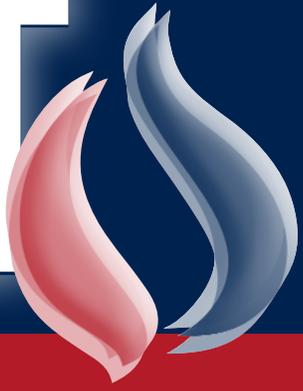


The LIGHT



One Nation, Many Faiths

Spring 2006

Renewing the Struggle...Growing Hope

TIA Activists Bring "Righteous Anger" to Nashville for 10th Annual National Leadership Gathering

By **Shantá Gray**, Field Service Coordinator
sgray@interfaithalliance.org

The 2006 National Leadership Gathering (NLG) was a tremendous success! Nearly two hundred progressive activists from across the nation convened in Nashville, TN, for intensive skills-building and strategic planning sessions. Engaging in important dialogue and networking with colleagues, activists exchanged stories of successes and challenges in grassroots organizing over the past year.

The weekend's theme, *Righteous Anger: Renewing the Struggle...Growing Hope*, captured the essence of Nashville's role in the civil rights movement. The Interfaith Alliance of Middle Tennessee joined the national office to coordinate an event that stayed true to its theme.

The weekend began by renewing the struggle surrounding the issue of poverty.



A diverse group of people of faith and good will gathered in Nashville, TN, for The Interfaith Alliance's 10th annual National Leadership Gathering.

A diverse group of religious, civil rights and disability communities came together for a public STOP the HATE vigil. Following the event, national activists participated in a local town hall meeting on the importance of renewing the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA).

Saturday was dominated by expert-led workshops and intensive clinics with topics ranging from public policy and creating a campaign toolkit to grassroots organizing and building a more inclusive interfaith movement. Other workshops focused on religious liberty advocacy and communications strategies. Of particular

interest were two plenary sessions addressing issues of faith and equality as well as religion and public education.

The Saturday luncheon keynote speaker was Kim Klein, an internationally respected grassroots fundraising trainer and author who truly put the FUN back into fundraising. We were also fortunate to have staff from Grassroots Leadership provide training and guidance on strategic action to abolish for-profit private prisons as a means of developing a more humane criminal justice system.

On Saturday evening, the Bishop Murphy local activism award was presented for

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With Your Support, Progress Will Continue

Friends of The Interfaith Alliance,

A few weeks ago, we received word about a situation that fundamentally threatens religious liberty in America: a member of the Missouri state Legislature introduced a resolution that would—in essence—make Christianity the official religion of that state. (The resolution solely recognizes “a Christian God.” Instead of acknowledging the rights of minority religions, it only “protect[s] the majority’s right to express their religious beliefs.”)

The national staff immediately sprang into action. We launched an e-mail campaign to our members in Missouri, asking them to contact their state legislators to express their shock and concern about the resolution. Calling on our most connected and dedicated activists in the field, we offered them resources and assistance as this fight ensues. We distributed a press release nationwide, denouncing the Missouri resolution as “divisive and un-American.” On our new weekly radio program, *State of Belief*, Rev. Gaddy interviewed a minister from St. Louis who expressed the sentiment that Missouri legislators are doing more harm than good through their ill-conceived attempts to “defend” Christianity.

As the individual tasked with managing TIA’s day-to-day operations, I was extremely proud of how quickly and efficiently the staff responded to the Missouri situation. When I joined the staff in 1997, TIA was a fledgling enterprise—far removed from our powerful neighbors on K Street in Washington, DC. But today, TIA is meeting with influential members of Congress, producing nationally recognized publications on religion and politics, and providing support to an extensive network of grassroots activists who are becoming ever more successful in fighting for religious liberty in their communities. I believe our growth in strength and influence is truly owed to the fact that you—and other members like you—have answered the call to join and support The Interfaith Alliance.

