



PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR 2015

The operation of Capital Region Interfaith Council during the year 2014-15 moved forward rather smoothly and most of the annual activities were undertaken successfully

1. Membership

There has been no change in the membership of CRIC over the year. As of today, the CRIC membership consists of representatives of the following 16 faith communities:

- Anglican
- Baha'i
- Catholic Diocese
- Christian Science
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- Coptic
- Falun Dafa
- Family Federation
- Hindu
- Islam
- Jain
- Jewish
- Sikh
- Unitarian
- United Church
- Zoroastrian

One representative from each of these faith groups will be entitled to vote at today's meeting and elections.

2. Monthly Meetings

CRIC meetings were held regularly. However, as in the past, no meetings were held in June and October as the Joy of Faith and Interfaith Prayer Service were held, respectively in these months. Also, the Council did not meet during the summer months of July and August.

3. I and My Faith

The following topics were explored during the year under "I and My Faith":

November 23, 2014	Charity
December 21, 2014	Manner and Practice of Giving
January 11, 2015	Our Faith's Perspective on Gambling
March 8, 2015	Faith and Palliative Care
April 12, 2015	Fasting
May 13, 2015	Burial Customs
September 15, 2015	Organizational Structure of your Religion

It was also decided that, instead of a subject on which the representatives give brief presentations, a more comprehensive one will be given on a religion occasionally. Accordingly, such presentations were made on February 8, 2015, in respect of Hindu and Jain faiths.

4. Spring Cleaning the Capital

For the ninth year, CRIC members participated in the City annual cleaning project. Lloyd Spencer and

Behnaz Bahrami undertook to organize a CRIC team to undertake the spring cleaning at the Ken Steele Park, 1195 Ogilvie Road on May 5, 2015. The team consisted of persons from four faith groups.

5. Joy of Faith

The Joy of Faith concert was held on June 14, 2015. Father Jacques Kabangu offered St. Gabriel's Church as a venue. Jag Humar and Blandine Stringer organized the function. The presentations by members of seven faiths were much appreciated, as was the participation from the faith communities. However, it was felt that it would be helpful if more efforts were made to attract greater participation from the communities.

6. Interfaith Prayer Service

Once again, Jacques Kabangu and his committee organized the Interfaith Prayer Service on October 18, 2015, and John Wilker-Blakley again offered Saint Matthias Anglican Church for the venue. The theme chosen for this year was "Peace with the Divine and Human Harmony". Almost all members offered their faiths' perspective on the chosen theme. A presentation was also made on behalf of the Aboriginal people. As in the previous year, member faiths contributed the refreshments. The overall participation was very good.

7. Interfaith Day

This year again, the Mayor of Ottawa proclaimed October 18, 2015, the day of CRIC's Interfaith Prayer Service, as 'Interfaith Day'. The Mayor was represented at the Prayer Service by Deputy Mayor Mark Taylor, who read the proclamation of 'Interfaith Day'.

I would like to suggest that CRIC will be strengthened by introducing young blood... To this end, it may be helpful to introduce young members of faith communities to participate and make presentations at the interfaith functions.

8. CRIC Webpage

There has been no progress on finding a webmaster for updating the CRIC Webpage, although it has been on the agenda for every CRIC meeting..

9. CRIC's Popularity

As CRIC becomes more known, some individuals and organizations approach us for support. This request may be simply to seek our appreciation of their good work or it may be a request to include our name as one of their sponsors.

You will recall that last year, the Canadian Peace Initiative had approached us in this aspect. We had informed them that, "while we appreciated their efforts, it was not possible for CRIC to become a participating member of CPI."

This year, we received a note from the Ottawa Police which included an advisory note, drafted by three faith leaders. The advisory note was to be given to all applicants who sought permission to hold a function on Parliament Hill. CRIC was asked to issue such a notice in its name. The unanimous conclusion of members was that the proposed action was outside the mandate of CRIC.

It seems to be a good policy for CRIC to support good activities and to avoid direct association or sponsorship of such an activity.

10. Multi-faith Prayer Room

A multi-faith prayer room was opened at the Ottawa Regional Cancer Foundation's Maplesoft Centre on January 11, 2015. I attended it on behalf of CRIC. Later, the Director of the Center made a presentation at a CRIC meeting on March 8, 2015.

11. Tree Ottawa

Tree Ottawa is an initiative of Ecology Ottawa. At the CRIC meeting on February 8, 2015, Suman Gupta and Velta Tomsons gave a resume of the project for replacing the 20 million ash trees that were expected to

be lost in the next three to five years.

12. Syrian Refugee Crisis

The Mayor invited some faith and other community leaders to the City Hall to discuss certain proposals about the Syrian Refugee Crisis. I was included in the participants. The proposal was to call a general meeting of Ottawa citizens and especially leaders of various groups. I offered to provide a list of faith leaders. With the help of some members of CRIC I provided the City staff an extensive list. A successful public session was held on October 1, 2015. I have tried to keep the CRIC members informed of developments.

13. CRIC Internal Correspondence

To avoid problems emanating from exchange of e-mails among members outside the forum of discussions at regular plenary sessions, CRIC agreed to a document entitled Code of Conduct. I had recommended last year “that, at the beginning of each year, the Secretary or the President should remind the members of the existence and importance of the basic documents including the Code of Conduct”.

