



The CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND STUDY (“CRES”)

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AN OUTLINE FOR A STUDY:

AN UMBRELLA FOR

KANSAS CITY AREA RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

1999 September 10

1. The Problem

The Kansas City area has no metro-wide organization by which all religious organizations are able to exchange information, respond to urgent or long-term social needs, co-ordinate resources, and co-operate on issues of mutual interest.

While most cities our size have well-established religious councils or ministerial groups, Kansas City has fragmentary and uncoordinated efforts which cause frequent amazement to those unfamiliar with the situation and annoyance to many familiar with it.

The *overarching priority* of the 30-some religious leaders who comprised the Religion / Spirituality Cluster of Mayor Cleaver’s 1996 Task Force on Race Relations was the establishment of an effective body representing all faith groups within greater Kansas City.

Why is Kansas City deprived of what many regard as an essential organ of complete civic life? What is the history of efforts in this direction? What are the current desires and possibilities? What needs to be done to enhance the effectiveness of religious activity here? In what ways could such an alliance heal state-line, racial, urban/suburban and other splits that affect the quality of decision-making, participation, pride and ownership in civic life?



2. The Study

We propose a comprehensive study to answer these questions. The study would have three phases:

1) The first phase would **develop a definitive history** of ecumenical, inter-faith, ministerial, congregational, and judicatory efforts among the various religious groups in the metro region. We would identify their missions, membership, organizational structure, and effectiveness. This would include well-established organizations like the NCCJ (originally the National Council of Christians and Jews, now the National Council for Community and Justice) and the very new groups such as Congregational Partners and the on-line *kcchurches.com*. However, we would pay specific and primary attention to efforts which most closely fulfill at least some of the functions outlined in the “Problem” section of this Proposal. Thus the history and declension of organizations like MICA (Metropolitan InterChurch Agency) and Ecumedia would be crucially important. We would also explore the distinctive missions of organizations like the Kansas City Interfaith Council and groups with emerging missions like Spirit of Service and the United Sabbath effort. In addition, we would describe comparable organizations in other cities and national groups that might be useful to examine as this study progresses. This stage would be launched with an advisory committee including religious, academic, civic and foundation and CRES Board participation. This phase would conclude with the presentation of findings to the Foundation for comment before proceeding to phase two.

2) The second phase of the study would **assess current desires and possibilities**. Using appropriate interviewing methods, we would ask key “players” in Kansas City religious organizations how important such an organization would be to them and to the city, what its mission should be, how they think such an organization should be structured and funded, and what the next step should be in bringing such an organization into being. This study would seek the information and judgments developed by Maurice Culver during his last sabbatical before retiring from Project Equality. His work included extensive comparisons of such organizations in other US cities which we would update with evaluations of how well



they are working. We would re-interview many of those within the Kansas City area that Maurice Culver previously interviewed to bring us up-to-date.

In addition to questions of organizational structure, different visions of the services such an organization might provide would be explored, from an emphasis on cooperative social relief, to a vehicle for communication, to an educational enterprise.

We would mail a draft copy of the report resulting from phases 1 and 2 with a questionnaire to several hundred religious leaders and organizations for their response. Follow-up phone calls would assure a sizeable response to the developing study. In addition, a web site would help to publicize the project and gain additional input to the study and provide a comprehensive list of notable religious assets and activities in metro Kansas City. The mailing and the web site would not only provide a more accurate assessment of the possibilities but also assist in generating interest for the final phase.

By the end of this second phase, we would form an *independent review panel* to assure relevance, accuracy, and fairness in this developing study. The panel would consist of prime stakeholders and others interested in the study appointed by the Foundation. The panel would bring together those whose visions of an effective bi-state, multi-faith organization might vary, in a way that would further the community dialogue and deepen understanding of how to bring reality from vision.

We would present the results of this phase and the review panel's evaluation to the Advisory Committee and then to the Foundation for comment before proceeding to the final study phase.

3) The third and final phase of the study would **develop a plan or alternative plans to establish a comprehensive organization of religious groups in Kansas City**. Such a plan or plans would identify and recommend possible missions and service arenas, organizational structures, key stakeholders, funding options, and developmental strategies. Likely levels of involvement would be assessed. (Possible levels range from a directory or information service or clearing-



house or coalition of organizations, to a “big tent” in which only some of the larger pool of potential participants might enter a particular arena for a particular purpose or project, to a chamber of commerce model, to a more institutional membership level, or even a legislative model.) Further, the type or mix or types of leaders likely to be involved would become clearer — persons from judiciaries, academics, those ordained serving congregations, lay congregational leaders, foundation representatives, and representatives of civic groups. Whether people or institutions or some mix should comprise the organization is also a question.

