

The LIGHT



One Nation, Many Faiths

Winter 2006

Voices from Baton Rouge

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There is a song that begins with the lyric, "She, she screams in silence." Never has that one line meant more than when The Interfaith Alliance (TIA), along with 20 inter-religious leaders from all over the country, visited Baton Rouge, LA, 56 days after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf region.

Encouraged by the generous compassion of the religious community and disturbed by the tardiness and outright failures by governmental agencies, TIA organized the delegation in October to meet with evacuees from New Orleans and to connect with community leaders and local agencies providing relief efforts to victims affected by the recent hurricanes.

At the onset of the trip, we had no idea what was in store for us. By the end of the

first day, it was painfully clear that thousands of evacuees, mainly from New Orleans, are screaming for help—be it financial, spiritual or just a friendly shoulder to lean on—but they are screaming in silence.

Our mission had but one goal: listen.

The people with whom we met, in what locals refer to as "FEMA ghettos" and in different kinds of temporary shelters, made it very clear that they are mired in the bureaucratic quicksand of FEMA, religious agencies and state politicians. And they are sinking deeper and deeper.

Although the population of Baton Rouge has doubled since Katrina decimated New Orleans, with the exception of a few dollars designated for the trailer park and basic operational needs, this hospitable city has received only modest reimbursement from the federal government to help support its care of the evacuees who have relocated.

Numerous houses of worship, which had never before been in the business of running

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Amrit Kaur listens to an evacuee's heart wrenching account of her journey from New Orleans to a shelter in Baton Rouge, LA.

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Encouraged by the generous compassion of the religious community and disturbed by the tardiness and outright failures in the delivery of services by governmental agencies, TIA organized the delegation in October to meet with evacuees from New Orleans as well as to connect with the many community leaders and local agencies providing relief efforts to victims affected by the recent hurricanes.

What Is a Progressive Religious Movement?

Friends of The Interfaith Alliance,

I would like for us to talk about members of the progressive religious movement as people in the tradition of prophetic religion; as people committed to a pursuit of the “beloved community” envisioned by Dr. King; as proponents of justice; and as advocates for religious pluralism.

We respect people’s freedom, civil rights, and ability to make choices in a manner that the Religious Right considers dangerous. Though we believe that politics should be moral, we do not believe that government should be an institution of religion.

We are not just the opposite of the Religious Right. We are about: a broader vision for the nation; a more inclusive community; a more multifaceted political agenda; a more expansive understanding of justice; a more loving recognition of the meaning of family; a more respectful view of humankind; a more in-depth commitment to peace; and a more profound understanding of spiritual pilgrimage than simply stating the polar opposites of the Religious Right’s extreme conceits.

Let us simply agree that moral motivations are major contributors to our passion and practices, but that our politics are just that—politics. We have no more right to identify our politics with God than does the Religious Right. The politics of people involved in the movement of progressive religion are *our* politics—not God’s politics.

The Interfaith Alliance is deeply concerned with the meaning of religious freedom as well as the blessing and responsibilities inherent in it. We can find in advocacy for religious liberty

a fundamental rationale for our positions on a wide range of social and political issues. For the good of religion and for the good of the nation, we say to an intrusive government, “Stay out of our congregations with your partisan political rhetoric, electoral strategies, and organizing tools! Stay out of our temples, synagogues, mosques, gurdwaras, and churches with your political understanding of private issues! Keep off the benches of our high courts people who will weaken a commitment to the principle that has contributed inestimably to the integrity of religion and the vitality of government. Don’t change the nature of our democracy under the guise of bringing more religion and ‘morality’ to our nation.”

A truly progressive religious community demonstrates a strong commitment to religious liberty as absolutely essential to building a more civil and inclusive America. It is for that reason we are proud to have many non-religious people included among us, united against the divisive and intolerant agenda of the Religious Right.

