

Ledger-Transcript

Peterborough, N.H.

Tuesday, July 1, 2008

PETERBOROUGH

A plea for faith-based diplomacy

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PETERBOROUGH — Thanks to faith-based diplomacy, a Middle Eastern girl caught talking on her cell phone to a boy from a rival sect did not receive the normal punishment of execution. The boy's offense, by local law, could have cost him his nose and ears.

This radical discipline was avoided after the leader of a madrasa — Arabic for "school" — intervened with diplomatic techniques he learned from the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy.

Doug Johnston, founder and president of the ICRD, shared this and other success stories with more than 150 people at the Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church Sunday at the first in the Monadnock Summer Lyceum Series.

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ries.

Johnston's background includes a doctorate in political science from Harvard University, where he founded the Kennedy School's Executive Program in National and International Security.

Johnston considers the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy the creator of faith-based diplomacy, a tactic he said is little-used in traditional governmental relations.

"When a government or industry hears the word 'religion' they head for the hills, for fear of favoring one over the other," said Johnston, who added that the sensitivity of religious discussions can be compounded in a hostile setting.

Johnston discussed the strategy of the Pentagon and the United States, including the idea of "irregular warfare," which includes covert operations and other responses to terrorist-type activity.

"There's not enough money in the U.S. treasury to protect this country from the full spectrum of threats," said Johnston.

"We're trying to displace the ideas behind the guns."

To that end, Johnston's organization has been working to address the religious element in Middle Eastern conflict, a process he said starts with educating each side about the other.

Johnston recalled a meeting with a Taliban commander who said he did not know what America wanted.

"They come here with guns and we are compelled to respond in kind," quoted Johnston.

Johnston told the man America wants peace in the region and a democratic and stable government.

"You have made me so happy," said a madrasa leader to Johnston after a lengthy meeting. "We thought all Americans hated us."

Johnston's work has developed a focus on madrasas — schools with little regulation that can be

started by anyone with the money and students. Johnston emphasized the wide range of curricula in the schools does not necessarily breed radicalism, but in some cases leaves students susceptible to those with malicious intent.

For instance, some schools require rote memorization of the Quran, with children as young as 12 years old able to recite it in its entirety. Johnston said memorization did not necessarily come with an understanding of the content, and as a result, a militant might convert a young person with a few select verses.

The International Center for Religion and Diplomacy has worked with more than 2,000 madrasas, a number he called the tip of a 15,000-school iceberg.

"When we first started, if a young man so much as raised his hand in class, that was deemed disrespectful," said Johnston.

The organization works with the schools and local scholars to develop alternative curricula that preserve cultural identity while developing respect.

"It's beyond tolerance; it's respect," said Johnston. "Tolerance means you deal with someone. Respect means you care enough to learn about them and find a way to work together."

Johnston said that after four years, the "guerrilla warfare" stage of the organization's work was drawing to a close, and he is ready to take it to the next level, working on larger initiatives.

Of course, some interactions blend the dangers of small-scale operations in hostile territory with the benefits of collaborating with

leadership. Johnston recalled a meeting he attended in the mountains of Pakistan where he, 57 Taliban leaders and tribal leaders assembled.

According to Johnston, key questions emerged. The Taliban wanted to know why America was attacking Afghanistan and Iraq, and Johnston had the delicate task of framing his response in terms he felt the militant leaders could relate to.

"Hospitality and revenge," said Johnston. "We welcomed their people into our country and that hospitality was violated on Sept. 11. We asked them to turn over the al-Qaida leaders, and when they didn't, we sought revenge."

The leaders also questioned why the United States always supported Israel. Johnston explained this country's traditional strategic relationship with Israel.

Johnston said his organization was called in when the Taliban took several South Korean hostages last year. Though by no means solely responsible for the hostages' release, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy played a crucial role. By citing the Quran, whose tenets excluded women from such operations, Johnston was able to provide a faith-based argument for the release of the 21 captives, 16 of whom were women.

"The best antidote to a wildfire is a counter-fire," said Johnston. "The best antidote to religious extremism is religious reconciliation. The stakes are simply too high for us not to give it our best shot."

Johnston has written two books on the subject, "Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft" and "Faith-based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik."

The Monadnock Summer Lyceum Series will be broadcast on NPR Saturdays at 4 p.m.

On July 6, Taylor Morris, writer and professor at Franklin Pierce University, will speak about the education of a lifetime.



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