

Building Hope:  
Christians and Jews Seeking the  
Common Good  
2011

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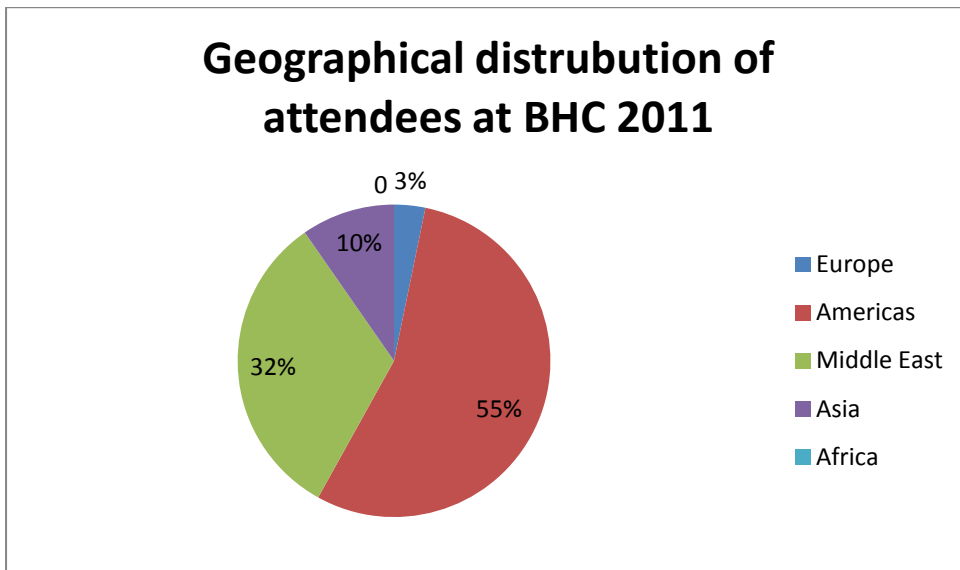
Hope Built?



Dr Richard McCallum 2014

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*Building Hope: Muslims, Christians and Jews Seeking the Common Good* was a 10-day conference held at Yale University in 2011 (hereafter BH). It was organised by the Yale Reconciliation Program which at that time was part of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture directed by Prof Miroslav Volf. It brought together 30 ‘carefully selected, influential, mid-career Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious leaders who have a proven record of leadership and clear future potential .... to consult with each other, to learn about one another’s faiths, and to bear witness to their respective faiths’.<sup>1</sup> With 5 exceptions participants came from North America and the Middle East, with Africa being unrepresented (see Fig 1), and were drawn evenly from across the three faith communities with Jews in a slight minority (Fig 2). There was one convert to Islam from a Christian background, one convert to Christianity from a Hindu background and one other Christian also reported a conversion experience. There were only 4 female delegates and the average age was 45.



	Jewish	Christian	Muslim	Total
<b>Attendees</b>	8 (26%)	12 (39%)	11 (35%)	31
<b>Male</b>	7	10	10	27 (87%)
<b>Female</b>	1	2	1	4 (13%)
<b>Mean age<sup>2</sup></b>	45.8	46.2	43.8	45.5
<b>Youngest</b>	34	34	36	34
<b>Oldest</b>	63	58	54	63

<sup>1</sup> Taken from the letter of invitation to the event

<sup>2</sup> Average age based on the 16 delegates who responded to the survey

The fact that the attendees were to ‘bear witness’ was significant as the organisers carefully chose leaders from ‘traditionalist or conservative wings of their communities’ such as Christian Evangelicals, Jewish Orthodox and Salafi Muslims amongst others (De Wolf & Spohn, 2011). The organisers saw these groups as frequently being sidelined as ‘many interfaith dialogues have reached out only to the most progressive wing of each community, leaving millions of more traditionalist religious believers feeling no sense of ownership in the process’ (ibid).

The program, which consisted of lectures, presentations, discussions, reciprocal visits to places of worship and excursions, was designed to move from less contentious common ground to sensitive complex issues. In particular in the latter part it focused on difficult questions such as religious violence, freedom of conscience and Israel-Palestine. According to the organisers this represented ‘a rare opportunity to develop personal relationships with influential Muslim, Christian and Jewish leaders from around the world who are likely to be among the most senior leaders in their respective communities in years to come’, the aim being to ‘develop lasting relationships with each other and help create the conditions for more peaceful and tolerant interactions among these faith communities in the twenty-first century’.<sup>3</sup>

The following data are based on a survey and interviews conducted one to two years after the event asking the participants to reflect on their experience at BH and the impact it had on their lives and work. 16 delegates replied to the online survey and 12 were interviewed in addition to 2 staff members. There were 20 informants in total (see Fig.2).

	Jewish	Christian <sup>4</sup>	Muslim	Total
Survey only	1	5	2	8
Interview only	1	1	2	4
Survey +interview	3	3	2	8
<b>Total informants</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>20</b>

All the participants reported that religion was important in their lives and all participated in at least a weekly corporate act of worship in addition to performing their own daily spiritual disciplines. All believed that they had influence or a leadership role in their community. So clearly BH achieved its goal of recruiting influential religious leaders who were serious about practising their faith.

