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Diplomacy via religion

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Four Americans who exemplify traditional American values will be recognized tomorrow when the Founding Spirit Awards are presented at The Washington Times' 25th anniversary gala at the National Building Museum.

"The Washington Times champions the principles of America's founding and the traditional values that allow our society to flourish -- freedom, family, faith, and service," said Tom McDevitt, president of The Times. "We have therefore established the Founding Spirit Awards program to recognize people who are living their lives for the sake of others."

This is the third in a series of four profiles of the recipients of the Founding Spirit Awards.

Barely three weeks ago, Douglas M. Johnston was in Afghanistan, meeting with Muslim Taliban, tribal and religious leaders and explaining the U.S. war on terrorism in terms the Afghans could comprehend: hospitality, loyalty and revenge.

He painted a picture of the United States as a nation exacting retribution against al Qaeda members who had violated its hospitality, not a nation out to destroy a religion.

The United States, he told the Muslim clerics, had not declared war on Islam.

And there, face to face with him, Mr. Johnston said, "they understood."

Building trust, which he hopes will lead to measures toward peace, is the latest project for the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD). The Washington-based nonprofit works to resolve and prevent conflicts by incorporating religious considerations into international relations and peacemaking.

Mr. Johnston, who will receive the inaugural Founding Spirit Award for Faith tomorrow night at The Washington Times' 25th Anniversary Gala, is ICRD's founder and president.

"I've come to view this work as something of a calling," said Mr. Johnston, 68. "Since leaving the Navy, I've had 15 jobs in half a dozen different career fields and all of them, in some way, have helped bring me to this point."

ICRD works in hot spots such as Sudan, Kashmir, Iran, Syria and Pakistan to bridge the gap between the political and the religious, laying a framework of trust and making religion a part of the solution.

Mr. Johnston is an evangelical Christian who is influenced by the biblical phrase "blessed are the peacemakers." His background gives him credibility with government leaders that otherwise might not be attainable for the director of a religion-based

organization.

A distinguished graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, he worked in the president's office of emergency preparedness, as director of policy planning and management for the secretary of defense, and as executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington-based think tank.

He recognized the importance of religion to international relations long before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, made his argument clear.

At CSIS, he led a seven-year research project to produce the 1994 book "Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft." Its sequel, "Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik," was published in 2003.

"We've let our separation of church and state, and our commitment to it, serve as a crutch for not doing our homework in understanding how religion informs the worldviews and political aspirations of others who do not similarly separate the two," he said. "We have no ability to deal with religious differences in a hostile setting."

Though Mr. Johnston insisted he was not a prophet, Ambassador John W. McDonald, a 40-year veteran of the Foreign Service, said the idea of religion in diplomacy never crossed his mind until he read Mr. Johnston's first book. He is convinced Mr. Johnston's work has had a major effect in government and beyond.

"It resonated," he said. "We've got to learn about other religions and nations. Religion might not always be the root cause of a conflict, but it's always there."

Mr. Johnston said the response to his work has gone from tepid to enthusiastic at the State Department, the Defense Department and the CIA. He is thinking about writing a third book, admonishing the United States for focusing on symptoms, rather than causes, behind the September 11 attacks.

One of ICRD's most rewarding projects, he said, is its work to reform Islamic education in Pakistan, where schools known as madrassas have been cited as breeding grounds of terrorism.

"Everybody talks about the madrassas," he said. "As far as I know, we're the only ones on the ground addressing the problem."

ICRD has forged partnerships with even "hard-core" madrassas, he said, helping them expand their curricula and releasing students from the grip of extremism.

The group also is working in Syria, bringing together Muslim clerics, Western evangelicals, and eventually Jewish religious leaders, to establish a religious framework for Middle East peace upon which political leaders could build.

"We seek to bring the transcendent aspects of personal religious faith to bear in overcoming the secular obstacles to peace," he said. "We're trying to fill a need that's desperately in need of filling."