

Expand faith-based diplomacy from the personal to state level

By John D. Stempel

Along with the rise of religious fundamentalism and ethno-religious conflict has arisen the idea and practice of faith-based diplomacy. This is a form of unofficial diplomacy that seeks to integrate the dynamics and values of religion with the conduct of international peacemaking and statecraft.

As modern diplomacy grew up in the 17th and 18th centuries, struggles over religion gave way to wars of national interest. By the mid-20th century, conventional wisdom held that religion was irrelevant to diplomacy. The rise of the state of Israel, the onset and aftermath of Iran's Islamic revolution and the end of the Cold War in 1991 made it impossible for diplomats and policy makers, as well as concerned citizens, to ignore the interplay of religion and diplomacy. Harvard Professor Sam Huntington even argued that the "clash of civilizations" along religious lines would be the principal cause of future conflict.

Until the past few years, however, the worlds of the statesman and religious individuals have been separated by a gulf. Those who know statecraft often admit they are beginners in spiritual matters, while few theologians can (or would) claim expertise in diplomacy and the political scramble.

Policy makers dismiss religious concerns as unrealistic and naïve and speak the language of realpolitik and balance of power while the religiously inclined often paint politicians/statesmen as insensitive and immoral.

A new breed, the faith-based diplomat is slowly bridging this gap, and ordinary individuals who would not claim to know diplomacy from a dumpster are actually practicing it by involving themselves in international development projects. Even the U.S. State Department now has an ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, and since Sept. 11, issues of faith and interfaith relations have become "job one" for diplomacy.

The new faith-based diplomats are often ministers or those trained in religion, but may be ordinary Christians, Muslims or Hindus. The core issue for most is to bring faith, expressed in love, to over-

come fear that divides people. At a Patterson School Conference on Faith-Based Diplomacy in October, 15 ministers, professors and practitioners gathered to explore the dimensions of this phenomenon. Represented were all major faiths.

The conference came to several important conclusions, which were strongly reinforced 18 hours after the conference ended when the bombing of Afghanistan began:

- Faith-based diplomacy, especially people-to-people contact, greatly enhances understanding among religions, helps express values of helping other human beings and can be a major force for conflict reduction.

- Faith-based individuals who would like to dip into unofficial diplomacy had better learn what diplomacy is all about so they can heed the first law of medicine: First, do no harm.

There is a major gap of understanding between policy folk and theologians that must be bridged, and the quicker the better. For faith-based diplomacy to succeed to the fullest, it eventually has to lap over into official diplomacy.

- Diplomats and politicians must learn a great deal more about religious values. Faith-based diplomacy is one of the best ways of transmitting and behaving in accordance with the highest values of any religion.

It also forces people to make the difficult journey into the belief system of others, without which there can be no successful policy.

America's public debate over U.S. relationships with the Islamic faith is a prime example of this. It is particularly helpful to understand the interrelations between faith and diplomacy, since for much of the world (Islamic and Hindu), they are not separate elements.

- The faith-based community must embrace diplomacy and seek to reconcile differences between religions. The diplomatic skills of precise thought, temperate language and efforts to understand the legitimate interests of others will be required. Conflict resolution between religions is an important task. It is time, according to Peter Steinfels, to "encourage the growth of the diplomatically engaged religious as well as religiously in-

formed diplomacy."

Faith-based diplomacy brings four distinct strengths to the table for dealing with diplomatic issues, according to one of its most distinguished practitioners, Douglas Johnston:

- The transcendent quality of an appeal to the sacred, which often allows it to overcome secular obstacles, encourage parties to acknowledge guilt, develop a force for forgiveness and reconciliation, and address the wounds of history.

- The moral authority to support a safe space for exploring divergent interests, to act as an honest broker, to effectively counter demagogues who manipulate religion and to humanize conflicts.

- A vision for social and economic justice.

- Development of a "just peace" theory, a counterpart to the historic "just war" theory, to promote cooperative conflict resolution, restore basic human rights, generate sustainable economic development and avoid demonizing one's opponents and consider them the "other," not the enemy.

Such initiatives are not limited to well-trained diplomats or international relations experts. In fact, they are going on all over the country. The reaching out of Lexington Christian churches to our Muslim brethren after Sept. 11 is one example. The dozens of local citizens who go to Central and Latin America during their vacations to help with rural construction of schools and markets is another. Programs that provide spectacles, hearing aids and medical supplies to poorer nations are a third example.

These efforts are truly faith-based diplomacy of the very best kind, which put the best of our values on display to developing areas and reduce the potential for conflict and violence generally.

John D. Stempel is director and professor of international studies at the University of Kentucky Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce.