



Interfaith dialogue group aims to prevent religious tensions

By Bill Glen
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Muslims, Christians and Jews in Edmonton are about to launch a new initiative to encourage grassroots interfaith dialogue in the city.

The Phoenix Multi-Faith Society will take flight Sept. 17 at 2 p.m. at a ceremony at City Hall with local representatives of the three faiths - as well as the Edmonton Police Service.

Archbishop Thomas Collins has represented the Edmonton Archdiocese in informal discussions "for several years" laying the basis for the Phoenix Society.

Distorted religion

"People use the name of God to destroy other people," Collins said in an interview. "Especially with Sept. 11 coming to mind, there can be great hatred between different groups based upon a distortion of religion.

"The proper pathway is to engage in dialogue with love and friendship, with people of different beliefs, and discuss the very real differences between different world religions and within the Christian Church."

While the activities of the Phoenix Society have not been fully determined, it will likely encourage visits among children of different faiths as well as hosting conferences.

The society will have a multi-faith core group to oversee its day-to-day operations and to encourage activities that will strengthen bonds of friendship and harmony.

Collins said it is important to get beyond the disagreements and misunderstanding that often arise among people of different faiths in order to build respect.

"When people have stereotypes of others, they can begin getting into dark pathways. But if you come to meet someone with a different religion or different approach, personally we can work together. It's good to build bridges and that is what this is about," Collins said.

The City Hall ceremony will be an opportunity for the different faith communities to gather and show support for each other and for peace, he said.

Middle ground

The archbishop said fighting and killing in the name of God is a false pathway as is the attempt to pretend that there are no differences among people of different beliefs.

The key is to find a middle ground between "a bitter war and a happy illusion" and that ground can only be found with dialogue, he said.

"We need to discuss in the spirit of love and honesty, to be who we are and state the facts. We must explain to each other what we do believe so that we are not disagreeing over something where we don't really disagree," Collins said.