I wish that all 150,000 TIA members could have stood with me in the recording booth for the first taping of *State of Belief*. Listening to Rev. Gaddy and Mr. Cronkite discuss prayer in the public schools and the war in Iraq, I felt like we had realized a dream. Instead of wondering if the mainstream media will give fair coverage to issues at the intersection of religion and politics, The Interfaith Alliance now has an unfiltered opportunity to spread our positive, healing message on the airwaves. You can read more about *State of Belief* on page 5.

In the current political climate, I know it can sometimes be difficult to see signs of hope. For example, a recent announcement that President Bush intends to funnel millions more in taxpayer dollars to the Department of Homeland Security to be earmarked strictly for faith-based organizations (see page 3 to learn more about TIA’s policy work). But please know that through your support of The Interfaith Alliance, you are helping to expose and challenge such misguided attempts to manipulate religion for political gain.

Together, we will defend religious freedom, protect the wall of separation between religion and government, and create a climate in which religious pluralism can continue to flourish in this nation. Thank you for your dedication and support.

Sincerely,



Suzie Armstrong
Vice President



Ask
Shayla

By **Shayla Ellison**, Member Services Associate
tiamemberservices@interfaithalliance.org

Over the past several months, The Interfaith Alliance has hosted several events that have given me the opportunity to interact directly with members. This column is dedicated to your membership concerns and other inquiries about becoming involved in your respective communities.

How can I reduce the volume of mail I receive?

You can contact me by phone or e-mail to make changes to your donor record at any time. Your record is officially changed only after you’ve contacted me to discuss your preferences.

I just renewed my membership [and/or gave a donation] and I’ve received another request already. Did TIA receive my contribution?

TIA’s mail schedule is determined one to two months in advance of when you receive the mailing. Sometimes recent donations cross in the mail. Or we may not have processed yours yet due to a large volume of mail. Once your gift has been processed, you will receive a *Thank You* for your donation.

How can I get more involved locally?

Local Alliances, TIA meetings and TIA partnerships mobilize grassroots activists to attend school board meetings, hold community forums, track legislation and provide the media with the unique perspectives of people of faith and good will. Feel free to contact Shantá Gray or Jenny Davis (field@interfaithalliance.org) for more ways to get involved!

I called for membership and I got a voice message instead of a live person. Anyone there?

Yes—I’m here and I’m also the only Member Services Associate. The Interfaith Alliance is composed of 18 wonderful staff members dedicated to the mission and spirit of the work we provide. If I’m not available, please leave me a voicemail with your request and contact information. I will get back to you as soon as possible.

TIA Stands Up Against Government-Funded Religion at Senate Roundtable

Washington Jeopardizing Religious Freedom by Promoting “The Gospel of Grants”

By **Kim Baldwin**,
Director of Public Policy and Voter Education
kbaldwin@interfaithalliance.org

In early March, Senators Enzi (R-WY) and Kennedy (D-MA) invited The Interfaith Alliance (TIA) to join a roundtable of community groups and service providers to discuss the role of faith-based groups in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Seated at the table were relief agencies such as the American Red Cross, The Salvation Army, United Jewish Communities, America's Second Harvest and Islamic Relief USA.

At first, it seemed out of character for TIA to be included among this group, as our area of expertise is not in providing disaster assistance. But as conversation drifted to the role of faith-based groups in times of national crisis, it became apparent that not only was our seat at the table warranted, it was necessary.

According to The Associated Press, “in fiscal 2005, religious charities received \$2.15 billion in federal grants to administer a range of social service programs for the needy. This is 7% higher than 2004, and represented 10.9% of the total grants from the seven [report issued before Homeland Security] federal agencies that are allowed to issue the money to faith-based groups.”

