

# **BUILDING INTERFAITH BRIDGES**

## **West Michigan's Journey toward Principled Pluralism**



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The Aspen Institute  
2300 N Street, NW  
Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20037

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*“The unique contribution of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute is that it creates a framework which transcends dialogue and engages in interfaith learning between people of faith. It creates an honest and safe space which inspires the presenters, the faculty and students, and the whole community who participated in the sessions, to reflect more deeply on their own religious lives, to share their own struggles, and to experience “holy envy” as they learn from the depth of another’s tradition. The Kaufman Institute models how faith can be a powerful source for respect and healing.”*

**Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman**, President, Shalom Hartman Institute.  
Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue participant in 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015

*“Engaging with scholars from other religious traditions around challenging topics that touch the core of human experience was an incredible opportunity to expand my own understanding and faith. All of us who presented were also deeply moved by the quality of conversation and questions from those who attended.”*

**Rev. Dr. Cynthia Campbell**, President Emerita, McCormick Theological Seminary.  
Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue participant in 2012 and 2015

*“The Kaufman Interfaith Institute is a preeminent example of the power of genuine collaboration between a university and its surrounding community. The Institute consistently provides intellectually grounded, community-oriented programming that engenders interfaith understanding and mutual respect in West Michigan. The vision and spirit of the founders are flourishing through the Institute’s impact, and Interfaith America is proud to be a partner in this vital work.”*

**Dr. Eboo Patel**, President, Interfaith America.  
Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue participant in 2018





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# Preface

Like many places, West Michigan has a long history of religious diversity. People of many faiths have lived in community for years on end. Yet unlike many places in the U.S., their interfaith journey has been cultivated with purpose and intention, filled with thoughtful dialogue, and nourished by a curiosity to learn about one another.

This journey involved many people from many backgrounds coming together to better understand one another and to honor one another's faith practices.

This journey hasn't been easy; reconciling the perspectives and practices of diverse communities comes with its own challenges. But with challenge comes opportunity, and West Michigan illustrates how meeting our differences with openness and integrity can create a meaningful, intergenerational impact. Here's one key lesson we learn through the interfaith journey of West Michigan: yearning to understand our deepest held beliefs and our sincerest practices is part of what makes us human. Education, civic engagement, community organizing efforts, media involvement, youth experiences, and volunteer organizations are just a small cross-section of how interfaith work in Grand Rapids and Muskegon stretches into different facets of our world.

The Aspen Institute's Religion & Society Program captured the interfaith work taking place in West Michigan in 2015 with our publication, *Interfaith Engagement in West Michigan: A Brief History and Analysis*. Reporting on the importance of interfaith work in West Michigan continues with the publication of this report, simultaneously released on the Program's tenth anniversary.

The Program's hope, and my hope, is that this report will inspire other cities and communities to engage in interfaith work with purpose and intention. This interfaith tale of two cities demonstrates that with committed individuals and the ability to acknowledge and honor differences, interfaith work can span decades and build lifelong relationships.

May we all be inspired by the interfaith work of the people of Grand Rapids and Muskegon.

Warmly,



**Simran Jeet Singh**  
Executive Director  
Religion & Society Program  
The Aspen Institute

# Introduction

This is an interfaith story: understanding, service, and friendships through the lens of interfaith relationships. This is a story about individuals serious about their own particular faith; these same individuals reached out through dialogue about different faiths to better know their neighbors. This is also a story of how people from different faith traditions can work alongside one another to develop greater ease in communication and broader circles of cooperation. Their communities are enriched for every member by the building of interfaith bridges.

The story told here is about two West Michigan communities, Muskegon and Grand Rapids, and the evolution of their robust interfaith movements from the late 1980s up to the present day. These communities created yearlong celebrations which in turn evolved into decades-long, institutionally sustained programs.

This story could have turned out very differently. Religious pluralism and religious conflict are shaped by a particular community's actions and attitudes, whether conflictual or cooperative and whether among adherents of the same faith or between adherents of different faiths. Efforts to build bridges between persons of differing religions have gone on many times and many places where people live harmoniously with others who do not share the same beliefs. Similarly, misunderstandings about religious differences can lead to conflicts among those who, stumbling over their disagreements, live in unnecessary tension with one another. Dialogue can also be difficult within religious traditions themselves. Conflict may erupt about proper statements of a faith's tenets, its ritual practices, and behavioral standards.

Tolerance entails little more than putting up with one another or avoiding tensions by being indifferent. Principled pluralism is more deliberate and more positive. It encourages appreciation for differences that grows through familiarity; in particular familiarity that develops when people of different faiths discuss their beliefs and commitments, explain their habits and practices to each other, and discover ways to work cooperatively without eroding their differences.

In developing the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, comparative religion scholar Diana Eck defined pluralism<sup>1</sup> as follows:

- “Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity.
- Pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.
- Pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments.
- Pluralism is based on dialogue.”

The interfaith story of West Michigan includes how the principles of pluralism were enthusiastically embraced by two highly religious communities. These communities reached across what first appeared to be profound differences, only to discover that it is possible for neighbors to appreciate one another. Their experiences underscore what is particular and local in interfaith initiatives. Their experiences also demonstrate what is universal and repeatable when people of different faiths make efforts to honor the diversity of beliefs within their communities.

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1 “Pluralism Project Celebrates Silver Anniversary.” *Harvard Gazette*. Harvard University, September 19, 2016, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/newsplus/pluralism-project-celebrates-silver-anniversary/>.

These communities put in motion the bold call of the Aspen Institute's Religion & Society Program (formerly the Inclusive America Project). This call was for the United States, "to move beyond mere tolerance to informed respect, and that we manage our religious differences in ways that contribute to the common good"<sup>2</sup> as stated in its 2013 report, *Principled Pluralism: Report of the Inclusive America Project*.

This volume builds and expands upon *Interfaith Engagement in West Michigan: A Brief History and Analysis*,<sup>3</sup> a 2015 publication of the Religion & Society Program at the Aspen Institute, written by Joseph DeMott. The authors owe much to DeMott's detailed research and insightful reporting, while also incorporating regional and national events that have transpired since that report was published.