This issue of *The Light* addresses many issues facing our movement. You will learn more about our recent “listening tour” to Louisiana in response to Hurricane Katrina. Please see cover story, *Voices from Baton Rouge*. On page 5, there is a truly touching account of one Sikh’s journey to her gurdwara in the midst of the devastation. Also in the wake of Katrina, our Public Policy department has been hard at work fighting the political opportunism of some members of Congress regarding the “faith-based” initiative. See Senior Policy Analyst Preetmohan Singh’s article on page 6 for more information.

Lastly, I’d like to thank you all for your steadfast support in 2005. Please remember you can still send your year-end gift in the enclosed envelope. We truly appreciate all that you do and stand for.

Warm regards,

Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, President



Ask
Shayla

By Shayla Ellison, Member Services Associate
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What an interesting first three months with The Interfaith Alliance! I’ve had the opportunity to talk with many of you via e-mail, letters, and phone. For your convenience, I’ve compiled a list of the most frequently asked questions. Of course, if your question isn’t addressed, feel free to submit it to the e-mail address below.

How do I contact The Interfaith Alliance and The Interfaith Alliance Foundation?

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Are my donations to The Interfaith Alliance tax-deductible?

No. Because The Interfaith Alliance achieves its goals through legislative advocacy, your gift is not tax-deductible by law. If you choose to make a donation to the Foundation, your gift will be tax-deductible but will not support our lobbying or legislative efforts. Please see *TIA & Your Taxes* on page 7.

Can I make changes to my membership record?

Yes. Just contact me at Member Services and allow up to six weeks for those changes to take effect permanently.

When will I receive the materials I requested?

Depending on the request, it may take 2 to 6 weeks. Material and informational requests will often take less than 2 weeks but changes to your membership record and/or removal requests may take up to 6 weeks since we prepare mailings a month in advance.



Religious Justifications for Supreme Court Nominees Raise Serious Concerns

By Preetmohan Singh, Senior Policy Analyst
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The religious affiliation of Supreme Court nominees has taken center stage in the ongoing political drama to fill Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's seat. Especially raising concerns recently have been President Bush's use of failed nominee Harriet Miers' Evangelical faith to justify her nomination in addition to the radical right's continued manipulation of religion for political gain. Religious Right groups such as the Family Research Council have organized so-called "Justice Sundays" for the previous two nominees. They have since promised a third on January 8, 2006, with the announcement of Judge Samuel A. Alito, Jr., as Bush's current pick in replacement of Ms. Miers.

During the confirmation process of Chief Justice John Roberts to the Supreme Court, some radical right groups claimed that questioning the nominee on anything related to religion—even the separation of church and state and the First Amendment—would be tantamount to violating the Constitution's ban on a religious test for public office. The Interfaith Alliance partially concurred, calling on Congress and the public to respect the Constitution's ban on religious tests for public office by neither inquiring about nor

discussing Roberts' religion and beliefs. However, we also stated that every Senator has the right and the duty to ask judicial nominees how, or if, their personal beliefs about religion will affect their decisions and rulings related to the Constitution.

We submitted our questions to the Senate Judiciary Committee for use in the confirmation hearings. Similarly, Judge Roberts responded to a question by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) by stating, "I do know this: that my faith and my religious beliefs do not play a role in judging. When it comes to judging, I look to the law books and always have. I don't look to the Bible or any other religious source." When asked by Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA), he expressed agreement with John F. Kennedy's 1960 statement that "I do not speak for my church on public matters, and the church does not speak for me."

When Ms. Miers was nominated to fill the remaining Supreme Court vacancy, the Religious Right was apoplectic that one of its favorites was not tapped to fill the position. In response, President Bush and White House advisors began using her religion as a justification for her nomination. In response, TIA President Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy had a letter to the editor published in *The New York Times* on October 8, 2005, which stated, in part:

"While the White House solicits support for [Miers] by focusing on her Evangelical faith, many on the Religious Right say her

religion is not conservative enough. Does being a biblical literalist give a person more credentials to be a justice than being a progressive religionist or secularist? Just as opposition to Supreme Court nominees



because of their faith is wrong, so is using faith to garner support. The administration can't have it both ways. Religious endorsements must not take the place of critical legal examination."