You know that helping people during a crisis is what houses of worship and religious organizations are called to do. And government doesn't need to fund or coordinate their work. We already know that the integrity of religion is often compromised when government seeks political gain from its involvement with religious institutions. You also know that in times of disaster, dismissing our Constitution is the *last* thing our government should do. But it's clear that many well-intentioned people are willing to

set its principles aside as a means to an end when motivated by the desire to do good.

In our recommendation to the panel, TIA noted that faith-based organizations would benefit from more timely, detailed communication with government agencies. But we also stressed that extensive coordination from the government is unnecessary. Faith-based organizations have been so incredibly effective in helping people in the Gulf Coast region precisely because the combination of compassion and independence allowed groups to react quickly and flexibly in emergency situations.



According to The Associated Press, “in fiscal 2005, religious charities received \$2.15 billion in federal grants to administer a range of social service programs for the needy. This is 7% higher than 2004, and represented 10.9% of the total grants from the seven [report issued before Homeland Security] federal agencies that are allowed to issue the money to faith-based groups.”

You have witnessed the incompetence of DHS since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit the Gulf region last year. Yet creating such a “faith-based” office only compounds the problem by entangling religion and government. This administration's decision blatantly used the wrath of the storms to break the levees protecting the separation of church and state.

Disappointed—but not surprised—by the White House's position, TIA will continue advocating on your behalf to help Americans understand and uphold the religious liberty clause of the Constitution. We will remind our government that it must serve all citizens equally, regardless of their religious belief or non-belief, and that no citizen's rights or opportunities should be sacrificed at the hands of any one religion or practice.

Your Call to Action

Call your member of Congress (Senate: 202-224-3121, House: 202-225-3121), or write a letter to the editor of your local paper. Tell them that if they really want the federal government to be of help, please appoint qualified individuals who will oversee an effective renewal of the Gulf Coast region. Let them know that faith-based organizations will continue to do their work without the complications that come with extensive government initiatives and coordination.

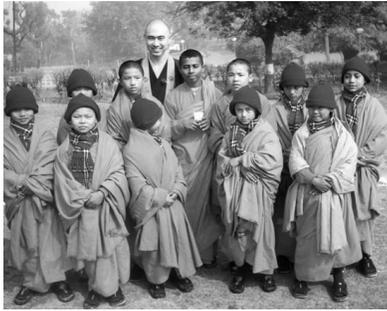
Homeland Security Newest Distributor of Federal Money To Faith-Based Groups

Just days after our appearance at the Senate roundtable, the White House announced it had ordered the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to create an internal Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. DHS is now the eighth agency ordered by our government to administer federal grants (your tax dollars) to religious organizations.

Portrait of an Interfaith Leader: Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki

By **Don Parker**, Press Secretary
dparker@interfaithalliance.org

As an interfaith leader in New York City and nationwide, the Venerable T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki serves in many capacities and on many boards. But it is his personal essence—as reflected in his smile, his eyes and his spirit—that brings happiness to those blessed by his presence.



By his example, Rev. Nakagaki—or T.K., as he is known to his friends—teaches us to find inspiration from a temporary work of art, a statue that survived an atomic blast, the music of the Beatles or the changing colors shimmering on an ocean's surface.

A member of The Interfaith Alliance's board of directors, T.K. says his interfaith work has been rewarding. "I have learned many things about my own Buddhism. I now know more about the uniqueness of Buddhism. What I want to share are different views called

'Eastern religions' or 'Buddhist religions.' Because of its uniquely different perspective, Buddhism can contribute to our community as well as to religious organizations."

Last year, *Newsday* published T.K.'s poetic reflections after he led a meditative walk through Christo's "Gates" in Central Park. From the depth of his Buddhist perspective, he wove a deeper understanding of the art, the natural world and the potential for human enlightenment.

