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Ten Saudi Arabian delegates attend chapel at ITC

Visiting Saudi Arabian Professors Delegation to ITC: “Let’s Collaborate!”

(September 6, 2007--Atlanta, GA) According to Al-Huiwiri in his work, “Bounty of Allah,” translated by Aneela Khalid Arshed (*Copyright 1999. The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY*) Muslim wisdom states that knowledge is of three kinds from God, with God, and of God. Knowledge of God is disclosed to all prophets and saints; it is a divine guidance and cannot be acquired. Knowledge from God is the sacred law made obligatory upon us. Knowledge of the path and stations and the development of saints.”

This divine knowledge became manifest as East met West, Muslims met Christians, would be saints and contemporary prophets, scholars and educators met seasoned scholars and the community at-large on the campus of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) on Thursday September 6, 2007. A delegation of 10 distinguished university professors from Saudi Arabia visited and dialoged with members of the historic seminary community. On this particular Thursday, the spirit and memory of Prophet Mohammed intersected with the historical Jesus on the hallowed grounds of the ITC campus minimally for a fleeting moment.

The professors represented Un-Quea University (Mecca), Islam University (Medania) and Imma Ben Saudi University (Riyadh) all of which are located some 8,089 miles from Metropolitan Atlanta. The distance between the two nations seemed much shorter as frank colloquy emerged bridging the gap of understanding and paving the way for possible intentional collaborations in the future. President Battle told the group on behalf of ITC community that, "I welcome opportunities for collaboration with you."

The group's visit to ITC was a concluding part of a United States State Department endorsed "Study of Religion in Public Life and Education." The intense three-week tour began mid-August upon their arrival in the United States with official visits in Washington, DC; Dallas, Texas; Chicago, Ill., and Atlanta at ITC.

Speaking through translators, the entire delegation affirmed that coming to the ITC community was a "dream come true" and one which they hope will result in a group from ITC visiting Saudi Arabia to continue and expand the dialogue. The "dream" need no longer be deferred as reality met opportunity at ITC and the dialogue was clearly established. The mutual sharing of knowledge and experience was at the focal point of the visit to ITC. It was clear that this knowledge and sharing was reciprocal, open ended and continuous.

The delegation insisted that members of the ITC faculty and students soon visit their country to continue the dialogue on the rich Saudi soil. A spokesman for the Saudi group stated that this was "a dream come true to come and learn while opening channels of dialogue."

The campus visit, hosted by President Michael A. Battle, consisted of executive meeting/briefings, a chapel worship experience, a kosher luncheon and time of open dialogue with the guests, a representative group of administrators, faculty, staff and students leaders. The education process became reciprocal as the visiting delegation requested and was happily encouraged to share during the chapel service from the Qur'an and their personal faith experience.

President Battle recalled with enthusiasm and shared his former experience, early in his teaching career at Hampton University, Hampton, VA, courses in religion which embraced and observed world religions as practiced and experienced here in the United States.

ITC's Dr. Marsha Snulligan Haney, Professor of Missiology and Religions of the World, skillfully facilitated the luncheon dialogue as she shared the breath and depth of ITC's curriculum and commitment to inclusiveness. She described in part, Religions of the World (a core course requirement), instructional materials with multi-religious representations, individual class trips to mosques and ongoing dialogue with Muslims in the metropolitan community and additional field trips to mosques in the global context.

The visiting group listened intently with many questions and had an opportunity to share their faith, interest, observations and concerns. It was interesting to note that the

delegation had intentionally been scheduled by the U.S. State Department for only three separate learning opportunities based in the African American community here in the United States. The three included Howard University in Washington, DC; The Potter's House Church with Bishop T.D. Jakes in Dallas, TX; and ITC. All of these visits were, according to visiting participants "incredible and insightful learning opportunities".

Professor Haney discussed the ITC faculty's actual, proposed research and development agenda which was inclusive of The U. S. A. Mosque Life Survey (2005), Muslim-Christian Community projects in Eight Urban Contexts and Women in Islam.

ITC has had adjunct faculty and Muslim clergy leadership who have made an impact in the ITC community. These have included but not limited to Dr. Debra Majeed Mubashshir (Beloit, Wisconsin), Dr. Fahed Abu-Akel (Palestinian) and Imam Plemon El-Amin. The group also learned of past collaborative research which included the University of Edinburgh (Muslim-Christians in four global contexts), University of Cambridge (Reconciliation in South Africa), Hartford Seminary (interfaith dialogue) and an Annual Interfaith Dialogue: "What's Love Got to Do With It—HIV/AIDS Religious Response, Faith" (2006).

A poignant and consistent question by the delegation was whether or not there was an encyclopedia or a published work available that clearly outlined the common areas in which major world religions agreed. President Battle indicated that this might be an area where ITC scholars and a group such as the visiting delegation could work to develop and publish in the future. The delegation stated that they would return to Saudi Arabia with recommendations to engage in some joint ventures/study collaboration.

Dr. Battle welcomed the possibility of an ITC delegation visiting Saudi Arabia and collaborating with Muslim scholars. Additional topics for the mutual dialogue included, formation of religious leaders, especially towards interfaith/inter-religious dialogues, globalization, challenges facing missionary religions in the 21st Century, "Sexuality and Religious Communities" a proposed course for the summer semester 2008 taught jointly by ITC and Selman, and Racism and African American Muslims.

Professor Haney and President Battle fielded questions and comments from the delegation, the ITC community and an in depth, informative dialogue ensued. President Battle expressed his appreciation for the openness and opportunity to establish continued future discussion both in Atlanta and Saudi Arabia.

The official, day long delegation's visit concluded with a late afternoon brief exit interview with President Battle and his staff after having visited several classroom settings with ITC faculty and students to experience the essence of the ITC seminary classroom learning milieu.

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