willingness to turn to them. The support from staff and consultants has been excellent. You feel as if you're not out here struggling alone." In 2003, the organization began a top-to-bottom review of its grassroots support efforts that promises further transition.

But that healthy tension between the national and local organizations has done nothing to hinder a robust slate of community-based Interfaith Alliance activities. The state and local organizations' capacities vary from community to community, as might be expected, but among them, the 42 Alliances stage hundreds of forums, rallies and events each year; reach out to thousands of clergy and lay leaders of houses of worship; and take an active role in the political lives of their communities, while generating reams of newspaper clippings.

The organization's signature events – the *Call To a Faithful Decision* events, STOP the HATE rallies, and a series of post 9-11 vigils – are ultimately grassroots led. Indeed, an important role that the national office plays in facilitating grassroots action is simply to keep local Alliances informed about their sister organizations' work in distant communities facing similar challenges.

Civil Debate

Another important and ongoing organizational initiative sprang from the battle over the impeachment threat to President Bill Clinton. The need for vigorous but civil political debate always had been a cornerstone of The Interfaith Alliance's work. After all, concern about the harm from the extremist rhetoric of the Religious Right was one of several driving forces behind the organization's founding, and in 1996, the group had challenged presidential nominees to sign a "Candidate Pledge of Civility." But the coarsening of the debate – sacred and secular alike – that resulted from President Clinton's impeachment proceedings drove the organization to sharpen its focus on the issue.

The 1996 pledge initiative, announced by Interfaith Alliance President Rev. Dr. Albert Pennybacker and Denise T. Davidoff at a rally near the site of the Republican National Convention, called on candidates to "not use religion as a weapon in their campaign or claim that a vote for them is a vote for God." The new initiative kept the pressure on the use of religion as a tool of division but expanded the focus to take in hate-filled and other divisive rhetoric as well.

In fact, the organization's involvement in the impeachment battle was an example of what Gaddy describes as the organization's deliberate opportunism in the early period of his tenure. One of Gaddy's 20 published books is about adultery, the question at the heart of the impeachment struggle. So Gaddy was a highly and frequently sought interview on the subject. The conflict offered a programmatic opportunity for the organization, as well: engaging religious leaders in a national call for civility in the political process. The resulting series of civility summits in Washington and around the nation further broadened the organization's reach, introducing it to a number of religious and political leaders in various communities. One such event on Capitol Hill connected the organization to Rep. Amo Houghton and former Rep. John Anderson, both of whom remained organizational allies. For their part, local Alliances, particularly in California and New York, conducted a number of summits in their communities that helped them involve religious leaders from the full spectrum of faith traditions.





In ten years The Interfaith Alliance has achieved great success in bridging the religious chasm in our country in the spirit of respect and understanding of the world's different faiths. May this friendly, persuasive endeavor meet with continued success.

Arun Gandhi
Founder, M.K.
Gandhi Institute for
Nonviolence

Religious Diversity

Through the early years of the organization's life, The Interfaith Alliance's interfaith outreach was restricted largely to Christian leaders of various denominations, Jewish rabbis, and Unitarians. By comparison to the Religious Right, such gatherings were a virtual rainbow of faith traditions. But by 1997, the group began to expand its vision of interfaith work to take in a number of other faith traditions.

That year, the group began reaching out to the American Muslim community, and working to improve media awareness of Muslim and other minority faith traditions. In May, for example, Imam Yusef Salim and Ambereen Khan, then director of the Muslim Affairs Council but a future media relations director for The Interfaith

Alliance, joined board member Rabbi Jack Moline and future president Rev. Dr. J. Philip Wogaman at an event calling on Congress to reject a Religious Right sponsored constitutional amendment to mandate government-sponsored school prayer. That was the first of many such instances that year and in the years to come that the organization engaged faith traditions beyond Christianity, Judaism, and Unitarianism in its activities. The effort was helped along by grant funding from the Ford Foundation for outreach to the broader faith community, and it is today a standard approach for all The Interfaith Alliance's organizing work, as well as staffing and board membership decisions. In 2003, Arun Gandhi, grandson of Indian peace activist Mohandas K. "Mahatma" Gandhi and co-founder of the M. K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence in Memphis, Tennessee became chair of the board. Other religious leaders to join the board included Dr. Maher Hathout of the Muslim Public Affairs Council and Rev. Dr. LaVerne Sasaki of the Buddhist Church in San Francisco.

In the wake of September 11, 2001, that outreach work paid enormous dividends for the organization, as it was uniquely positioned to engage the Muslim community in a variety of efforts aimed at stemming a rising tide of anti-Muslim violence and bigotry. Almost immediately following the attacks, it became instantly clear to The Interfaith Alliance leaders that the potential for a hateful backlash against American Muslims was strong.

"We knew we had several important roles to play after September 11," said Gaddy in reflecting on the organization's work. "We had to help religious leaders minister to their flocks. We had to send a message of acceptance to

Muslims, making clear that we understood the difference between Osama bin Laden's twisted interpretation of Islam and the interpretations observed in mosques across the United States and most of the rest of the world. And we had to do what we could to make sure our national leaders sounded the right tones on this issue – that they were sensitive to the Muslim community here in America."



The next morning, The Interfaith Alliance issued a statement extending its condolences to those touched by the attacks. It called on Americans to "hold fast to the core values" of the nation's great religious traditions, and in so doing to deter hateful stereotyping and vengeful attacks on Muslims and Islamic centers of worship. In subsequent days, Gaddy and other staff members accompa-

nied Muslim leaders in negotiations with the Department of Justice and Sikh leaders in negotiations with the Department of Transportation.

