

# **A Brief History of NAIN**

**By Bettina Gray**

## ***Three Paths to the Formation:***

### **1. 1960's - Immigration in North America**

The 1965 US Immigration and Naturalization Act led to an increased variety of religions in North America through changes in the immigrant population. Dr. Diana Eck and the Pluralism Project at Harvard have documented extensive change in religious diversity in the United States dating from the 1960's. In many communities across the US and Canada, this period saw the birth of interfaith and multi-faith councils, projects and dialogues as a grand experiment in hope and bridge building.

### **2. Late 1970's - National Association of Ecumenical Staff Meetings and Survey of US Interfaith Councils**

In 1978 and 1979 several staff members of interfaith councils attended summer meetings of the National Association of Ecumenical Staff. From workshops and impromptu discussions at these meetings emerged the desire to identify other interfaith councils and projects in the US and determine if there was interest in some form of organizational affiliation. Bettina Gray of the Berkeley Area Interfaith Council, with the assistance of CORLE (Commission on Regional and Local Ecumenism of the National Council of Churches) offices, developed the first such survey to identify the religious make-up and location of interfaith and multi-faith groups and helped identify their programs and focus of activity. It was published in 1980.

Some 35 groups responded to the survey indicating a clear trend in growth of interfaith activity in North America. Responses showed a strong interest in the development of an independent network of interfaith councils, in communication tools such as a newsletter and directory, and in exchange of ideas between these interfaith projects and groups. Another interesting result of the survey was the apparent equal division of focus and formative activity between service projects and dialogue. About half of the councils responded that they were organized around interfaith dialogue, and the other half around common goals of social service and community action.

### **3. Early 1980's - Ammerd, Temple of Understanding and Meetings at Assisi**

As the result of a meeting of international interfaith organizations convened by the World Congress of Faiths in 1983 at Ammerdown, England, the Temple of Understanding was charged with a task to identify and support interfaith activity in North America. Dan Anderson was hired to co-ordinate this effort. In 1987 the first directory of interfaith organizations was published with the help of the Temple of Understanding.

In 1986 Pope John Paul convened his first interreligious gathering in Assisi Italy. The Assisi event inspired plans for a follow-up North American Assisi.

## **Work begins to develop a network.**

Temple of Understanding hosted meetings during 1985 through 1987 to discuss the formation of a network of interfaith councils in North America. The staff of several of the existing interfaith councils from many parts of the US attended these early meetings. Charles White and Mohammad Mehdi were designated interim co-chairs by the group. Other interim executive committee members were Bettina Gray, Peter Laurence, Margaret Orr Thomas, and Jay Rock. The participants worked very carefully over several meetings to devise a structure that would support the development of a network that would strengthen the various interfaith councils but not necessarily create a large formal institution. Participants attended at their own expense traveling from cities in the US and in Canada. It was with a great deal of donated energy, insight and prayerful envisioning that NAIN was born. Great care was taken on the development of the constitution and organization of NAIN.

Participants at these early meetings included Dan Anderson (Temple of Understanding), John Berthrong (United Church of Canada), Charles White (Buffalo Area Metropolitan Ministry), Jim Bell and Sam Muyskens (Inter-Faith Ministries of Wichita), Clark Lobenstein (Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington D. C.), Bettina Gray (Berkeley Area Interfaith Council), Jerome Gurland (Black-Jewish Dialogue), Aziz Khaki (Multifaith Action), Mohammad Mehdi (Council on Islamic Affairs), Elizabeth Espersen (Thanks-Giving Square), Jay Rock (National Council of Churches), Elias Mallon (Graymoor Ecumenical Institute), Shanti (Jain Mission), Richelle Wiseman (Vision Television of Canada), Peter Laurence (Wainwright House), Rajwant Singh (Guru Gobind Singh Foundation).

Several of those planning a North American Assisi were also on the planning group for the new network. The two merged in the birth of NAIN and the first NAIN conference: A North American Assisi, hosted by one of the oldest interfaith councils in the US, Interfaith Ministries of Wichita, Kansas, in 1988. New York Times, November 2, 1988 reported the event: *“In robes of white and black, saffron and green they came. In suits and ties, in shirtsleeves and jeans, with prayers chanted, hummed and spoken, from distant states and foreign lands, they gathered here in this city of 288,900 people on the Great Plains. . . They represented 12 of the world’s major religions – the faiths, they said, of two billion people, seeking worldwide understanding with underlying themes of peace, justice and environmental preservation.”*

Work continued with an interim executive committee and a constitution for NAIN was approved July 3, 1990 at the second conference in Seattle Washington. NAIN was incorporated as a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization in the State of New York.

