

COLLEAGUES:

Surf the Internet and you can find information on religious traditions from Assemblies of God to Zoroastrians. While the Web facilitates dialogues among people from around the world, not much conversation seems to be going on locally about the changing religious landscape of Indianapolis.

True, we don't have our own "Highway to Heaven," the name given to a road outside Washington, D.C., along which one can find scores of different faith traditions. But the roads we travel are becoming less homogenous and the signposts of religious diversity more prevalent.

Hospitals are striving to accommodate the beliefs and practices of different faith traditions. The public schools grapple with questions of wardrobe, diet, and observance of religious holidays that reflect the growing diversity of students. Ask your parishioners. Government workers, neighborhood planners, food service managers, and human resource managers all have stories about how the changing religious landscape affects their business and workplace.

"World Religions" used to be the name of a course offered in seminary about life in faraway places. Today it's a study of our local life together. Is your congregation taking note of the growing religious diversity of our city? I'd like to hear from you. Let's keep in touch.



Kevin R. Armstrong is minister of faith and public life at North United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, and serves as senior public teacher of The Polis Center. You may write to Kevin at The Polis Center, call him at (317) 630-1667, or contact him by e-mail at Clergynote@aol.com.

WORLD RELIGIONS IN INDIANAPOLIS

Kanwal Prakash (K. P.) Singh came to Indianapolis in 1967 as an urban planner in the city government. He could count on one hand the number of families from his native India living in the city. Nor was there a temple dedicated to his religion, Sikhism, which originated in India and attracts most of its adherents from that nation.

Today, Singh estimates that thousands of Indian immigrants live in Indianapolis. The city now has two Sikh congregations, each with an estimated membership of 200. The Sikh Satsang of Indianapolis recently built a new temple at I-74 and Acton Road after several years of meeting at the India Community Center.

Throughout the 1990s, the strong economy in Indianapolis brought immigrants from all over the world, who brought with them their religious traditions. Yet, unless one goes searching for them, the world faiths represented in Indianapolis are nearly invisible to most of us. Their meeting places are widely scattered around the city. Often, there is no sign outside because the congregation doesn't own the building; or the sign is in a foreign language.

Three years ago, a local journalist and research associate with The Polis Center, Susan McKee, went looking for world religion congregations in the city. Her research effort was part of the Center's Project on Religion and Urban Culture. She found one Baha'i, one Hindu, two Sikh, three Buddhist, and four Muslim congregations. The largest of these, Mosque Masjid Al-Fajr, is at 2846 Cold Springs Road on the west side; it has about 2,000 members. McKee believes that, given the city's growing Asian population, there could be other Buddhist and Hindu groups that she didn't find. (She also uncovered numerous small groups classified as "pagan, neopagan, and Wiccan," but she found no Satanic activity. "The common impression that Satanism would be the most common form of non-normative, non-immigrant religion," McKee said, "was not borne out by research.")

Of the major faiths with a presence in the city, probably the most unfamiliar are Baha'i and Sikhism. Sikhism originated in India in the 15th century and now claims 25 million adherents worldwide. It grew out of opposition to India's caste system, which divided people rigidly into classes (see the accompanying interview for more information). Baha'i is similar to Sikhism in its emphasis on the oneness of humanity. Its adherents—about 5 million worldwide—seek to break down the various barriers that divide people and nations, and they emphasize the unity of all religious truth. (See the resources section for more information about Baha'i and other world religions.)

McKee found that the congregations listed in her study are detached from the life of the broader community. This is partially because of cultural barriers. "The social networks of these faith-based organizations are culturally, not geographically, based," McKee wrote in a report of her findings. "That their facilities remain closed between services is of no importance to them." Most of these congregations, she found, lack full-time clergy and are operated by volunteers.

McKee believes that diversity reflects well on the American experiment, and wants to "make it visible to the rest of the community. It's the reason the United States was founded," she said. "We didn't have a state-imposed religion. Everybody was supposed to be welcome—and, by golly, here they are."

For Singh, recognizing the presence of other faiths in the city is the first step toward greater compassion, understanding—and, ultimately, a better world. "Our ability to relate one to another, our ability to celebrate together certain aspects of our humanity, is a strength for the community," he said. "We are all here to serve. By knowing, by sharing, by appreciating, we add something to our own humanity and become part of a larger human community."

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

A CONVERSATION WITH KANWAL PRAKASH SINGH

Kanwal Prakash (K.P.) Singh co-founded the International Center of Indianapolis in 1972 to give the community a space to learn about, and celebrate, other cultures. The Center holds an annual International Festival at the Indiana State Fairgrounds every fall.

