

**Conference Session 4.1: Media - Publications**  
**Faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Dallas, Texas**

**Dr. Bob Roberts, Jr.**

Fort Worth, Texas, USA

Senior & Founding Pastor Northwood Church

Founder Glocalnet, Glocal Ventures

I never had any intentions of getting to know Muslims or Communist, let alone do humanitarian projects with them or become good friends of theirs. Never in a million years would I ever expect that I would have them in my home and that I would be in theirs as well on a regular basis. Not unless I had left the faith and joined a different religion, could I see myself close friends with people of different religions and worldviews. The chances of that happening were about as great as me baptizing you all out in the Persian gulf this afternoon! I dreamed of my church being filled, but not with thousands of Muslims that would be coming to connect with Christians along with their imams to serve the common good of the city. I never dreamed that I'd come to love the call to prayer from mosques around the world. Why would I after all, there was nothing in my background in any way that would prepare me to even consider it. I'm a Baptist, a Southern Baptist, a salifi of the evangelical persuasion. I am also from East Texas, we are not prejudice, we just don't like some people, and we're better than others! It was us against them, two opposing philosophical positions of capitalism and communism, two opposing faith systems of Jesus as a prophet versus Jesus as God. How could I ever expect to differ so much with someone and be a relationship with them? Honestly, I couldn't be in a relationship with them because of the way I was raised not just my family, but my culture and worldview as well.

There is no doubt in my mind, this shift would have never taken place had it been left to philosophy or theology from a very ethnocentric worldview. There was something that trumped it all and frankly began to make me think deeply philosophically and theologically like I had never thought in my entire life, even though I'd earned 3 degrees from 3 of the most respected universities and religious seminaries in the world. That one thing that changed everything can be summed up in two words, personal relationships. It's easy to categorize people that you don't know, once you know them and begin to become their friends, it makes it much more difficult to categorize, fear, or vilify others. At Northwood Church, we have had thousands of people go and work in Vietnam in a country where "church" work is not permitted from the West. We do this at the invitation of that government. We do not preach, do religious work, but serve the city and if someone asks us about our faith we can answer, we will not deny or hide our faith, we are not there to promote our religion, we are there to serve in the name of Jesus. We became an NGO, not because we were planning on starting one, but because the government asked us to become one so we could legally broaden our work. That work has led to a dozen churches along with our church sending hundreds of volunteers for 2 weeks at a time to connect with people. It didn't stop there. Northwood starts churches in the United States, not globally, that now represents well over 60,000 people. Each one of those churches are required to work in the inner city closest to them, and to pick a hard place in the world and serve the people there together with the people. From there, it's grown so much that we formed an organization [www.glocal.net](http://www.glocal.net) to connect, equip,

facilitate, and release everyday people into the domains of society to serve the city and the world based on their jobs.

After 9-11 we were asked to do the exact same thing in Afghanistan. I refused the first several times I was asked. We were busy in Vietnam, and I had just gotten over my fear and frankly hatred of Vietnamese. There was a military base where I grew up in Texas as a little boy and many soldiers came to my Dad's church. After our church services on Sunday afternoon, my mother would feed soldiers in our little house. Many of those soldiers were killed in Vietnam. It caused me to both fear and hate the Vietnamese. As a grown man, when I began to pastor my church we wanted to work somewhere in the world and serve people. It took a man who was an atheist who I led to faith in Jesus to even get me open to taking a trip to Vietnam. This man was a very successful doctor who had been shot down three times during the Vietnam war and survived all three times. He came back home to become a medical doctor. Now that he had given his life to God he wanted to help people somewhere in the world, and that place was Vietnam. So we began in 1994 to work in Vietnam and have been working there ever since.

Finally, I agreed to try to help in Afghanistan. I told the leaders in the province where we worked who I was and what I wanted to do, I asked them how I could help and they needed hospitals, clinics, schools, everything! I had a chance encounter in the Afghan desert with a group of 15 or more imams and we had lunch together. They asked me if I would be willing to help them with schools and clinics. This was very strange to me, I began to wonder what am I doing working with imams? These are my "religious opponents" and whereas they believe in Dawa I believe in the Great Commission. I honestly didn't know what to do. I prayed in my heart – God, if this is wrong stop it, but it seems so strange that it might be from you! So I agreed, and we built schools, clinics, orphanages, and many other projects. I connected them with pastors in America and we all became friends and started working together. Then something happened, we started laughing together, having fun together, sharing stories. I came to love those men and they love me as well. I could care less about interfaith work, I was trying to serve Afghans. Interfaith was what intellectuals did that was boring.

