

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Difference between thin, thick dialogue

Note: *In 2012, The Grand Rapids Press was a partner in the communitywide "Year of Interfaith Understanding" initiative. The success of that project led to an ongoing effort to build interfaith understanding in West Michigan. This new weekly column, Interfaith Insights, is one such effort. It is coordinated by Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, and will be written each week by Kindschi and others in the interfaith community.*

During the 2012: Year of Interfaith Understanding, congregations from all faith traditions, as well as various community groups, participated in more than 300 events.

As facilitators, we emphasized the distinction between "thin" interfaith dialogue and "thick" dialogue.

In thin interfaith dialogue, we seek to affirm our faith in terms that are thin enough to not be in conflict with someone else and their faith. For example, the theologian Hans Kung has said that all religions have in common the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." Religion scholar Karen Armstrong has boiled down all faith traditions to the common element of compassion.

While these attempts to find commonality are of value, we also have encouraged a dialogue that asks each person to share the "thickness" of one's faith, but in a spirit of openness to the other per-



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son's full faith expression as well. We can learn from the commonalities but also the differences.

If we are all alike, there is not much to learn nor is there an opportunity for growth. If we truly believe the human perspective is limited, and God is greater than any one person's understanding, then we have the opportunity to enhance our own faith understanding by interaction and dialogue with those who see faith through different eyes.

My own experience during that year of interfaith understanding was that the insights I received from others forced me to look more closely at my own faith. It led me to a deeper appreciation and understanding of my Christian heritage.

This past year, I had the privilege of studying at Cambridge University as a vis-

iting fellow in the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme. I learned from a variety of professors who taught Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist thought.

I also was invited to spend time with the students of the Cambridge Muslim College, a program training future teachers and leaders of mosques in Britain.

As I learned more about Islam and the Muslim community in Great Britain, I found my own Christian understanding was enhanced. Learning from and about these students and their deep faith commitment challenged me to see more clearly my own tradition and beliefs.

That is the goal of our West Michigan interfaith project: to understand, appreciate and accept others while growing in one's own faith.

Let it be so.