Following the death of George Harrison, T.K. led his church by strumming a guitar and singing several of Harrison's songs, drawing on previous experience playing in a Japanese rock band that covered the Beatles. Following the devastation of Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, T.K. traveled to Baton Rouge, LA, with a TIA-sponsored delegation of 20 interfaith religious leaders to learn more about the evacuees' needs and the role of faith-based groups in rebuilding the Gulf Coast region. In December 2005, T.K. participated with

other religious leaders and Mayor Michael Bloomberg in the 5th Annual Interfaith Breakfast in New York.

"Because there are many different faces of religions, it is fun and rich, and I enjoy the differences," T.K. says about the experience of working and living in New York City. "Buddhism teaches us to live in harmony and peace, so it is a good practice to work with various groups." Although he and his family visit Japan each year, he has said that if he returned for good, he would be homesick for New York.

Born in Osaka, Japan, T.K. was ordained in 1980. He came to America in 1985 as an overseas minister from Hongwanji Mother Temple in Kyoto. Since 1994, he has been the head resident minister of the New York Buddhist Church—Jodoshinshu (Shin Buddhist) Temple, the oldest Japanese Buddhist temple in the city. He serves in leadership and advisory roles for a wide range of interfaith and community organizations, and is the UCM Buddhist Chaplain at Columbia University.

Many of T.K.'s writings, including his poem about the "Gates," can be found online at www.newyorkbuddhistchurch.org.

POLICY ALERT

Voting Rights Act Renewal Challenges Faith Groups to Protect Civic Participation

By **Anne Sclater**, Policy and Voter Ed. Associate
asclater@interfaithalliance.org

Religious people led the fight for civil rights in the 1950s and '60s. Now people of faith and good will have another important task before them.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is most often associated with the protection of black voters in the civil-rights-era South. But today, the laws actively protect Latino voters in Texas and the Southwest, and Native-

and Asian-American voters in the West. Critical sections of the VRA will expire in 2007 unless Congress renews them. The Interfaith Alliance is active in the fight to renew the VRA. But we need your help to make it happen.

Three important parts of the law are up for renewal:

- Section 5 protects minority groups from changes in the election process that make it harder for them to vote.

- Section 203 requires that non-English-speaking voters receive help with voting, or are provided ballots in their native languages.
- Sections 6–9 allow government-assigned monitors to ensure fair elections.

Most of the VRA is permanent and will never expire. No citizens will lose their right to vote, regardless of the current outcome. But renewing these three measures is still important because they help guarantee that all Americans can participate in the democratic process.

Continued page 5

New National Radio Show Premier

The Interfaith Alliance Foundation Launches *State of Belief* on Air America Radio

State of Belief, a new national radio show produced by The Interfaith Alliance Foundation (TIAF), premiered January 15 on the Air America Radio Network, to great success.

Hosted by TIAF President Rev. Welton Gaddy, *State of Belief* talks about religion and politics in all the ways you've been told not to. Through interviews with newsmakers and celebrities and field reports from around the country, *State of Belief* explores the intersection of religion with politics, culture, media and activism. The show also exposes and critiques both the political exploitation of religion for partisan gain, and the religious manipulation of government for sectarian purposes.

Notable guests to date have included: Walter Cronkite, Senator Patrick Leahy, Senator Kent Conrad, Congresswoman Betty McCollum, Sam Harris, Chris Hedges, Rabbi Michael Lerner, Arun Ghandi and Diana Eck. *State of Belief* also features voices of activists across the nation, sharing their stories about how religion and politics have intersected in their lives.

DC metro-area members recently joined with Welton, Isaac Aronson (*State of Belief's* producer) and the TIAF staff to celebrate the launch of the show. The open house provided an opportunity for Welton to mingle with members like you and to share his vision for the show and the organization.

You can listen to *State of Belief* live on a local Air America affiliate, on XM radio channel 167, or online at www.StateofBelief.org, where you can also download and podcast previous shows. If your local station is not airing *State of Belief*, please let them know how much you'd like them to!

