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News Briefs:

- **Religious groups urged to ally to fight faith-based violence**
- **Congregational Studies Grant**
- **EMU Summer Peacebuilding Institute 2006**
- **United Religions Initiative Interfaith Peacebuilding Guide**

Religious groups urged to ally to fight faith-based violence

By Patricia Zapor, www.catholicnews.com

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- With governments and transnational bodies such as the United Nations unable to deal with the role of religion in global violence or uninterested in addressing it, the responsibility falls to religious organizations, especially the Catholic Church, said the Rev. John Danforth, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Speaking Oct. 12 as part of a panel on the role of religion in peacemaking, Rev. Danforth, an ordained Episcopal priest who is also a former U.S. senator from Missouri, said whether religion has been "hijacked" or simply injected into disputes with secular origins, "it still is an element in the divisiveness and bloodshed in the world."

While that is nothing new in human history, Rev. Danforth said, "my guess is that of the 200 or so people in this room, probably everybody thinks the proper role of religion is to hold us together. And if at least those of us in this room agree, the first step is to shore up that conclusion."

He described his own difficulties as an ambassador in trying to work with governments and the United Nations to address the way religion has been used to incite violence in places such as Sudan and the Middle East. Their lack of interest has led him to conclude that the solution lies with religious institutions themselves to work together in peacebuilding, Rev. Danforth said.

That does not mean "holding conferences, singing songs and holding hands," he hastily added, but taking specific, concrete efforts to stop factions from using religion as a way of dividing people.

Because of its hierarchical structure, its vast worldwide presence and even its intellectual tradition, the leadership of the Catholic Church will be the critical element to make that work, he said.

In a prepared text delivered in his absence, Bishop John H. Ricard of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Policy, defined four building blocks of the Catholic Church's role in peacebuilding.

The church's faith and teachings that say peacemaking "is not an optional commitment," is the starting point, said the text, delivered by Steve Colecchi, director of the U.S. bishops' Office of International Justice and Peace.

Other building blocks, the text said, include the church's interreligious partnerships; its institutional presence around the world in parishes, schools, hospitals and development agencies; and its leaders and people.

Sulayman Nyang, a Catholic-educated Muslim from Gambia who teaches African studies at Howard University in Washington, said Muslims, Jews and Christians have long coexisted peacefully in many places. Where religion is used to aggravate tensions, the problem often is what he called "international fundamentalist cartels" of various faiths, identified among other things by their totalitarian approach and a "my way is the only way" attitude. Such groups "not only want to dominate, they want to make politics the instrument of religion," Nyang said. Dialogue with such groups is unlikely to work because "if you're going to dialogue you have to recognize that the other side has a point," he said.

Other speakers suggested that Rev. Danforth's proposal might succeed for the very reason that campaigns to get rid of land mines and to cancel debt of the world's poorest nations have worked, and that the type of faith-based mediation team he described would need to be prepared for multiyear commitments in specific places.

Maryann Cusimano Love, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and an instructor on globalization and foreign policy issues at the Pentagon and The Catholic University of America, said "resurrection politics" might be one model for implementing Rev. Danforth's idea.

The debt and land mines campaigns were both "dead on arrival," having been abandoned or ignored by governments worldwide, she said. But each campaign was taken up by religious and nongovernmental organizations that ignored official naysayers and proceeded on their own.

Both efforts have made huge progress, Cusimano Love pointed out. While much work remains to be done, "religious and nongovernmental organizations have absolutely been able to make a difference and reduce the problems."

Gerard Powers, director of policy studies at the University of Notre Dame's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, cautioned that Rev. Danforth's proposal for religious mediation teams would require long-term commitments. "You can't send a mediation team into Sudan for one week and to Liberia the next," he said. "They've got to be ready to be there for 10 years."

He pointed out that some leaders look at religion being used divisively and think the proper response is to marginalize all religion in public life.

