

Inter-faith column #11 – teaching our children
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In this year's Annual Conference Agenda, a paragraph in the Methodist Schools Committee report (p 42, para 11) attracted my inter-faith attention. It describes a change from the National Council for Religious Education (NCRE) in its curriculum strategy, a change from teaching 'World Religions' towards teaching about 'Religion and Worldviews.' This shift seeks to address the increasingly secular atmosphere of school classrooms and to challenge those who claim, 'I am not religious' as a way of avoiding 'thinking about life's great mysteries.' The new paradigm seeks to provide tools for exploring all views, both 'religious' and secular, an essential task in our increasingly polarised society.

I read this paragraph with several recent conversations on my mind. A ministerial colleague is stepping down from a position as a chaplain in a Methodist school having found that the vast majority of this school's students were ambivalent at best about religion and faith exploration. Parents were paying to send their students to the school for a 'good education' which many of them felt was not contingent on providing religious education.

I was aware that the National Interfaith Network recently lost government funding for its work and is facing the real possibility of closure after many decades of excellent work.

I also read verses from Psalm 78 in my morning devotions: "I am going to use wise sayings and explain mysteries from the past, things we have heard and known, things that our ancestors told us. We will not keep them from our children; we will tell the next generation about the LORD's power and his great deeds and the wonderful things he has done." (Ps 78.2-4 GNB). The Psalm goes on to warn parents and grandparents to teach their children well in order to avoid the catastrophic results of a people ignorant of God's presence and activity in the world.

I was reminded of a conversation with a student many years ago. He was from interfaith marriage in which his parents had decided not to pass on the traditions of either faith in order that he might 'decide for himself when he was older.' He came to me after the sudden death of his father: 'I don't know either of my parents' religions. How do I know what's happened with my father?'

Last month's column explored the perils of imposing our religious beliefs on others, but there is also a need for passing on the best of what we know and have experienced about our own faith journeys to future generations. Parents and grandparents and beloved family members are often best suited for this task, and the telling of stories is a time-honoured way of passing on the essence of our beliefs. Sadly, many parents today don't know or have forgotten the stories of their faith tradition. Passing on stories is passing on wisdom and giving our children and grandchildren access to a deep well of resources, which, when handled well, can equip them with critical thinking skills to make informed decisions for themselves.

Some months ago, I arrived at a local primary school classroom armed with several carry bags of resources for Christmas, Hanukkah, and Divali. The children were delighted with the divas and the menorah and the Advent candles – all symbols of light overcoming darkness. Several were aware of rangoli patterns welcoming guests into Hindu homes, and all were eager to play with Jewish dreidels and share in the sweets I'd brought from each tradition.

What intrigued them most were the stories. As it happened, they had already enjoyed a Nativity Play at their school assembly that morning, so they were eager to tell *me* the story as they knew it (I added a few bits, like telling them that the *Magi* who brought gifts to the Baby Jesus were probably Zoroastrian priests known as *Magoos/Magi*.) When I told the Jewish story of the Maccabean uprising that led to a severe shortage of oil for cooking and lighting the lamps, some were reminded of current day food shortages and an underlying fear that there wouldn't be 'enough.' The story format gave us the testimony of the ages and the room to consider how God had provided in challenging times.

When I related the Hindu myth of Rama and Seetha, I noticed a small boy in the back paying close attention. As I told the story of Rama and Seetha overcoming evil forces in Sri Lanka and being welcomed back home to Ayodhya with hundreds of tiny oil lamps lighting the night-time path, the small boy seemed to grow taller. *His* story was being shared – and therefore recognised -- by someone in authority from outside his tradition (me!). With newfound confidence, he proceeded to correct a few of the details of my narrative and then share with his classmates how his family celebrated the *pooja* festival at home. In the telling, his story became the communal story of everyone in the classroom, prompting others to consider what stories they knew about good overcoming evil.

If the government can no longer fund a national resource for sharing the stories and beliefs of our faith traditions, then it is up to each of us to seek out our own local opportunities. We especially owe this to our children and our children's children. They will need all the resources they can gather to face the challenges ahead.