Finding Peace in a Time of Crisis


(Vocus) February 27, 2009 -- In a world that is increasingly interfaith and multicultural, what spiritual practices can we learn from each other to help us find the peace, calm and faith needed to get through today's global economic challenges and beyond?

In a time of economic uncertainty, it may seem surprising or even foolish to offer a conference on the frontiers of Christian spirituality. Yet perhaps the need for "A River Deep and Wide: Christian Spiritual Practices for the 21st Century" (www.upperroom.org/river) is greater than ever says the Rev. Jerry Haas, director of the Academy for Spiritual Formation and Emerging Ministries at the United Methodist General Board of Discipleship.

Participants attending the five-day event, April 20-25, 2009, at the Scarritt-Bennett Center in Nashville, Tenn., are encouraged to open themselves to see, hear and be in dialogue with others, while experiencing the spiritual wealth available in today's world of diversity.

Three of the key presenters for "A River Deep and Wide" weighed in by e-mail and telephone on what they hope people will gain from participating in this gathering. They say it will lift up some of the most important Christian spiritual practices that can help us get through times of crisis.

M. Thomas Thangaraj, a faculty member at Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai, India, suggests that "the massive and formidable character of our present economic challenges requires a spirituality that frees us from undue attachment to and craving for material goods and instills in us an authentic and active compassion for those who suffer in times of economic crisis."

Practice a Lenten Spirituality
Thangaraj, author of "Relating to People of Other Religions: What Every Christian Needs to Know" (Abingdon, 1997), says "perhaps we cannot simply limit ourselves to the forty-day period of Lent but continue to practice a Lenten spirituality beyond Easter and Pentecost."

Thangaraj, Emeritus Professor of World Christianity, Candler School of Theology, where he served for more than 20 years before moving back to his native India, is among the presenters at the conference.

The Rev. Barbara Holmes, dean at Memphis Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tenn., and one of the plenary leaders, stated that one of the important Christian practices that can help in times of economic crisis is an intentional turning toward historical legacies of the church and then bringing those legacies into the present. From there one may see how these legacies inform our lives.

"Spiritual practices cannot be something bizarre or odd," Holmes said. "Spiritual practices should not be special behaviors for special occasions. Most of us do not have the time or the calling for the monastic life. Instead, we must have spiritual practices that we can engage while we are jogging, working, changing our children's
clothes, making lunches and cleaning the house. We need to develop those practices that will enhance and deepen spirituality in the midst of busy lives."

Leave safe, shallow water behind; plunge into the deep

Author of "Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church" (Augsburg, 2004) Holmes sees "A River Deep and Wide" as a way of inviting the church to leave the shore and the safe, shallow waters and to once again plunge into the depth that we are called to by Scripture.

"Christ called [us] to take up crosses and follow, to walk through places where suffering would not be alleviated, but where God would be with us," Holmes continued. "This is a journey that is not easy. It is one that immerses us deeply into the heart of God.

"What I hope to do while I am there is to deeply immerse myself and those that are participating into practices that remind us of our baptism and how far we still have to go but that this walk is a walk permeated with joy.

"When we talk about journey in the quest for Christian faith, we sound like we're trudging, but this is joy. It's joy unspeakable. It's a dance with God. So I hope that people will come away knowing that hope is always possible.

"I'll do that through music, the arts and through practices that really gauge it together and by drawing on a word of hope from Cornell West, one of the pre-eminent philosophers of our age, who has just written a book called 'Hope on a Tight Rope': 'it's on a tight rope. It can go either way--but it's always there.'"

Called to be neighbors and witnesses

The conference will also address the diverse interfaith and multicultural context in which the church finds itself.

"Combining the multicultural and the interfaith aspect may be ambitious," Haas remarked, "but it's the emerging context in which we live. The United Methodist Church has a document in the Book of Resolutions entitled, 'Called to be Neighbors and Witnesses.' That's what we're called to be today, and this conference is designed to help us live out that call."

Co-sponsored by the General Board of Discipleship, Scarritt-Bennett Center, Weavings Journal and the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, "A River Deep and Wide" includes contemplative spiritual practices from Native, Africana, Hispanic and Euro-American perspectives.

According to Haas, the leader of the design team that helped envision this gathering, "in times of stress, the tendency is to go inward and defend what we know. Yet there is another pull inside us. God may be inviting us to build relationships across barriers that separated us in the past." Christians know that Jesus called the forgotten and the needy into community precisely in a time of crisis. Beyond that we are also called to be neighbors to those whose beliefs are different than (ours), to listen to our common longings," he noted.

