



# Faith and Community: A Dialogue

Program Newsletter No. 2  
December 2008



## About the Faith and Community Program

The exchange program *Faith and Community: A Dialogue* provides opportunities for youth leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and the United States to better understand each other.

In September 2008, the first of two cohorts of US experts visited Bosnia and Herzegovina for one week. They reconnected with previous program participants, attended workshops and seminars, visited religious and cultural sites, and met with religious, youth, and other community leaders.

## US Experts Experience the Balkans

By Shannon Burke Bruder

During the first week of September, two US experts had the opportunity to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of *Faith and Community: A Dialogue* – an exchange program for youth religious and community leaders from the Balkans funded by the US State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and administered by IREX and its partners the International Visitor's Council of Philadelphia (IVC) and the International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center (IMIC) in Sarajevo.

The two US experts were nominated by the first group of *Faith and Community* participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia, who spent three weeks in Washington, DC and Philadelphia in April 2008. The experts were Mustafa Ahmed, Director of the Foundation for Islamic Education in Villanova, PA, and Judith Nelson, Director of Conflict Resolution Theater for the City of Philadelphia Department of Recreation.

During the week they spent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the US experts participated in a series of meetings and activities arranged by IMIC to give them an overview of various organizations working on promoting religious tolerance and inter-religious dialogue while allowing them to share their expertise with representatives of these organizations. Several of the meetings focused on the role of religious education and the strategies being taken by international organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), federal agencies like the Federal Ministry of Science and Education, and NGOs like the Open Society Fund – Bosnia and Herzegovina to deal with this issue.

The US experts met with representatives of all four major religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Catholicism, and Judaism. They visited several religious monuments – from the Serbian Orthodox Monastery in Zitomislici to the Jewish Synagogue and Old Temple

in Sarajevo to the Franciscan Monastery in Fojnica and the seat of the Mufti of Mostar – where they learned about Bosnia and Herzegovina's rich religious history and its tradition of religious tolerance. These meetings were complemented by a walking tour with an art history scholar who described the history of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian periods and their influence on the architecture of Sarajevo.

The US experts engaged in spirited discussion with leaders of each religion about the role of religious nationalism in the conflict and the possibility for religion and inter-religious dialogue to help rebuild society. Several meetings touched on the critical issue of Islam's role in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina and the tension between the values of traditional Islam and those of modern Europe. They were also able to observe how Ramadan is celebrated in Sarajevo.

The US experts also had the opportunity to interact with members of both April and October 2008 *Faith and Community* participants from the Balkans. The schedule included site visits to an NGO in Stolac and a drug addiction treatment center in Mostar run by members of the April group, as well as meetings with April participants who received funding for follow-on activities and a dinner with members of the October group who were in Sarajevo for pre-departure orientation. □



US experts Mustafa Ahmed (left) and Judith Nelson (right) with IMIC Program Coordinator Sabina Pstrocki (center) at the Faculty of Islamic Studies

## Seeing the Future Through the Past

By Mustafa Ahmed

I had the opportunity to host the first group of *Faith and Community: A Dialogue* participants from the Balkans at the Foundation for Islamic Education in Villanova, PA while they were in the US for three weeks in April 2008. These youth

leaders were intelligent and inquisitive, asking probing questions about the role of Islam in America at large and the Philadelphia area in particular. One member of the group even conducted the Friday prayer. After welcoming them to Villanova, I was pleased to be invited to Bosnia and Herzegovina as a US expert in September 2008.

My trip greatly enhanced my knowledge about the Balkan region – particularly in terms of history, education, culture, and interfaith communication. We had the opportunity to reconnect with some of the April group participants and meet the October group participants who were preparing to depart for the US. Particularly meaningful was the chance to share knowledge and experiences with academic, government, and civil society leaders, as well as leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina's four major religious communities – Islamic, Serbian Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish.



US experts meeting with the Mufti of Mostar

The workshops and seminars gave me a better appreciation of the mutual cooperation required to promote tolerance between different faiths and ethnic groups. These proactive programs are especially needed in the Balkans, where wars have caused hostility and ethnic fragmentation. I had the opportunity to present two lectures in Sarajevo – one at the Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies (CIPS) entitled "Human Rights as Illustrated in the Objectives of Islamic Jurisprudence" and another at the Faculty of Islamic Studies on "Ramadan; The Month of Spiritual Purification and Spreading Goodness". The latter topic was timely, given our arrival on Ramadan's first day.



Visiting the Jewish Synagogue in Sarajevo

My trip gave me an appreciation for the complex role religion has played in the tumultuous history of the Balkans and its critical role in the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The historical context is the memory of any nation and its people, so today and tomorrow cannot be isolated from yesterday. The father of modern sociology, Ibn Khaldun, states: "Appearance of history is merely narration but its essence is lessons and admonitions".

