

Interfaith Conference Points to Action
By JEFF FARR, Associate Editor
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The true meaning of being a religious person is found in compassionate action. So agreed representatives from several world religions at today's 2nd Annual Westside Youth Interfaith Conference, held at the Santa Monica Community Center.

From Dr. Joyce Kovelman, a Jewish author of two spiritual books and a psychiatrist focusing on fostering people's uniqueness, to Nazareen Haroon, a Muslim woman who has helped open 40 one-room schoolhouses in rural Pakistan, all 70 participants had stories to share of "Changing the World Through Individual Action," the conference theme.

A small group of SGI-USA members, who began preparations for today's event nine months ago, chose this theme because they wanted to focus on the participants' experiences — how their beliefs had led them to take action in their communities. "It was hoped that this year's theme would pull out the real human struggles that we all go through, regardless of our different beliefs," explained Darin Nellis, one of the event organizers. This was thought of as a stepping stone toward future dialogue in which the participants can decide on appropriate projects to work on.

The Rev. James Lawson, pastor of the Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles and the keynote speaker, came at the term "individual action" from an interesting angle, pointing out that individualism can be a negative force. It can make us into "billiard balls," he argued — we sometimes pursue change as individuals, forgetting how much more we can do together. "Being an African American man who's been in this country for 68 years," he said, "I am persuaded that when we talk about individualism, we're talking about an American cultural feature that is probably very destructive."

The Rev. Lawson, a colleague of Martin Luther King Jr. and who has been jailed in seven states for his civil rights activities, proposed "personal action" as an alternative. He defined this as each of us working with other religious people toward concrete common goals, making the most of whatever we each can give to the combined effort. "Human solidarity is a *must* for the kind of world we want," Dr. Lawson emphasized.

Painting a dark picture of the social machinery, especially economic policies that tend to oppose solidarity of the people, he harshly criticized religions in America — especially his own, Christianity — for being too quiet about an economy in which "people who work do not matter, are less than human." Asked to describe what things might be like in 10 or 20 years if policies don't change, the Rev. Lawson imagined an "authoritarian society" where "economic inequalities would be justified and exaggerated." Interfaith activities aren't about "niceness toward each other," he concluded, but about taking a unified stand on such issues.

Valerie Thomas, another event organizer, found Rev. Lawson's talk and the entire conference an eye-opening experience. "This was my first time to participate in an interfaith activity," she said. "I never realized how important this kind of activity is for improving our society." Participants who also attended last year's inaugural conference noticed much progress this year, as the participants went beyond just sharing their doctrines to sharing their activities and discussing working together. "Last year many people from the SGI and other religions had difficulty finding value in interfaith, because they felt as if they would have to compromise their own religious values," Mr. Nellis reflected. "This year I saw this change in many of the SGI members involved, although there are still many who maintain an attitude of fear and skepticism."

Mrs. Haroon agreed, saying that "even if we affect one person, that is enough. Even if

one person becomes more understanding, more tolerant, more loving, it's well worth the effort." Like many participants today, she was already expressing excitement about next year's conference before today's conference was over.

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