



The InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington (IFC)

"Advancing Justice, Building Community,
Nurturing Understanding"

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Some thoughts from Rabbi Gerald Serotta, newly appointed Executive Director of the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington:

Dear Friends of the IFC:

I am deeply honored and humbled to accept the call from the Board of the IFC to follow in the footsteps of two spiritual giants -- Rev. Clark Lobenstine, who is internationally acknowledged as a pioneer in the field of interfaith relationships and who is equally known for his wisdom and humility -- and Rabbi Eugene Lipman, of blessed memory, a founder of the IFC, and a beloved mentor and role model for me as a rabbi, teacher, and justice seeker.

I can't imagine a more important mission than to join with you in support of the holy work of the IFC. The recent powerful example of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, bringing leaders of many faiths to Rome to pray for peace, can inspire us within the InterFaith Conference to seize our opportunities to unite and to work for the welfare and wholeness of our community. In the words of the Prophet Jeremiah, *dirshu shalom ha-ir*, "Look after the peace of the city wherever you reside."

I am particularly excited that the IFC model of interfaith relations transcends the religions which trace their lineage to the family of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah. In Washington we have an incredibly precious opportunity to grow in our faith through learning about the beliefs and practices of communities very different from our own. In the words of Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, "in whatever way people approach Me, in that way do I favor them. Human beings tread My path in every way." And the holy Qur'an teaches that God has created many different forms of religion in order that we can come to learn from one another and encourage one another in the pursuit of justice in our world.

Here in the nation's capital the IFC has a unique opportunity to model dialogue and respect for difference, both of which can be assets not only within our houses of worship, but also within our houses of government. We can and should make a difference in the divisiveness of our political culture. We also can and should play our part in repairing the shattered lives of people in our communities and in confronting the challenges which threaten the earth on which we live and the air which we breathe.

We are (so far) 11 different instruments in an orchestra which together plays a symphony of praise to the Creator. We are 11 teammates carrying the ball forward toward the goal of the protection of all Creation.

The IFC's newest addition to the "Strengthening Teaching About Religions (STAR) series, on the role of scripture in our diverse traditions, underscores the unity that we can forge from this diversity. (For details

see www.ifcmw.org.) For example, in the Baha'i scripture, Baha'u'llah encourages leaders of different faiths to consider the world's needs, "take counsel together and, through anxious and full deliberation, administer to a diseased and sorely afflicted world the remedy it requires." In Buddhist scripture, the Buddha urges his adherents to observe conditions of thought and action "that are conducive to amiability, that engender feelings of endearment and respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony, and a state of unity." And we are reminded of the traditional Zoroastrian greeting, "May we all be united in strength with all that is Righteous!"

May I share a few words about my background: I grew up as a child in the segregated South of the United States. My parents instilled in me a responsibility to protect and defend the most vulnerable residents in our midst against the bigotry which sadly still lurks in many of our communities. They also taught me an appreciation for the many paths to the One God, values which my wife Cindy and I have tried to pass on to our three children.

My decision to become a Rabbi was heavily influenced by two Protestant ministers I met in college, William Sloane Coffin and Martin Luther King, Jr. More recently I have been deeply influenced by the opportunity to serve as Executive Director of Clergy Beyond Borders (CBB) and to partner on a profound level with my close brother in religion, Imam Yahya Hendi.

Much of my career I was a university chaplain. As Chair of the Board of Chaplains at George Washington University, my role included making sure that all religious paths were available and respected by our students of whatever background. In my work within CBB we summarized this same idea in a concept borrowed from the Biblical story of Noah and Naamah, yet even more relevant today: "One Ark – One Humanity." We are all residents on the Ark of Planet Earth, there is no one to safeguard that Ark but us. We are all in this together.

My sisters and brothers, I ask that you offer prayers in many holy languages for the success of our mission as an InterFaith Conference. I also hope you know that there are hundreds of volunteers and supporters who have helped keep the flame of the IFC torch burning brightly for 36 years. Please consider joining them. In order to succeed in our mission, in addition to your prayers we will need each and every one of you who is reading these words to contribute in three ways: your spiritual energy, your volunteer commitment, and your material support. As is said in the Christian Scriptures, Gospel of Luke, "to whom much is given, from her or him much is required." And this in fact applies to each of us!

I look forward to hearing from you and I promise we will do our best to honor any of the gifts which you can offer. You can reach me at gserotta@ifcmw.org.

May we have many opportunities for sharing moments of meditation and time for learning from each other, and much holy joy in doing good deeds and God's will together.

Peace and Blessings,

(Rabbi) Gerry