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## **Top Evangelicals Critical of Colleagues Over Islam**

by Laurie Goodstein

Evangelical leaders meeting here today denounced as "dangerous" and "unhelpful" the anti-Islam remarks made in the last year by leaders in their own movement and proposed new guidelines for churches to follow in relating to Muslims.

At the same time, the religious leaders reaffirmed their commitment to proselytizing, and they accused mainline Protestants and groups like the World Council of Churches of holding "naive" dialogue sessions with Muslims that minimized theological and political differences.

The meeting came at a time when Christian leaders are deeply divided over whether their goal should be to coexist with Muslims or to convert them. It was convened by the National Association of Evangelicals, which represents 43,000 congregations, and the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a conservative Christian group in Washington that often critiques mainline Protestantism.

Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, said to the 40 leaders attending today, "Since we are in a global community, no doubt about it, we must temper our speech and we must communicate primarily through actions."

It has been more than a year since major evangelical leaders, like the Rev. Franklin Graham, the Rev. Jerry Falwell and the Rev. Jerry Vines, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, began publicly branding Islam, or Islam's prophet Muhammad, as inherently evil and violent.

Mr. Graham, son of the evangelist Billy Graham and head of a global missions agency, Samaritan's Purse, said last year that Islam was "a very evil and wicked religion." Mr. Vines described Muhammad as "a demon-possessed pedophile."

The evangelical leaders here today issued what one of them called a "loving rebuke" to their colleagues for remarks that they said tarnished American Christians and jeopardized the safety of missionaries and indigenous Christians in predominantly Muslim countries.

Dr. Clive Calver, president of World Relief, the relief and development agency of the National Association of Evangelicals, told the group, "It's very dangerous to build more barriers when we're supposed to be following one who pulled the barriers down," a reference to Jesus.

In an interview, Dr. Calver said that when he was working recently in the Mideast with Muslim members of the Red Crescent relief agency, Mr. Graham's comments were circulating widely.

"It's used to indict all Americans and used to indict all Christians," said Dr. Calver, who is British. "It obviously puts lives and livelihoods of people overseas at risk."

None of the evangelical or Protestant leaders who were criticized attended the meeting today.

Sayyid M. Syeed, secretary general of the Islamic Society of North America, said in a telephone interview that he welcomed the evangelicals' statements and encouragement of interfaith dialogue -- even the emphasis on sharing the gospel with Muslims.

"I don't have any problem with that because interfaith dialogue does not mean diluting the individual traditions of the different faiths," Mr. Syeed said. "All it means is that we respect each other's world view."

Those here said that they did not want to undermine the missionary work of their fellow evangelicals and that they would soon convene a session with those they had criticized.

A spokesman for Mr. Graham said that he was in San Diego for a mission led by his father and could not be reached for comment.

Mr. Falwell, reached by telephone, said that he regretted saying in a "60 Minutes" interview last year that he had concluded after reading books on Islam that "Muhammad was a terrorist."

He said he was unhappy to learn of today's event only through calls from reporters, but supported the evangelical leaders' call to temper the language on Islam.

"In this media-sensitive world, we must be cautious that we walk a tightrope that does not allow offending others while at the same time never compromising what we believe," Mr. Falwell said. "At the same time we cannot expect hundreds of thousands of evangelical church leaders to go silent when somebody asks what they think about any religion, just because those religions might kill their missionaries."

The guidelines for churches proposed today are notable for urging evangelicals, who have not made a priority of interfaith dialogue, to interact more with Muslims. But the guidelines promote a fundamentally different approach to interfaith relations than that used by mainline Protestant groups.

The evangelicals emphasize that Christians should use dialogue sessions with Muslims to "give testimony to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, because it is our duty to do

so." The guidelines also urge Christians to use dialogue to spell out the differences between Christianity and Islam, and to call Muslims to account for the lack of religious freedom in Muslim countries.

Alan F. H. Wisdom, vice president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, who drafted the guidelines, said that much of the dialogue that Christians carried on with Muslims across the United States after Sept. 11, 2001, was motivated by "a genuine, perhaps naive wish to be reassured that they don't all hate us."

Mr. Wisdom said, "There has been the tendency to put reconciliation above witness to the truth here."

Responding to the criticism in a telephone interview, Dr. Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, which represents mainline Protestants and Orthodox denominations and frequently engages in dialogue with Muslims, said that he agreed that each faith must not dilute its own distinctions.

But Dr. Edgar said: "We disagree that you can't have dialogue unless you talk about Jesus. My belief is that dialogue is best built on relationships. People have to get to know each other, to trust each other, to like each other, and in some cases to even love each other before real learning and listening takes place."

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