Though the story told here took place in West Michigan, it mirrors similar stories that have taken place across the United States and around the globe. The interfaith story of West Michigan is fitting for the present day because it demonstrates that, when encountering religious variety, familiarity is safer than indifference and cooperation is more fruitful than conflict.

How can this be accomplished? By getting to know each other in deep and meaningful ways. That is the essence of what it means to be interfaith.

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2 Joseph DeMott. *Principled Pluralism: Report of the Inclusive America Project* (Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, June 2013), 10, [https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/files/content/docs/pubs/Principled-Pluralism\\_0.pdf](https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/files/content/docs/pubs/Principled-Pluralism_0.pdf).

3 Joseph DeMott. *Interfaith Engagement in West Michigan: A Brief History and Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, April 2015), <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Interfaith-in-W-Mich-online-version.pdf>.



## CHAPTER ONE

# From “Judeo-Christian” to Potluck Nation: The Changing Picture of American Faith

Looking across the audience at a Kaufman Interfaith Institute conference, one can reflect, “This is my community and faith matters to us all.” The audience was drawn from many faith traditions; every seat in the house was taken. The experience of being together in one room for one event in no way diminished the particularity of any individual’s faith tradition or commitments. The conference hall was in a public university in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a city once known more for rock-ribbed Christianity than religious pluralism. This traditionally conservative but rapidly changing community is now commonplace for such warmly engaged gatherings.

West Michigan has long been known as a highly religious, solidly conservative region, and a great place to raise a family. While that popular shorthand still holds true to an extent, the predominantly Protestant and Catholic cities of Muskegon and Grand Rapids mirrored the country’s movement towards an increased religious diversity. The tension inherent in the changes taking place nationally have been felt in this region as religious, cultural, and political conflicts that carved deep divisions between people. Within that tension, however, the opportunity for healing exists, due in no small part to the high faith commitment within these two communities.

This reality in 2022 in West Michigan was not inevitable fifty years ago, as this area was almost entirely Protestant and Catholic. These thriving religious communities coming together was the result of more than thirty years of interfaith efforts in two religiously traditional West Michigan cities: one effort in Muskegon beginning with the centennial celebration of its Jewish community, the other taking root in Grand Rapids with living room gatherings of broad-spirited friends. Both efforts were led by women with ambitious visions. These women parlayed personal relationships into lasting initiatives that eventually came under the wing of a supporting institution, Grand Valley State University (GVSU).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his final book, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, suggested that moral reflection, when carried out in a gathering of those who share faith, supports community in ways no other institution in society can. Rabbi Sacks wrote that religion has the power to bring people together, helps them stay together, and encourages them to find strength through cooperation. In doing so, people can move from abstraction to reality and move from theories about religion to actual interfaith relationships.

Growth and maturation took place in Muskegon and Grand Rapids through interfaith relationships. It is the reason to tell this story about their interfaith experiences. This interfaith story is offered as a template for how communities can grow together despite the context of broader social forces that would tear individuals apart. If Grand Rapids and Muskegon can foster interfaith understanding and cooperation in an increasingly divided America, there is promise for diverse and changing communities elsewhere.

## A Religious Self-Portrait, 1950s Style

This interfaith story begins at a benchmark event that occurred in 1955. Scholar Will Herberg wrote *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, thus labeling Americans in the three named categories. The idea caught the public imagination and was repeated often; it became conventional to refer to the religions of the United States as “Judeo-Christian.” That characterization eliminated the long-held distinction between Protestant and Catholic.

When Herberg’s book was published, persons identifying themselves as either Protestant or Catholic together made up 92 percent of the population in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Jews made up another four percent. Herberg himself was part of the Jewish four percent.<sup>5</sup> By claiming recognition for a relatively small group with a long and significant religious and cultural presence in the United States, Herberg altered the way Americans referred to themselves religiously. The final four percent of Herberg’s “Judeo-Christian” spectrum was left invisible.

Even those who confidently identify with one of the faiths broadly defined by Herberg — Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish — did not necessarily know about or understand others gathered under that same rubric. Tensions that surface within religious traditions may take the form of intra-faith battles, whose vehemence can rival the bitterest interfaith differences. The nationally-felt differences over the inclusion and role of women and LGBTQ+ individuals in religious life have been intense in West Michigan, sometimes compromising progress in interfaith understanding.

## The Invisible Four Percent

The phenomenon of invisible religion resulted from many in the United States, either intentionally or habitually, not interacting with those they judged to be religiously unlike them. There was a wide array of faith practices in the United States for centuries, even though they remained largely hidden. The original peoples of the Americas were deeply spiritual, as evidenced in their stories, traditions, ceremonies, and way of life. Perhaps as many as ten to fifty percent of enslaved Africans brought to this country were Muslim and, while not documented well, there are indications of individuals practicing Islam into the 19th century.<sup>6</sup> The first Christian African American churches were organized before the writing of the U.S. Constitution but were outside of majority view.

Sikhs were the first group of South Asians to migrate to North America in the 1800s. Buddhism arrived with Chinese workers in the mid-19th century. The Parliament of World Religions in 1893 in Chicago may have brought together Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Unitarians, and adherents of the Shinto and Zoroastrian traditions for the first time in modern history, but discrimination and immigration restrictions perpetuated their invisibility. They remained largely hidden from the “Judeo-Christian” majority until the Nationality Act of 1965.

The traditional melting pot image expected dissimilar or marginal groups to assimilate into the dominant society in the United States. Getting along with those who are similar seemed so much easier than getting along with those who are different. Over the years, this attitude impacted racial, gender, and economic minorities; among differing faiths, the effect was especially consequential. Many solid citizens with good intentions lived by the dictum that if you want to get along with people, you should leave religion and politics at the door where paths did cross.

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4 “Religion,” Gallup News, Gallup. Accessed August 22, 2022. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.

5 Ibid.

6 “The First American Muslims,” The Pluralism Project, Harvard University. Accessed August 22, 2022. <https://pluralism.org/the-first-american-muslims>.

