

*‘Imagining Peace—With Mutual
Respect and Shared Hunger’*

Reflection Given at the Second Annual Interfaith Peace Service



President Beverley Pitts
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What does it mean to be an interfaith community? To really believe in the importance of respecting one another as we explore our spirituality in the contexts of our various approaches to faith? Maybe it's in the mutual respect we show for each other.

Maybe it's in the way we seek to learn about each other. Maybe sometimes it's in feeling just a little uncomfortable with a new religious experience, but knowing it's something we want to experience anyway.

Maybe it's learning of the symbols that represent the most holy parts of each religion. Maybe it's in experiencing a true shared worship, knowing we are all hearing the same God.

You need only to be here in this setting, to experience the warmth of mutual respect and a shared hunger for understanding and closeness to God, to know how right it is.

I was drawn to this community precisely because that culture is alive and well here. I am drawn to communities where people come at you with their arms open rather than crossed in front of themselves.

In joining the United Methodist Church, I found that I loved the motto, “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.” I'm pleased that this institution, in its affiliation with the United Methodist Church, lives this motto every day, and especially in settings like this.

This institution was born in 1902, launched by members of the United Brethren in Christ, which later merged with the Methodist Church to become the United Methodist Church. The United Brethren wanted to bring Christ-centered

higher education to Central Indiana, and there was no doubt about their orientation in the Christian faith.

But at the same time, it's noteworthy that, in the University's statement of purpose when it opened its doors in 1905, there were already signs that this was not to be an institution where students were required to subscribe to one faith.

What we still take seriously today is the importance of creating and maintaining a campus community where, as that first statement of purpose put it, "the influences are conducive to the best and highest development of the social, moral, intellectual, and religious nature" of our students, our faculty, and our staff. ¹

In those early days, campus life was a little different and the choice of religious experience wasn't always that of the student, as many who attended a church-related institution know. For much of its history, the University required daily chapel services, a forerunner of what has evolved into our Lecture and Performance Series.

Today, we are much more comfortable with providing opportunity to call us together. No demand performance is needed.

Here at the University we celebrate the fact that our students come to us from all over the world. Where once we were a community of mostly United Methodists, today Catholic students outnumber the United Methodists, we have two extraordinary chaplains, one Catholic and one Protestant, who model the best of an ecumenical approach to life, and we welcome students and faculty of the Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu and other traditions as well.

Our commitment to this ethic is apparent in that the University created a position, the dean for Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs, appointing Dr. Michael Cartwright to this important post and devoting significant resources to that office. We are very grateful for the excellent service of Dr. Cartwright and our University's two chaplains, the Reverend Dr. Lang Brownlee and Sr. Jennifer Horner O.S.B.

And so we come to this time and place, both through our history and through our commitment.

As Diana Hayes, a professor of theology at Georgetown University, writes, "We have today . . . the unique opportunity to engage our fellow human beings of different faiths in an open, honest and loving dialogue which can only enrich both our lives and our faith rather than threaten them. For an unquestioned faith is no faith at all and at the first challenge will shatter and crumble into dust."²

This is a benefit that may seem counterintuitive to those who want us to limit our explorations and cling only to the familiar. But I think the far greater risk is to hold an unquestioning and unchallenged faith.

As we learn from each other in the classroom, in the residence halls, at social occasions, and at events like today, we gain insight not only about the complex and interesting world we live in, but also in ourselves, in our own belief systems. What richer environment could we ask for than one that challenges, enriches, teaches, and nourishes us every day?

It actually boils down to respect. It's easy to say the right words, not always so easy to really respect another way of worship, another system of beliefs, another set of religious symbols, another group of people. But we do it, and we mean it. That's why this is such a healthy community that can truly take on the claim of being ecumenical.

And, perhaps even more importantly, respect is the core word for peace.

When knowledge and respect exist, peace will always spring forward.

And isn't that our combined responsibility today? It is wonderful that we have a spirit of acceptance and love for each other. It is incumbent on us to do something about that. I urge us to move beyond belief to action.

Wayne Dosick, in *Dancing with God*, says, "We all desperately want peace . . . That is why *shalom* is such an oft-repeated word. For, even as a simple greeting, it embodies deep yearning and solemn promise. . . . [T]he ancient sage Hillel insisted that it is not enough to simply want peace, to hope for peace, even to pray for peace; he taught us to "love peace and actively pursue peace."³

It doesn't come easily, and it certainly hasn't come quickly for us, but that doesn't mean we stop trying.

Dorothee Soelle, in her book *Against the Wind*, reminds us that "The people who worked to build the cathedrals in the Middle Ages never saw them completed. It took two hundred years and more to build them. Some stonemason somewhere sculpted a beautiful rose; it was his life's work, and it was all he ever saw. He never entered into the completed cathedral. But one day, the cathedral was really there. You must imagine peace the same way."⁴

As we look at a world where war and hatred seem to dominate, we do need to remember that peace and love are lived every day in places all over the world, including here at the University of Indianapolis.

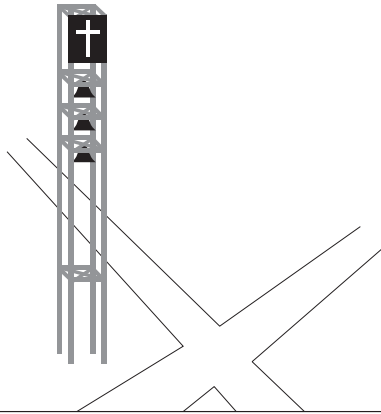
The beauty of the new Crossings Mural around the corner, apart from the beauty of the painting itself, is its intertwining symbols of faith. It is a rich symbol of how we, too, are woven together in our campus life, in our shared understanding, in our continuing search for truth.

As we worship together, it is a joy to recognize the richness of our cultures, of our humanity, of our very differences in the context of our similarities.

The words that grace the mural are Reconciliation, Hospitality, Service, Mentoring, and Worship. Consider those words independently, and together. They say: “Love one another as I have loved you.” What better message for us all than that?

WORKS CITED

- ¹ *Downright Devotion to the Cause: A History of the University of Indianapolis and Its Legacy of Service* (University of Indianapolis Press, 2002), by Dr. Frederick D. Hill, 12.
- ² *Millenium Monthly* (<http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/MM/ap0199.asp>), “Dialogue Among World Faiths,” Dr. Diana Hayes (January 1999).
- ³ *Spirituality and Practice* (<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/practices.php?id=23&g=1>), *Dancing with God*, Wayne Dosick.
- ⁴ *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, Dorothee Solle, et al. (English translation copyright 1999 Augsburg Fortress)



The Crossings Project

University of Indianapolis