Singh serves as unofficial local spokesman for his own faith, Sikhism, and as a champion for religious diversity in general. "Let us keep our religion and religious matters from becoming divisive distractions," he wrote in a recently published letter to the *Indianapolis Star*. "Let us be guided by principles that are unifying, inclusive, timeless, universal, and reaffirm the spirit upon which our nation was founded."

Singh, who was born in India, came to the University of Michigan in the mid-1960s, where he earned a Master of Planning degree. In 1967, he went to work as an urban planner for the City of Indianapolis, before launching

a career as a fine artist in the early 1970s. Working under the name K. P. Singh Designs, he has become well known for his depictions of Indiana architecture and landscapes.

Here, Singh describes his religion, comparing and contrasting it to Christianity.

CN: What are the tenets of Sikhism?

Singh: Sikhism is a monotheistic faith that believes in one supreme God, the father and mother of all life. We believe that God Almighty is the creator of all knowledge and the supreme inspiration of all faiths. Each faith has pretty much agreed on some basic thoughts; therefore, we have to say that all inspiration has come from one source. Since God created light, and from that light he created all life and blessed each living being with a divine essence, how then can some people be holier than others? From this, it follows that all humanity is one race, one brotherhood, regardless of where you were born or which faith you belong to. The Sikh faith emphasizes the importance of service—to man, life, creation—as the highest form of offering to God. Every act of service is an offering.

CN: Give an example of how these beliefs are put into practice.

Singh: Each Sikh temple has a community kitchen, where food is served every day at noon and at night, and anyone of any faith can come and partake of blessed food. In those places, there is the sense that we're all one, and the food is prepared by volunteers and served by volunteers. At each step, symbolically and ritually, the concepts of oneness, equality, unity, and brotherhood are reinforced.

CN: In what ways does Sikhism differ from Christianity?

Singh: We differ in our belief in transmigration of the soul and karma. Karma means your actions in a previous life that you carry from a previous birth into this life. What you do with this life might emancipate you or bring you closer to eternal union with God, or it might not, depending on the burden you're carrying from a previous life and the burdens you've added in this life. We believe that there are many lifetimes and many life forms, and that this is a process in which you could be vegetation, a bird, an animal, or an insect. But humans are the most precious life form in this whole process. If you are blessed with a human body, that is your time to know God and to be reunited with God.

CN: Christians believe that faith in Jesus Christ is the exclusive means of human salvation. Is there a similar concept in Sikhism?

Singh: I believe that the light of God has arrived here in many ways and in many forms and through many messengers. And I, as one human being, am willing to receive that light—not just from Christianity but through Buddhism or Islam or from non-faith, for that matter. No particular faith could possibly have the entire truth.

CN: What is the point, or benefit, of learning about faith traditions foreign to your own?

Singh: By understanding the things that have been obstacles in our path, we can bring in greater understanding and greater appreciation of other cultures. A lot of positive energy can flow from this kind of sharing. It is not something to be frightened about; it is something to celebrate. Let us not be bogged down by one tradition or another. There are common fundamentals that unite us all as one human family. Let us focus on those.

RESOURCES

Thousands of books have been published on the various world faiths. Now, Web sites dedicated to this subject are proliferating on the Internet.

The dominant "world faith" in Indianapolis—Christianity—is the subject of a site sponsored by Frontline, the PBS television show. The site is a spin-off of the program *From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians*,

which originally aired in 1998. It includes excellent scholarly essays that provide an overview of the history of Christianity. The address is www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion.

- To find out more about other faiths, bookmark one of the "meta-indexes" of sites devoted to religion. The most useful and highly regarded of these, the *Virtual Religion Index*, is maintained by the Religion Department at Rutgers University. The address is <http://religion.rutgers.edu/vri/index.html>.

- Another excellent index, *Religion Religions Religious Studies*, provides annotated links. A particularly interesting feature is the "Current Features Sites," with links to various odd and illuminating religion-related sites around the Web. The address is www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/rel.

The following sites are dedicated to a specific religion:

Baha'i: www.bahai.org.

Buddhism: www.buddhanet.net/qanda.htm.

Judaism: www.jewfaq.org

Sikhism: www.sikhs.org/summary.htm.

The following links connect to institutions representing world faiths in Indianapolis:

Baha'i: www.indybahai.org

Islam: www.isna.net (the web site of the Islamic Society of North America, located in Plainfield)

Judaism: www.jewishinindy.org/home.html

Sikhism: www.iupui.edu/~mtrehan/gurdwara/home.html

For a list of addresses of the congregations that Susan McKee found in her research, contact Kevin Armstrong.