## Church and State Open Their Doors

Outreach by individuals eager to learn about the faith and culture of others generated new interfaith encounters among Americans. This also occurred due to institutional and legal changes.

Important legal changes shaped the attitudes of Americans regarding religion. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed to prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The passage of the Nationality Act of 1965 removed the quota systems for immigrants from Asia and Africa. As people from those regions of the globe resettled in the United States, they brought with them their identities, their ethnicities, and their religions.

One significant faith-based institutional change served as a wake-up call to religious division and proposed a new and concerted effort for interfaith dialogue. This significant change occurred in the Catholic Church during The Second Vatican Council in 1965. An enthusiastic attendee was Bishop Joseph Breitenbeck of the Diocese of Grand Rapids, which also includes Muskegon. The declaration by Pope Paul VI titled *Nostra Aetate* (“in our time”) was a bold statement on the part of the church to declare a new embrace of other world religions. The document specifically mentioned Hinduism and Buddhism, regarding them with “sincere reverence” and acknowledging that they “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”<sup>7</sup> *Nostra Aetate* also makes specific mention of Islam, saying the “Church regards with esteem” this Abrahamic faith. It pointedly confessed and apologized for the ways in which Catholic theology and history participated in the persecution of Jews and “decries hatred, persecution, displays of antisemitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”<sup>8</sup>

Additional institutional encouragement for interfaith encounters was provided by ecumenical organizations of Christian denominations at the global (World Council of Churches), national (National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA), and local levels through the councils of churches in many communities, including Muskegon and Grand Rapids. These Christian councils often had interfaith departments encouraging relationships between their members and those of other religions or provided programs that included individuals from the interfaith community.

## Newcomers Bring Tasty Dishes to the Potluck

In *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, published in 2001, Diana Eck describes the United States as “the world’s most religiously diverse nation.”<sup>9</sup> She based her observations on field studies done with her students as part of the Harvard University Pluralism Project<sup>10</sup> which carefully explored Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims in the United States and where they lived side by side with their Christian neighbors.

Today’s United States looks less like Herberg’s “Judeo-Christian” country than what interfaith activist Eboo Patel calls the “potluck nation: one where everyone is offered a place at the table.”<sup>11</sup> It’s a vision he advances in the organization Interfaith America,<sup>12</sup> whose nationwide initiatives aim to build bridges of cooperation through religious diversity. Interfaith *awareness*, however, extends to knowing what goes on in places of

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7 The Holy See. “Declaration On the Relation of The Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* Proclaimed By His Holiness Pope Paul VI On October 28, 1965,” [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nos-tra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nos-tra-aetate_en.html).

8 Ibid.

9 Diana Eck. *A New Religious America: How a Christian Country Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 12.

10 The Pluralism Project at Harvard University. “A New Religious America,” Harvard University, <https://pluralism.org/new-religious-america>.

11 Eboo Patel. *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 107.

12 “Interfaith America Magazine,” Interfaith America, <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/magazine/>.



*Eboo Patel of Interfaith America speaks at a Kaufman Interfaith Institute event.*

worship or understanding the rituals or events celebrated by people of faith in their homes. As interfaith awareness develops, interfaith communication also deepens personal friendships.

Adherents of worldwide religions brought their faith with them as they settled in a new home, transplanting forms and practices that reflected what was familiar to them in their country of origin. Simple labels tell us far less about religious groups; getting to know our interfaith neighbors moves beyond knowing what to call them. Neighbors truly get to know one another when they become acquainted with their neighbors' lived story and how faith plays a role in their lives.

## **Resources Found in Interfaith Encounters**

How can we sort out the incongruence of what appear to be countercurrents? We are more connected than ever before; at the same time there is an epidemic of isolation and fear that has been exacerbated

by the COVID-19 pandemic. Interfaith dialogue can help. Opportunities for interfaith encounters are more abundant than ever before. People increasingly encounter others with beliefs different from their own; that is the reality of the United States in this millennium. This is also happening simultaneously with widespread concern about polarization and isolation.

## **Coming Together Against Fear**

Fear of cultural clashes, conflicts, and actual violence changed our public spaces, habits, and attitudes. Today's younger generations will likely never know what it is like to walk into an airport boarding area without going through security, or not reviewing lockdown procedures during the first few weeks of school each fall. We are surrounded by signs of worry; they are reminders that situations can easily erupt.

Violence can take many forms. One that continues to rear its ugly head is violence acted out in hate crimes directed toward racial or religious groups. In 2012, a lone gunman entered a Sikh gurdwara in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, targeting men who wore the faith's traditional turban. He killed six people and wounded four others. In 2015, a gunman entered Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where a group of people invited him to join their Bible study. He then killed nine of them. In 2018, during a Sabbath service at Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, a gunman entered the building and killed eleven worshippers, wounding six others. In 2019, a gunman shot 100 people at the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing fifty-one of them. These high-profile murders are only a fraction of a much larger number of reported hate crimes during these years.

Hate crimes also occurred in West Michigan. In 2019, the doors of Temple Emanuel in Grand Rapids were defaced with antisemitic posters credited to a white supremacist group. One bore an image of Adolf Hitler, while the other read, "A crusade against Semite led subhumans." Although no shots were fired, these messages would have done emotional violence to congregants and Sunday school students had the rabbi not removed them early on Sunday morning.

What these events have in common is that they were attacks that took place against persons practicing their religion – although when it comes to hatred, religion and race are not easily separated. Many of the attackers browsed internet sites advocating violence rooted in hatred for certain religious and racial groups. Misinformation, religious illiteracy, and a breakdown of community solidarity created room for these acts of violence. If community trust is broken in this way, can it be rebuilt?

Interfaith dialogue, programs to build friendship and familiarity, and shared community-wide events are starting points for shifting from isolation and prejudice to communication and acceptance. We do not

have to erase our differences to live peaceably together. We do need to build familiarity and trust with one another so that strangeness does not trigger fear or aggression.

