



*Interreligious Dialogue and Human Rights:  
Affirming our Solidarity  
A Collaboration of many Faiths and Traditions  
Istanbul Cultural Center 591 N Main St. Alpharetta, GA June 3, 2017*

Surprised by the spirit on the Christian weekend of Pentecost and the Muslim celebration of Ramadan, over 75 people of a variety of faith traditions gathered at the Istanbul Cultural Center in Alpharetta, Georgia to dialogue over deep cultural and societal issues as we explored ways in which we could stand in solidarity.

This initiative was began as a request *from John Raymaker, Germany and Marita and Gerald Grudzen, California* who are long time members of FCM and believe interreligious dialogue is a continuation of FCM's vision of inclusivity. Because people today experience great stress and trauma worldwide, the call to **Dialogue** is an ever present mission, demanding cultivation of the skills. This workshop was both a learning experience and a Call to Action.

*Richard Penaskovic, FCM of Auburn, AI* who has given Interfaith workshops for 30 years, responded to being part of the team as well as 2 members of the Turkish community, Nwandi Lawson of the Baha'i Community, John Tures, professor at LaGrange College, and Adelina Nicholls of the Latino Alliance for Human Rights.

Designed to explore the role dialogue plays in managing issues before conflicts arise, the opening exercise pulled us into questioning why we would make the effort to both travel and participate. What would bring you to this table?



*Fairyal Maqbool Halim*  
Interfaith Speakers  
Bureau

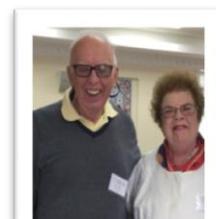
**Panel 1 Dialogue** is finding common ground and developing friendships that bend toward the unity of our religious practices, acknowledging that our values-compassion, empathy and love-are the binding agents of all faiths ....In this we affirm our solidarity.

We clarified that when we come to dialogue, we must put down our desire to proselytize, preach and evangelize- a skill not taught in seminaries or promoted by our traditions, but necessary as we move forward. We come seeking a wisdom beyond our traditions, embracing what values are common to all.. Our faith compels us to increase the bonds of unity and learn to stand as equals in conversation and action.

[Fairyal Maqbool Halim](#) of the [Islamic Speakers Bureau](#), asked how our personal faith compels and propels us to dialogue....With great skill, she led the community to reflect on the importance of Dialogue, gave examples of successes and obstacles in her local interfaith community, and how developing friendship and a desire for unity were key values in bringing people back to the table.

From this local perspective, we moved to an international setting and learned how dialogue has been a catalyst, through [Paths of Peace Kenya](#). In our local setting we explored how dialogue is a defining community builder among those resettling refugees and residents of the [Clarkston Community of Atlanta](#)

How does your faith compel or propel you towards an interreligious dialogue?  
What are some of the opportunities and challenges to interfaith dialogue?



*Gerale and Marita  
Grudzen*  
Paths to Peace. Kenya

[Gerald and Marita Grudzen](#) (FCM) have taken their Christian missionary zeal not to convert the people of Mombasa, Kenya, but to use their faith and leadership skills in calling regional religious leaders to learn how to talk to each other and build bridges. Joining with a multitude of religious leaders and teachers, they visit communities striving to build long lasting and sustainable peace through understanding of our shared values. Their first hand experience is chronicled in Gerald's new book, [Bury the Sword](#): Confronting Jihadism with Interfaith Education and the continuing efforts they are making through [Global Ministries University](#) to promote Interfaith Dialogue.



*Roberta Malavenda*  
Clarkston Development  
Foundation

When the US government chose Clarkston, Georgia-a small residential village inside Atlanta that housed many low income residents, -as a space to re-settle refugees from warring countries, [religious leaders](#), [government officials](#) and a multitude of teachers, university professors of varying traditions began the long journey of assistance to invest these new-comers in America's best values.

[Roberta Malavenda](#) shared how her Jewish faith and lived traditions have found a home in Clarkston. She gave witness to the months she worked with multiple communities to painstakingly work on dialogue and collaborative decision making among all residents. These activist communities seek funding to go to Apartment homes to set up day care, offer classes for teacher certification so people can hear their own languages and learn processes of American life. The community is a thriving group that is working to build strong citizens and promote integration through diversity. She ended with an invitation to join the community June 17<sup>th</sup> for [World Refugee Day at Refugee Coffee](#).

As noted in the opening introduction, the importance of this day was to get a taste of the value of dialogue in interreligious collaborations, not to listen to speakers. Each panelist had 10 minutes to communicate-and as John Raymaker noted, he came 10,000 miles to speak for 10 minutes. The majority of time was spent in dialogue, with someone of diverse background related to a topic of importance. This part of the day was probably the most important and engaging in terms of taking the process home and building opportunities for dialogue in everyone's respective communities.

## Panel 2 Service

Serving others is a form of dialogue in which faith groups participate directly in the building up and collective growth of the community. This is a dialogue of the hands...offering yourself for the good of others.

Nwandi Lawson of the Baha'i Community and founder of [The Virtues Collective](#), spoke clearly of the how her faith compels her to live out the prophet Bahauallah's call to [humankind](#). She gave numerous examples of how her community engages youth in projects that involve real problem solving, catalyzing a revolution in [education](#). Perhaps the most touching moment for me was the deep call for prayer with one of the Baha'i members gave in response to the displacement of refugees.



