

Choosing to talk: A fourth meeting between church leaders and Ahmadinejad

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

In the fourth meeting between Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and religious leaders seeking to keep lines of communication open between Iran and the U.S.—the second such meeting I've attended—speakers from Jewish, Muslim, Lutheran and Mennonite communities made brief presentations that were followed by a long response from Ahmadinejad in which he affirmed that “all divine prophets have spoken of one truth.”

Unlike previous engagements with Ahmadinejad, news of this event leaked out. A concerted protest campaign ensued, culminating in a rally outside a Hyatt hotel in New York where the dinner was held. Opposition came largely from Jewish and conservative Christian groups, as well as from some Iranian dissidents.

Said Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League: “Breaking bread with President Ahmadinejad is a perversion of the search for peace and an appalling betrayal of religious values.”

Richard Land, the Southern Baptists' principal spokesperson on sociopolitical ethics and religious liberty, called the meeting disgraceful: “I am appalled at the moral obtuseness of people. . . . We condemn those useful idiots who help his evil causes by their witless complicity in meeting with him.”

Some mainline church constituents were angry that the UN Liaison Office of the World Council of Churches was a cosponsor of the dinner. Michael Kinnamon, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, told a reporter at an earlier rally: “Provocative, belligerent rhetoric is the enemy of peace. Therefore, those who claim to be peacemakers must know when to say ‘No!’ to rhetoric that threatens the neighbor.”

Elaborating on his views for the Century, Kinnamon said that he respects “the decision of those who decided to hold and attend the dinner, but I chose not to [attend] because I think the Iranian president’s language precludes effective dialogue and because I wanted to express my solidarity with those who are the target of his vituperation.”

Kinnamon added: “I take it that no major Christian leader endorses Ahmadinejad’s verbal attacks and that most of us, myself included, are committed to dialogue, even with enemies.”

Besides the WCC office, cosponsors of the dinner were the Mennonite Central Committee, the American Friends Service Committee, the Quaker United Nations Office and Religions for Peace USA. The groups coordinated the event with Iran’s Permanent Mission to the United Nations, which initiated this and earlier meetings with the president.

The contacts grew out of the Mennonite Central Committee’s work in Iran after a devastating 1990 earthquake in that country. A relief, development and peacemaking organization, MCC has also sponsored a student exchange program with Iran, convened consultations of Mennonite and Shi’a Muslim theologians and sponsored learning tours for North Americans to Iran.

Because of these meetings with Ahmadinejad, the MCC in particular has been accused of being used by him for his political purposes. Mennonites, one of the historic peace churches, take the often unpopular stance that members’ Christian convictions require them to engage their enemies, even when they disagree with them.

In meetings with Ahmadinejad, MCC representatives have repeatedly challenged the Iranian president about his rhetoric against Israel, about his seeming denial of the Holocaust tragedy and about his nuclear intentions. In September Arli Klassen, MCC’s executive director, also cited reports of religious persecution in Iran. She urged Ahmadinejad to allow for religious diversity and to let people make their own religious choices.

MCC leaders were pleased by the greater diversity of the audience, compared to previous such gatherings. Three former members of the U.S. Congress were present, and this time more Jews broke bread with the Iranian president. Some Buddhists, Hindus and Zoroastrians also attended.

Progress is hard to measure, MCC officials said. They noted only that Ahmadinejad's rhetoric was more moderate than previously, especially in relation to Israel and the Middle East.

In the absence of diplomatic relations for 30 years and now increasing hostility between the U.S. and Iran, the historic peace churches hold on to the hope that over time trust can be built, which is already happening between the Iranian Mission to the United Nations and MCC.