## **‘Thick Dialogue’ Deepens Understanding**

Essential to the process of neighborly familiarity is the intention to invite “thick dialogue,” i.e., deepening relationships by gaining an understanding of different beliefs, doctrines, motives, and actions as they take form in many different circumstances. “Thin dialogue” can threaten some faith communities by watering down deep commitments to lowest common denominators. As we discover what matters to others, we also reveal the ethics by which they intend to live and the beliefs by which they are sustained in the process. Thick dialogue is also a prime value of principled pluralism and is the opposite of snap judgments based on buzzwords or platitudes. It respectfully clarifies differences and avoids watering down complex views. Thick understanding becomes possible through face-to-face encounters as we move side by side through our many varied life experiences.

## **Know Thy Neighbor**

“Knowing” is the present approach as we become increasingly visible to and familiar with one another. Interfaith encounters are not about defending our respective religions. Interfaith encounters are instead about *knowing* our neighbors in many ways, including understanding the content of our respective religions, showing respect for each other’s faith practices and events, and cooperating in day-to-day ways with persons shaped by different beliefs.

When people begin to engage one another in honest dialogue on faith, they can recognize similarities that have previously been masked. Only then are they able to know differences that deserve to be taken seriously. Difference is not a flaw, and it is not dangerous. Over the years, at the grassroots level in communities like Muskegon and Grand Rapids, this discovery began to build familiarity among various religious groups. Knowing more about the faith of others is certainly better than knowing less, knowing nothing, or believing misinformation.

## **Toward ‘Potluck Nation’ Cooperation**

In 2020’s *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again*, authors Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett remind us that we have been caught in a long shift from a “we” society to an “I” society. They also note that we have been at this point in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the so-called “Gilded Age,” when a similar polarity existed in incomes as well as in political and racial conflict. They describe an upswing of cooperation that developed during the first half of the previous century to the point during the 1950s and 1960s where bipartisan cooperation led to the national highway system, the expansion of voting rights, and civil rights legislation. They argued that America has come together as a “we” society before and we can do it again.

Could interfaith efforts in communities help swing us back towards “we” by taking moral leadership in bridging our deepening political and cultural divides, becoming the potluck nation that Eboo Patel describes? The stories of Muskegon and Grand Rapids suggest it can.

The value of dialogue and cooperation between individuals and groups who represent different faiths is not only to avoid negative events. The momentum of good interaction doesn’t stop when the pendulum reaches neutral; the momentum continues in a ripple effect that is enriching for an entire community far beyond the obvious impact of what is routinely described as religion.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Muskegon and Grand Rapids: An Interfaith Tale of Two Cities

Water, furniture, and faith: the cities of Muskegon and Grand Rapids were built of such sturdy resources; Muskegon on the shores of Lake Michigan and Grand Rapids along the Grand River. These cities thrived on hard work and devout worship. Indigenous and marginalized communities worked hard for their place in the lake-effect clouded sun. Their religious histories are infused with stalwart Calvinism, close-knit Catholicism, steadfast mainline Protestantism and long-standing though small Jewish communities. As the rest of the country has diversified in faith, so too has this green region of Michigan – a trend which over time these two cities came to not simply tolerate but celebrate.

### Meeting at the “Marshy River”

Muskegon, a town of nearly 40,000<sup>13</sup> along Lake Michigan, grew at the mouth of a river and centered around a harbor. The region was first inhabited by the Hopewell peoples some 2,000 years ago, and evidence of their sacred burial mounds dot the region. In the 18th century, trappers and traders came to the area and began to refer to it by the name the Odawa peoples had given to it: Muskegon or “marshy river.”

When lumber was being pulled out of Michigan’s abundant forests at the end of the 1800s, Muskegon became a boom town with nearly fifty<sup>14</sup> mills for processing timber. As the prosperity of the town grew, so did many forms of manufacturing. Muskegon began producing pianos, refrigerators, desks, ladders, oak filing cabinets, and much more that was shipped out through the Great Lakes to markets around the world.

### Commemorating One Hundred Years with a One-Year Celebration

In 1888, a group of Jewish citizens organized Temple B’nai Israel (meaning “the Sons of Israel”), a Reform synagogue in Muskegon. The larger community knew the Jewish community and the members of B’nai Israel through business contacts and their participation in local organizations. At the time of the congregation’s fiftieth anniversary observance, Protestant ministers participated in a dinner and program of celebration. During World War II, members of the congregation served in the armed forces.

By the time of its centennial in 1988 to 1989, the congregation of B’nai Israel numbered just under ninety families. Its membership included doctors, lawyers, and business owners who were significant leaders in the community. Members participated in local music and the arts; their children attended the public

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13 “Muskegon City, Michigan Search Results,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/search-results.html?search-Type=web&cssp=SERP&q=Muskegon%20city,%20Michigan>.

14 Daniel J. Yakes. “History of Muskegon,” Muskegon County MI Official Website, <https://www.co.muskegon.mi.us/770/History-of-Muskegon>.



schools. Temple B'nai Israel also had a women's organization (Daughters of Israel) who were well known for their willingness to lend support to community events. The stage was set to plan a centennial celebration not just for the Jewish community, but for the entire city of Muskegon.

One hundred years after B'nai Israel's founding, the city's Jewish community was preparing to celebrate its centennial. Sylvia Kaufman, a prominent member of B'nai Israel, took charge of creating some community events, beginning with an exhibit of Jewish life at the Muskegon Art Museum. Sylvia and her husband, Richard, had settled in Muskegon and built a successful company there. They were also involved in many community events that enriched the local culture. Sylvia brought to the centennial celebration her gifted imagination and ability to inspire others.

It is not in Sylvia Kaufman's nature to think small. Her vision to partner with the Muskegon Art Museum to commemorate the centennial kept growing until it became a yearlong interfaith celebration, including fifty-five programs for general audiences and fifteen programs designed for schools celebrating different religious communities.

In the fall of 1988, Kaufman told *The New York Times*, "People may not even know there's a Jewish community here, but after the next nine months they will – and in a positive way."<sup>15</sup> More than three decades later, she was right. The yearlong celebration of her faith community would have far longer-lasting and wider-ranging influence than she could have known then.

