

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Learning from other communities, other generations



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This past weekend we had the privilege of joining three other interfaith centers in the Midwest to compare our programs, share our hopes and vision, and explore ways in which we can collaborate in accomplishing our various missions. At a time when the political forces seem inescapably set on polarization and disharmony, it was good to know that there are others committed to bringing people with various faith commitments together to seek understanding and mutual support.

Thanks to a small grant from the Lilly Endowment, representatives from Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana met in Indianapolis to share our programs and ideas. Coordinated by the Center for Interfaith Cooperation in Indianapolis, we shared goals and strategies and proposed ways that we could develop a Midwest network to make our efforts more effective and mutually supportive.

Sometimes it seems like our local efforts will only be a drop in the vast ocean of need for international and interfaith understanding. It is reassuring that other local efforts that share this vision of interfaith acceptance are already in existence right here in the Midwest.

Perhaps best known of the groups com-

ing together is the Center for Interfaith Relations in Louisville, Kentucky, which is planning its 23rd Festival of Faiths to be held in April. This four-day event draws world-renowned religious leaders, artists and musicians, as well as thought leaders and authors for an event that draws thousands together to learn, celebrate, and share.

From Cincinnati, representatives from the Bridges of Faith Triologue and the Brueggeman Center for Dialogue at Xavier University presented some of the programming they have begun in their community. Our host, the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, has led interfaith efforts in Indianapolis for the past few years, including its version of an annual Festival of Faiths event. Thanks to their leadership, the four centers came together for what we trust will be a network of communities from mid-America working for interfaith understanding and acceptance.

WISDOM THROUGH INTERACTION

If these cities in the heart of our land can lead in acknowledging and embracing the increasing diversity of our country, it can be a model for others to do the same. In our discussion, one insight that emerged for me is the difference between truth and wisdom. So often when the issue of different religions or faith traditions come up, the question is over the truth of some doctrinal statement or claim about the religious founder or leader. We can compare and even argue about the truth of a certain statement, or compare

practices or institutions, but the real question is: What is the wisdom that we might learn through our interaction with others? Wisdom is not a "true or false" topic. It can change as we seek better approximations of wisdom through our experience, especially the experience of interacting with someone who is different, who comes from a different tradition and had different experiences.

Taking wisdom as the goal leads us away from the binary approach of discussing whether some claim is true. Wisdom goes beyond our limited views, or limited language, or our differences in practice. From our distinct positions and histories, we can still seek wisdom in our journey together.

Our discussions also went beyond the different traditions or histories, but also to the generational differences. Why is it that more and more of the millennial generation have become disillusioned with institutions?

As we consider the next generation in interfaith spaces, we must remember that people feel welcomed and invested when they are given representation, visibility, and voice. According to a 2014 Pew Research Study, approximately 35 percent of millennials identify as religiously unaffiliated or "nones," making this the largest category of self-identification among Americans born between 1981 and 1996. If our interfaith spaces are not creative and open enough to welcome voices from atheist, agnostic, secular, humanist, and no-faith perspectives, then it should come as no surprise that the "nones" feel little investment in the inter-

faith conversations. If we engage these perspectives positively as traditions, world-views or philosophies right alongside those of faith communities, then we can in fact deepen the wisdom and cooperation of interfaith.

Our former program manager, Katie Gordon, demonstrated this in her participation in the "Nuns and Nones" gatherings, where the Dominican Sisters at Marywood in Grand Rapids and "nones" of the millennial generation share conversations and dreams about new initiatives for justice. Another example is the increasingly popular podcast, "Harry Potter and The Sacred Text," which applies the disciplines for reading and mediating used in religious communities with their respective scriptures to an everyday, non-religious piece of literature. This isn't to say that this story series is worshiped or seen as "holy," but that disciplines like *Pardes*, from the Jewish exegetical tradition, and *Lectio Divina*, from the Christian exegetical tradition, when applied to a deeply loved book or series, can be compelling and intriguing for religious and non-religious audiences alike.

As human beings we share a common longing for relationships. We have such wonderful gifts to share with one another, places to begin good conversations and wisdom to be gained, if we are creative enough to give it a try. This is the richness of interfaith engagement.

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