A number of local Alliance affiliates moved quickly as well. The Denver Interfaith Alliance sponsored a human chain of more than 1,000 people holding hands, surrounding a local mosque, as a symbol of the community's embrace. So many supporters showed up, the mosque was encircled three times. The Interfaith Alliance of Wake County, North Carolina immediately scheduled a meeting with their mayor



to talk about possible backlash problems and to help plan preventive and healing measures. Government offices called on TIA chapters, in many cases to lead “STOP the HATE” events, ecumenical services or other local vigils – in Peoria, Illinois; Rochester, New York; Marion County, Florida; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Brevard County, Florida; middle Tennessee; Wake County, North Carolina; Boston, Massachusetts; Saratoga, New York; and in Pittsburg, Kansas.

In addition, the national office began piecing together a unique Internet resource designed to help religious leaders pastor their flocks in the days immediately following the disaster. It included practical suggestions for easing community tensions, prayers for peace from each of the major religions, a rich array of resources for people wanting to learn more about Islam, and a host of sample sermons from around the country on the topic. Another feature was a message board for inspiration and support, allowing website visitors to read or add uplifting messages.

In all the post-September 11 activity, The Interfaith Alliance worked to communicate a message that has ever been at the heart of the organization’s work: America’s religious diversity must be respected and cherished, not used as grounds for division and hate. “September 11 was the source of untold agony,” Gaddy concludes. “We felt a genuine obligation to make a significant contribution by educating leaders and citizens about America’s rich diversity and serving as a clarion voice for tolerance and unity. I’m proud that we rose to the challenge.”

Religious Right Intolerance

Although the September 11 context of these efforts was new and uncharted territory, fights against intolerance and hate have been at the heart of the organization’s work since its founding. Some Religious Right leaders and organizations are more adept at masking the contempt with which they view those whose faith leads them to different political conclusions, but in the end, the Religious Right can always be relied upon to reveal its fundamental intolerance with regularity.

That intolerance is reflected not just in the movement’s rhetoric, but in its policies and methods. Virulently anti-gay rhetoric supports similarly anti-gay policy objectives; intolerant rhetoric about people of minority faiths backs up efforts to weaken First Amendment protections.

Capturing, releasing to the media, and then responding to the various outbursts and policy initiatives of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Gary Bauer, and others has been a full-time job for The Interfaith Alliance since the day it opened its doors. Such rapid response activity is aimed squarely at reminding the media and the public that the movement’s hateful rhetoric is unacceptable in American political and religious discourse, and that its cramped policy objectives are intended to narrow the circle of inclusion in American life.



The Intersection of Religion and Politics

Another constant in the work of The Interfaith Alliance has been the protection of the American tradition of separation between the institutions of religion and government. The effort has included opposition to school voucher programs that would undermine public education and unconstitutionally promote religion to children, and fighting off constitutional amendments aimed at reinstating government-sponsored prayer in public school classrooms.

It has also thrust the organization into a leadership role in Washington in combating efforts in Congress to permit houses of worship to use tax-deductible contributions to support work on behalf of specific candidates for public office. The specific proposal, The Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act, known more commonly as the “Jones Bill,” for chief sponsor Rep. Walter Jones, would rewrite tax and election laws to permit houses of worship to engage in outright electioneering with tax-deductible funding. Not only would the proposal give houses of worship favored political status over non-religious charities, it would invite them into a partisan thicket that might ultimately undercut their more central concerns: ministering to their congregations, regardless of their political affiliations.

Another important area of work for the organization has been identifying and publicizing the pernicious effects of President Bush’s “faith-based initiative.” Even before the fall campaign of 2000, The Interfaith Alliance began its public exploration of the implications of candidate Bush’s faith-based initiative, a component of his overall agenda of “compassionate conservatism.” At the GOP convention that summer, the organization conducted a workshop on

the subject, at which Rev. Dr. Welton Gaddy delivered a powerful deconstruction of the then amorphous proposal’s underpinnings. Gaddy observed that Marvin Olasky, the “father of compassionate conservatism,” whose writings on the subject were the wellspring of candidate Bush’s program, argues that separation of church and state is not mandated by the Constitution, that government is the worst possible source of support for the poor, and that religious institutions are presumptively superior sources for such supports.

After President Bush took office and began to advance his faith-based initiative, it became clear that these specific failings of Olasky’s vision of “compassionate conservatism” were also in evidence in the president’s policies. Indeed, his initial proposals foundered in Congress precisely because the White House and its congressional supporters were unable to devise an approach that did not brazenly violate accepted principles

of religious liberty. For its part, The Interfaith Alliance led efforts to educate members of Congress and the administration on the subtleties of the issue, while at the same time warning of the harm entanglement with the government could do to the religious institutions themselves. A particular concern for legislators was whether faith-based institutions accepting federal money would be free to discriminate against job applicants of different faiths.

In the end, Congress could not resolve the profound problems with the proposal, and an impatient administration began implementing key provisions of the proposal by executive order. In the years to come, the issue will surely be an important part of The Interfaith Alliance’s work.



For the community of civil rights organizations that work each day to gain and preserve fairness and equality in America, one of the greatest blessings is The Interfaith Alliance. For more than a decade it has stood strong in the face of those who would undo such liberties, a strong force of people of faith and principle.

Elizabeth Birch
Former Executive Director,
Human Rights Campaign