At the end of this phase, Kansas City religious leaders and others will know what kind or kinds of organization might be possible, whether the will and resources exist to establish such an organization, how to go about it, and who might be the incorporators.

This proposal is written without any prejudice about the shape of the result, but it is written with familiarity with the religious situation in Kansas City, with experience in organizational questions, and expertise in interfaith relations.

Each phase would take about three months to complete, with a written report to the Foundation at the end of each phase.

We could begin the study no later than one month after the signing of a Contract.

3. The Study Director and Organization

THE DIRECTOR. The Rev Vern Barnet, DMn would direct the study. He is minister-in-residence at the Center for Religious Experience and Study. His doctoral work at the University of Chicago and the affiliated seminary, Meadville/Lombard, included two years as Professor Robert Tapp’s research assistant for, and is acknowledged in, a book published in the *Quantitative Studies in Social Relations* series. For twenty years, Barnet has taught religion courses including “Religion in American Society” for Ottawa University in Corporate Woods. He has also served as an adjunct at the Saint Paul School of Theology.

Since 1994, he has written the “Faiths and Beliefs” column which appears



each Wednesday in *The Kansas City Star* FYI section. The column usually focuses on some aspect of religious life in Kansas City. *The Star* selected him to write this column because of his familiarity with religious diversity in Kansas City.

Barnet organized the Kansas City Interfaith Council in 1989. The Council is composed of persons from the American Indian, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian Protestant, Christian Roman Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, and Zoroastrian communities. He coordinated the Christian Jewish Muslim Dialogue Group here for the first four years of its existence. He has received "Distinguished Community Service Awards" from both Jewish and Muslim groups here, and other religious and civic recognition.

He drafted the recommendation for the Religion / Spirituality Cluster of Mayor Cleaver's Task Force mentioned above, served in the Harmony in a World of Difference program and wrote the section on "Religious Diversity in Kansas City" for its *Teacher / Student Resource Guide*.

In addition, he has participated as a workshop leader, conference organizer, and board member of various international interfaith groups.

An informal biographical sketch is appended.

References:

- Helen Gray, Religion Editor, *The Kansas City Star*, 234-4446.
- Donna Levine, Provost, Ottawa University – Kansas City, 451-1431.
- Maggie Finefrock, chair, Religion/Spirituality Cluster,
Task Force on Race Relations, 765-9685.
- The Hon David Adkins, special counsel,
Kansas City Community Foundation, 842-0944.
- The Rev Robert Meneilly, DD, retired pastor, 648-6179.
- David Stallings, CPA, President, Community Mediation & Consulting, PA,
451-0412

Additional references on request.



THE ORGANIZATION. CRES is a low-profile organization that has been effective advising and supporting other organizations in Kansas City through its emphasis on building personal relationships among those of diverse faiths. This made possible the creation of the Kansas City Interfaith Council, which offers a Speakers Bureau used increasingly by those who want to know their neighbors of different faiths and by organizations like the Midwest Bioethics Center when they need expertise on certain religious issues.

The CRES Board would review the study as it progresses. Because of the special skills and knowledge several board members possess, their advice would add to the effectiveness of the study. These board members include Larry Guillot, formerly executive director of the Center for Management Assistance, specializing in non-profit organizations. The board list is appended to this proposal.

THE KANSAS CITY INTERFAITH COUNCIL is not a likely model for the organization envisioned by this study. The Council's representation reflects distinct faith groups, rather than congregations or judicatories. Thus, while there are hundreds of churches, almost a dozen synagogues, a handful of Buddhist groups, and one Hindu temple, there is only one Roman Catholic, one Protestant, one Jewish, one Buddhist, and one Hindu representative on the Council, along with single representatives of the other faiths. Furthermore, the Council's mission is largely educational. The character of the Council makes it doubtful that an umbrella organization could be modeled after it, but the relationship between CRES and the Interfaith Council provides important partial background for this study.

OTHER RESOURCES. In addition to the Board and Barnett, the study would use Karen Flattery and others to assist in the interview and focus segments of research, and CRES paid and volunteer staff would assist in other areas of research and support. The study would also utilize the *independent review panel*, described within phase two above and be guided by the Advisory Council in place at the beginning of the study.