The airwaves in this nation are filled with people appealing to religion for purposes of self-advancement, economic gain, or political



Rev. Welton Gaddy and Al Franken in the State of Belief NYC studio. Al delivered the Religious Right update on the March 19 show.



State of Belief Producer Isaac-Davy Aronson hears from TIA members who attended the recent open house.

control. It is time—far past time, actually—for a radio program committed to protecting religion from those who would hijack it for selfish purposes and to build support for all who will work for a nation in which religion supports radical freedom, a vital democracy and an unrelenting passion for social justice. Such is the mission of *State of Belief*. Tune in today.

State of Belief

- Religion and radio, done differently
- Brought to you by The Interfaith Alliance Foundation
- Sundays on Air America Radio Network

Voting Rights Act

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Renewal Efforts

Opposition to VRA renewal is not likely to be overt. After all, few politicians want to be on record saying that they are against fair voting rights for minorities.

We expect some opposition to come from anti-immigration groups, which do not want election materials to be provided in any

language other than English. Other opponents might push to expand Sections 5 and 203 to become universal. Though that might seem sensible at first glance, legal experts predict that it would raise constitutional questions that could threaten to overturn the provisions altogether. VRA supporters also worry that if the Supreme Court trends more politically conservative, the power of the law could be threatened by judicial rulings; a strong vote for renewal and

vocal public support could help ward off such a challenge.

Your Call to Action

Tell your members of Congress that you support renewal of the VRA. Let them know that people of faith and good will believe that every citizen has an equal right to vote and participate in American democracy. Remind them that VRA renewal helps turn the moral value of equality into action.

TIA Snapshots

Help LEADD the Next Generation

By **Jenny Davis**, Deputy Field Director
jdavis@interfaithalliance.org

Your support for The Interfaith Alliance Foundation (TIAF) allows us to engage in public education to ensure that diverse people of faith and good will participate in and influence public policy. This summer, TIAF will debut an exciting new camp to engage youth leaders on the issues of religious liberty. The program is titled **Leadership Education Advancing Democracy and Diversity (LEADD)**.



The Mountain



Created in partnership with The Mountain Retreat & Learning Centers, LEADD will convene rising high school sophomores and juniors from across the United States to facilitate an educational and empowering experience. Youth leaders will participate in a week-long immersion course that will engage participants in a range of creative and cooperative activities, covering such topics as:

- Democracy in the Real World
- Religion in the Public Square
- Rights and Responsibilities of Citizens
- Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Problems

TIAF believes that all generations, particularly young Americans, need to be catalysts for change, shaping our democracy

to reflect America's rich diversity of heritage, culture, religion and values. It is through your support that we will be able to empower a generation of young adults to become such outstanding leaders. For more information on the program, please visit www.weleadd.org.

How Are YOUTH Involved?

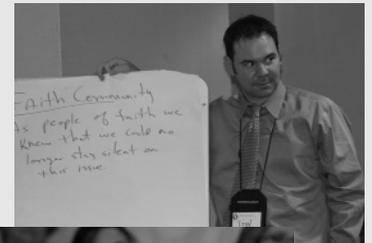
By **Eric Shutt**, Public Policy Intern
intern@interfaithalliance.org

What will The Interfaith Alliance (TIA) look like in 30 years? TIA's future hinges on youth involvement in the progressive religious movement, and it is our responsibility to provide meaningful opportunities for youth to be involved in our work.

Primarily, TIA's summer internship program provides inspired opportunities for college students interested in religion and politics. Interns do meaningful work in their

own area of interest, whether that be researching public policy, working with the media, building our grassroots activism or helping raise funds to support our programs.

TIA's welcoming office atmosphere, just a few blocks from the White House, is sure to be an unforgettable internship experience for just about any student. If you know someone who might be interested, please ask them to join us. We are currently accepting applications for summer and fall 2006 at intern@interfaithalliance.org.