Because our visit focused on youth, we inevitably explored the impact of parents on the process of reform. The parents

of today's youth have a different political and social mindset than their offspring because they grew up under the communist dictatorship of Tito's Yugoslavia, which is in stark contrast to the current free and democratic society. Since religious institutions had no role or social influence on education or public life under communism, they have only recently begun to proactively influence the new generation growing up in a democratic society. Religious institutions are cautious in moving forward because they remember how their freedom was curbed in the previous era.

With the fall of Yugoslavia and the eruption of national ethnic wars, religions were dragged into the battle for political purposes. Thus, religious institutions were mobilized to serve a different agenda than the agenda they actually stand for. Religions oppose racism, yet acknowledge differences between people without being divided. While religions rightly justify defending oneself against any aggression or attack, they do not accept unfair wars that victimize innocent people. No doubt painful memories of war are still fresh in the minds of the parents and youth who lost family members during the war. The natural result is that Yugoslavia became divided. For this reason, IMIC Director Marko Orsolic emphasized the need to "move towards gradual change in Bosnia to reinstall trust and peace between people" at our first meeting.



Zitomislici Serbian Orthodox Monastery

In order to positively influence youth, it is necessary to develop qualified institutions capable of bringing the best memories of the past to the forefront of societal consciousness – including Sarajevo's history of religious tolerance – while working to heal the painful memories of the war. This also involves promoting new values of tolerance and cooperation. Religious, educational, and community institutions are critical to achieving these goals.



Franciscan Monastery at Fojnica

Certainly there are three essential foundations that have to be established. The first is security, peaceful relationships, and political stability – both within Bosnia and Herzegovina and between the country and its neighbors. The second is the protection of human rights through well-defined terms in

constitutions that grant justice to all. Lastly, it is essential to provide humanitarian aid to orphans, widows, and all victims of the war. When humanitarian activities precede other religious activities, it creates a positive atmosphere for acknowledging the religious values of tolerance and peaceful relationships with others.

The Education Department of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has recognized the significance of humanitarian aid working in cooperation with educational programs, and is currently developing new curricula for Bosnia and Herzegovina's schools. Because education is a long-term strategy for development and security,

#### **FC Dialogue US Expert Meeting Hosts**

- International Multi-religious and Intercultural Center
- Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Education Department
- Open Society Fund – Bosnia and Herzegovina (Soros Foundation), Education Department
- Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Synagogue, Old Jewish Temple and Museum in Sarajevo
- Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies

there is a necessity to develop a new approach for teaching history. This new approach should focus on representing the country's seventeen national minorities through appreciation of diversity and inclusiveness.

The dramatic political and social changes of the recent past have placed Bosnia and Herzegovina's religious and educational institutions at the cross-roads of either limiting their role within the framework of the past or meeting today's challenges by playing an influential, independent role in post-war society. In other words they have to choose whether to be traditionalists or reformists. The first alternative requires limited effort, but will lead to isolation and obscurity as the country moves toward a European future.

The second alternative is most effective but also more difficult because it requires intellectual pioneers who are equipped with sincerity, knowledge, wisdom, and perseverance to solve modern problems while staying true to traditional religious and educational principles and goals. I expect that the traditionalists will eventually, although cautiously, move towards reform in response to persistent social needs. In spite of current societal divisions, there are many positive historical examples to illustrate the values of tolerance and interfaith cooperation.

The religious and educational institutions should mobilize these memories in their program of reform to influence the youth. During our visit to the historical site of the Franciscan Monastery in Fojnica, Pastor Tvrtko Gujaic presented de-

tailed historical background about the Franciscan community and their religious practices.

The monastery houses a museum that contains a host of valuable information for students of history. One of its fascinating historical documents is from the Turkish Sultan Abul-Fath Gazi Muhammad Khan, dated 1462. The letter is a guarantee to Christian people that they may continue to freely practice their religion. Because people had knowledge of the letter guaranteeing their rights, many who had fled the land returned. To ensure their rights following the Sultan's death, they could present the document to any future successor, who was obligated to uphold it.

- Zitomislici Serbian Orthodox Monastery
- Federal Ministry of Science and Education
- Mufti of Mostar
- Center for Prevention and Outpatient Treatment of Drug Addicts
- NGO 'Orhideja'
- Fojnica Franciscan Monastery
- Faculty of Islamic Studies
- National Theatre of Sarajevo
- Office of Inter-religious Service, Pontamina Inter-religious Choir

In another example, Mr. Eli Tauber — a writer, journalist, and mentor at the Jewish Community Synagogue in Sarajevo — described how the Muslim Caliph welcomed and sheltered Jews who fled Spanish persecution to Ottoman-controlled Bosnia in 1502. Since that time, they have lived peacefully in the country. During World War II, the local Jewish community was once again protected by the local Muslim community.

