

Religious leaders decry the spirit of indifference

By LESLIE SCANLON
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Whether President Clinton's Initiative on Race is just earnest talk about the problems that divide us or can lead to real change remains to be seen.

But the consensus of religious leaders gathered in Louisville yesterday was that it won't be the president who changes things. It will be people and congregations and neighborhoods, one by one, deciding where they stand.

In Chicago, for example, the city schools are full of children, most of them black, who grow up in poverty and show up for kindergarten with so little preparation for school that they don't even know their last names, said Robert Henderson, secretary-general of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States.

The enduring, entrenched, unrelenting problems of the nation—from poverty to violence to poor education to prejudice—are “a threat to the internal order,” Henderson said during a forum on race and religion at Spalding University.

“No matter what faith we are from,” he said, “this is an emergency call to people who believe in anything.”

But too often, people of faith don't act.

It's “the spirit of apathy, indifference and denial” that keeps people apart, said Dr. Jahangir Cyrus, a Baha'i who was born in Iran and now is a physician in Louisville.

As another participant put it: “We need to get off of warm fuzzies and really talk about the gut issues.”

Representatives from the President's Initiative on Race are traveling the country discussing issues of race relations. They convened the day-long forum in Louisville yesterday, inviting local religious leaders from a broad array of faiths.

The discussion is the second one nationally focusing on the religious dimension of race relations. And throughout the discussion, there was kind of a seesawing mood about whether real change is being made.

Some sounded positive notes.

In Lexington, for example, people “from the Baha’i to the Zen Buddhists” have joined together to “mentor” families affected by welfare reform, said Ginny Ramsey, who works with the Kentucky Council of Churches’ task force on welfare reform.

And the leader of the Hindu Temple of Kentucky, Dr. Kunwar Bhatnagar, said his family has been made to feel welcomed since he came to the United States in 1968. Bhatnagar said one of his daughters married a Jewish man and another a Catholic, and “we all go to each other’s services.”

“My vision and my prayer” is that in discussing race, people will recognize that we are “all human beings.” Members of the human race, he said.

But a moderator of one discussion—Rose Ochi, a Japanese-American and a U.S. Justice Department official—reminded people that 40 years after the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling and 30 years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, “racial prejudice and the corrosive effects of discrimination are still with us.”

Ochi—director of the Justice Department’s Community Relations Service—said her department has tried to help communities deal with racial polarization following the burning of black churches and the attack in Chicago by white teen-agers on a 13-year-old African American.

Then there are encounters that are wounding even if they don’t involve physical violence. Ochi recounted how yesterday morning, a stranger followed her through an airport as she raced to catch a plane to Louisville, finally sticking a finger in her face and saying excitedly: “Connie Chung!”

Ochi offered the old lame joke: “We all look alike.”

Harvard University professor Diana L. Eck noted that the nation has been getting more diverse religiously ever since a 1965 change in immigration

policy opened the door to more immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

“We can no longer speak of America as if we lived in the 1950’s” and as if everyone were Protestant, Catholic or Jewish, said Eck, who is Director of the Pluralism Project, which is tracking the country’s growing religious diversity.

Pennsylvania now has a summer camp for Hindus; one of the astronauts who died on the space shuttle Challenger was a Hawaiian-born Buddhist; and there are more Muslims in the country than members of the Louisville-based Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Eck said.

But the real story, she said, is “not about numbers. It’s about how we deal with our differences.”

Sister Aminah Assilmi, director of The International Union of Muslim Women, pointed out that the media play a role in fomenting religious prejudice.

In the news, “any time a Muslim does anything wrong,” the person always is identified as a Muslim, said Assilmi, who lives in Kenton County. But “they don’t say the religion of Jeffrey Dahmer.”

Assilmi, who was raised a Southern Baptist, was in Oklahoma City for her father’s funeral when the Alfred G. Murrah Federal Building was bombed—and initial news reports speculated that the bombing was the work of Muslim terrorists. There was so much antagonism to Muslims voiced, she said, that “I was scared to death.”

African-American Christians also voiced their concerns.

“I understand you to say things are looking good,” said the Rev. Louis Coleman, a Louisville pastor who frequently chastises public and corporate officials for not doing more to promote racial equality and minority hiring. But “I’m feeling the pain every day.”

The Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook, a Baptist minister from the Bronx, is a member of the advisory board to the President’s Initiative on Race and led yesterday’s discussion.

In an interview, she said that as an African-American pastor she's seen the pain of racism among the people. But she's also heartened by the "wonderful response" she has heard around the country from people willing to make things better.

And compared with when she joined the Initiative on Race a year ago, "I'm much more hopeful than I was."