

Summary prepared for the Civic Council  
**The Gifts of Pluralism**  
Kansas City's First Interfaith Conference:  
A Success — A Model for the Future



**Overview.** The “Gifts of Pluralism” conference, held Oct. 27-28, 2001, on the Ward Parkway (State Line) campus of the Pembroke Hill School, marked the metropolitan area’s first interfaith conference and set the stage for future collaboration among representatives of all faiths. Never before have so many people of so many faiths gathered here to learn from each other and to plan for the future.

**Participation.** Over 250 people participated in the two-day event representing 15 faith groups — American Indian, Bahá’í, Buddhist, Christian (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox), Free Thinkers, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, Zoroastrian.

- > Congressman Dennis Moore and Congresswoman Karen McCarthy opened the conference, held on State Line. Proclamations from Governors Graves and Holden and area mayors were acknowledged.
- > Although the conference was focused on Greater Kansas City, several out-of-town, out-of-state, and foreign visitors learned about it and were drawn here.
- > About two dozen high school and college students were involved. Students were represented on each of the three Saturday panels. The Pembroke venue was used to emphasize that we are all students learning from each other.
- > Eighteen civic leaders such as Beth Smith and Bob Stephan had provided early planning advice.

**Program.** A goal was to focus on the diversity in Kansas City, so out-of-town celebrity speakers were not engaged. The resources within our own area were displayed in many ways, including the Saturday evening of drama, dance, and music.

- > A process called “Appreciative Inquiry” was used throughout the two days to help people, one-on-one and in small groups, encounter each other in the depths of their faiths quickly and with mutual respect.
- > With preparation by four focus groups held last summer, three Saturday panels of religious leaders addressed (1) environmental, (2) personal, and (3) social failings of our time in the context of Kansas City, with the resources of their respective traditions. On Sunday a panel on the role of religion in Kansas City with leaders from government, media, business, and the non-profit sector was featured, and a final panel discussed “Where do we go from here?”
- > Many faith groups held pre-conference open houses on Friday, and workshops were offered on most faiths on Saturday. Sunday began with an interfaith worship service. Throughout the conference, faith groups had displays and information for registrants.

**Concluding Declaration.** A 500-word declaration, edited from comments posted on a wall throughout the conference, was unanimously adopted and signed in a ceremony using the conference logo and water from rivers around the world and from area fountains from Independence to Olathe.

- > The Declaration begins, “This is an historic moment because never before have people of so many faiths in the Kansas City area convened to explore sacred directions for troubled times. Especially after the events of September 11, the need for our support for one another and the larger community is clear and commanding.”

**Evaluation:** The formal evaluation instrument and informal comments have been overwhelmingly favorable.

- > Participants valued opportunities to build relationships, to learn about other faiths, to experience the "Appreciative Inquiry" method, and to come to a better understanding of our community.
- > A Nov 1 *Kansas City Star* editorial began, "If other communities want an example of how to conduct interfaith dialogue in this tense time among followers of different religions, they should look at the recent 'Gifts of Pluralism' conference in Kansas City." [See below.]

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**THE KANSAS CITY STAR.  
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**Organizers:** This conference represents the cooperation of many organizations which understand the importance of faith in the life of the community.

- > "The Gifts of Pluralism" was conceived by the Kansas City Interfaith Council under the auspices of CRES. Vern Barnet, president of CRES, was conference president. Larry Guillot is CRES Board Chair.
- > Co-sponsors were KC Harmony, NCCJ, and Spirit of Service. Churches with world headquarters here (Community of Christ, the Church of the Nazarene, Unity School of Christianity) were official observers at Interfaith Council planning meetings and participated in the conference.
- > A list of some 80 leaders and presenters (Clyde F Wendel, Stumbling Deer, Bill Tammus, Bilal Muhammed, Saraswati Shanker . . . ) is available on our web site or by request, along with the members of the Interfaith Council.

## EDITORIALS

*The voice of The Kansas City Star*

# An interfaith model

If other communities want an example of how to conduct interfaith dialogue in this tense time among followers of different religions, they should look at the recent "Gifts of Pluralism" conference in Kansas City.

Sponsored by the Kansas City Interfaith Council, the two-day event was the city's first areawide interfaith conference. It brought together several hundred people who represented more than a dozen religious faiths and provided a timely opportunity to demystify religious beliefs and to learn from one another about common hopes for peace and justice.

The event, under the auspices of the Center for Religious Experience and Study, was held in the gymnasium of Pembroke Hill School. Around the perimeter of the gym, various tables offered material from different religions to explain their beliefs and practices. But the core of the weekend event was a series of presentations and panel discussions in which participants articulated what turned out to be shared values. Beyond religious representatives, those who spoke included politicians and representatives of businesses, nonprofit groups and the media.

Organizers were surprised by the large turnout, which was an indication of the hunger for spiritual understanding in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

President Bush has repeatedly said that the American war on terrorism should not be seen as a war against Islam. But understanding how followers of various religions see terrorism and what they believe constitutes a just response to it is crucial. The recent "Gifts of Pluralism" conference here was a model for how to hold an interfaith conversation about all of that.

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**Additional information** (including extensive press coverage, the *Concluding Declaration*, and detailed program and participants) is available on the CRES website ([www.cres.org](http://www.cres.org)). Conference notebooks (120 pages) with each faith's section prepared locally, are available for \$22 each from the address below.