## Building on a Network of Relationships

What caused this swell of interest for a yearlong faith-based celebration that garnered both regional and national attention? Was it the friendliness of a close-knit town? Was it energized by appreciation of the Jewish community that had been contributing to the town's culture and growth for over 100 years? Was it the right time for interfaith initiatives? Perhaps it was the answers to these questions and more.

The Jewish community of Muskegon, as well as their friends and acquaintances, had a well-developed network of interfaith relationships necessary to bring about a yearlong centennial celebration. Planning for the celebration had certain important features worth noting that contributed to its success. From the beginning, the organizing committee included members from many other community organizations, as well as Christian churches. Their network of relationships made it possible for the organizing committee to partner with other cultural organizations by encouraging these organizations to incorporate a Jewish theme into their regular schedules of events. Rather than creating their own events, the committee approached these organizations with an idea, as well as funding and other means to make the centennial celebration happen. It was not just the congregation's celebration; it was also the community's celebration of its Jewish citizens. The full year of events was made possible by partnerships built on shared effort and shared benefit.



Sylvia Kaufman welcomes guests to an interfaith event.

15 Isabel Wilkerson, "Muskegon Journal; A Centennial in Honor of All Things Jewish," *New York Times*, September 28, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/09/28/us/muskegon-journal-a-centennial-in-honor-of-all-things-jewish.html>.

Among the organizations joining in the celebration were:

- Muskegon Museum of Art;
- Muskegon County Museum;
- Muskegon Community College;
- Baker College;
- West Michigan Symphony Orchestra;
- Muskegon Civic Theater;
- Hackley Public Library;
- Community Foundation for Muskegon County; and
- several Christian churches.

## Celebrating with Arts, Oratory, and Education

The centennial celebration began in a big way: the opening weekend in September 1988 featured a concert by the renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman at the historic Frauenthal Center. Three hundred guests attended a gala dinner with an entirely kosher menu before the concert. Selling 1,800 tickets in a town of 40,000 was an impressive accomplishment and the performance sold out well in advance. People came from not just across the region, but from across the nation to attend what some considered to be one of the biggest cultural events in Muskegon's history.



Rabbi Alan Alpert of Temple B'nai Israel.

That same weekend, the Muskegon County Museum opened an exhibit featuring Anne Frank, the diarist and Holocaust victim. At the opening of the exhibit, U.S. Senator Carl Levin, Michigan's longest-serving senator, offered remarks. Later in the centennial, the Muskegon Civic Theater produced *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. It was a success, with 1,500 middle school children attending a special matinee.

Dr. Dennis Devlin, a professor of history at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), was commissioned to write *Muskegon's Jewish Community: A Centennial History 1888-1988* to prepare for the opening of the celebratory year. The book was launched on the opening weekend of the centennial celebration.

That Sunday, Rabbi Alan Alpert of B'nai Israel and nine Christian clergy joined together for an interfaith service. An inspiring message was offered by U.S. Representative Guy Vander Jagt, a Yale Divinity School graduate and noted orator. Those gathered joined together in singing "God Bless America" at the close of the event. This choice of music was significant. When Irving Berlin, a Jewish composer and a refugee from the pogroms targeting Jews in Russia, wrote it in 1938, it was a plea for peace at a time when the events that led to the Holocaust were already on the horizon. Rep. Vander Jagt noted attendees sang it not as Jews or Christians but as "brothers of one nationality."

Although not all of the centennial's events were as dramatic as those of that opening weekend, they were significant, nonetheless.

- Area schools were provided with materials on Jewish history and the importance of civic and religious pluralism.
- The public library featured traditional Jewish literature and an exhibit on Jewish involvement in the civil rights movement.

- GVSU and Muskegon Community College each offered a lecture series about the Arab-Israeli conflict and Jewish history. The lectures were delivered by visiting experts from the University of Michigan.
- A small group met in a private home for interfaith dialogue, working from a structured discussion guide.
- Temple B'nai Israel held an interfaith Hanukkah celebration, Jewish cooking classes, and periodic interfaith discussions with local churches.

Although many of the events highlighted Jewish history, some drew significant attention to the contributions made by Jews to U.S. arts, culture, and religious dialogue. One event addressed the matter of Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue centered on theology. Several Muskegon congregations sponsored a two-day symposium in which Rabbi Eugene Borowitz and Reverend Paul van Buren spoke on "Understanding Each Other: Issues which Unite and Divide Jews and Christians." Rabbi Borowitz was a professor at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion who was well known for his book *The Masks Jews Wear: the Self-Deceptions of America's Jewry*. Rev. van Buren was a professor of religion at Temple University and an Episcopal priest who had written *Discerning the Way: A Theology of Jewish-Christian Reality*. The two theologians discussed how their respective views of religion were reflected in a way of life.

At the wrap-up of the centennial year in 1989, 400 participants gathered at the Muskegon Harbor Hilton for an interfaith Seder. Many of them were Christian and likely had never attended a Passover meal. The guests were seated at tables with at least two members of the Jewish community. Rabbi Alpert and Reverend Don Matthews, a Presbyterian minister, spoke about the importance of the Passover meal in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

## Making It Happen

Behind the scenes of this impressive array of activities, the Jewish Centennial Committee made it all work by figuring out how to pay for the celebration and spreading the word far and wide. The committee members took on a significant responsibility for assembling the funding that made the high quality of the events possible. They did so through foundations and charities, and by soliciting donations from local businesses. The committee then distributed these funds to augment the regular budgets of partnering organizations.

The committee also spread news of the centennial celebration publicity through local, statewide, and national media. Members distributed several thousands of brochures, posters, calendars, and announcements to a wide range of regional schools, universities, businesses, and cultural organizations. If its ability to reach all groups within Muskegon was remarkable, equally so was its reach beyond the community into the West Michigan region and across the state.

