Interfaith event in Jordan opens new conversation with Islamic world

Tolerating different religions not enough; a growing need for respect, Adventist religious liberty expert says

8 Mar 2011, Silver Spring, Maryland, United States
Bettina Krause/IRLA/ANN staff

A religious liberty conference held in Jordan last week represents a historic step forward in dialogue between the Islamic world and advocates for religious freedom, organizers said.

Adventist world church Vice President Delbert Baker at an interfaith conference in Jordan last week. Baker urged the audience to narrow the gap between theory and practice in respecting differences between religions. [photo courtesy IRLA]
The Teaching Respect for Religions Symposium gathered scholars, political representatives and legal experts at the Amman College of Al-Balqa Applied University on March 1. The event marked just the second time the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA) has met in the Middle Eastern in its 119-year history.

Organized in 1893 by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the IRLA is the oldest association dedicated to freedom of conscience for people of all faiths and persuasions.

"This conference has opened up an extraordinary opportunity for meaningful conversation with key Islamic leaders and thinkers about what it means to respect different religious traditions, and to live in harmony with one another," said John Graz, IRLA secretary-general.

"Two of the most powerful forces we can use to fight religious prejudice are knowledge about each other and building personal relationships," Graz said in his address.

The symposium was co-sponsored by the Arab Bridge Center for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization founded by former Jordanian Judge Amjad B. Shammout. It brought together IRLA experts, Islamic scholars and Imams, Jordanian law-enforcement leaders, youth leaders and members of the diplomatic community. Jordan's Prime Minister Marouf Suleiman al-Bakht lent his support to the event and was represented by Jiryis Samawy, secretary-general of Jordan's Ministry of Culture.

Delbert Baker, a vice president of the Adventist world church and vice president of the IRLA, spoke to the group about respect and freedom -- principles that he said are mutually valued by both the Islamic and Judeo-Christian worlds. Yet, he said, too often a gap appears between theory and practice. He challenged the audience to analyze whether these principles influence their interactions with people.

In presenting his paper "Beyond Tolerance," IRLA coordinator for Interfaith Relations, William Johnsson, defined the difference between respect and tolerance. "Respect" actively affirms an individual's right to religious freedom, while "tolerance" can imply a reluctance to grant people their religious views, he said.

According to Johnsson, Jordan provided an ideal location for the symposium, given its track record as "a moderate Islamic nation that models openness, tolerance and rejection of violence." Johnsson helped facilitate an earlier, smaller gathering of religious freedom experts in Amman last year, which he said helped pave the way for this month's more public event.

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**Commentary: Facebook, Twitter have much to teach us about personal, corporate interactions**

*Use social networks to engage people, not just announce events*

8 Mar 2011, Beirut, Lebanon
Chanmin Chung

Building relationships is difficult when no listening is involved. Social Network Services (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter should be used to create dialogue, not just act as banners, leaflets, or one-way communication tools for advertisement.

Suppose you are hosting the following event and you'd like to use an SNS to reach out to your intended audience:

*Event: Golden Angels 30th Anniversary Concert*
When launching an online campaign, remember that the draw of an SNS is the user's ability to interact with them. Unlike posters and bulletin announcements, readers are able to respond to the information presented by commenting or posting on Facebook walls, tweeting about them on Twitter, recording video responses on YouTube and even forwarding information they like on to friends.

When planning an event or selling a product, your first step should be to empower your intended audience. It will reap rewards.

SNS users are not interested in tasting food that has already been cooked. They would like to help choose the ingredients, put the recipe together and then help cook. Empower your users, or your intended audience, by giving them a voice and invite them to help you plan the event. You'll empower them and they'll be eager to help you make decisions.

Church entities could do this more often. Corporations do it regularly.

VitaminWater created a "Flavor Creator Lab" through a Facebook application and let its users vote on new flavor design labels and share their opinions about new products. Through this process, a new product was born, and most importantly, VitaminWater empowered its users, who are likely to become customers.

Starbucks -- the most mentioned word on Twitter -- doesn't only use its SNS for product promotion, it also uses them to receive ideas from users of these platforms and then applies those changes to its services. Chase Bank and others have used SNS to have users vote on corporate charity sponsorships.

While these corporations increase their visibility and Facebook participation, most importantly, they are building relationships.

Getting the participation of users in the planning stages will increase the chance of turning those SNS users into an audience for your event.

Even just adding this tip to your SNS invitation, you are likely to boost participation in the Golden Angels' 30th Anniversary Concert. In addition to posting the date, time and location, the event promoter can identify an aspect of the program where users can contribute. For example, see how much more engaging the following announcement is than the previous one:

*Help us choose an opening & closing song for the Golden Angels 30th Anniversary Concert! Submit your favorite, along with why the song is special to you, and you will be entered to win a Golden Angels CD, which will be presented at the:*

*Golden Angels 30th Anniversary Concert*
*6 p.m. Saturday, January 8*
*Sahmyook University Church, Seoul, Korea*

Facebook and Twitter can be effective tools for ministry as long as you build relationships with people by making them your partners.

Whoever heard of effectively building a relationship with a person or group without listening? Just telling people stuff is so five years ago.

--*Chanmin Chung is originally from South Korea and currently serves as a production manager at the Al-Waad*
ANN World News Bulletin is a review of news and information issued by the Communication department from the Seventh-day Adventist Church World Headquarters and released as part of the service of Adventist News Network. It is made available primarily to religious news editors. Our news includes dispatches from the church’s international offices and the world headquarters.

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