

Faithful witness: Interfaith engagement

From the Editors in the [December 22, 1999](#) issue

The sharp awareness of religious pluralism that developed in the 20th century is likely only to intensify in the 21st century. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, people of other faiths and people of no explicit faith will increasingly work, study and play together—and share their faith with one another in formal and informal ways.

Some of the challenges of this reality were made plain last month when Chicago's Council on Religious Leaders engaged the Southern Baptist Convention about its evangelism program. The council, which includes Jewish, Hindu and Muslim leaders as well as a wide range of Christians, was concerned about the SBC's plan to send 100,000 volunteer evangelists to the city next summer. In view of the SBC's focus on evangelizing Jews, Hindus and Muslims, as announced in prayer guides issued recently by the SBC's International Mission Board, the council worried (plausibly) that the summer evangelism project could increase interfaith tensions, and it suggested (less plausibly) that this evangelism could play into the hands of hate groups.

If the council hoped that these comments would be taken as a bit of fraternal advice, it sabotaged the effort by releasing the letter to the press before delivering it to SBC President Paige Patterson. Patterson reacted defensively, asserting Southern Baptists' constitutional right to evangelize and suggesting that it was evangelistic-minded Southern Baptists who were most likely to be objects of prejudice and hate. Ironically, the council's plea for religious sensitivity and tolerance toward other faiths looked to Patterson like religious insensitivity and intolerance toward the SBC. An opportunity was missed for an important interfaith and inter-Christian dialogue.

The Southern Baptists insist that they intend simply to share the gospel in a loving and noncoercive way. Surely, however, part of such love, and part of effective evangelism, is listening to the concerns of those you seek to reach and caring about

how they hear your message. If Jews or Muslims, as religious minorities, feel beleaguered and wary about the strategies of the SBC, then those concerns should be taken especially seriously by evangelists—not dismissed as an assault on their right to evangelize.

Jews, Muslims and others have some reasons to be wary about SBC evangelistic efforts. This year the SBC chose the Jewish High Holy Days to release its prayer guide focused on evangelizing Jews, and it timed the release of the prayer guide on Hinduism to coincide with the Hindu festival of Divali. Such moves were clearly aimed at dramatizing and heightening a sense of conflict between the faiths. The SBC also is blunt in describing non-Christians as "the lost," those living in "darkness."

We would not want to suggest that decisive differences should be ignored. In any genuine religious encounter, people's deepest convictions must be named. But that is not the best place to begin the conversation.

A passion for evangelism is one of the gifts of the SBC. One of the gifts of the mainline churches has been to seek fully to respect and sympathetically understand those of other faiths—an effort that may have complicated the mainline's own evangelism efforts, but in a fruitful and necessary way. What all Christians need is a theology—and especially a practice—of evangelism that emphasizes the gospel as invitation, not admonition, and that points to the light of Jesus, not the darkness of others. Needed above all is an evangelism that is faithful to the one who came in vulnerability, as a servant, and who was quick to rejoice at the ways that God was already at work in those outside the fold.