The centennial year brought Muskegon national attention in *The New York Times*,<sup>16</sup> *The Washington Post*,<sup>17</sup> *Detroit Free Press*, *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, *The Toronto Globe and Mail*, *Voice of America*, and *Religion News Service*. While Muskegon was celebrating its own heritage, it was also giving the possibility of interfaith cooperation in Middle America national visibility. A feature published by *The New York Times* written by Isabel Wilkerson quoted Senator Levin as calling it "a celebration of American pluralism."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> "Small Jewish Community's Centennial Attracts Wide Interest," *Washington Post*, October 22, 1988, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1988/10/22/small-jewish-communitys-centennial-attracts-wide-interest/b980cec2-0bd5-417c-bc44-53af912e9624/>.

<sup>18</sup> Wilkerson, "Muskegon Journal: A Centennial in Honor of All Things Jewish."

## Why Was the Centennial Celebration So Successful?

There are many other details of the Muskegon story that could be added to exemplify the dynamism of that year. As important as the details is the fact that this story offers an example for interfaith growth and can serve as a model of what is possible elsewhere. The celebration had several outstanding features.

- The centennial celebration began with **personal relationships** of individuals who already knew each other and were ready to pool their interests to form the planning committee.
- The planning committee had **broad representation** as it included members from other religious groups.
- The committee **built on existing resources** by reaching out to institutions and organizations that were already contributing to the vitality of the community.
- The committee was able to approach other community organizations by **offering something rather than asking for something** because the committee emphasized shared celebration rather than need.
- The network of cooperative partnerships across the community created events (music, visual arts, theater, holiday celebrations, outdoor events, festive meals, and religious observances) in a wide variety of comfort zones where there was **something for everyone**.
- The impact was both broad and deep as the story of a group was told in a variety of ways, **engaging the attention of those both familiar and unfamiliar with Jewish history and traditions**.
- Finally, a celebration with broad engagement and that lasted over many months created a **ripple effect of inspiration** that moved outward from the city of Muskegon, across the region, and drew national attention.

Many of the events would have drawn audiences regardless of whether they were part of an interfaith celebration. It did not take a Jewish temple's centennial year to bring out people interested in an exhibit of Marc Chagall's work. He was a widely known Jewish artist, and the drama of his scenes from Jewish life was familiar to many. His murals and stained-glass windows were well known from their installations in large cities. Viewing his work at the Muskegon Art Museum made not just Chagall and his work accessible; it also brought his Jewish faith to the forefront. Associating his work with the centennial celebration was a vivid reminder that this group of people living along the shores of Lake Michigan were also part of a worldwide tradition of art and culture.

## Leaving Lasting Legacies

Thirty years after the Jewish Centennial Celebration in Muskegon, West Michigan has continued to be a center for interfaith dialogue. The momentum created by the centennial celebration year was carried forward after the official celebrations concluded. Two developments are especially important as evidence of interfaith solidarity encouraged by the celebration.

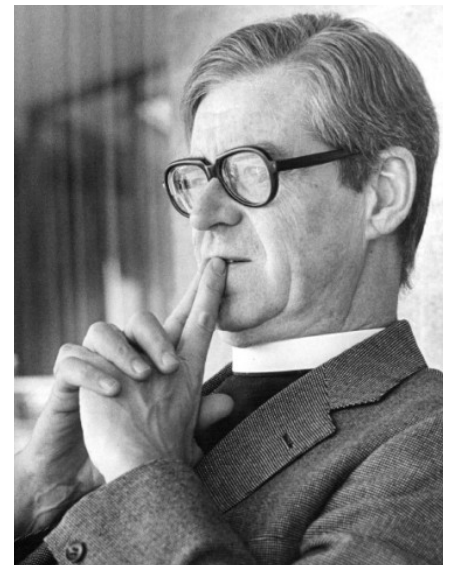
One development was the West Shore Committee for Jewish-Christian Dialogue. It was formed by clergy who were involved in the centennial year using leftover funds from the celebration. They agreed to invite two nationally renowned speakers, one Jewish and one Christian, to headline a daylong dialogue every three years, with smaller events held in the interim years. From 1991 to 2003, these triennial dialogues organized around themes of common concern and attracted between 200 and 300 people.



Featured speakers in these dialogues included:

- Dr. Krister Stendahl, a Swedish Lutheran clergy and professor and dean of the divinity school at Harvard University;
- Dr. David Hartman, a rabbi and founder of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem;
- Dr. Martin Marty of the University of Chicago Divinity School, a prolific author and leading authority on U.S. religious trends; and
- James Carroll, a writer and former Catholic priest who has written on the church's historic role in antisemitism.

With the triennial pattern established over a dozen years in Muskegon, the event was moved to GVSU in 2006. A Muslim speaker was also added, reflecting the increasingly prominent profile of Islam in the community. The expanded Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogues continued to be held at GVSU every three years through 2018.



*Dr. Krister Stendahl, who spoke at an early Jewish-Christian dialogue.*

A second enduring interfaith event from these triennial dialogues emerged. Reverend Chris Anderson, the pastor of Samuel Lutheran Church in Muskegon, attended the first Jewish-Christian dialogues in 1991 and 1994. Although he was inspired by the conference, he felt its scholarly tone failed to appeal to a broad enough base. Rev. Anderson decided to hold a memorial observance for the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi death camps and the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor martyred during World War II.

Rev. Anderson reached out to Rabbi Alan Alpert, of Temple B'nai Israel, to partner with him for the memorial event at Samuel Lutheran Church. Only twelve people turned out, which was a shocking contrast to the enthusiastic crowds that had gathered five years before for the centennial celebration. It was a moment of truth for the organizers. They recognized an ongoing tradition requires more than a repeated annual event; it also needs institutional support and a platform that gives it broad visibility.

Undeterred, Rev. Anderson approached Muskegon Community College administrators. Together, with Rabbi Alpert, they agreed to set up the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.<sup>19</sup> The Center supports education programming that promotes values to reduce hate and to encourage diversity for Muskegon County schools. Rev. Anderson's intuition about what it would take to keep the tradition going was on the mark. The International Day of Holocaust Remembrance service organized by the center has continued to be a valuable source of education for combating racism and religious discrimination.

