



A Bishop's Quest

William E. Swing

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A Bishop's Quest is the story of one man's campaign to gather the best of religion in order to counter rising religiously-motivated violence.

"What we need is a United Religions to counter the religious extremism in the world today.... In the past, most wars were motivated by the idea of nationhood. Today, however, wars are incited about all using religion as an excuse." (Former Israeli President Shimon Peres to Pope Francis, September 2014)

That very same idea came to Bishop William Swing, of the Episcopal Diocese of California, in 1993. At that time, the United Nations was planning to celebrate its 50th Anniversary in San Francisco (where the U.N. Charter was signed in 1945) and wanted Bishop Swing to host an interfaith and intercultural celebration at Grace Cathedral featuring all nations and all religions. In context of this event, it dawned on him that the nations of the world have met daily for 50 years to pursue peace, but during that same time, the religions haven't met once. It was time to create a United Religions.

A Bishop's Quest describes Bishop Swing's initial travels to confer with the great religious leaders of the world about this idea. These fascinating conversations reveal the admirable uniqueness of each faith and at the same time explore their limitations in cooperating with others. In the course of six months of global travels, Bishop Swing had access to palaces and leaders on thrones, militant figures in compounds, and Cardinals in the Vatican; he preached in a jungle for seven days to 200,000 people. Since he began the pilgrimage with little knowledge of interfaith history, his travels provided a first-hand education as few people in the world have experienced.

Finally, the journey led to a crucial realization - that the competition engrained in religious institutions overwhelms their cooperative impulses. Should the Bishop pursue the creation of a United Religions for the leaders of religions, or should he take a completely different course and found a grassroots interfaith movement, a United Religions Initiative, that would one day, in the distant future, lead to a United Religions? With his choice of the latter, an entirely new adventure began.

With no money, expertise, or constituency, Bishop Swing faced the challenge of bringing people of diverse faith together to create a global community, a charter and an inspiring organizational structure. The core challenge he faced was one of organizational design, and to solve that he turned to the founder of the VISA card, Dee Hock, and to one of the originators of Appreciative Inquiry, David Cooperrider, for solutions. That is the focus of the second part of the book, and it is another fascinating, unique story.

From 2000 to 2014, the United Religions Initiative (URI) has become the largest grassroots interfaith organization in the world. At a time in history when news stories are dominated by the atrocities that religious people perpetrate on innocent populations, the public wonders if anyone is doing anything about this? By means of Cooperation Circles in 85 countries, URI gathers people of different faith and value systems together to address local, and sometimes, global issues. Their approach involves a little bit of dialogue, and a whole lot of cooperative action. URI is convinced that, with long-term persistence, the energy that erupts between competing loyalties can be harnessed for the good of society. Their formula works at a grassroots level and, increasingly, at regional levels throughout the world on a daily basis. Bishop Swing

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Joe Williams:

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