4. Budget

One third of the total contract fee would be due to CRES, a 501(c)(3) organization (Tax ID 48-0953375), at the end of each phase of the study.

SALARIES

Director, 120 hours @ 75/hr	\$9,000	
Research Asst, 240 hours @ 25/hr	\$6,000	
Clerical Asst, 50 hours @ 10/hr	\$ 500	
Contract Interviews, etc	\$4,000	
		\$19,500

OFFICE

Rent and Utilities, 9 mos @ \$400/mo	\$3,600	
Space for focus groups	COMP	
Supplies and Equipment	\$1,900	
		\$5,500

COMMUNICATIONS and TRAVEL

Web site	\$ 800	
Phone, local and toll	\$1,200	
Printing and postage	\$2,500	
Travel	\$ 500	
		\$5,000

T O T A L

\$30,000

Kansas City will continue to have a fragmented spiritual community without a way for it to engage fully with the educational, business, health care, and other concerns and offer its unique perspectives and resources. And the quality and level of exchange within the religious community will continue to produce duplication of effort and unnecessary misunderstandings and the perpetuation of prejudice. Further, the absence of a forum for dialogue among the various faith communities may continue to affect public policy when extreme groups are untempered by peer interchange.

Meneilly
Clergy group Mainstream coalition
IF Peace Alliance
KC Council of Churcheskansascity.com provides a listing of religious websites.

The Center for Management Assistance offers various workshops on improving the effectiveness of non-profit organizations; 600 Broadway, KCMO 64105; 816.283.3000.

Congregational Partners matches congregations of ethnic and faith diversity to build relationships for outreach to children; 703 W 38, KCMO 64111; 816.531.6577.

Gaea Retreat Center open to all faiths, as close to heaven as you can find in the State of Kansas.

Health Ministries (Greater Kansas City) is an interfaith group committed to whole-person ministries in congregations; c/o Mary Lou Niebling, 4504 E 65, SMKS 66208.

International Relations Council; 210 Westport Road, KCMO 64111; 816.531.0090.

Islamic Books and Software, 5908 E Bannister Rd 966.0999.

MAINstream Coalition, 5255 W 94 Ter # 108, SM, KS 66207; (913) 649.3326.

The Minority Museum, founded by David Shapiro, 8817 Wornall, KCMO.

MBC Midwest Bioethics Center, 1021-1025 Jefferson, KCMO 64105, 816.221.1100

A Peaceful Place, in process with Laura Conley

PeaceWorks provides a regularly updated Community Organization Directory and mailing labels; 816.561.1181.

Spirit of Service provides information for and about area churches, facilitates outreach programs, offers improved usage of limited resources with volunteer/coordinator assistance and computer/communication technologies; 816.942.2224, SOS@crn.org.

University of Missouri-Kansas City Center for Religious Studies is a consortium of several area educational institutions that have agreed to pool their academic resources to cooperate in establishing a religious studies discipline on the PhD level; 5100 Rockhill Rd, KCMO 64110-2499; 816.235.2538.

Faith in the Heartland Project. the January 12-13 conference/ Debra Parson, Education Director / Jackson County Historical Society

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As you know, I organized the Kansas City Interfaith Council in 1989, building upon the tradition CRES began in 1984 of yearly interfaith ritual meals on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. (CRES itself began in 1982.) The Council consists of persons from the American Indian, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian Protestant, Christian Roman Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, and Zoroastrian communities. These people are distinguished within their own faiths. For example, George Noonan, the Catholic representative, is chancellor of the diocese, and Anand Bhattacharya, president of the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center during the time when the temple was built, has served since the founding of the Council. The mission and work of the Council is described at <http://www.cres.org/ifc> or by clicking on the IFC button on the CRES website.

The Council was also built upon contacts developed at the North American Interfaith Network conference (I served on its planning committee) in 1988. In addition, the Harmony in a World of Difference religion task force, at my urging, reworded its draft "Covenant" so as to include all faiths, and it was signed in a ceremony the following year by representatives from the Interfaith Council. Incidentally, I was on the writing team for the 650-page Teacher/Student Resource Guide for Harmony, and wrote the "Religious Diversity in Kansas City" section (p 223-228).

Aware of the demise of MICA (Metropolitan InterChurch Agency) in the early 70s, I think it was, Maurice Culver (then head of Project Equality) conducted a study of the need for a metro interfaith agency in 1990 through the Saint Paul School of Theology. He surveyed not only local needs but also different forms of organization in other localities. The main problem he identified is that no one seems interested in putting up the money for the kind of organizations he studied.