Board of Directors document dating October 12, 1991 lists Co-Chairs: Mr. Aziz Khaki and Charles White; Co-Vice Chairs: Bettina Gray and Elias Mallon; Secretary: Peter Laurence; Treasurer: Margaret Orr Thomas. Others listed: B. K. Agnihotri, Dan Anderson, John Berthrong, Robert Greenwood, Anson Laytner, Rita LeBlanc, Clark Lobenstine, Jamsheed Mavalwala, Francis Mazur, Pasha Mohajerjasbi, Paul Newman, Swami Shantananda, Rajwant Singha, Suwanda Sugunarsiri, Richelle Wiseman and Bobby Woods. [From Canada: Aziz Khaki, Rita LeBlanc, Jamsheed Mavalwala, Suwanda Sugunarsiri, Bobby Woods, Richelle Wiseman]

## *NAIN in the Early Years*

Directory, Conferences, Newsletter and NAINOnline

The main focus of NAIN's work has been to support the growth of interfaith understanding by supporting the work of member organizations. NAIN chooses the term "network" to describe its work rather than institution, organization or association.

In 1987, before formal bylaws were yet even approved, NAIN published the first comprehensive directory of interfaith organizations in North America. In the days before desktop publishing and the Internet this was a laborious process to complete and a momentous step forward in identifying a new and growing community. These were time-consuming and tedious tasks. By contrast, with the advent of the Internet, NAIN is able to provide an internet based directory which can be updated almost instantaneously. We established our presence on the internet with [www.nain.org](http://www.nain.org), begun in the mid 1990's and in 2000 launched NAINOnline, a private subscription-based interactive community for NAIN member organizations.

From the start NAIN undertook to prepare and distribute a newsletter, NAINews. Four individuals have served as managing editor of NAINews: Robert Greenwood was first person to serve in this post, followed by Chuck White, Joel Beversluis, and Judy Trautman who is the current managing editor. Since 2006 NAINews is now being distributed electronically.

NAIN has sponsored conferences, now familiarly called "Connects", held every two years from 1988 to 1996 and then annually every year after.

### Past Conferences and Hosts

1988: -Wichita, KS	Inter-faith Ministries of Wichita
1990 – Seattle, WA	Interfaith Council of Washington
1991 – North Atlantic Region	Interfaith Forum, Buffalo, NY
1992 – Berkeley, CA	Pacific Interfaith Net. and Berkeley Area Interfaith Council
1993 –	<i>Parliament of World Religions in Chicago</i>
1994 – Orangeville, ON	United Church of Canada & Buddhist Center
1996 – Dallas, TX	Thanks-Giving Square
1997 – Columbia, SC	Partners in Dialogue
1998 – Edmonton AB	Edmonton Interfaith Center
1999 – Chautauqua, NY	NAIN Board & Chautauqua Institution
2000 – Fullerton, CA	Alliance for Spiritual Community
2001 – Beausejour, MB	NAIN Board & Jessie Saulteaux Resource Centre
2002 – Wichita, KS	Inter-faith Ministries of Wichita
2003 – Columbus, OH	Interfaith Association of Central Ohio
2004 – New York, NY	Impact Coalition, NAIN-NAES co-conference
2005 – Las Vegas, NV	Southern Nevada Interfaith Council – NAIN-URI co-conference
2006 – Vancouver, BC	Multifaith Action Society of BC
2007 – Richmond, VA	Int. Council Greater Richmond and InterFaith Conf. of Met. Wash.
2008 – San Francisco, CA	Interfaith Center at the Presidio

2009 – Kansas City, KS	Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council
2010 – Salt Lake, UT	Salt Lake Interfaith Roundtable
2011 – Phoenix, AZ	Arizona InterFaith Movement
2012 – Atlanta, GA	Interfaith Community Institute
2013 – Toronto, ON	Toronto Area Interfaith Council

As NAIN has matured...

...the board has expressed a deepened commitment to continuity into the future. One of the most significant aspects of that commitment is the development of Young Adult Scholarships to conferences and a board Young Adult committee to continue to support interest in interfaith activity in the next generation. With a new scholarship endowment fund in place as of 2007 to help Sikh young adults to attend NAIN conferences and the prospect of other similar endowments from other faith communities NAIN and interfaith work is secured to continue with new leadership and energy.

NAIN's history holds a vision turned into reality that across North America religions can live together in peace, serve together in compassion, and witness together to the validity of the spirit moving in us all. In an uncertain era of rapid social and technological change, NAIN's growth into the future holds for all of us a hope and a promise, that we can continue "Building Bridges of Compassion and Understanding."