BRIDGING FAITHS, BUILDING COMMUNITY
The Kaufman Interfaith Institute is part of a rich history of interfaith dialogue in West Michigan. In 1989, respected community leader Sylvia Kaufman initiated a Jewish-Christian dialogue as part of the centennial celebration of the Jewish community’s presence in Muskegon, Michigan. This led to conferences every three years and eventually to the establishment of the Sylvia and Richard Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

Sylvia Kaufman’s vision led to collaboration with other colleges and seminaries leading to their sponsorship of an annual interfaith conference. Since the establishment of the institute, the programming has been expanded to include many events throughout the year, collaboration with other organizations, small group connections, as well as active on-campus programming. International efforts have been supported by grants and include an interfaith approach to science and religion.

The institute is now a part of the university’s Division of Inclusion and Equity working with other social justice units on campus. The community outreach established at the beginning continues to be the major focus for the institute.
The Jewish-Christian Dialogue that Sylvia Kaufman initiated in Muskegon in 1989 was held every three years. In 2006, the dialogue moved to Grand Valley State University and expanded to include the Muslim tradition. The expanded Triennial Interfaith Dialogue brings internationally respected Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders to our community. The dialogue themes have included:

2006 Religion and Power: The Power to Create, the Power to Destroy
2009 Religion and the Challenges of Modernity
2012 Living with God in a Time of Suffering
2015 To Repair the World: How Does Religion Help or Hinder?
2018 Religious Identity: Dividing or Uniting?

Martin Marty, professor emeritus, University of Chicago
Donniel Hartman, rabbi and president of Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem
Cynthia Campbell, president emerita, McCormick Theological Seminary
James Carroll, author of Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews
Ingrid Mattson, professor and previous president of Islamic Society of North America
In 2000, Sylvia Kaufman invited the colleges, universities, and seminaries in the area to join together in sponsoring annual interfaith events in the intervening years between the Triennial Dialogues. Each conference features a single speaker and breakout sessions provided by faculty from the academic institutions. The current consortium members are

Aquinas College  
Calvin College  
Calvin Theological Seminary  
Cornerstone University  
Grand Valley State University  
Hope College  
Kuyper College  
Western Theological Seminary

David Nirenberg, professor at the University of Chicago, spoke at the 2008 conference at Aquinas College.

Margaret Mitchell, professor and dean of the Divinity School, University of Chicago, was the speaker at the 2013 conference held at Calvin Theological Seminary.

Omid Safi, professor of Islamic studies at University of North Carolina, spoke at the 2010 conference at Calvin College.

R. Scott Appleby, professor and dean of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame, spoke at the 2017 conference held at Aquinas College.

In 2016, Amy-Jill Levine, university professor of New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt University, spoke at Calvin College.
Grand Valley State University established the Sylvia and Richard Kaufman Interfaith Institute and began a campaign to build an endowment for its support. Many West Michigan people caught the vision and contributed. In 2010, Douglas Kindschi was asked to be the founding director of the institute. An interfaith planning group was formed and the idea of having a whole year of interfaith activity was presented to then-mayor of Grand Rapids, George Heartwell. The Grand Rapids Press announced the project in a front-page story in September 2011, and planning began for the “2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding.” Three councils were established to make plans for the year-long event:

- Congregations Council comprised of clergy and lay members from the various religious traditions;
- Campus Council with representatives from the eight consortium campuses; and
- Community Council comprised of organizations in the community including museums, symphony, and theater groups.

Mayor George Heartwell’s official declaration proclaiming 2012 the “Year of Interfaith Understanding” for Grand Rapids helped kick off an effort that ultimately featured more than 300 events and national recognition, with coverage by PBS.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who also founded the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, gave the annual address at the Economic Club of Grand Rapids. Blair helped further the spirit of the “Year of Interfaith Understanding” by meeting privately with an interfaith group of high school students from the area.

The Grand Rapids Press supported the “Year of Interfaith Understanding” with a front-page story and weekly listing of the activities taking place in the community.
In 2015, the institute moved its agenda from talk to action, from understanding to service. We would not only dialogue but would also do service together. A new interfaith service council was formed bringing together the various faith traditions with service organizations in the community to coordinate the “Year of Interfaith Service.” Food pantries, Habitat for Humanity, hospice organizations, environmental groups, and others came together with the faith communities to plan and implement service projects carried out by faith groups working together.

In 2017, partnerships among congregations were formed and a new effort was launched: “2018 Year of Interfaith Friendship.” Understanding dealt with the head and knowledge of others and their faith traditions. Service engaged our hands as we worked together for the common good. Friendships involve the heart as we get to know others around common interests. Affinity groups formed around topics such as reading books, eating and cooking together, watching and discussing films, playing chess, creating art, reading various scriptures, contemplation, and sharing insights.

Habitat for Humanity builds were a key part of the “Year of Interfaith Service.” This collective work by volunteers represented what the designated year of service was about: harnessing the positive energy of the interfaith community into actions that contribute to the greater good.

The affinity group, Interfaith Imagination, comes together to make art and learn from each other.

Volunteers from Calvin College met with members of the At-Tawheed Mosque to help clean up Plaster Creek, which runs through the mosque property.

The affinity group, Interfaith Foodies, enjoys visiting ethnic restaurants and cooking together to build friendships around their common interest.

Johanna Osman from the Wege Foundation talks with Imam Dr. Sahibzada.
In 2014, the Kaufman Interfaith Institute established the Sylvia Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Award, recognizing leaders in West Michigan who, like Kaufman, are committed to carrying out the dialogue and service that promotes understanding and mutual respect.