Incidentally, Wichita has one of the oldest interfaith agencies in the country, but its mission is primarily social service. Such social service cooperation was, as I remember, the primary concern of research funded through David Ross about ten years ago (I'd have to check the dates). CRES participated in the interviews although our function is multifield education, not social services.

CRES has also cooperated with Ecumedia (in fact, I picked up the mail for a while) until it dissolved following Sr Shirley Koritnik's departure. An agency at Rockhurst now provides mailing labels of religious organizations for those who wish to do mass mailings.

Note should be made of the attempts to establish a Council of Congregations, the major recommendation (which I drafted) by the Religion/Spirituality Cluster of Mayor Cleaver's Race Relations Task Force. When I have written about this in my Kansas City Star column from time to time, I always get interest from readers who see the need for such an organization based not by faith (like the Interfaith Council) but by congregation. It has been a disappointment to me that the careful instructions of the Cluster about how the Council of Congregations should be organized have not been followed, though some hope remains, I suppose, that what has come into being might eventually serve the needs originally identified.

The CRES web site "network" button contains links to some local organizations involved in interfaith work (we are still in the process of constructing this page), and The Star's yearly "newcomer" publication also lists some. Certainly the reformed Harmony organization, NCCJ, and the Christian Jewish Muslim Dialogue Group (which I coordinated for the first four years of its existence) are good examples of different kinds of interfaith activity.

There are more, but this quick sketch demonstrates, I hope, my interest in the subject, acquaintance with different models, and knowledge of the local situation.

A word about CRES. As you know, CRES is a unique organization, not only locally but compared with other interfaith organizations around the country. Part of that has to do with my mix of ministerial and scholarly background and part of it has to do with the absolute independence CRES has from particular religious groups. I think this helps to give us the credibility we have working with all faiths, and I suspect this is one reason why in 1994 The Star asked me to write the weekly "Faiths and Beliefs" column, usually focused on local concerns relating to interfaith activity or interest.

Another reason CRES is unusual is that our focus is educational and networking (which is why we have been involved as supporters and advisors for so many other efforts, from the Martin Luther King Jr Interfaith Celebration each year to the current Compassion Sabbath initiative of the Midwest Bioethics Center) rather than social service. One of our goals is to make the religious diversity in Kansas City more visible, and the underlying reasons for this goal is the belief that we as neighbors need to respect one another, that we discover new depths in our spiritual traditions when we learn about others, that the process leads to mutual purification of the traditions, and that to address the great crises of our time (environmental, personal, and social), we need the resources of all faiths.

But, frankly, I suspect the major reason CRES plays such an important role behind the scenes with many organizations despite our low public profile and very limited funding is that over the years we have emphasized the importance of building interfaith personal relationships.

Two columns and one 1999 news article

123. 970101 THE STAR'S HEADLINE
Metro area may need to form a 'Council of Congregations'

On Nov 27 Mayor Emanuel Cleaver endorsed the creation of a metropolitan "Council of Congregations," recommended in the report on Religion and Spirituality from the Mayor's Task Force on Race Relations. If such a council is actually formed, it may be the most important local achievement by people of faith in this decade.

Cleaver, a minister, said that, unlike most cities of similar size, Kansas City has no area-wide organization of religious bodies to facilitate communication and joint efforts.

The recommendation came from a group with Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Unitarian Universalist participation. The 27 members, all from the Kansas City area, decided that existing agencies were not suited to the task of engaging every local congregation in "articulating an interfaith theology that makes clear that our ultimate commitment includes ending all forms of oppression."

The group deliberately focused on local congregations rather than clergy or regional offices to emphasize that the work must be done in ways appropriate to each setting.

Copies of the report, with 14 specific ways for the council to fulfill its mission, are available from the mayor's office.

"Harmony, Project Equality, the Nation Conference (of Christians and Jews), the Urban League and the Kansas City Interfaith Council have offered support to create the Council of Congregations," said Maggie Finefrock, who chaired the group and is encouraging funding "so the council can become a reality in 1997."

175. 971231 THE STAR'S HEADLINE:
The fight against racism needs congregations

Those of us who worked on the Religion/Spirituality component of the 1996 Mayor's Task Force on Race Relations -- and all citizens of the metropolitan area -- can be cheered by two developments this year.

Congregational Partners, one of the efforts envisioned by the Task Force, has become a reality. Now with funding and a project planner, experiences across racial and religious lines are being nurtured.