Holmes said, though "multiculturalism is surprising the church, it is the lifeblood of the future church. Diversity enriches the practices we're familiar with. It gives new insights into the meanings of those practices and layers
upon the familiar the opportunity for not only diverse practices to surprise up, but for God to surprise us through the newness that we experience when we invite others in."

"Multiculturalism brings to the global church an acute awareness about the rich variety of spiritual postures and practices that is available to us in God's world," Thangaraj said. "Such a new consciousness releases us from the monotony of our age-old practices and ushers in a fresh and renewed commitment to turning our spiritual antennas in a direction that will catch the 'wind that blows where it wills.'"

When crisis erupts, spiritual leaders can help restore peace and calm, but Christian leaders need to deepen their own faith as they reach out to others.

Thangaraj also said that the processes of globalization have brought us all closer to our neighbors of other religions: "That has helped us to discover how deep and wide the river of spirituality is. Once we discover that, we cannot but realize that our current theological and pastoral resources are not sufficient to face the new situation."

This conference is precisely to meet, listen, pray, and discover those resources that will assist us to draw power and nourishment from the deep and wide river. "You do not have to be tied down to failed postures and worn-out practices. A new and vibrant spirituality is waiting for you," Thangaraj said.

Wisdom from the Native Tradition

A sense of community--that you are not alone-- is one of the key spiritual practices of his faith that "Dancing with Words: Storytelling as Legacy, Culture, and Faith" (Discipleship Resources, 2003) author Ray Buckley hopes to share with participants who will gather for the conference. Buckley, a member of the Alaska Missionary Conference, is also interim director of the Center for Native American Spirituality and Christian Studies in British Columbia.

"In our villages there is not enough heating oil and when it is available, it is extremely expensive," Buckley said. "The change in the weather conditions last year made it a very difficult time for hunting and fishing so there's not enough food. There aren't any roads connecting a lot of our villages so you have to fly in or go by dog sled or snow machine. There's not enough food and heating oil; it's an incredible hardship. Our people have had and still do depend on hunting and fishing and literally gathering berries--all of the things that are needed for survival."

You are not alone

One of the important spiritual practices is that in every situation of life you are not alone, said Buckley. "The community is involved with you. Even in problem-solving you come together and you end up with consensus. There is also among our traditional people a very strong sense of prayer and that is true of our Christian traditions as well. In our traditions, everything you did was an act of prayer."

Buckley believes that there is a genuine hunger to know what God is doing in the lives of other people: "Some of our greatest theology has come out of times of desperation and despair. We are all related. Everybody around the world."

Holmes, who tends to hang around oceans instead of rivers, finds that water has been a conduit for her
transcendence above ordinary issues or problems. "It's always been water and being near water and that power and movement of God through water that has given me insights as to the next steps in my life," she said.

Holmes and her 91-year-old mother takes delight in walking hand in hand near the ocean's edge, not getting too far in but feeling the sense of depth and power that is helping her mother move toward the realm of the ancestors and is helping her to walk with her mother and in knowing when to let go.

"Water does that for you," Holmes said. "She'll often repeat this over and over: 'Notice that God sets limits.' The power of the ocean only comes so far and stops. Suffering only goes on so long and then stops. There are powerful cycles in our lives, teaching us that trouble doesn't last always. We forget that."

See possibilities for resolutions

A walk by waters--whether they be deep waters or whether they be rivers or oceans--reminds you that God has the power to hold back the power of the waves, has the power to keep the river within its banks. It doesn't always happen that way but you are witnessing the power of God and whatever you bring to those edges, you will begin to see some possibilities for resolutions."

Deeply immersed in her brand new book, "Liberation and the Cosmos: Conversation with the Elders," (Fortress Press, 2008), Holmes brings back all the deceased civil rights leaders to talk about where we are now and where the liberation movement is going and how we as people of faith can move forward:

"These are imagined conversations, but they speak in the voices of the elders and one of the things that we tend to do is we cut off our spiritual practices from the voices of those who trained us in them. The practices are not sacrosanct. They don't have to be held in a dusty box, but we're supposed to remember where they came from and remember the people who brought us thus far by faith and then take those practices and see what God wants to do with them next."

All are welcome to attend. For more information, call 877-899-2781; ext. 7233. Registration is $225 or $175 for students. Visit http://www.upperroom.org/river/registration.html to register online.


GBOD's mission is to support annual conference and local church leaders for their task of equipping world-changing disciples. An agency of The United Methodist Church, GBOD is located at 1908 Grand Ave. in Nashville, Tenn. Visit www.gbod.org for more information or call the Media Relations Office toll free at (877) 899-2780, Ext. 7017.

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