

Baptists wrestle with ways to find common ground with other faiths

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ATLANTA—As Baptists seek common ground to work with people of other faiths, they face the challenge of finding ways to be relevant in an interfaith context while retaining their own distinctive identity.

“We often don’t reach out to other faiths because we are scared of losing what’s essential about our Baptist faith,” said Noel Erskine, associate professor of theology and ethics at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Ga. “We are so afraid of losing our identity that we are not relevant in a multi-faith context.”

Erskine was one of three participants on a panel that discussed “Can we all get along? Finding common ground with other faiths.” Others on the panel were: Faysel Sharif, People of the Book Ministry; Virginia Baptist Mission Board in Falls Church, Va., a former Muslim who converted to Christianity 28 years ago; and Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance in Washington, D.C.

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“Many Baptists have not been good at dialogue in the interfaith context,” Erskine said, “because you cannot have dialogue if you start from the idea that others are religions of unbelief.”

“We better act the way Jesus Christ has called upon us to act,” Sharif said. “We need to practice true faith—not Christianity as a religion but Christianity as a true relationship with God.”

Cultural differences play a part in understanding religious differences, Sharif stressed.

“Before you try to develop a relationship with a Muslim or Hindu, you must break down the barrier of stereotypes,” he said. “What we need to do to go

forward and meet our neighbors is to establish a bridge on which we can communicate. Without that, we cannot reach out to Muslims, and Muslims cannot reach out to us.”

Gaddy, who works daily with 75 different religious traditions in the United States, said he believes the future of the church will be interreligious in nature.

“In that future, distinctions of diversity must be preserved,” he said. “We do not need a religious community shaped by the lowest common denominator. That would rob us of the symphonic-like nature of the people who make up this nation.”

Gaddy said that differences should not be ignored but should be recognized and respected if possible. One value that Gaddy said is shared among virtually all religions in the United States is religious freedom.

“Religious freedom is what has made the U.S. the most religiously pluralistic country in the world,” he said, noting that he subscribes to the motto “Out of many, cooperation,” not “out of many, one.”

Some specific suggestions the three panelists offered for churches and individuals who want to understand other religions better include:

- *Have someone in the church, either staff or a volunteer, whose primary responsibility it is to help the congregation understand and reach out to other religions, giving particular attention to religious groups that may worship nearby.*
- *Educate yourself about the social practices of others.*
- *Listen to the stories of others.*
- *Begin to understand other faiths by first coming together in the civic*

realm (for example, to discuss a local school issue).

- *Recognize that one culture is not superior to another.*
- *Learn to differentiate between what is cultural and what is spiritual.*
- *Demonstrate your Christian beliefs by your actions, not by preaching.*
- *Recognize in some tangible way a special day in the religion of a neighbor whose religion is different from yours.*
- *Get to know better a co-worker, neighbor or schoolmate of another religion.*
- *Study a book on another religion in Sunday school or on Wednesday night.*
- *Dream a new church—one not only focused on its own internal life but one that wants to reach out in dialogue.*
- *Recognize that God's call to us is to love our neighbors.*
- *Begin with the common values that most people share: the dignity and worth of every person, the importance of compassion and of community.*

Sharif said the secret to good interfaith relations is not complicated. "Just be a true Christian in the way that Jesus Christ modeled for us."

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