It was clearly a robust event that showcased difference rather than minimised it in favour of some negotiated common ground. One Muslim testified that it was very different to the “wishy washy stuff” that many in his community fear interfaith dialogue to be and a Christian said:

I had long only hoped for multi-faith engagement which is not mushy "inter-faith"; now I not only hope but know this is possible and I feel inspired to make more of this happen in the world. I learned

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Two of these respondents objected to the label ‘Christian’ both preferring the descriptor ‘follower of Jesus’

that we need to engage each other at the level of worship, and we need to engage each other with each being fully who they are - not (the) lowest common denominator.

For 87% of respondents the events either met or exceeded their expectations. The most popular words used to describe the event were words like educational, challenging, inspiring, and transformational. In particular people singled out having time to form relationships – often during free time or informal activities – and the opportunity to listen to others as being the highlights of the event.

With the exception of one person, who was not sure, everyone felt that attending the event had a lasting benefit for them. This included the formation of lasting relationships. Everyone felt that they had made friends with people from their own faith community and, with the exception of one person who was not able to attend consistently, everyone felt even more strongly that they had made friends from another faith community. However, only two-thirds of respondents reported that they were still pursuing these relationships after a year and only just over half felt that others were pursuing relationship with them. The interviews bore out this finding as people admitted that they had not kept in touch with others as they had hoped. This was due to busyness but also to a perceived lack of follow up by the organisers. A follow up event that had been mooted did not materialise for lack of finance. As one of the organisers admitted, “if we’re really going to build hope, that means that there has to be long term relationships, and it does take money to follow up”. Several participants mentioned this as a significant failing of the program.

A few participants mentioned other spinoffs or benefits of the program. A Christian lecturer “created a course from the experience which included visiting a mosque and a synagogue, which students have responded positively to”. The same person asked some of the delegates to come and speak at a conference on peace at his university. A Muslim delegate organised some speaking engagements for a Christian speaker in Asia. A Christian academic invited a Muslim participant to be an instructor at a seminar on the Qur’an, and the same person later sought advice from a Jewish attendee about the role of women in Orthodox Judaism. In turn the Muslim delegate invited the Christian and one of the Jewish rabbis to a workshop on the Qur’an and its interpretation at his institution.

In addition to the above events there were also informal visits as when some of the Christian participants visited a couple of the Jewish delegates in Israel and a Jewish rabbi attended a lecture on the Qur’an given by one of the other Jewish participants.

Other events are still at the planning stage and less directly involve interaction between the participants. A Christian activist is planning a curriculum with a rabbinical school on dealing with fear and trauma through religion and spirituality. And a Christian pastor organised a "Love Your Neighbour" dinner at his church attended by a local Imam and 50 people from the local mosque.

11 of the respondents mentioned speaking about the BH experience with their congregations. A rabbi reported that “Every single time we talk about religious tolerance here in our country or with other people, I take this as example the experience I had in Yale”. Extrapolating from numbers reported in the survey replies it is probable that at least 750 people and as many as 1000 people

heard about BH in mosques, churches and synagogues. In total between 2000 and 4000 family, friends, neighbours and colleagues may have heard the reports.

However, beyond the relationships, events and reporting that followed the event had a more intangible impact on the attendees' attitudes, thinking and own faith commitment. 69% reported that their attitudes to people of other religions changed because of the event. In addition to increased knowledge and interest in other religions two people mentioned an increased respect for others. Someone else felt a greater tolerance. Another recognised that he had been "missing some concepts and words that would help further dialogue" and now had "a better vocabulary". However, three people felt that their attitudes had not changed as, in the words of one of them, "I have always been pretty open and tried to work with various groups on peace and justice work". One of the others did feel that his attitudes had become "more mature and responsible".

When it came to changes in the participants own religious commitment, despite the fears of many within conservative religious communities, only one out of 16 respondents felt that his own religious identity was weakened by attending BH. 9 reported that their identity had been strengthened, 2 that it was unchanged and 4 were not sure. A Christian said "Building Hope has given me a deeper faith commitment" and an imam commented "one of the things that was an important take away for me was that interfaith work can help to strengthen an individual inside of their own faith".

The event also stimulated positive reflection on the participant's faith. For instance, a rabbi confessed that "the bottom line is I came back with a lot of reflections about my faith, and that surprised me". And someone else shared "I love Jesus, and he is my life. My connection to him probably deepened through the event, because of highlighting that Jesus is not about religion, but about life".

These are interesting observations as it seems that for most, at least in the short term, interfaith initiatives between people of conservative faith do not lead to a weakening of faith identity which could in turn erode community boundaries. Rather robust initiatives of this type might actually strengthen religious identity. Of course this is a very small sample relying on self-reporting and much more complex tools would have to be used to assess the trend with any certainty. However, it is an indication that such engagement need not weaken faith as some in faith communities fear.