

WAGING peace

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF ART

“The point is, art never stopped a war... That was never its function. Art cannot change events. But it can change people. It can affect people so that they are changed - they then act in a way that may affect the course of events... by the way they behave, the way they think.”

Leonard Bernstein, the renowned late 20th century composer and conductor.

The current conflict in the Middle East highlights that much work lies ahead toward finding ways that the cultures and faiths of the Middle East and West can live peacefully together. Given the increasing chasm of discord and misunderstanding that exists between the two, a new kind of movement is needed: one that builds on what we hold in common, and that wages peace on the “other”.

In a world of stereotypes and assumptions, it is essential to redress the balance, listening to each other, and gaining true insights into each other. Hence it is more critical than ever that “creative demonstrations of dialogue” be developed.

I grew up as an American from a Christian background in Senegal, West Africa, a Muslim country. And as a young person I observed the tension that all too often exists between different faiths and I remember thinking early on that there must be another way. Senegal is also known for its artistic richness, and I grew up around the visual arts and music, including musicians that became world-class performers, such a Youssou N'Dour, who lived in the next neighbourhood over. So I have been passionate about both interreligious relations and the arts from

early on. However it was while living in Egypt that both of these passions came together as we began to experience the transformative power of art, echoing the words of the late Nobel Prize Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, “Art is language of the entire human personality”.

“Art is language of the entire human personality.”

The vision for CARAVAN originated over seven years ago in Cairo where I lived for ten years serving as the Rector of the historic St. John’s Episcopal Church; focused on the international diplomatic, business, academic and NGO communities. With the goal of building bridges with our Muslim brothers and sisters, we started a citywide interfaith arts initiative called CARAVAN that quickly grew into a movement that led to it becoming an international interreligious peacebuilding arts non-profit organisation (NGO). Our focus was on encouraging people to “journey together through the arts,” thus the “caravan” theme. Through these initiatives in Egypt, we discovered how the arts can be one of the most effective mediums to build bridges between the creeds and cultures of the Middle East and the West, and to enhance understanding, bring about respect, enable sharing, and deepen friendship between them.



Viewing The Bridge in London



Siona Benjamin's work in Metz Cathedral, France

Through the CARAVAN exhibitions and festivals we learned how the arts can serve as an indirect catalyst for diverse peoples to come together that would normally never come together, thereby becoming a means to encourage new friendships to be made across religions and cultures. The early 20th century Lebanese artist and writer, Kahlil Gibran, who profoundly bridged the Middle East and West, beautifully said, “Your neighbour is your other self dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down.” In this sense CARAVAN is not so much about interfaith dialogue, but about something much deeper; interfaith friendships. CARAVAN's exhibitions become “encounter points,” enabling new friendships across faiths and cultures and changing erroneous stereotypes that previously existed. And there are numerous inspiring stories of strategic interfaith initiatives and programs that have come out of these art initiatives.



Muslim Imam and Christian Coptic priest at London opening of The Bridge

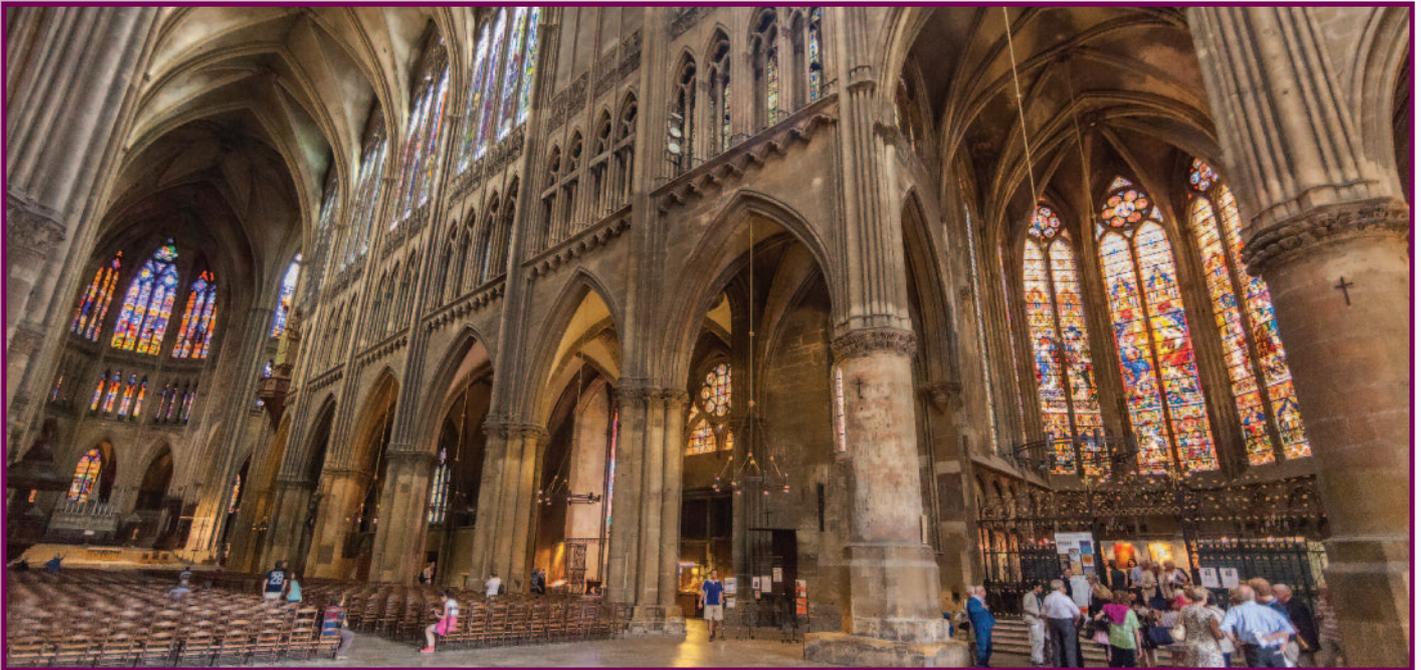
One of the flagship initiatives of CARAVAN is the globally recognized interfaith CARAVAN Exhibition of Art, that brings together many of the Middle East's premier and emerging artists with Western artists for peacebuilding, seeking to use the arts as a bridge for intercultural and interreligious interchange and dialogue between their cultures and creeds. Each year this unique exhibition has garnered attention from the international press, media and art world, attracting thousands of visitors.