The twenty-fifth annual Day of Remembrance service was held over Zoom in 2021 due to COVID-19. It featured a child survivor of the Holocaust. The 2022 event, also virtual, showed the film *Violins of Hope*, about instruments recovered from the Holocaust and played by professional musicians to keep alive the message of "Never Again" a phrase often used in Holocaust remembrances and memorials.

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<sup>19</sup> "Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies – Muskegon," Muskegon Community College, <https://www.muskegoncc.edu/center-for-holocaust-and-genocide-studies/>.

## Grand Rapids: From Friendships to Community Initiative

In the late 1980s, independent of activities in Muskegon, another robust interfaith initiative was taking shape in Grand Rapids. As in Muskegon with Sylvia Kaufman, it was launched primarily by women. It is also the religious history of Grand Rapids that laid the foundation for the friendships of three women from different faith traditions who later would transform community-wide interfaith initiatives.

### A Religious History of Grand Rapids

Grand Rapids was built around the resources of a powerful network of rivers that wove its way across the state of Michigan. Sacred burial mounds of the Hopewell people were built along the Grand River. Later, the Anishinaabe peoples fished and clammed the river, establishing meeting places where they traded. In the 1700s, trappers and fur traders began working the forests of Michigan, establishing trade with the Indigenous peoples, and bringing their faith with them.

In the early 1800s, Baptist and Catholic missions were set up along the Grand River. At both missions, conversion of Native Americans was a primary goal. In James Bratt and Christopher Meehan's *Gathered at the River*, a history of faith in Grand Rapids, pioneer priest Fr. Frederic Baraga declared that "our holy religion alone is capable of making them Christians and good men."<sup>20</sup> The missionaries' treatment of Indigenous residents was a matter of religious coercion and cultural nullification, far from a harbinger of interfaith understanding.



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Temple Emanuel Rabbi Michael Schadick shows interfaith students the Torah scrolls.

Those first Baptist and Catholic missions evolved into enduring congregations: Fountain Street Church and the Cathedral of St. Andrew. Other early houses of worship were established by faith communities that ranged from United Methodist, Congregational, Lutheran, and African Methodist Episcopal Zion to Reform Judaism. Many of their founding members were active in business, philanthropy, and civic affairs, including Julius Houseman. Houseman served as mayor of Grand Rapids and as the first Jewish U.S. congressman from Michigan. He was also the founder of Temple Emanuel.

Through the 1800s, growth of industry around the river drove up the demand for labor. This led to a rapidly rising population as waves of immigrants from Germany, Ireland,

and other parts of Europe joined earlier settlers from New England and New York. Two large immigrant groups helped fuel the boom; one from the Netherlands and the other from eastern Europe, including areas in what is now Poland and Lithuania. They worked the fertile farmlands of Kent and Ottawa Counties and as skilled craftsmen in the busy furniture factories for which the city became well known.

These industrious newcomers created their own neighborhoods and faith communities centered around church, language, and religious schools. In a breakaway from the already established Reformed Church in America, some new immigrant congregations formed the Christian Reformed Church in North America in 1857, with its headquarters, its own college, and a seminary all located in Grand Rapids. Catholic parishes to this day are markers for the groups that first settled in their parish neighborhoods, including Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Italian, Irish, German, Latinx, and Vietnamese.

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20 James D. Bratt and Christopher H. Meehan, *Gathered at the River: Grand Rapids, Michigan, and its People of Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 12.



The traditional enclaves of Dutch Reformed and ethnic Catholic faithful formed cohesive cultures of religion, having little to do with each other while devoutly aiding their own. Together with mainline Protestant churches, they built a strongly religious community widely known for its pious conservatism which quietly produced plenty of social reformers and political progressives.

Although predominantly Protestant and Catholic, Grand Rapids has also been home to a small Jewish community since the founding of Temple Emanuel in 1857 – the same year as the birth of the Christian Reformed Church. A Conservative synagogue, Congregation Ahavas Israel, was founded in 1892. The latter 19th century saw Grand Rapids become a home for even more Christian traditions, including African Methodist Episcopal, Missionary Baptist, Free Methodist, Disciples of Christ, and Seventh-day Adventist.

## **The 20th Century: Diversity, Division, and Social Action**

It is not difficult to imagine that Will Herberg was describing Grand Rapids when he chose the title for his book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, in 1955. This was a city where conservative congregants had long banned lawn-mowing on Sundays and card-playing at all, and where in the 1960s the fundamentalist Baptist preacher Reverend David Otis Fuller thundered for decades against the alleged blasphemies of the fiercely liberal Reverend Duncan Littlefair of Fountain Street Church. In Grand Rapids, it was not unusual for Jewish kids to be told by their playmates they were going to hell, or for dates between Catholic and Christian Reformed teens to be forbidden.

Even in the 1950s, the mostly white Christian community had long seen diversity among its Christian believers. In the early 1900s, immigrants from the Middle East, Russia, and Greece formed Eastern Orthodox churches. The Great Migration of African Americans from the southern U.S. after World War I brought Baptist and Pentecostal traditions and formed some of the city's largest, most vibrant places of worship. Later came dramatic growth in the Latinx population, filling old Catholic parishes like St. Andrew's with Spanish-speaking services and founding new evangelical churches. More quietly, the latter 20th century saw a proliferation of smaller faith communities, including Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Quaker, Bahá'í, and more. While these new residents enriched the broader community, the city's largely conservative religious majority struggled to accept them.

As the city diversified and cultural religious rules relaxed, Catholics, Protestants, and people of other faiths increasingly worked alongside one another, be it in soup kitchens, on hunger walks, or at drop-in centers for the homeless. Where you worshipped became less relevant than how you put your faith to work when it came to meeting social needs. Over time, perhaps these civic interactions created interest in learning more about what motivated the person at your elbow serving beef stew to customers shivering from the cold.