However, recently, I have received some e-mails which contain certain suggestions or proposals. Since these e-mails were addressed or copied to all members of CRIC, it was not clear who was being asked to consider the proposal. As the Code of Conduct suggested these should have been sent to the Secretary to circulate them to the members (without personal comments) for discussion at a CRIC meeting. It was also agreed that any “correspondence on any subject between two or more members will remain private and will not form part of CRIC documents”.

I, therefore once again, recommend that at the beginning of each year, attention of members should be drawn to the basic CRIC documents.

14. CRIC’s Annual Elections

At the conclusion of the Annual General Meeting, a number of representatives are elected for one year to an Executive. A member may be re-elected for the next year or two. This creates certain anomalies. The Executive discussed this issue briefly at its meeting on October 28 and decided that this item should be placed on the agenda in the coming year.

15. Canadian Pluralism

I seek the indulgence of members for a few minutes to bring to their attention another subject which, I personally, believe is very important.

In the sixties and seventies, there was a lack of knowledge in Canada about Islam and Muslims and there appeared a similar lack among Muslims about other faiths, especially Christians. I also recognized that ignorance breeds suspicion, fear and hatred. Accordingly, over thirty years ago, I got involved in interfaith dialogues and discussions. Besides speaking at schools, universities and churches, I especially engaged on three projects.

- a) In 1992, a Christian priest and I started a Christian Muslims Dialogue group, which has since been meeting every month. At these meetings, a Muslim and a Christian makes presentations on a subject based primarily on their Scriptures, followed by discussion. Over the last two and a half decades, we have learned from each other about the perspectives of these two faiths on practically every subject: religious, moral, social, family, economic and political.
- b) Then, I joined a Hindu Pundit and the president of the Council of Christian Churches in Ottawa and we created the Capital Region Interfaith Council. Its Mission Statement, as you know is “To enhance awareness of the existence in Canada of the many faiths which are based on the supremacy of the Creator, and to encourage within these faiths and others the development of a living and dynamic expression of our pluralistic spiritual community”.

- c) This was followed by the creation of Interfaith Ottawa, a joint project of the City of Ottawa and local faith groups . Its objectives include “To provide a unified voice against acts of intolerance or hatred and to work towards the abolition of prejudice”.

The overall emphasis on existence and acceptance of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith society in Canada was both heartwarming and a source of pride for minorities. These developments provided them with a sense of belonging and security.

An unwelcome change occurred when a Provincial government proposed a Charter of Quebec Values. It generated a strong negative reaction from members of the CRIC. The Council quickly agreed to voice its disapproval of the proposal but could not resolve on an agreed version of the protest. The then President of CRIC felt strongly that this was similar to the earlier treatment of aboriginal people, the Chinese and the Japanese, etc. Some members disagreed with this and wanted a more neutral protest. In fact, the discussion among members became quite acrimonious, resulting in the resignation of the president.

Then the Federal election this year brought in a new phenomenon in Canada. The early polls showed that Canadians were more or less equally divided in their support for the three main political parties. Accordingly, each party tried to find ways and means to influence public opinion in its favour. One Party decided to embark upon a campaign of generating fear and hatred against one minority, the Canadian Muslims. It appealed to the emotions of Quebecers and raised the question of niqab although it involved only two out of over six hundred thousand Muslim women. This was accompanied by vicious propaganda and misinformation. A division in the society was being created. “Islamism” was claimed as the greatest threat to Canada.

In fact, during the election period, hatred was being promoted against one minority. A prominent leader of the Political party termed the members of this minority as followers of barbaric cultural practices. And another advised people to report against members of this minority. The result was verbal and physical attacks on visibly Muslim women

There were cases of violence against Muslims across the county. And Ottawa Police issued a public request for people to report this kind of violence. Muslims were too scared to protest. The propaganda and dissemination of hatred against the members of a faith group in Canada were clearly against the mission of CRIC. You will recall that, last year, there were two cases of vandalism at houses of worship. In both cases, I sent letters of condemnation of vandalism and of CRIC’s support to the organizations responsible for the places of worship. I strongly believe that CRIC should have issued a condemnation of these events. I did not raise this issue since it was my community under attack. But none of the other members of CRIC took the initiative either.

Fortunately, Canadians across the country did not keep silent. The situation changed overnight on October 19, 2015. However, we should not become complacent. As the well-known Canadian historian, Erna Paris, recently wrote:

“No immigrant-based country can afford to believe that its leaders will never resort to the oldest, most dangerous, tactic in politics: the devaluation of a national minority. Nor can we Canadians afford to imagine that we will be immune to incitement. Recent events proved otherwise. We had a close call.”

Most of the representatives on CRIC are among faith leaders. Irrespective of the position of CRIC or anyone else, I believe they should be able to raise issues of human dignity within their own faith community and voice their condemnation of any form of spreading hatred and division in Canada.

16. Closing Remarks

In North America, there are scores of interfaith dialogue groups among the members of the three Abrahamic faiths. I believe our Capital Region Interfaith Council is unique as it encompasses all the main faith groups in the Region. We should continue to develop ways and means to promote the objective which brought CRIC into being. This will be a worthwhile service to our nation.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the members of the executive for their help and assistance and members of CRIC for their kindness and support.

- Abdul Rashid
November 8, 2015