"What we need to do is to marginalize religious extremism," Powers said. That's a problem many faiths must face among their own believers, he said, adding that building the capacity to offer peaceful alternatives should start at the bottom, with ensuring that people understand their faiths' teachings about violence.

"If we're going to intervene in international conflicts, we have to tie it to the local, lower levels," he said. Individuals can begin by becoming involved in organizations like the Catholic Peacebuilding Institute, he said. Its Web address is: <http://cpn.nd.edu/>.

The program was organized by the Leadership Institute for Applied Social Teaching, a project of the Archdiocese of Washington and the Washington Theological Union. It was co-sponsored by Franciscans International, the Kroc Institute and the Holy Name province of the Franciscan Friars.

A full transcript will be available Monday at <http://www.franciscansinternational.org/news/article.php?id=878>

Congregational Studies Grant

The Congregational Studies Team is inviting younger scholars and religious leaders, from any discipline, whose focus is on the practices of local communities of faith, to enter into a program of research and networking. Participants will hone research skills that allow them to take the life of faith communities seriously; build a network of interlocutors and mentors who can read and evaluate their work; build a cohort of colleagues who can encourage and stimulate each other in advancing understanding of how engaged scholarship works best; and gain \$16,000 in financial support for their research and writing.

Full details are available in the attached flyer "csptfellow.pdf" or by contacting csptmentor@emory.edu.

EMU Summer Peacebuilding Institute 2006

Greetings from the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding in Harrisonburg, Virginia! At the Summer Peacebuilding Institute, instructors, participants and staff join in a community of learning and healing. Together, we explore issues of both local and global concern through classroom interaction, luncheon presentations, weekend seminars, special interest groups and community celebrations. Informal sharing of personal stories creates trust, bonds of hope, and courage to move forward.

Information on SPI 2006 can now be found on the Internet at <http://www.emu.edu/spi>. Course offerings and schedule, instructor bios, estimated costs, and an application form can all be obtained from this site. Beginning this year, we are only mailing the brochure to organizations, past participants of SPI, and those persons who have requested a hard copy.

If you would like to receive the SPI 2006 brochure and application by email, please contact Valerie Helbert at helbertv@emu.edu by November 7, 2005. Applications for SPI 2006 are due by January 9, 2006. If you have questions, please send an email to spi@emu.edu.

United Religions Initiative Interfaith Peacebuilding Guide

This guide provides 50 exercises, plus readings and references. With this interactive training Guide you will:

Develop basic skills in conflict analysis, interfaith dialogue, nonviolent action, healing and reconciliation

Create a shared vision and action plan for your community using Appreciative Inquiry

Build group trust and ability to deal with challenging intrafaith and interfaith issues

Deepen individual capacity for understanding other faiths

Written by Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Barbara Hartford, Claudia Liebler, Susanna McIlwaine, Cynthia Sampson and members of URI. To preview or purchase: www.uri.org/peacebuilding/guide

For more information, e-mail Barbara Hartford at: peacebuilding@uri.org

The Catholic Peacebuilding Network (CPN) is a voluntary network of practitioners, academics, clergy and laity from around the world which seeks to enhance the study and practice of Catholic peacebuilding, especially at the local level. The CPN aims to deepen bonds of solidarity among Catholic peacebuilders, share and analyze “best practices,” expand the peacebuilding capacity of the Church in areas of conflict, and encourage the further development of a theology of a just peace. While it is a Catholic network, the CPN believes that authentic and effective Catholic peacebuilding involves dialogue and collaboration with those of other religious traditions and all those committed to building a more just and peaceful world.

Contact Information:

Gerard F. Powers, *Coordinator*, or Colette Sgambati, *Program Assistant*

Catholic Peacebuilding Network

P.O. Box 639

Notre Dame, IN 46556-0639, USA

574.631.9370 (ph)

574.631.6973 (fax)

email: cpn@nd.edu

<http://cpn.nd.edu>

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