Nwandi Lawson of the  
Baha'i community

Addressing the Gulen movement , Ms. Lawson asked:

What has been your experience of the *Hizmet* or “service” movement inspired by Fatullah Gülen?  
What are the key ideas expressed by Mr. Gülen in his various writings?



Dr. Richard Penaskovic, FCM AL sets the tone for the Gulen movement

Giving background into the *Hizmet* movement, *Richard Penaskovic*, FCM, emeritus professor of Auburn University, remarked that the Turkish intellectual, Fethullah Gülen is a mystic and a man of faith. Gülen argues that in terms of interreligious dialogue we must forget the past, ignore polemics, and focus on the common ground that exists among people of other religious traditions. “[Hizmet](#) is a faith-inspired civil society movement that seeks to create a culture of coexistence within universal, humanist values and is comprised of volunteers. The essence of volunteerism is to make a contribution without the expectation of anything in return.”



Professor John Tures of LaGrange College shares data of terrorism’s effectiveness.

*John Tures* reported on research collected by forty plus of his undergraduate students at La Grange College in Georgia. In looking at ninety groups, (half of which practiced terrorism, and half did not), terrorist organizations succeeded 13.3% of the time in meeting their goals (acquiring territory, changing or maintaining policy or bringing about a separate homeland) while non-terrorist groups met their goals 57.8% of the time.



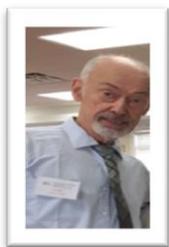
Kemal 1 Gulan and the Hizmet movement.

The third panelist, Kemal (who cannot give his last name for security reasons) spoke about his personal journey that took him to be a member of the *Hizmet* or “service” movement, inspired by Fethullah Gülen. Kemal noted that Gülen believed strongly in the power of love, the importance of working with others in peacebuilding, and in the education of youth from elementary school to the university level in order to bring about peace on earth. He also called his followers to spend themselves in service of others as a recipe for inner peace and happiness.

### Panel 3 Human Rights—the place where deep dialogue begins and ends

[Anahata Iratah](#) sings —

*May wisdom bring about understanding. May love bind us all as one... preparing us for the Dances of Universal Peace.*



John Raymaker, Germany

Attaining peace begins first with an internal dialogue, one that acknowledges all religious believe in the oneness of all humankind. As [John Raymaker](#), FCM, Germany author of *Bernard Lonergan’s Third Way of the Heart and Mind*, reminded us, the mind allows us to grapple with what divides us, and our collective religious practices of the heart bring us to universal love, compassion and an empathy that allows people of all cultures to transend any differences ... we began the heartbreaking exploration of the active marginalization of people, one that compels us as religious leaders to attend to and propels us into the cultures of our religious experience to address and bring about change.

As Moderator, *Marita Grudzen* asked the following questions of panelists...

How can we use dialogue to relate to the violation of Human Rights today?  
What ideas and resources do you/your organization bring to this table?  
What recommendations do you bring to this interfaith and humanist group today?



Adelina Nicholls,  
[Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights](#)

[Adelina Nicholls](#) has been a Latino community activist for over 20 years. The marginalization of Latino's and refusal of the US to grant them immigrant status is well chronicled as an attempt to justify deportation. Culturally, religious leaders must grapple with this issue- Are the undocumented less human and do they support or undermine the society to which they fled?

She argued passionately for social groups to form in order to create a culture of resistance to the violation of human rights for Latinos because of their humanity and the contribution they are making to American society. As dialogue of the mind begins to inform the heart, we come to realize this is a religious issue and a moral mandate, -part of a broader picture of RESISTANCE to home grown terrorism. By EXPANDING SANCTUARY's in cities and churches, by mobilizing legal assistance and delving into policy and legislative action until this humanitarian crisis wanes, all religious communities can create solutions to reach out in compassion, empathy and a true exercise of love within our own borders.



In the same vein, we hear that last year, democracy in Turkey became a totalitarian government as [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#), grabbed power and expelled his own people.

Kemal 2 shared chilling statistics directly related to the experience of every Turkish attendee. These refugees came to the US as immigrants with green cards with little money as everything they owned and worked for was confiscated by the government because of their affiliation with the Gulen Movement. The [terror](#) continues to exist as their activities worldwide are [monitored](#) and the families left behind are punished, thus they spoke unpictured.

My personal internal dialogue of the heart notes that while Latinos are mostly uneducated, non-professionals, and the Turkish community is composed of the educated university professors, politicians, teachers, community activists, they are all seeking for a place to belong. As a religious leader, I feel called to highlight these needs to bring many to the table who are brave enough to explore the humanity within these populations because new solutions for the next era of sustainable policies will arise.

Question: In the development of culture and societies, do we as religious leaders remain silent as our local and global governments cast out those they deem unfit, allowing others deemed "more fit" to remain? Or, does the exercise of all of our religion's values and principles, propel us to create new forms of living in a society and culture that supports and sustains a global humanity?

Our day began with dialogue of the head, the hands and the heart. We learned that "[Dialogue](#) is finding common ground and developing friendships that bend toward unity of our religious practices, acknowledging that our values-compassion, empathy and love-are the binding agents of all faiths ....In this we affirm our solidarity."

But the question remains, can we as religious leaders learn to stand with our feet on many grounds in solidarity with each other, affirming their humanity and ours....? Our test begins today.