Rest assured, TIA will take this nuanced message to Senators as they consider the nomination of Judge Alito. We will continue alerting the public and the media that a narrowly constituted "Justice Sunday" composed of the radical right's most extreme political and religious activists does not represent all—or even most—Americans of faith and good will.



The Interfaith Alliance called on Congress and the public to respect the Constitution's ban on religious tests for public office by neither inquiring about nor discussing Roberts' personal religion and beliefs.

However, we also stated that every Senator has the right and the duty to ask judicial nominees how, or if, their personal beliefs about religion will affect their decisions and rulings related to the Constitution.

A Profile on Reverend Leonard Jackson

By Jon Niven, Deputy Press Secretary
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Rev. Leonard Jackson was among the more than 20 interfaith leaders to participate in The Interfaith Alliance's October visit to Baton Rouge, LA, and it is not an experience he will soon forget. Having been on the ground in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots, Jackson said there is a common thread in each disaster's recovery process.

"It was the organizing of the churches, government, and community working together that proved to be the ultimate salvation for Los Angeles," Rev. Jackson said. "If it were not for churches performing



Rev. Leonard Jackson
 TIA Board, President Emeritus

much of what government is responsible for, what would have happened to the people of the Gulf region?"

Rev. Jackson currently serves as Associate Minister at Holy Trinity A.M.E. in Las Vegas, NV, and is *President Emeritus* on TIA's Board of Directors.

While Rev. Jackson has spent the last 15 years serving on the front lines of society, he began his career serving on the front lines in Vietnam. He worked two tours as an aircraft crew member in 1965-66. On

his first tour he logged more than 100 hours as a helicopter door gunner escorting and rescuing troops from the battlefields. On Rev. Jackson's second tour, he was 1st Sgt. in the 155 Howitzer Armored Division where he was

in charge of rotating troops in the field and making sure they were supplied.

"When I reflect upon my military career and all the near fatalities, I realize God had bigger and better things for me to accomplish in life," Rev. Jackson said. "Witnessing individuals that are close to you perish makes you realize just how precious life really is." Because of Rev. Jackson's firsthand experiences, he urges TIA members to continue preaching UNITY within our communities of faith by addressing the moral issues of our nation, or what Rev. Jackson calls "focusing on the U's more than the I's to help close the widening gap between the have's and have not's."

To learn more about Rev. Leonard Jackson, please visit www.interfaithalliance.org. Click on "About Us," and then "Board."

Cronkite 2005: A Sparkling Success

The Interfaith Alliance Foundation's 8th Annual *Walter Cronkite Faith & Freedom Award* gala promised to be a night unlike any gala in our history. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet a diverse group of The Interfaith Alliance supporters—field activists, members and donors, policymakers, media contacts, and honored guests. Hosted at the Essex House in midtown Manhattan, the venue offered attendees excellent displays of food and hospitality. The evening commenced with a reception in the Petit Salon—resplendent with conversation and many opportunities to meet Mr. Cronkite as well as this year's honored guests, Dr. Keith Jennings and the Honorable Thomas H. Kean.

After the cocktail hour, guests were ushered to the Elegant Grand Salon for an invocation followed by dinner. Denise Taft Davidoff, the Host Committee chair, introduced the premier screening of The Interfaith Alliance's new organizational video. Guests were also delighted to hear Mr. Cronkite's poignant remarks about our duty as a nation to promote and preserve religious liberty in light of the current political climate. The Interfaith Alliance President, Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, closed the Gala with an announcement of a weekly

radio show on Air America beginning in January 2006 that will address issues at the intersection of religion, politics, and culture.

A transcript of speeches from the event including Walter Cronkite's remarks is available online at www.interfaithalliance.org.



Ethnic Profiling, a Lingering Plague for the Sikhs in the United States

*By Sumir Kaur Chehl, President
The Sikh Society of South, Inc.
TIA Activist since 2002*

Hurricane Katrina—the worst natural catastrophe in the history of America—spelled disaster, devastation, and despair. Countless people's lives were suddenly toppled, and among them were nearly sixty Sikh families from the New Orleans vicinity. Our Gurdwara, the only formal place of worship for Sikhs in Louisiana, was flooded—with Siri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scriptures, still inside the building.