Because of the work in Afghanistan I was asked to be on a think tank called the NYON process that the Alliance for Civilizations with the United Nations had started. It exposed me to world leaders and I began to work in connecting pastors and imams, Christians and Muslims, to do humanitarian work in places like Gaza, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Pakistan, Iraq, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, India, and the list goes on. Currently I'm working on a project with the Saudi's on connecting top imams and top evangelical pastors where they will spend a week with each other in their church and home first in the U.S. then Saudi Arabia with the Imam at his home and mosque. Hopefully it will lead to joint humanitarian work in some country like Somalia or somewhere else where we can serve the good of humanity together. This is the impetus of what has led to creating the [www.globalfaithforum.com](http://www.globalfaithforum.com) It is a one of a kind conference and you're all welcome to attend. Instead of evangelicals trying to "convert" and talk "about" the world, it's a chance for them to meet with many of my friends that are leaders in government, business, etc., and talk to them about their worldviews and how they would like to work together versus being imposed on by "Christians" from the West. I'm trying to redefine that conversation and Glocalnet, as an organization, is trying to provide the tracks and connections to see this spread.

HRH Prince Turki-Al-Faisal is a part of the NYON group. At a meeting where we were together he was complimenting me about all the work I do in the middle-east and then asked what I did back home. My answer was nothing – not in DFW. DFW is the Baptist Mecca of the United States. I had always seen this mosque in the southeast corner of DFW when I flew in. So I went to meet the imam and it led to a strong relationship, some of which I will share with you. My book, “Bold as Love” goes into detail about it. Interfaith dialogue desperately needs to move from dialogue to engagement and relationship, and that is what I am giving my life to. It is about so much more than clerics and academics trying to understand each other’s faith and debating nuances. At it’s core it is about how people in the “glocal” public square relate and get along with each other with conflicting worldviews. There are some things I’ve come to believe about how faith can be a blessing to society instead of a point of conflict, war, hatred, and segregation.

Like never before the world is connected, and like never before we are not getting along. We have a 17<sup>th</sup> century worldview in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world and it’s killing us. Most people really want peace. People are hungry to connect. They deserve better than what they’re getting from their government leaders, business leaders, educational leaders, and yes – faith leaders. Those of us who lead, are letting the faithful down, and we are letting God down if we don’t learn to relate instead of promoting hate. Many of us would never promote hate, but we wouldn’t stop it either. We view “hate” as a necessary barrier to keep our people from connecting with the “other” and things getting out of hand, or worse yet, that people would change their religion.

I dream of a world where people of faith love God, are true to truth as absolute, not as “poll driven.” I dream of a world where we love each other and serve the common good, and vigorously debate, question, disagree – but in harmony on how we see God, without destroying relationships. Yes, I’m an evangelical and I want everyone to know about Jesus, and I’d like to personally baptize all 7 billion people – but that isn’t realistic, maybe 4 or 5 billion, but what about those other 2 or 3 billion that won’t let me baptize them. Do I write them off? Do I ignore them? Or does God want to love them regardless and serve them regardless. If God is merciful does that have any bearing on me? There are seven things I believe that must happen if we are to use faith to build society versus destroying it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These things are not things that I learned in books, though I read in this field, they are things a stumbled into as a practitioner and as someone who engages other countries, cultures, faiths, and worldviews. Here are seven critical things I’ve learned from building relationships with people that could alter and redefine how people of faith relate together around the world.

First, we need a course in linguistics on how to communicate with each other in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Migration has changed everything all people are all places. All faiths are all places. Faith used to be tribal and geographical, not anymore. In Dallas-Fort Worth a new report shocked everyone. Currently 44% of the population in DFW was born in non-english speaking nations. In 1973 we had one mosque, today there are close to 50. People come to DFW because the airport is central, the economy is better than most places in the United States. It’s also a friendly place. The whole world is present, and the whole world is listening, how do we speak? I teach our pastors a concept I call “one conversation.” When you preach and you put it on the internet the whole world is listening – how should that affect how you preach, tweet, blog, everything.

Most of us have multiple conversations based on who we are with at the moment, one conversation in public, and another one in private. We have to speak knowing the whole world is listening. It forces us to speak clearly, honestly, consistently. If we don't, we are viewed as hypocritical and even hateful. We must ask the question what is the best way to say it? How will this be received? How can I say it more clearly and as kind as possible? There is no privacy anymore, we all live in the public square. One conversation must be consistent for all and clear for all. This has a huge impact for theology. All of us, all of our faiths, our theology is global theology – so it is critical we keep it clear, core, simple, understandable, and accessible to understand by all. If religion was meant for common people, clerics who make it too complicated can expect God to judge them! As clerics our goal must be to make the God and the Scriptures as accessible as possible. Those of us who are serious about our faith and believe in the objective truth of our Holy Scriptures must be true to them, but we must also be able to clearly communicate them.

