

Interfaith Programs: Making A Difference

Excerpt from 2004 Annual Report

If you want to make a difference in the world, where do you start? The Mastery Foundation began in 1983 with the recognition that religious institutions form the most enduring and wide-spread network dedicated to the well-being and transformation of humanity.

It is estimated that as much as 90 percent of the world's population believe in God, though the expressions of that belief are amazingly diverse. A study in 2001 cataloged 10,000 distinct religions in the world, 150 of which have one million or more followers. Within just one of those religions – Christianity – 33,830 denominations were counted.

Underlying the doctrine and dogma of each faith is a concern for that which transcends our separation, a concern for that which connects us with the best in ourselves and each other, and a concern with that which is eternal. Yet religious institutions are also among the most tradition-bound and slow to change. Fr. Basil Pennington likens them to “sleeping giants” waiting to be roused from their dormant state to deliver on their promise.

As the original program of the Mastery Foundation, the Making A Difference course is designed to empower religious leaders – both clergy and laity – to challenge them to rethink what is possible and to make the full power and promise of their faith available to those they serve. It is a unique and powerful program for those who are radical enough to preach and practice transformation in today's world.

In 2004 we completed and launched a new, redesigned Making A Difference course. Since our first course in 1984, the nature and concerns of ministry have changed considerably. For example, interfaith work was much less common then, and lay ministry was only beginning to come into its own.

Now, more than before, clergy are likely to be dealing with lessening job security, declining congregations and economic resources, divisive social issues, and overwork. In addition, their role as leaders has become less defined and more difficult. For most denominations, the days of rigid hierarchy are past, but there is no clear-cut model or method for building a new sense of community and participation. As

one Episcopal priest told us, “Most clergy are still trained to be 19th century vicars in England.” In the face of all this, it is not surprising to discover an underlying sense of powerlessness among clergy that narrows their individual vision of what is possible.

The Making A Difference Course allows those who minister to reclaim the power that originally called them into ministry and gives them the tools to return again and again to the source of their calling, tools they use to awaken within themselves and others new ways of being and acting.

The teaching and practice of Centering Prayer is integral to the workshop. This simple form of contemplation is a powerful tool in this era of increased awareness of the need for interfaith relationship and reconciliation. Centering Prayer is a shared spiritual experience where there is no liturgy, no text, no one theology. There is each person sitting in silence, dwelling for those minutes in relationship to the divine presence at the center of each person's religious faith. Being together in this sacred silence, is a powerful and meaningful way to open ourselves to being with those from other traditions and faiths without ignoring or focusing on our differences.

Lay or ordained, experienced or just beginning, participants are able to apply what they learn in the Making A Difference course naturally and with renewed confidence and commitment. Participants report that the Making A Difference Course has a lasting, positive impact on their lives and ministries in both practical and experiential ways. Years later, they write to tell us that the power of what they learned and declared for themselves continues to bless them with new possibilities and abundant grace.

By empowering these men and (many more than when we started) women, we know these new possibilities also touch and empower the tens of hundreds of people they serve. Ministry, like community, is about caring for the whole, and even for the most devoted, it is a daunting commitment. Because it challenges the status quo and the limitations we place on ourselves, because it empowers deeper questioning rather than providing answers, the Making A Difference workshop is and remains one of the most powerful and valuable experiences available for those rebels and mystics among us who are called to minister and to bring God present for others.

When I first did the Making A Difference course 16 years ago I had been ordained for about five years. The workshop was the most profound work I had done in figuring out who I wanted to be as a Rabbi and why I do what I do. We go into the seminary with ideals and thoughts about what we want to do and accomplish and learn a tremendous amount about how to do our ministry. There is not always a focus on what it means and why we are doing it. The workshop provided a great opportunity to frame what it was all about – the declaration I made at that time has helped to shape and form my Rabbinat and continues to do so. What I took away from the workshop really kept me centered

in terms of my work – it was sometimes the only thing that made a difference for me when things were difficult – as it allowed me to reference my commitment.

Participating in the interfaith environment of the workshop added to the experience – there is a power in hearing expressions from other faith traditions – and the requirement to choose words carefully so that my expressions communicate and translate to those of other traditions was one of the gifts of the Making A Difference workshop.

In the Jewish tradition congregations often reflect the Rabbi – people will say I belong to Bookman's congregation rather than naming the synagogue itself. I have

been privileged to serve two congregations. Each of the congregations was struggling and wanting to know how to attract new members when I arrived, and both are now thriving. One of the things that was important in my leadership was being able to say what I stand for and the ability to stand forth with the congregation.

I have encouraged many people over the years to attend the workshop and suggest to them to come with their openness and be prepared to look at yourself in ways you have not previously been taught to look at yourself and what you can do.

Rabbi Terry Bookman

Miami, Florida

In the summer of 2000, I crisscrossed the country several times to interview 37 of the classmates who graduated with me from Virginia Theological Seminary in 1975. Of all the discoveries I made on that journey, one sticks in my mind and heart: the conflicting views among my classmates regarding the nature of “priesthood.” Is being a priest defined by what a priest “is” or by what a priest “does”?

After 25 years of ministry, the precious few who were still engaged, excited and committed to their vocation almost always came down on the “being” side. What they did day-to-day as priests in the Episcopal Church emerged from who they were as ordained people, called by God to ministry. But the majority of my overworked, depleted, and depressed classmates — like most ordained clergy — defined their ministries and themselves by what they did. They were out of touch with the power and possibility that called them to the ordained life; they felt stuck and exhausted, far from the vision that drew them to ministry.

The Making A Difference workshop is a

rare opportunity for those in ministry to encounter themselves and their ministries from a place of “being” rather than “doing.”

Unlike most workshops for ordained and lay ministers, it does not offer strategies and techniques for how to do ministry more efficiently and effectively. Instead, it provides the opportunity for participants to discover again what originally and vitally called them into ministry.

Letting go of doing and having—the primary definitions of who we are in our time and place—and opening up to being as that sacred place from which to come into the responsibilities and actions of day-to-day ministry is the gift of the Making A Difference workshop. This gift of being is not something the workshop gives—it is a discovery each participant is invited to create and declare for themselves.

I’ve been around the Making A Difference workshop in one way or another since 1987. When I first participated, I was considering renouncing my vows as an Episcopal priest and moving on to the next chapter of my life. Unexpectedly and powerfully, the

workshop gave me back my priesthood all new—created out of my simple declaration “I am a Priest.”

Having a place to come from in my ministry, instead of working to get to something, was remarkably liberating. Living out of my declaration rather than living up to expectations (my own and others’) gave me the freedom and openings the workshop had promised! To say I got better as a priest wouldn’t be accurate at all. In fact, being freed from “getting better” was a major gift of Making A Difference.

A day in my ministry — and my life! —doesn’t pass without referencing one or more of the powerful distinctions that comprise the workshop. The workshop continues to bear fruit both within me and in my work. Not much in parish ministry has “changed” over the nearly 17 years since my workshop; however, my priesthood is constantly being renewed and transformed in ways that still astonish me.

Rev. Jim Bradley

Waterbury, Connecticut

To make a difference is the deep aspiration of each of us whose life is about sacred ministry. The power of a Moses who led a people to freedom, the power of a Gandhi to march to the sea and lead a people to freedom and dignity, the power of a Martin Luther King, of a Teresa of Calcutta. The same power resides within each one of us. But it is restrained by our considerations, our memories, our fears. Whether you call it a workshop or a retreat, the Making A Difference course enables us to get in touch with our power and in living out of that power, to make the difference we want to make.

Fr. Basil Pennington

I participated in the Making A Difference workshop in the fall of 2004. My confidence in the path I am on and the strength of my belief in my ministry expanded. The three days shined a light on ways I had been limiting myself and places it could be said I was seeing the woods for the trees. I have noticed when preparing talks and sermons I now have much more freedom to create, really to come out of my corner and make God available.

As a Muslim originally from the Sudan, I am part of the Sufi tradition. While Americans often misidentify it as the mystical tradition of Islam, Sufism is actually the spiritual tradition. Part of my ministry is to bring a better understanding of spirituality to our community since in some ways the

original message of Islam has been lost in the focus on strict adherence — more focus on the “how to” than the essence of the faith. In the Sufi tradition we have a daily practice that is similar to Centering Prayer. I found practicing Centering Prayer with those of other faith traditions during the workshop a rich and powerful experience.

The workshop provided an opportunity to have a profound connection with people of other faiths with similar commitments and to see the effect of that connection through the interactions in the workshop. It was very powerful and moving to have that connection confirmed and each person’s contribution in the group confirmed — to be known and appreciated for the contribution I have to make made

a difference. There is so much strife in the world — the workshop is one of the places where one can begin to see some light at the end of the tunnel.

I would especially encourage Muslims to attend the workshop. It is very useful in the world we live in for Muslims and non-Muslims to come together — they become less inhibited about each other. People especially in the Muslim tradition (and likely others who don’t do interfaith work) are inhibited by misconceptions. The more we talk together and pray together the more we realize how close we are to each other; we share so many of the same underlying concerns and the same desire to do good.

Sadig Taha

London, England