



Global Interfaith Conversations | RACHEL DAVIES INTERVIEWS

WILLIAM JOHNSON



Davies: *You recently retired from a long post as editor at the Adventist Review. Now you have been appointed assistant to the General Conference president for interfaith relations. How did this come about; and, what, specifically, are your new responsibilities?*



Johnson: *At the end of 2006, as I was about to retire from the Adventist Review, I planned to go back to academic life. Loma Linda University invited me to teach; and Jon Paulien and I had begun working on courses and schedules.*

Then Pastor Jan Paulsen contacted me and asked me to come back to the General Conference and work on a part-time basis as his assistant for interfaith relations. He said that he wanted me to chair the official dialogues between the General Conference and other Christian churches and also to develop relations with leaders of the world religions. In today's world, Adventists occupy the same ground with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and followers of other religions; and it simply makes sense that we should try to engage with prominent leaders of other faiths—and to begin with Islam, because of its size and widespread nature.

Q: *How are you enjoying your new work?*

A: I am having a ball!

Q: *What interfaith conversations are you currently engaged in?*

A: We completed dialogues with The Salvation Army and with the World Evangelical Alliance. For the past

three years, we have been in conversation with the Presbyterian Church (USA); these discussions are ongoing. Interestingly, they approached us at headquarters requesting a dialogue. Our church is being noticed as never before; and others want to find out more about us. We are also moving toward official conversations with the Mennonite World Conference.

Q: *How about non-Christian religions?*

A: We are involved in a serious conversation with Muslim spiritual leaders in one country and close to entering into an official Adventist-Muslim dialogue in another country. Recently, representatives of the Sikh community in the US expressed to us a wish for an official dialogue. Of course, Adventists are engaging Muslims and other faiths in conversations in various places around the globe; I am involved only in GC-level discussions.

Q: *You recently returned from an overseas trip in the interests of interfaith relations. Where did you go; and whom did you meet?*

A: Jordan. It was my third visit in less than two years. Dr. John Graz, director of the GC PARL [Public Affairs and Religious Liberty] department, accompanied me on this visit; and we were joined by church leaders from the Middle East. We met with HRH Princess Basma, a sister of the late King Hussein and a leading voice for women's concerns in the Arab world; the Minister for Information and Communication; the director of The Royal Jordanian Institute for Interfaith Studies; the former Ambassador to the UN; and other leaders involved with human rights.

Q: *Please talk about your experience with and commitment to interfaith dialogue prior to your new appointment.*

A: I have been involved in inter-church dialogues for twenty years or more, as a member of the Adventist team. Now I take the lead in these conversations. I believe in and am committed to this process—I would rather talk than fight! I believe that Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, called us to be peacemakers. So far as other religions are concerned, my doctoral studies included a minor field in World Religions; and I spent fifteen years in India. At Spicer College, I taught classes in each of the great faiths.

Q: *How is the church currently thinking about its relationship with other religions? Are we interested for the sake of refining outreach approaches; establishing genuine friendships; having a more recognized voice on the world stage; or is it some combination of all these things?*

A: All these, and more. As I see it, our relationship with other religions can be understood as operating on three levels. First is the level of cooperation: joining with Muslims, Hindus, or whoever to help in community projects, times of crisis, disaster relief, and so on. The next level involves closer interaction: this is the stage of dialogue. Here the intent is to listen and to seek to understand. We want leaders of other religions to know who Adventists are and the values that we hold. And we want to understand them, removing false stereotypes and misinformation—there are a lot of false ideas out there, particularly with regard to Muslims! These dialogues typically proceed by way of a series of discussions involving exchange of scholarly papers and continue as long as each side finds the process valuable. The third level of interaction is one where genuine friendship between Adventists and Muslims blossoms into a desire to know more about our faith. These three levels are not necessarily sharply distinct. I see them all as part of fulfilling the Adventist mission to the world.

Q: *What reactions do you get from Adventists concerning interfaith dialogue?*

A: Some are suspicious. They think that inevitably we will give away the store in an effort to please the other side. I just wish they could be present to witness the dynamic. Early on I learned that the only way is to be transparently open and honest, telling it like it is, the acceptable with the less welcome. After all, in dialogue the purpose is not trying to prove any side right or wrong but to understand the views of the other.

Q: *How long have Adventists been involved in these conversations?*

A: I have never seen a history—it would make a fascinating study, I think. Without having researched the matter, I would be surprised if we weren't involved at some level from early in our history. Our very presence in the world leads to interaction with others. In modern times, however, we can trace Adventists' increasing involvement to one individual—Dr. Bert B. Beach. He is truly a world figure, probably better known and more appreciated in other circles than by Adventists. Some of our people have severely criticized him for his efforts to introduce who we are and what we stand for to the top-most leaders of Christianity; I applaud him. I think he has made a huge contribution.

Q: *At last year's Annual Council the church voted a new document called "Roadmap for Mission." Can you provide a short history and synopsis of the new policy?*

A: Early in 2009, General Conference president Jan Paulsen set up a small committee of theologians to develop a statement on our mission. He asked me to chair the group. At our first meeting together, he explained why he thought the work was necessary and laid out parameters. I was surprised to learn that, after so many years of mission activity, Adventists have never had a document defining our mission. Paulsen indicated that he hoped the document that would emerge would have a sound scholarly basis but would be worded in language that the average member could follow. The committee worked diligently and, I think, did excellent work. As we thought about our assignment in the context of the times, we realized how much such a document is needed. The spirit of the age holds that there is good and bad in all religions, so it is arrogant to suggest that one religion is better than another. In terms of the world religions, many today would say that the task of Christian missions is to make Muslims better Muslims, Hindus better Hindus, Buddhists better Buddhists, and so on. The idea of seeking to encourage anyone to change their faith is not intellectually acceptable.

We had the initial draft ready for the 2009 Spring Meeting in April. It was well received, and various sug-

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