More difficult was the Cluster's recommendation to create a Council of Congregations. The Task Force recognized that a response to racism would be far more effective if Kansas City had an area-wide network of religious bodies for communication and joint programs.

While the Kansas City Interfaith Council represents American Indian, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian Protestant, Christian Roman Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan and Zoroastrian faiths, Kansas City, unlike most communities of similar size, does not have an ongoing organization connecting its congregations.

Thanks to the persistence this year of the regional office of the National Conference (NCCJ), Project Equality and Harmony, partial

funding to develop such a network has now been obtained. Early next year, members of Task Force who issued the recommendation, from the suburbs as well as Kansas City proper, will reconvene with additional community participation to form a steering committee to bring the Council into existence.

Diane Hershberger, director of Harmony, is "enthusiastic" about this "opportunity for lay members of the greater Kansas City faith community to lead the city in breaking racial barriers through relationship building, study, prayer, work projects and dialogue . . . to put faith into action."

Religious diversity grows
Yet many aren't aware of holidays celebrated by others

By: SHAWNA A. HAMEL The Kansas City Star
Date: 01/18/99

Diversity in matters of faith is widespread in the Kansas City area. But those whose faiths fall outside the Judeo-Christian tradition still face subtle problems.

One problem is that their beliefs aren't quite understood by mainstream society, and another is that their traditions aren't quite honored.

"I think in past years there has been an increase in understanding of other religions, and that's very healthy," said the Rev. Vern Barnet, an expert in world religions.

"However, a case we still have is that dominant religions don't necessarily recognize the importance of other religions and their holidays that are observed," he said.

One example, Barnet said, was the case of a Muslim student at a local school who was all but forced to eat lunch even though he was observing his religion's fasting period.

The five-county Kansas City area is home to more than 2,000 congregations and more than a dozen religious faiths. In addition to the more familiar Christian and Jewish faiths, there also are Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, Baha'i, pagan and Islamic groups. "Although it is hard to pinpoint in numbers, the largest faiths in Kansas City outside (Christianity) are Jewish, Muslim and Hindu, and they're easily recognized because they have a strong sense of identity," Barnet said.

There are substantial Sikh and Buddhist communities in the area, too, said Barnet, who is the founder and minister-in-residence of the World Faiths Center for Religious Experience and Study in Overland Park.

He is also active with the Kansas City Interfaith Council, which works with about 11 different faiths. "There's a Muslim population between 10,000 and 15,000 people in the Kansas City area, but most people do not know about our religion and it is sometimes a problem for us, taking off our holidays from school or work," said Amjad Dalaa, manager of the Islamic Society of Greater Kansas City. The Muslim religion centers on the word "Islam," which means both "submission to the will of God in all aspects of life" and "peace." Muslims believe that God, whom they call Allah, created human beings and the world for the purpose of worshipping him, Dalaa said.

"Our children who go to public schools, kids in their classes sometimes don't understand what they believe and make fun of them, and some teachers don't like our children taking off school days for our holidays," Dalaa said. "Some parents just take our kids out of school for the day anyway."

Steve Klick, a spokesman for Buddhist Information of America, said mainstream society knows little about Buddhism, despite the growth of the faith in America. Thousands of Buddhists live in Kansas City, he said.

Buddhists celebrate mainstream holidays, such as Hanukkah and Christmas, but the group's belief system differs sharply from most Western religions, Klick said.

"It's not that we don't have faith, it's just a different kind of faith," Klick said.

"We're about proof and evidence, and we believe you should doubt and question everything until it is proven to you, which eventually it will be. We believe in striving to help and benefit as many people as possible. There is no heaven and hell in our belief system, and we don't dwell on sins a lot. We believe people are inherently good and pure."

Mark Johnson, with the Spiritual Assembly of Baha'is of Overland Park, said local Baha'is haven't encountered much discrimination. There are between 200 and 300 members of the faith in the area, he said.

The Baha'i faith was founded more than 150 years ago in Persia, now known as Iran.

"Unfortunately, our religion was seen in Persia as a very big threat, and our people were persecuted very severely and exiled numerous times because of it," he said.

Barnet said society is becoming much more inclusive.

For instance, an increasing number of churches have begun offering world religions series, he said. And he has seen more awareness in civic organizations of the need to be more inclusive of all faiths.

"I think, for the most part, people are pretty eager to learn about other faiths without having to change their own," Barnet said. "What I would like to see is people visiting each other's places of worship, and that doesn't happen very often. Also, I hope someday people can start talking more openly about religious and spiritual activities, like they talk about the weather."