

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Seeking unity without uniformity in a troubled world

By Douglas Kindschi
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Next week, 10 Jewish and Christian seminary students will join more than 20,000 Muslims at the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America in Detroit.

ISNA is the largest organization of Muslims in North America and sponsors a convention each year. This is the organization's 51st year but its first meeting in Detroit. The schedule is packed with activities from entertainment and bazaars to lectures and breakout sessions. Former President Jimmy Carter will give the keynote speech.

Why would Jewish and Christian seminary students join



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this event? ISNA has partnered with the organization Shoulder to Shoulder, an organization formed to counter the bigotry and anti-Muslim sentiment that developed after 9/11. A tiny number of extremists coming from another country did that awful deed, but the more than 2 million law-abiding, patriotic Muslim U.S. citizens often are painted with the same brush.

The Shoulder to Shoulder-ISNA partnership provides the opportunity for future leaders from the Jewish and Christian communities to learn about

mainstream Muslim activity by inviting them, all-expenses-paid, to observe, learn and converse. Students applied from all over the U.S., and those chosen include Jonathan Owens, a student at Calvin Theological Seminary. Others come from seminaries at the University of Chicago, Yale University, Claremont School of Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, Hebrew College and the Rabbinic College in Pennsylvania.

A rabbi from the Detroit area will help coordinate the experience, and I have been asked to do the same from the Christian perspective. It promises to be a wonderful time for the two of us, as well as for the seminarians. It

will be yet another opportunity to dialogue in a way that respects the religious principles we hold while being open to understanding those of other faiths.

Because of the events in the Middle East, especially in the Israeli-Hamas conflict and because of the role of the U.S. government, this has been a time of disagreement and tension among religious groups, as well as within the Muslim community. The president of ISNA, Mohamed Hagmagid Ali,

addressed this in a recent communication to the American Muslim community:

"My brothers and sisters, we should be grateful that we live in a world where we are able to engage in dialogue, vote and

lobby our government. To be silent, to disengage, would be to discard one of the most powerful tools God has given us with which we can do good. I would like to say that ISNA would like to be that platform where we can agree to disagree and to represent different points of view, unity but not uniformity."

I applaud this statement and suggest it also can apply to our ongoing efforts for interfaith understanding. It also is my hope that the interfaith students present will model this kind of respectful understanding amid differences. Let us maintain our principles and strive to do good as we seek unity but not necessarily uniformity.

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