I was particularly impressed with the Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies (CIPS), which promotes a critical approach to Islamic thought, and their efforts to revive the scholarly method. Their focus is on recognition of legislative themes while avoiding blind adherence to tradition. It was an honor to meet the Mufti of Mostar. It appears that his tendency is towards the school of *maqasid* (following the objectives and spirit of Islamic Law) rather than *taqlid* (following literal and tradition interpretations).

Scholarly publications, seminars, and international conferences about the Balkan region are required to develop educational programs and strengthen interfaith cooperation. Islam in the Balkans could be a role model for Islam in Europe. At the same time, exposure to the diversity of American society could enhance their progress toward reform. People generally are ready to appreciate existing, functional models. Since returning from the trip, I have shared my observations with students from our local school, staff, community members, and various interfaith programs participants. Americans appreciate freedom, justice, tolerance, and mutual cooperation and stand to protect these noble values. □



## Full-Circle

By Judith Nelson

I still remember the day last March when I received a call from Anne Stauffer of the International Visitors Council of Philadelphia, asking me to do a workshop. I have conducted hundreds of workshops across Philadelphia in my capacity as Director of Conflict Resolution Theater (CRT), so the request did not seem unusual at first. Little did I know how profoundly the chain of events that ensued would impact me, both personally and professionally.

The workshop turned out to be for a group of 12 youth religious and community leaders from the Balkans visiting the US for three weeks in April as part of *Faith and Community: A Dialogue*. I led a workshop on journaling, communication, and self-esteem for this extraordinary group, which was one of the most memorable workshops I conducted that year. I was honored when IREX notified me the participants had nominated me to visit Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Mustafa Ahmed (right) and Judith Nelson (kneeling, center) with April participant Minva Hasic (kneeling, left) at her NGO in Stolac

The week I spent in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a whirlwind of new people, experiences, and information. The busy schedule arranged by IMIC gave me perspective on the history of tolerance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the recent conflict, and reconciliation efforts. Although the issues facing the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina as they attempt to rebuild the fabric of their war-torn society are different than those facing my clients in Philadelphia, I realized that trauma and addiction are prevalent in both populations. Many of the interventions and tools I use in my daily work could therefore be successful if modified to fit the unique Bosnian context.

Our schedule included meetings with officials from agencies such as the Federal Ministry of Science and Education, the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) who are in the position to make fundamental decisions affecting the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina

that will shape the reconciliation process. They were curious about my work, interested in hearing about my experiences, and eager for new ideas to apply to their efforts. Experiencing what it is like to meet with key leaders who can influence policy changed the way I manage my time and organization and gave me a new appreciation for the importance the role of policy in the work I do and in the world my clients live in. Since returning home, I have been spending more time on strategic planning and building partnerships. I am creating interventions that key leaders can use to create group cohesion and enhance interpersonal and social skills.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, I also had the opportunity to learn about the wide range of work being done by civil society to rebuild the country, both physically and psychologically. The impressive religious and community leaders I met taught me a great deal both about the Balkans and about my own work in Philadelphia. It was gratifying to see that work I had introduced in April in Philadelphia had already been integrated into activities the April participants were organizing

in their home communities.

When I conducted the first workshop in April, I had no idea that *Faith and Community* participant Minva Hasic of the NGO Orhideja in Stolac would be so influenced by the workshop that she would create a business model from a CRT concept and exercise we did. In reuniting with other program participants during my trip, I discovered that several were utilizing CRT techniques to create workshops for youth. And all of this was happening in Eastern Europe, where my both my paternal and maternal grandparents were born and where I had never visited. I had come full-circle.

My week in Bosnia and Herzegovina went by all too quickly, and was not long enough for me to share everything I wanted to with the many eager contacts I met. Nevertheless, I look forward to building on the relationships I formed during the trip. I have already conducted a workshop for the *Faith and Community* group, and hope to return to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the near future for a longer period of time that will allow me to conduct more in-depth workshops. □



**IREX**  
WWW.IREX.ORG

IREX  
2121 K Street NW, Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20037  
T: 1.202.628.8188  
F: 1.202.628.8189  
E: [newsroom@irex.org](mailto:newsroom@irex.org)

### About IREX

IREX is an international nonprofit organization providing leadership and innovative programs to improve the quality of education, strengthen independent media, and foster pluralistic civil society development.

For more information about IREX or the *Faith and Community: A Dialogue* program, please visit [www.irex.org](http://www.irex.org).