

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Let's continue as a community of faith, respect for others

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Today's insight is less of a commentary than a reflection on the past few years of our interfaith efforts in the community.

It is prompted by the recent announcement that the PBS story about West Michigan's Year of Interfaith Understanding, which aired a little more than a year ago, recently was selected to receive the Gabriel Award by the Catholic Academy of Communication Professionals.

This award recognizes excellence in television and radio that



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shows a positive and creative treatment of concern for all people. In their words, "The single-most important criterion of a Gabriel-winning program is its ability to uplift and nourish the human spirit."

What a compliment to our community that our interfaith efforts have been recognized. I have lived in West Michigan for nearly 40 years, and I'm aware of the strong religious atmosphere that pervades this area. We have

a reputation for being a conservative Christian community and historically one that saw new arrivals to the area as targets for conversion. I know from my own experience, as well as those whose faith traditions are other than Christian, that this pressure can be felt in many ways. When we arrived in the 1970s in one of the primarily Dutch communities, we were one of very few who subscribed to the Sunday Grand Rapids Press, and the local McDonald's was perhaps the only one in the U.S. that was closed on Sundays.

What we experienced was a community that was very homo-

geneous and looked askance at anyone who was a stranger. In recent decades, the region has become much more diverse.

When we launched the Year of Interfaith Understanding project in 2012, there was concern whether this relatively conservative community would be open to such an exploration of religious diversity. To our delight, we discovered this community is a very respectful one. Some of the intolerant behaviors and violence toward minority religious groups that other communities have experienced were not the pattern here.

While there still are incidents

of disrespect and lack of understanding, overall there has been an interest and desire to learn more about different traditions, beliefs and practices. Since 2012, the interest in interfaith engagement has continued.

The award-winning PBS story appeared on the national television program, "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly," and was titled, "Grand Rapids Interfaith Year." It can be seen at bit.ly/pbsinterfaith.

The program and other interfaith information also is available at interfaithunderstanding.org.

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