



# One City, Many Faiths, One Hope

*An Interfaith Conference in the City of Rochester*

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## **Keynote Luncheon Address**

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## Power of Inclusiveness

My name is Prince Singh, and ever since my consecration last May as the eighth Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, I have got a kick out of introducing myself as the Bishop formerly known as Prince. I am humbled to stand before you to offer some thoughts to ponder as we celebrate this significant anniversary of our beloved city. It is an honor to be asked to step in to pinch hit in place of the Chief of Pastors for President Obama understanding fully that he is doing what he needs to do, ministering to the President and his staff during these extremely challenging times. I am also conscious that I stand before you as a fellow servant called to stand in and help connect the gap between the people we serve and their pursuit of happiness. We are truly grateful to our Mayor and his gracious officers for making it possible for us to come together in this fashion. We are in conversation in real time. The root meaning of conversation is “to sit with or hang out with” another. We are listening to one another as we mark the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city we have come to call home. Hopefully, we can make this about more than words.

As a recent resident of Rochester I am aware of the amazing heritage of the city. I am also aware of the polarization that often distracts us with competing identities of the city and the suburb. Well, without getting too Pollyanna about it, let me suggest the obvious, there is no suburb without the city and *vice versa*. We are all in this together and so let us figure out some solutions together. How may we do this without merely slipping into perhaps even an annual event when we come together as one city with many faiths and one hope? How may we go beyond the sentimentality akin to standing around the campfire and singing *Kumbaya* and expect to meet our mounting social and spiritual challenges? Well, let me make a few suggestions for your consideration this afternoon.

We begin with good old honesty. Integrity is at the heart of any good thing that will ever emerge. We are all people who have been wounded in some way or other. We have wounded others consciously or

unconsciously. We are also presented everyday with the option to confront and stop the cycle of violence within us; the harm that was meted out to us, the internal violence by turning it over to the divine presence. We have the option to surrender all our bitterness to the holy one; whatever the name. This is liberation; true freedom.

In our current global economic context we have an opportunity, wherever appropriate, to confront our obsession with greed and arrogance. “Is the economy bouncing back?” is perhaps an important question of expediency, but “How will we confront our greed?” is a spiritual question for people of all faiths. Most people agree that greed is what got our economic enterprise to implode the way it did. While regulatory strictures are important preventative considerations to keep corporate greed under check, the radical evidence of greed running amuck needs our attention NOW. Greed is often accompanied by arrogance because we lose sight of each other as well as important information. We tend to do that when we become obsessed with or addicted to what we want.

Most recently, at a speech at U of R, Malcolm Gladwell described our recent debacle on Wall Street as “expert failure.” These leaders were not a bunch of evil people. They were experts who were competent at what they do; just overconfident! Proverbs 1:31 speaks of those who had stopped listening because of their haughtiness as those who are sated with their own devices. The word sated also implies full of them-selves, satiated with their own agendas.... Etc. I would like to think that today is about intentionally making a good thing emerge when we sit humbly with each other. Let us keep in mind that we are engaging each other in conversation about the “other.” That totally or wholly other, in this case is the poor, the forgotten, the neglected, the invisible, the one who is left behind in our beloved city. Could we let our defenses down even momentarily so that we can look at the other with authenticity and a sense of responsibility for the powerless other who is not in this room? Perhaps King’s words are apropos that Justice denied anywhere is justice diminished everywhere... so let us listen to one another with authenticity and humility.

As leaders of faith communities we are all mostly involved in the unfinished business of life with its vicissitude of challenges that cover the whole gamut of life’s cycle and then some. Much of this is unfinished and may never be finished in our life time. This is probably why I like to occasionally do the dishes. There is a beginning and an end to this activity. Not so with most of our work as ministers, servants of the faith we nurture among our congregations in real time with people who trust us as much as their expectations of the divinity they revere. What we do is constantly a work in progress, and interestingly, so are we. When we settle we ossify; we become museums. Speaking of museums, I think it is safe to assume that our city is quite “strong” in that department! Precisely because our work

is never complete, we need more of a sense of community to be of support to each another. We cannot do that lone ranger thing and expect real progress in our changing world anymore.

