

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Seeing the winter darkness as a festival of light

By Douglas Kindschi

Director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at GVSU

It is impossible not to notice this is the Christmas season. In many ways, it has become a secular holiday, with shopping, gift giving, office parties, eggnog, mistletoe, sending out of holiday greetings, Christmas trees, Santa Claus, etc.

But for many, it still is a religious holiday celebrated with singing, special concerts and religious services. In the Christian liturgical year, the season begins with Advent, the four Sundays before Dec. 25. For our Jewish



Kindschi

friends and neighbors, it is the season of Chanukah, which this year began Tuesday and lasts until Dec. 24. Since the Jewish calendar is lunar, the timing is not always such. Chanukah can begin anywhere from late November to late December. In 2016, it will begin on Dec. 24, the day Christians celebrate Christmas Eve, the high point of the Christian religious services during this season.

Chanukah sometimes is spelled Hanukkah, but the Hebrew term has a more guttural sound, somewhat like the "ch" in Bach, rather than the soft "h" that is normal in English.

While not considered a major Jewish holiday, Chanukah celebrates the rededication of the temple following the defeat of the Syrian occupation in the second century B.C. The menorah was to be lit again, but there was only enough oil for one day, and yet the flame continued for eight days. This miracle led to Chanukah being called the Festival of Lights.

Christians also mark the season by lighting a candle each of the four Sundays of Advent. Light is such an important part of these celebrations, in part because of the time of year, winter solstice, when daylight is the shortest in the Northern Hemisphere. Celebrating Christmas on Dec. 25 has no basis in the biblical stories, but might go back to the popular Roman festival of light called Saturnalia, honoring the deity Saturn, which was celebrated during this time of year for centuries before. When Christianity became the state religion in the

fourth century, this most popular festival was incorporated into a celebration of the birth of Christ. Many of the traditions, such as gift giving and singing in the streets, were given new religious interpretations.

These festivals of light have different traditions and meaning in our culture. The victory of light over darkness also represents the victory of knowledge over ignorance and understanding over prejudice. The darkest day of the year also can be a time of renewal, expectation, celebration and hope.

Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu