

Bishop Madden hopeful about U.S.-Muslim relations

Improving relations between the United States and the Muslim world will depend on stronger diplomacy and better understanding between the two cultures, says Bishop Denis J. Madden, Baltimore's urban vicar.

Bishop Madden's comments came after the Sept. 24 release of a report he helped produce, "Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World."

The report, by a group of 34 American leaders (11 of them Muslim), says creating "partnerships for peace" with Islamic countries and communities represents "one of the greatest challenges - and opportunities - facing the United States today."

Bishop Madden stressed the urgency of building stronger ties.

"This is not an optional thing," he said. "We have to address this head-on, right now."

The Leadership Group on U.S.-Muslim Engagement, which spent two years researching and writing the report, comprises a wide array of leaders in foreign and defense policy, religion, politics, business, education, psychology, philanthropy and conflict resolution.

The report concluded that the U.S. response to the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks has sparked fear, mistrust and hostility among many Muslims in countries affected by U.S. military action as well as in other countries. A small minority of violent Muslim extremists, in turn, have exploited the "climate of distrust," the report said.

"Our recommendations will not eliminate the risk of terrorist attacks affecting the U.S.," the report said. "Yet given a broad, deep, and sustained commitment, our proposed strategy will reshape U.S. relations with Muslim leaders and peoples in ways that improve U.S. and international security, transform the spiral of fear and mistrust into a foundation of mutual confidence and respect, and help create a more

peaceful world.”

Bishop Madden brought to the group not only his Catholic perspective, but also considerable experience in troubled regions of the world. He has served as associate secretary general of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association and director of the Pontifical Mission for Palestine Office in Jerusalem.

Along with resolving conflicts through diplomacy, the 154-page report urges U.S. government and non-governmental leaders to:

- Seek immediate “de-escalation” of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a two-state solution providing security for both sides.
- Explore with Iran the possibility of agreements that could increase regional security, while seeking the country’s compliance with its nuclear non-proliferation commitments.
- Promote “broad-based political reconciliation” in Iraq and clarify the long-term U.S. role there.
- Support nonviolence, pluralism and fairness in elections and reforms of authoritarian governments in Muslim countries.
- Create jobs in Muslim countries through efforts such as public-private investment partnerships, trade agreements and education.
- Improve U.S.-Muslim relations by expanding cross-cultural education, interfaith exchange efforts and “cultural diplomacy” through arts and entertainment.

While the threat of terrorism does not loom as large as it did in the 2004 presidential election campaign, the report calls on George W. Bush’s successor to provide “immediate and sustained leadership” to improve U.S.-Muslim relations. The next president, the report said, should reaffirm the U.S. commitment to prohibiting torture; seek to resolve regional conflicts in the Mideast; and help establish a business-government summit on economic reform, growth and job creation for the region.

Despite their diverse views, all the group's members signed off on the report – a hopeful sign, Bishop Madden said.

“People are willing to put aside many of their differences for the common good,” he said. “And people, I think, now are at a point now where it's not just something that you can talk about. It's something we have to do.”