Renewing the Struggle

from page 1

outstanding excellence in grassroots organizing. TIA board member and Executive Director of the Muslim American Society, Imam W. Mahdi Bray delivered an inspiring address that challenged activists to grow hope, despite the formidable challenges faced today.

Sunday featured an interfaith worship experience through music, song and dance. The conference concluded with an

inspirational sendoff address by Dr. Keith Jennings, international voting rights activist and founder of the African-American Human Rights Foundation.

We would like to thank all of you for your continued support and commitment to building TIA's grassroots influence. The 2006 NLG provided advocacy skills and tools to you, our phenomenal members, so that we may continue working together to protect religious liberty for all Americans. You are truly the "heart and the hands" of The

Interfaith Alliance. We are honored to join with you as we renew the struggles of the past...and grow hope for the future.

For information on the 2007 NLG, please e-mail field@interfaithalliance.org.



BISHOP MURPHY AWARD PRESENTED TO OUTSTANDING GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS

The 2005 Bishop P. Francis Murphy Local Activism Award was presented to The Interfaith Alliance of Colorado (TIA CO) for its outstanding grassroots activism, with runner-up awards given to The Tulsa Interfaith Alliance and The Interfaith Alliance of Long Island.

TIA President Welton Gaddy cited TIA CO's outstanding grassroots work to increase public awareness of religious freedom. "We are a national organization, but our real work is done in the grassroots," Gaddy said. "We are thankful to have a group in Colorado which recognizes the threat religious liberty is facing and who is willing to stand up and fight to preserve rights for all Americans."

In 2005, TIA CO opened interfaith dialogue on Islam, led statewide coalitions

and lobbied to restore funding for healthcare and education. TIA CO also advocated to protect the filibuster and to oppose a federal budget cut that would harm programs providing food stamps, student loans and healthcare to those in need. For more information on TIA CO, please visit <http://www.interfaithallianceco.org/>.

Bishop P. Francis Murphy, the Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, MD, and founding board member of TIA, passed away in September 1999 after undergoing treatment for cancer. The Bishop P. Francis Murphy Local Activism Award was established in 2001 to recognize outstanding grassroots work and commemorate the memory and spirit of Bishop Murphy.



"Bishop Murphy's passion for social justice and his tireless commitment to the role of

religion as a constructive and healing force in public life is an inspiration to our chapter and to people across many faith traditions...Through this award, The Interfaith Alliance of Colorado hopes to connect with his courage and his wisdom."

Sr. Maureen McCormack,
TIA Colorado President

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One Nation, Many Faiths ★ **www.interfaithalliance.org**

In Our Own Words

What Does Interfaith Mean to You?



Right now, especially in Ohio, religious-political issues are reaching a boiling point. Many of our elected leaders are intimately tied to the extreme Religious Right. I knew I must get involved now or risk jeopardizing American democracy for their vision of a theocracy.

Janice Weiss
Cincinnati, OH



I found TIA to be an extension of my quest for justice and equality. In America, diversity is reality. . . We must find ways to learn about each other and become comfortable with those who are different from us. . . if not, ignorance often leads to hate and violence.

Dr. Mussarat Chaudry
TIA of New York State, Capital District (Albany)



For me, religion was never separate from my political interests. My faith and values stress inclusiveness, tolerance and equity. In my opinion, I can't just be faithful without being faithfully active and making a difference in my community.

Connie Ryan Terrell
Executive Director, TIA Iowa (Des Moines)



In Hawai'i, there are people from very diverse faith traditions sharing a small space. I've learned that interfaith work is not about conversion, but about valuing different beliefs or spiritual perspectives. . . Together we share a common vision for humanity that defuses religious extremism and intolerance.

Jonipher Kwong
TIA Hawai'i (Honolulu)



In my mind, "interfaith" describes a common thread that runs across all religions: justice. Working with TIA makes you realize you're not an island. With understanding across faith traditions comes peace. . . that's what it's all about.

Jarvis Johnson
Washington, DC

