

When it was mentioned during James Dunn’s funeral last summer that he was a champion of religious freedom, I realized that my interfaith starting point as a Baptist is religious freedom. As the head of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington D.C., he worked alongside people of other religious traditions and his work was always to protect the religious rights of any group. His task was not that of a theologian wrestling with exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Instead, he was an ethicist concerned with the rights of any group to have freedom to worship. For him, being Baptist meant following in the footsteps of Roger Williams who recognized that as a religious dissenter in the new world, if everybody didn’t have religious freedom then no one had religious freedom. For Baptists, people must be able to choose their own faith.

Seeking to follow Jesus’ command to “love thy neighbor,” several churches are trying to figure out how to love our Muslim neighbors. When my class at church did a several-week study using materials from *Sojourners*, our leader John Baxley asked, “To love my neighbor, do I need to make a conclusion about who is right and who is wrong?” His question echoed Jesus’ parable about the Good Samaritan who doesn’t ask if the man in the ditch is worthy of saving. As we are trying to figure out how to build bridges with our Muslim neighbors, we must approach the relationship not as a debate to win or argument about who is right, but rather a dialogue in which we listen to one another.

Listening is one of the guidelines in Leonard Swidler’s *Dialogue Decalogue*. He also includes dialogue suggestions such as: participants describe themselves; participants do not speak for their entire tradition; participants are only required to speak out of their own experience; participants do not come with preconceptions of disagreement; the purpose is not to agree, but to learn about different viewpoints; participants do not disprove another’s faith in order to validate their own; and participants do not water down their own religion, but rather come authentically from their own background. When I meet with groups who want to engage in dialogue, I present these as our starting guidelines and ask what we would want to add or take away.

A few years back, some Resident Advisors at Wake Forest asked me to do a program on north campus about interfaith dialogue and I found that students were mostly interested in meeting an “actual” Muslim. At the time I was the faculty advisor for the Interfaith Council, so I prepared a presentation on dialogue and brought some bright students from the Interfaith Council. While the information on dialogue was helpful, students were most interested in hearing a fellow Wake student talk about his experience as an American Muslim.

In January, a young woman from Campbell University told me that she had never met a Muslim and wouldn’t know what to say that wouldn’t be offensive. If you’re her, a book such as *How to Be a Perfect Stranger* gives readers an ability to learn about

basic beliefs, practices, and expectations of those who visit various religious sites. As I’ve interviewed undergraduates for my doctoral work, many students report that there weren’t Muslims in their hometown so some churches may be in areas where there are few Muslim neighbors. Despite this, churches such as First, Elkin, have been doing a study on Islam as a first step to creating better relationships. Particularly since so much harmful misinformation exists, it is important to develop religious literacy. At First, Elkin, Imam Griggs, Wake’s Associate Chaplain of Muslim Life, told the congregation that an important step was knowing someone from another tradition. Knowing someone from another tradition meant being less likely to believe misinformation.

At Wake Forest

we started doing the Muslim/Baptist cookout, using halal beef for dishes such as hamburgers or chili. While there has not been an official agenda, my hope for the cookout is that Muslims and Baptists can get to know one another. People have preconceptions about both groups, and in their meeting, hopefully, they will know one another and will be able to respond to misinformation about Baptists and Muslims alike.

## building bridges

by Chris Towles, CBFNC Campus Minister at Wake Forest University



Imam Griggs (right), Associate Chaplain, Wake Forest University, discusses Islam with Chris Towles (left) and Pastor Rick Bennet (center).