Guru Granth Sahib is the living Guru of the Sikhs; most revered, loved, and held in the highest esteem by the Sikhs worldwide. Bringing the sacred scriptures—the embodiment of the Guru—out of the contaminated water and waste was of utmost importance to us; it was like witnessing our own father drowning and stranded in the floodwaters.

Our desperate appeals for help to city officials and President Bush fell on deaf ears. Even a personal plea to Congressman Bobby Jindal was futile. It was only the determination and resourcefulness of the United Sikh Organization in hiring a private rescue squad armed with a special Zodiac boat who finally rescued Guru Sahib on September 7. Guru Granth Sahib was found floating on the throne (palki), completely unharmed and unstained despite the total destruction: truly a miracle!

Four weeks after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, New Orleans East was officially declared open to its residents. I, along with two turbaned Sikh gentlemen visiting from

California—Ram Singh and Amritpal Singh—and our priest, went back to visit the Gurdwara. En route, we were stopped by two young, white police officers. I explained, “Our temple was flooded, we want to take a look.” He replied that the city was still closed. “Even to the residents?” I asked.

And then hell opened up.

Guru Granth Sahib is the living Guru of the Sikhs; most revered, loved, and held in the highest esteem by the Sikhs worldwide. Bringing the sacred scriptures—the embodiment of the Guru—out of the contaminated water and waste was of utmost importance to us.

The officers began yelling, hurling deplorable language at us—even threatening to arrest us if we took one step farther! This was the first such experience in my 45 years in Louisiana. Undoubtedly shaken but undaunted by the encounter, our group continued on our way to the Gurdwara. As we journeyed farther down the road we eventually entered the so-called “closed” city with ease. Another police officer we encountered there sympathized with our plight, but warned us that the area where the temple was located, “did not look good.”

Ethnic profiling and discrimination at the hands of those who were supposed to guard, guide, and lift us in this difficult time was especially painful. Sikhs in the United States, a minority among the minorities, are honest, hardworking, and law-abiding people who have been facing hate crimes and ethnic profiling since 9/11. Firm steps must be taken to eliminate such atrocities, especially in times of tragedy.



Political Opportunists Push Government-Funded Religion, Religious Discrimination

Preetmohan Singh, Senior Policy Analyst
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Since our founding, The Interfaith Alliance has advocated for an appropriate interaction between religious and governmental institutions. Specifically, we have consistently decried the manipulation of religion for partisan political gain. Since Hurricane Katrina, however, political opportunists have renewed their efforts to provide direct taxpayer funding to religious institutions which would allow for unprecedented religious discrimination with our tax dollars.

As many TIA members know, President Bush's "faith-based" initiative, which provides direct funding for religious institutions, has been stalled in Congress for nearly five years. However, the Bush administration continues to vigorously push this unconstitutional policy that would enmesh religion in the political appropriations process.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina's devastation and our government's failure to adequately respond, many houses of worship were transformed into emergency shelters at great expense. They provided the kinds of social services we expect from the government agencies that failed to deliver post-Katrina. For many houses of worship, this meant depleting critical financial resources and accruing substantial debt.

As a front-page article in *The Washington Post* reported on September 27, "The Federal Emergency Management Agency said yesterday that it will use taxpayer money to reimburse churches and other religious organizations that have opened their doors to provide shelter, food, and supplies to survivors of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. FEMA officials said it would mark the first time that the government has made large-scale payments to religious groups for helping to cope with a domestic natural disaster."

TIA believes that religion's role as a prophetic political critic is compromised when government seeks credit for, or seeks political

gain from, its involvement with religious institutions. Houses of worship responded to people's needs because they are built on God, not government. Whatever the government's plan is for those in need, or its remedy for prior failings, it must not use tragedy to transform church-state relationships that have well served both houses of worship and government during good times and bad.