One of the distinctive elements of CARAVAN is that we do all possible to hold our interfaith exhibitions in sacred spaces, instead of in traditional art venues, such as galleries or museums, in order to reach a broader demographic than just the “art world.” Also, in sacred spaces there is a contemplative atmosphere that enhances the message of the art. Within the CARAVAN arts initiatives there is also a charitable component that seeks to bring hope to individuals that are in need (economically, socially and physically) within the Middle East through the support of charities assisting the poor regardless of creed.



Imam from Al Azhar with Anglican Archbishop of Middle East at Cairo's The Bridge

The 2015 CARAVAN Exhibition of Art, titled “THE BRIDGE,” is a ground-breaking travelling interfaith art exhibition featuring 47 premier Arab, Persian and Jewish contemporary artists of



The Bridge at Metz Cathedral, France Photograph: Olivier-Henri Dancy



Paul-Gordon Chandler with Grand Rabbi Bruno Fiszcon at opening in Metz, France



Viewing The Bridge in London

Christian, Muslim and Jewish faith backgrounds focusing on the theme of what “bridges” us to each other. The exhibition, which is sponsored by SODIC in Egypt and United Religions Initiative (URI), and will tour for 18 months, opened in Paris, France in February during the United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week just after the Charlie Hebdo tragedy, at the historic Church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, in the Latin Quarter, the oldest church in Paris. It has since been exhibited in Cairo, Egypt, on London’s Trafalgar Square (St.Martin-in-the-Fields) and in Metz, France’s majestic cathedral. Following the tour in Europe, it will head to the USA in early 2016 to open at Ground Zero’s St. Paul’s Chapel, following by in cities throughout the USA.

In this time of turbulence around the world, as THE BRIDGE exhibition travels, it takes with it a fundamental message of intercultural and interreligious harmony, seeking to serve as a common starting point on which to build, toward seeing the development of a society that inherently respects and honours cultural and religious diversity, living and working together to jointly enhance their communities.

The words of Kahlil Gibran are most apropos to CARAVAN’s artistic mission, and our current THE BRIDGE exhibition: “I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are [children] of one religion, and it is the Spirit.”

For more information on CARAVAN and its interfaith art initiatives, please see: www.oncarvan.org
Visit us on Facebook: CARAVAN Arts Twitter: @oncarvanarts Email: oncarvan@gmail.com

Author: REV. PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER is the Founder and President of CARAVAN. An author, interfaith advocate, art curator and patron, social entrepreneur and a U.S Episcopal priest, who grew up in Muslim West Africa, he has lived and worked extensively throughout the Islamic world in leadership roles within faith-based publishing, relief and development agencies and churches. Most recently, he served as the rector of the Episcopal Church of St John the Baptist-Maadi in Cairo (2003-2013). He has curated exhibitions at such sites St. Paul’s Cathedral-London, Egypt’s Museum of Modern Art, Washington D.C.’s National Cathedral, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City and St. Martin in the Fields in London.