

# 4 **MANY BELIEFS:**

*public worship in a multi-faith society*

BY PAUL LOUIS METZGER, PHD

**t**he Bible has a great deal to say about how God's people are to be hospitable and neighborly (Lev 19:34; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:25-37). We are called as Christians to care for the "other" in need, whoever that may be. The "other" in America is becoming increasingly diverse spiritually. As worship leaders who seek to care for all those around them, we will be called to serve an increasingly multi-faith community. Many of us don't feel comfortable, adequate or well-prepared to lead in public worship that might include diverse religious practitioners or in civic gatherings involving religious ceremonies in our increasingly multi-faith public square.

## A NEW CULTURAL REALITY

While Evangelical Protestantism is the largest Christian group in the United States, Protestantism as a whole is no longer a strong majority religious tradition in the US, according to a recent study (*The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey - Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic*, February 2008 of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public

Life claimed that the percentage of self-professed members of Protestant denominations was presently around 51 percent; see page five of the full report). Whereas Protestantism and Catholicism have experienced decline, Islam, for example, has experienced net growth on account of changes in people's religious allegiances from childhood to adulthood (See the chart titled "Childhood Versus Current Affiliation of U.S. Adults" on page 24 of chapter 2 of the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*). The government no longer views Christianity as the understood civil religion.

These developments present distinctive opportunities and challenges to those who provide spiritual care for such diversity. Military, hospital and prison chaplains already care for a progressively more diverse religious population. Against this backdrop, how can worship leaders develop a biblically framed and sensitive theology of inclusion/hospitality for those in need as they oversee public worship in a multi-faith society that includes religiously diverse others?

## TRUTH AND LOVE

There is not sufficient space to address all these issues. So, I will take up one. In light of the recent senseless tragedy that occurred in Aurora, Colorado, what might a worship leader do to provide spiritual care for his or her religiously diverse community when a major tragedy strikes the region? In our broken world, these types of things occur—whether it's an explosion at a power plant or a school bus full of kids that crashes and where many of the children die, or an individual commits an atrocity in a movie theater. The civic authorities call on you and other leaders of different religions to participate in a public ceremony involving leaders from various religions to honor the victims and care for their families. You are asked to provide a meditation or lead in music to provide comfort to those gripped by grief, fear, and loneliness. What will you do?

We get a few cues from Dr. Billy Graham's talk at the National Cathedral on September 14, 2001, just a few days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks engineered by al-



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Qaida, an extremist Muslim group. During his address at the memorial service that included meditations from leaders of various religions, including the Muslim faith, Dr. Graham gave a message grounded in the Bible but inclusive of all those gathered for that most somber of occasions. Here is what I take away from his talk:

First, Dr. Graham shared his faith. He did not shove it down people's throats. He did not get preachy. He led people forward to consider his claims rather than push and shove them into a corner. In other words, he spoke from his Christian convictions without imposing them on others. This reminds me of what a Buddhist practitioner said to me this past year at a gathering I co-lead involving Evangelicals and Zen and Tibetan Buddhists: Evangelicals should gently lead others to Christ instead of pushing and forcing them toward him. The Buddhist actually referred to Dr. Graham and said he champions this more constructive approach. Dr. Graham's message addressed the brokenness in our world and the Christian conviction and hope that the world is in desperate need of God's deliverance, which he believes Christ provides. Yet he did so in a way that was descriptive, not prescriptive. As he said,

*Here in this majestic National Cathedral we see all around us the symbols of the Cross. For the Christian, I'm speaking for the Christian now, the Cross tells us that God understands our sin and our suffering, for He took them upon Himself in the person of Jesus Christ our sins and our suf-*

*fering. And from the Cross, God declares, "I love you. I know the heartaches and the sorrows and the pains that you feel. But I love you."*

There was no altar call, though there was a call to consider the biblical hope.

### EMPATHY AND INCLUSION

Second, Dr. Graham moved from common convictions to his distinctive Christian claims. He started with the familiar and with what united them (their universal sense of loss, desire for justice, fears, hopes) and then presented his particular Christian convictions that had a bearing on everyone. He was not parochial, speaking only to Christians. He spoke to everyone's concerns. He did not attack Muslims but was inclusive of all. Dr. Graham never compromised his Christian convictions regarding our uncommon God. But I also believe people of diverse persuasions were able to hear him more readily because he also affirmed our common humanity and our common concern for decency. He empathized and identified fully with his fellow Americans in their suffering and shared in their longing for resolution and search for answers to their ultimate questions about the problem of evil.

### LEARN THE LANGUAGE

Third, Dr. Graham spoke a common language. He avoided private language games and widespread use of Christian jargon. In keeping with his use of inclusive language ("we," "us," "our"), he spoke in terms that many could understand. As is often

the case, Dr. Graham's message was simple and went straight to the point. There is something very refreshing about the simplicity of his public addresses throughout the years that stick to the basic facts of our frail, fallen, and broken common human condition and God's sacrificial love for all that provides healing and transformation of that condition. Brokenness and healing and love are universal terms that speak to our universal experience.

We Evangelicals who only or primarily speak to ourselves need to ask ourselves if those outside our faith communities would understand our Christian lingo.

We can learn a lot from Billy Graham on how to lead in worship in the public square in our multi-faith society. People may not always care for his Christian convictions, but I believe they know that his particular Christian convictions lead him to care for them. As we lead in our multi-faith society, may people sense from us that we are not sending mixed messages of love and hate and indifference. May we always be known for our hospitable and neighborly love centered in Christ in a world marked all too often by indifference, fear, and 9/11-like extremes of hate. ❧

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