Many who are involved in relief efforts through houses of worship share their religion explicitly—with prayer services, religious education, and the distribution of religious tracts. To ensure religious liberty for all, the government must not support such efforts. Instead, voluntary dollars should fund these faithful efforts. Therefore, TIA, along with the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, has advocated that only private sources of money—individuals, religious institutions, nonprofit organizations—should provide help reimbursing houses of worship who responded to urgent needs and emergency situations. For example, houses of worship should seek funds from private relief efforts such as the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund. This will eliminate the risks of government entanglement in religious institutions.

In addition to unprecedented direct government funding of religious institutions, Hurricane Katrina was also used by political opportunists in the House of Representatives to pass a controversial provision allowing government-funded Head Start providers to exercise religious discrimination in selecting teachers and volunteers.

Rep. John Boehner (R-OH) had planned for several months to offer the religious discrimination amendment to The School Readiness Act (H.R. 2123). But in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it was advertised as an effort led by Rep. Charles Boustany Jr. (R-LA). The change was widely seen as an effort to gain support for the amendment based on its new tie to the Louisiana congressman.



TIA President Rev. Welton Gaddy testifies before Congressional subcommittee against H.R. 1054 which would have permanently established the Office of Faith-Based Initiatives in all future administrations.

The Head Start program began in 1965 following the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, and has since been widely recognized as one of the most successful government programs ever created. It has provided early childhood education and development programs that have helped millions of lower-income families overcome inequities for more than forty years.

The Senate passed a similar bill, but without Boustany's religious discrimination amendment. The House version will now go to a joint conference committee. We will continue to work with TIA members and lobby conferees to strip the bill of the Boustany amendment in conference. We will also continue to fight efforts, no matter how politically opportunistic, to make religion dependent on our tax money and beholden to government priorities and direction.

Baton Rouge

from page 1

shelters or providing direct social services, have filled the void, opening their doors—and pocketbooks—to welcome and care for evacuees. Many of the religious leaders in Baton Rouge told us they never expected any type of reimbursement from the government. They extended a helping hand because it is what religious leaders and institutions are called to do in times of trouble.

Since Katrina hit, there have been many examples of political opportunists manipulating a national tragedy to institute policies that never garnered enough support to pass during normal times. Such appears to be the case with the President's "faith-based" initiative, despite the rhetoric coming from the White House. The Interfaith Alliance has feared for some time that this initiative was more likely grounded in politics instead of piety.

TIA was particularly interested in how (and if) the government is working with religious institutions, and whether religious organizations are being manipulated for partisan political purposes. We carried with us to Baton Rouge suggested guidelines for structuring a healthy partnership between both institutions that maximizes the delivery of much-needed services without violating the autonomy of houses of worship—making

religious institutions accountable to the priorities and interests of federal, state, or local governments or compromising the religious freedoms of those in need.

The journey to Baton Rouge was an eye-opening and life-changing event for the entire delegation. As we assessed the many ways in which TIA can contribute, two things became clear:

First, we must demand that the administration act like a government, responding with help to all citizens, especially the weakest and poorest among us; that the religious community act dutifully and spiritually, responding with compassion and charity to their brothers and sisters in need, without the guarantee of government aid or reimbursement; and that individuals act with empathy and humanity for their neighbors who have lost everything—except their optimism for the future.

And second, TIA, just by sharing our experiences with our vast networks, will make a difference in the lives of those with whom we met.

To tell the stories and highlight the needs in Baton Rouge, TIA has released a video and written a report on this visit that will be distributed to government officials, religious leaders, the media, community organizations, funding sources, and business leaders. It is also on our website. Please visit www.interfaithalliance.org to learn more about the delegation, read their reflections, and view other photographs of the trip.

There are also many local groups doing tremendous work all across the Gulf region who need resources. Please visit www.interfaithalliance.org for a list of groups providing relief services whom we met on our trip. Feel free to contact them directly and ask how you can help.



TIA & YOUR TAXES

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