It is important to approach each other with humility if we are to truly dialogue with each other. This does not mean that we give up our convictions and our sense of identity as Jewish people, Humanists, Hindus, Christian, Muslims, Hebrews, Universalists, Buddhists, followers of Baha'i, etc. What it means is that we focus on the needs of the world around us and come with our identities to help address those needs. We can all agree that poverty is bad, we can all agree that violence is bad, and we can all agree that the lack of enlightenment or education is terrible. Is there anyone in this room who thinks these are not bad? Let us then enter into a dialogue without words, because these issues are no brainers.

You have heard of one hand clapping, perhaps we need to enter into no word dialogue; actionable dialogue. We pray our authentic prayers. We act with compassion. We pray and act together. We become a pray-active people! Most importantly, we need to intentionally bring the next generation of Rochester's leaders into this discourse. We need our young people to help figure out solutions for our present and our future. They are our present and our future! Eboo Patel's model of interfaith youth core is an opportunity for us to invite the next generation of leaders to come together not because we share a common understanding of soteriology, eschatology or even heaven, but because we can all agree that we must eradicate poverty, and violence and make Rochester the most enlightened city in the nation. Our youth can lead us in this kind of actionable dialogue.

My friends, we are at the crossroads of history where we can either settle into our parochial corners while maintaining our own little fiefdoms or we can come together and work together on the tangible solutions many of which we have already figured out for our time. We must, however, decide to intentionally put our collective weight behind it. We can reduce poverty by half in our city in the next ten years. We have a viable faith-based volunteer base in our education system; could we work to double it in the next five years? We have violent crime in our streets and we are all aware of it. When one Rochesterian is killed, we all die in some way. What may we do about the hunger for purpose that these mostly young perpetrators of crime are crying out for? As leaders of faith we have something meaningful to offer. We optimize our efforts when we collaborate! Could we share our common challenges with our city administration and figure out how we might work together? We all share the same hope. We hope for a city that is safe, inclusive, prosperous, and enlightened.

Take a look at yourself for a minute as we sit here together. Who are you? What are you doing here? Who am I? I was born in South India and was raised by a single mother who invested the gift of a

sound education for me. Here I am joining hands with you in Rochester, NY figuring out solutions for this beloved city.

We stand on the shoulders of leaders of the past, like Nathaniel Rochester (an Episcopalian, I might add!), Jonathan Child, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B Anthony, Frederick Douglas, George Eastman, Helen Barrett Montgomery, John Wegman, and today, on the shoulders of Mayor Johnson, and Mayor Duffy. What do all these leaders and those I could not list because the list is long, have in common? They had faith: “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Let me translate. They were all a little crazy, a little delusional. You need to be a little crazy not to give up on a dream for one city and one hope. Let us keep the dream of a city, in the paraphrased words of Rabindranath Tagore,

WHERE the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever-widening thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom, my God, let my city awake.

My brother, my sister, together we can do more. Together we can be more than we ever thought we could be. Our Faiths point to people who pursued a wholesome peace. People like Mohammed, Haggar, Siddhartha, Bahauallah, Rama, Sita, Jesus, Mary, Abraham, and Sarah. Creating wholesome peace begins with taking the first steps of hospitality toward one another. We have symbolically taken those first steps today. We are inextricably interconnected to each other in some real ways. Let us make a promise to continue to sit with one another at the same table to figure out how we might foster even greater interconnectedness for the future. Let us roll up our sleeves and get to work. Let the future of Rochester be better because we showed up. So what are we waiting for? In the words of Sweet Honey in the Rock, “we are the ones, we’ve been waitin’ for!” God be with you.