Past recipients have brought varied backgrounds to their interfaith journey and stewardship, from leading a house of worship to working as a public servant.

Richard Rhem, former pastor of Christ Community Church in Spring Lake, received the award in 2014 for his pioneering work on interfaith understanding. Sylvia Kaufman said of him: “You were called not to judge, but to serve.”

Greg Kaufman presented the 2016 award to former Mayor George Heartwell for his contributions to the interfaith efforts as well as his public service.

The 2018 award was given to the Padnos Families, represented by Seymour Padnos and Jeff Padnos, both of whom have been active in support of the institute and its mission.

The three founders of the Interfaith Dialogue Association, Ghazala Munir, Marchiene Rienstra, and Lillian Sigal, received the award in 2015.

Longtime leaders of the Muskegon faith community were honored in 2017 for their interfaith leadership in the early Jewish-Christian Dialogue. Rabbi Alan Alpert of Temple B’nai Israel and the Reverend Don Matthews, retired pastor for First Presbyterian Church in Muskegon, received the award.
The spirit of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute is represented in the cooperative programs held in the community to enlighten, inform, and promote inclusivity.

These events bring together diverse voices and faith traditions to find a common ground while still honoring individual experiences. The institute champions “thick dialogue,” meaning people should bring the complexities of their beliefs and traditions to these interfaith efforts rather than shedding conflicting layers to get to a kernel of common ground. In the end, exploring the full spectrum of everyone’s beliefs often results in discovering commonality that they didn’t know existed.

Whether it is working with others in the community to host a civilized discussion about polarizing issues or organizing a celebration that welcomes all and encourages learning through differences, the institute has found great success carrying out its mission through these community collaborations.

The Abrahamic Dinner, in cooperation with the Niagara Foundation, meets in different houses of worship each year to enjoy fellowship and hear from representatives of the three faith traditions. In 2018, the theme was “Listening to New Voices” and featured Margarita Solis-Deal, director of the Dominican Center; Zahabia Ahmed-Usmami, program coordinator at Kaufman Interfaith Institute; and Shelby Bruseloff, student life coordinator, Hillel Campus Alliance of Michigan.

Each fall the institute helps facilitate an Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration bringing together religious and secular traditions. IDA president, Fred Stella, plays a Hindu piece.

The Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA), now a part of the Kaufman Institute, created the annual Rabbi Sigal Memorial Lecture in honor of the scholar and former rabbi at Ahavas Israel Synagogue. Jennifer Bailey, African Methodist Episcopal Church minister and founding executive director of the Faith Matters Network, was the featured speaker at the 2016 lecture.

In cooperation with the Dominican Center, Kyle Kooyers, Kaufman Institute program manager, leads the procession for the Interfaith Memorial Service.
The placement of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute in the Division of Inclusion and Equity in 2017 marked the opportunity for increasing interfaith work with students on the campuses. The university created a staff position for the new Campus Interfaith Resources program that works in cooperation with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute community programs.

Eboo Patel, founder and director of the Interfaith Youth Core, calls colleges the “ideal civic laboratory for interfaith cooperation” and encourages students to build bridges across religious differences while remaining true to their own tradition. With this charge in mind, Kaufman Interfaith Institute created an inter-institutional interfaith cohort with a group of students from numerous West Michigan campuses. Interfaith work with students is also promoted through internships at Aquinas, Calvin, Hope, and Kuyper colleges. Thanks to a generous endowment gift to the Institute, the Kruizenga Interfaith Ambassador fund supports the Hope College intern.

In 2015, Eboo Patel spoke to audiences at both Grand Valley State University and Aquinas College about the importance of interfaith leadership in diverse communities. He also met with student leaders at the two schools emphasizing interfaith engagement as vital to the mission of the colleges.

Students from West Michigan schools receive training and also participate in planning for leadership conferences in cooperation with the Interfaith Youth Core.

Kevin McIntosh, Campus Interfaith Resources coordinator, brings a group of students to visit a local mosque.

Students also serve on the planning committee for the Made in Michigan Interfaith Lab, a leadership conference held for students who want to lead interfaith efforts on their respective campuses. Participants learn a wide range of tools for promoting diversity and interfaith inclusion.
Exploring the intersection of religion and science from an interfaith perspective is another aspect of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute’s mission. The Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion for the Greater Grand Rapids Area sponsors conferences that address issues such as why people believe in gods and the effectiveness of prayer.

This area has also developed an international aspect with major funding from the John Templeton Foundation to address an Abrahamic approach to science and religion. Thirty scholars from the three faith traditions and from over ten countries work on this project with annual workshops to share their progress. Kelly James Clark is the senior research fellow with the institute that directs this effort bringing together scientists, philosophers, and theologians to address randomness in science and providence in the faith traditions. It has taken him and the institute’s effort to many countries in the Middle East including Israel, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, and Oman.

Alvin Plantinga, retired professor of philosophy from the University of Notre Dame, was one of the Grand Dialogue speakers and was awarded the Templeton Prize in 2017.

Grand Valley State University President Thomas J. Haas meets with Mohammed Al-Mamari, the scientific advisor to The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Oman, at the exhibition from the global project, “Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence,” that was brought to the university’s campus.

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Caner Taslaman, professor of philosophy at Yıldız Technical University in Istanbul, Kelly James Clark, senior research fellow at Kaufman Institute, and Nidhal Guessoum, astrophysicist at the American University in UAE, at the Templeton workshop in Macedonia.
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