A few years ago I was with a very wealthy and prominent Muslim in England with whom I had become friends with. One day, he pulled me off to the side and said with tears coming into his eyes, “Bob, I would never offend you, but I’ve come to love you, would you read the Koran again, and seriously consider the claims of Islam – I can’t bear the thought of you not being in heaven.” That to me, was the greatest compliment that man could have ever paid me. He loved me so much, he wanted me in heaven and was willing to risk offending me for the sake of his understanding of truth. We need that kind of clarity, honesty, and love in communication even if we disagree.

Second, we must create a new platform to connect with one another, it’s called multi-faith. When I met with Imam Zia of the Irving Islamic Center and Rabbi Jeremy Schneider of the Temple Shalom in Dallas I told them I didn’t like interfaith. Most religious conservatives will never have anything to do with interfaith, they view it as “all roads lead to heaven” and compromising your own faith and watering it down. Liberal Christians believe that, but not evangelicals and conservatives so they are not at the table at most interfaith discussions. This is a problem, because these are the very people that cause the biggest conflict between the faiths. How do we get the people who have the biggest conflicts with each other at the table? Until we get those people to the table, we can all meet but nothing will change in the world.

Multifaith says, I hold on to my faith and do not compromise it in the least. It also says, I’m willing to connect with you in the public square and for the common good because the best of my faith teaches that I should love God, serve people, and build bridges to others. I think this frightened the rabbi more than the imam. The Imam liked it! He felt the same way I did. Because the rabbi was reform, he was curious what he was getting himself into with a conservative pastor and imam! I’ve learned this leads to deeper relationships because you are honest and candid about what you believe. We pulled all three of our congregations together and came up with a religious pilgrimage where we went to the synagogue on Friday night for Kosher food and to see their worship and then do Q & A with the rabbi, imam, and myself. The next day we repeated the same format and went to the mosque where we ate Halal food and watched the prayers in the mosque. Sunday we had Jews and Muslims at our church. Our members have said it was the most powerful service they ever remembered being a part of. The service was positioned as

“multifaith” saying that we do disagree on various fundamentals of our faith but we still wanted to build friendships.

Third, we need a common desire to connect based on the ancient grid of the city or society in the public square and focus on the common good. We all have the same political leaders, police force, schools, roads – and city, thus we should all work to build stronger communities. We teach something called domains. A domain is the infrastructure that a city is built around. Traditional urban studies will teach there are three traditional domains: civil society, government, and business. World Vision will teach there are 27 sectors of society. I use a human resource map that most people understand because I work with volunteers and it has 8: civil society, government, health, education, communication (arts,media), agriculture, economics, science & technology. Most people’s job fit into one of those categories. We teach our members that their vocation is their primary ministry, or religious work. Each member is to use their God given skills and their education to serve our city and the world with that skill. The job of clerics should be to release the faithful upon the city to engage and serve it, regardless of who needs help. It looks many different ways. From our religious pilgrimage we had some ladies start an embrace group made up of 8 Jewish women, 8 Muslim women, and 8 Christian women. At first they were a cooking club, then they began to work at senior centers together, then refugees. In Vietnam, we had workers go to an orphanage. One of those workers was an executive for Fidelity. She wound up mentoring the top 50 female entrepreneurs in Hanoi. She taught them micro-finance and together they started helping people buy water buffalos in a village. Another group started taking landscapers to build corales for the water buffalos. A physical education teacher who’s also a weight trainer went to build a corale, he is now taking physical education teachers to teach physical education to over 120 teachers in the mountains of north Vietnam. This means we move from competition to collaboration. There is a verse in the Koran that says Muslims should “compete for good works” and Christians have a verse that says we should “let our light shine so people will glorify God.” This moves us from isolation to integration. We are working not as a group “for” the city but “with” the city. It is colonialistic and arrogant to get a big group of Christians together or muslims for that matter and have them do their thing for the city and say “look at what we did.” Instead we should do it with others and build bridges. We are on the grid of the city in the public square.

Fourth, the conversation needs to slow down and the service needs to speed up. In issues of interfaith most people start with the head, and that’s why we never get anywhere. Those things we hold most passionately theologically we begin to debate without knowing each other. We approach each other as a philosophy instead of as a person. I have regular, deep, and meaningful conversations with people of other faiths, but I start first with the hand. We serve together in the city. This builds trust. As the trust is built you then come to love and respect them. As you are friends, you can ask one another deep questions without risking offending each other. Now, faith is something you share as a natural conversation in life instead of a “mission” to convert someone you’ve never known. Instead of starting with the head, then the heart, then the hand – the order must be reverse. We must start with the hand, which takes us to the heart, which with trust we are now ready to talk. We have a saying at Northwood we teach, serve not to convert, serve because you’re converted. God does the converting, it’s our job to serve, love, and

share naturally. When I work in a country, I don't try to find Christians instead I focus on the relationships I have, often with the government and serve at their behest in various domains with others that want to do this.

In time I may meet Christians, but it's often because someone in leadership in that country wants me to meet them and want help in understanding them. When we do things together it opens more doors. Imam Zia wanted to go hunting and fishing with me, he had never been. He was born in Pakistan, raised in the UK, and now in DFW. I told him, "OK, I'll take you, but you can't wear that Pakistani outfit with that little hat. We start running through the woods chasing deer you yelling Allah Akbar in that outfit we're both gonna die! You wear a T-shirt, blue jeans, and I'll take you." I did and we had a blast. Other imams heard about it and last December we took 10 pastors and 10 imams on a hunting and fishing outing. They were all nervous getting turned into the FBI for having guns but they're American citizens, no big deal. We have deep and meaningful conversations. We took them to a Christian encampment to stay – we even got them their own dorm so the facilities and prayer spaces would be appropriate. I'm sure that's the first time a group of imams have ever been to a Christian camp and a Christian camp hosted imams!

Fifth, connect beyond clerics to masses. The goal of centers like this should be two-fold. First, they should be centers of the best thinking on issues involved on interfaith issues and challenges, particularly with people that are more conservative. The reason for relating to conservative believers strongly is because that is where most of the conflict from religion comes, regardless of the religion. Second, provide opportunities to connect people of different faith for engagement opportunities beyond dialogue and to relationship building and city engagement. We started [www.glocal.net](http://www.glocal.net) with this in mind. We have a special training and facilitation process that gets pastors and imams in the room together, explains the concepts of multifaith and hand, heart, and head – then together they map out their own strategy for their city working with Muslims and Christians. We have a world class facilitator who drives this. The goal is not just a big event and gathering but partnering for the good of the city. What an opportunity for people to come together. Recently, we had a gathering of 1500 Muslim and Christians at our church where we served halal beef, Texas barbequed ribs. What was most exciting was all the projects people signed up to do together. It is growing and people now feel like anytime there is a project, muslims must be present or we aren't loving the way Jesus loves! It has opened many doors. This year, at the National Prayer Breakfast, I took Imam Zia of the Irving Mosque to the National Prayer Breakfast. This was probably the first time a pastor and imam came together from the same city!

Sixth, you have to challenge your own tribe. I have come to fear my own tribe more than yours and others. When you start reaching across the lines, you can expect more resistance from your own tribe than others. Tribes stand together collectively to protect each other and watch out for each other's interest and agendas. We have another saying at Northwood Church, "Never, never, never vilify another religion!" Just lift up Jesus and be a good example of what a follower of Jesus is. If you have to put down another religion to build yours up, yours must be awfully weak! The first religious pilgrimage we had was very difficult. We had several hundred people leave our church as members, because we had brought Muslims and Jews. Some said we would become terrorist victims. Others said we are a church they can go to their mosque. Some in the

community accused me of trying to start a new religion by blending Islam and Christianity, this was in 2010. So, in 2011 we wanted to do something, but keep it low key. We were trying to recover from all the challenges we faced from within our own tribe. We met as pastors and imams and set the date. We did it September 2011, but not 9-11 because they wanted it to be a different date, and not have to be put on the defensive, we agreed. Our church holds 2,000 in the worship area. We didn't know how many to expect, maybe a few hundred at best. We had 2500 come. I was stunned. As I was walking through the building and there was standing room only, I shook my head and thought to myself, "I know God is pleased." I said that from the stage, and everyone shouted out in agreement in applause and shouts of joy. I thought to myself, "I'm sad our church lost a few hundred of it's members, but I wouldn't trade that for this!"

Seventh, we must all forgive and show mercy like God does. Mercy isn't about letting them off the hook, its about freeing yourself from hate. There is enough revenge and hate to go all over the world, nothing new there, and nothing good there that ever makes things right. Only forgiveness has a chance of opening ourselves up to the rebuilding of relationships. It doesn't mean there aren't consequences. In 2010 I was here in Doha for a meeting with the NYON process and Al Jazeera. I read through my Bible every year, and pray daily and even write out a prayer every day. I also have a page that people who want can sign and write own what they want me to pray about for them. We had just finished a session and there were two men that were with the Taliban at the event and because of my work in Afghanistan we were talking. As we talked someone walked by and said something to the effect, "Sign his Bible!" They asked what did they mean – I explained it to them. They asked if I they could sign my Bible and they did. One wrote, "I hope that the Lord of heavens will forgive us." Jesus was very serious about forgiveness, in our Holy Scriptures he said, "Forgive and you will be forgiven." We all need forgiveness, and we all forgive. The Bible says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." When we try to repay, we are playing God. The only part of playing God we are told in Christian Scriptures is God is light, so walk in the light. God is holy, so be holy. God is love, so love. God forgives you, so forgive others. Only God is the judge and has the right to say who is condemned and who is not. When we act that way, we always loose – all of us.