## **Give Us Your Tired, Poor, and Desperate**

As the 1990s gave way to a new millennium, the faith community of West Michigan continued to diversify. New immigrants brought their vibrant cultures and faiths with them, much like the Irish and Polish pioneers of the 19th century, and the Southern Black, Latinx, Korean and Vietnamese of the mid-20th century.

West Michigan has long been seen as an area favorable to resettling refugees and displaced persons. Refugees fleeing war and persecution in countries in Africa, Central America, the Balkans, and Southeast Asia have found homes there. Faith-based organizations such as Bethany Christian Services, Samaritas, Catholic Human Development Outreach, and the Freedom Flight Task Force helped facilitate their new lives.

The 1990s saw a significant growth in West Michigan's Muslim population, fueled by an influx of Bosnian Muslim refugees. Later immigrants came from Somalia, Iraq, and other countries. As of 2021, metro Grand Rapids was home to eight mosques – dramatic growth since the founding of the first mosque in the late 1980s. The early 2000s also saw the founding of a Hindu temple and a Sikh gurdwara. Diverse faiths are also represented in two Buddhist temples and a Bahá'í community center.

Professionals from around the globe fed the local growth in religious diversity, finding jobs at Spectrum Health's medical facilities, the Van Andel Institute's cutting-edge research labs, the Grand Rapids-based Meijer superstore chain, and various high-tech industries.

The sharpest population increase was among the Latinx population, further diversifying Christian congregations. Many migrant workers found jobs in area fruit orchards. Many also found jobs in manufacturing and construction during the Great Recession. Latinx students in Kent County K-12 schools nearly doubled from 2002 to 2020.<sup>21</sup> A 2013 demographic study conducted for Kent District Library found approximately sixteen percent of Grand Rapids children five and older spoke a language other than English in the home, with about twelve percent speaking Spanish.<sup>22</sup>

A 2019 study<sup>23</sup> of more than 500 Christian congregations in the Grand Rapids area reflected these demographic changes. Compared with a study done a little over ten years earlier,<sup>24</sup> the 2019 survey showed that 121 of the congregations existing then were no longer in operation; conversely, 168 congregations existing now were not organized at the time of that earlier study. The city's Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish communities are from centuries old traditions, but their adherents' congregations are constantly changing. The Grand Rapids survey shows evidence of a decline in membership among predominantly white churches, but growth of new congregations among groups that are predominantly people of color, especially Black and Latinx.

## Precursors to Interfaith Cooperation

Grand Rapids is a highly religious city that recognizes the value religion holds for many of its citizens. It also recognizes that what has taken shape in Grand Rapids is both religiously and culturally distinctive. It is not a culture in which, for the sake of being friendly and avoiding misunderstanding, religion is hidden away. Religion is instead prominently displayed. Biblical texts were often found in letters to the editor of *The Grand Rapids Press*, which for decades featured an award-winning and closely read Religion section. Many people find the question, "What are you?" referencing religious identification as an acceptable part of conversations when people are getting to know each other. Officials also feel comfortable disclosing their faith. George Heartwell, who served three terms as mayor of Grand Rapids, was also an ordained minister who served as pastor of Heartside Ministry for fourteen years.

Although organized programs to promote interfaith dialogue were not prominent in the past social landscape of Grand Rapids, certain leaders and organizations brought people of different faiths together to cooperate for a common cause. Consider these examples:

- From 1972 to 2018 the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism (GRACE) sustained a faith-based network of social outreach. Though Christian-based, GRACE touched people of many faiths for forty-one years with the broad reach of its programs. Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, and Catholics walked alongside others from all corners of the faith community in an annual hunger walk to raise funds for food pantries, as well as engaging in anti-poverty work, and social assistance. In the later 1980s, under the leadership of Reverend David Baak, GRACE drew participants from many religious groups to provide support for those diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. It formed the Racial Justice Institute

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21 "Today's classrooms look more like the world," School News Network. Accessed August 19, 2022. <https://www.schoolnewsnetwork.org/2021/05/19/in-todays-classrooms-students-look-more-like-the-world/>.

22 "Demographic Study of the Kent District Library Service Area," Kent District Library, 2013, 10, <https://kdl.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/88/2020/08/2013-kdl-demographic-study.pdf>.

23 "Greater Grand Rapids Study of Congregations," Urban Church Leadership Center, 2018, [https://urbanchurchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GGR-Study-of-Congregations\\_ENG\\_FINAL-with-security-1.pdf](https://urbanchurchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GGR-Study-of-Congregations_ENG_FINAL-with-security-1.pdf).

24 Edwin L. Hernández, Neil Carlson, Nathan Ward, Amanda Stek, and Lori Verspoor DeVries, "Gatherings of Hope: How Religious Congregations Contribute to the Quality of Life in Kent County," Calvin College Center for Social Research, 2008, [https://urbanchurchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/gatherings\\_of\\_hope-1.pdf](https://urbanchurchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/gatherings_of_hope-1.pdf).

in 1997. The institute held annual summits on racism attended by hundreds who committed to anti-racism work throughout the community. While these events were not specifically about interfaith dialogue, they were definitely about interfaith cooperation for the common good.

- Between World War I and World War II, large numbers of African Americans moved from the southern United States to northern cities. They brought with them a culture of religion that supported their engagement in the public square. As an example, in 1968 the Reverend Lyman Parks, pastor of the large First Community African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, was elected the city's first Black city commissioner. He was a presence in the larger community, sharing family recipes with community members and delivering invocations at an assortment of community events. In 1971, he became the city's first Black mayor and served until 1976. After his death in 2009, a statue of him was erected outside the City-County Administration Buildings, a lasting monument to both his service and also the city's comfort with the role of faith in public life.
- Rabbi Albert Lewis was the longest-serving rabbi of Grand Rapids' oldest Jewish congregation, Temple Emanuel, where he served from 1972 until 2000. Rabbi Lewis' intellectual and spiritual reach extended far beyond his congregation's 300-plus families. He was a key figure in issues of aging and dying as founding president of both Hospice of Greater Grand Rapids and the West Michigan Society for Gerontology, of which his wife, Shirley, also served as president. He taught at Hope College and at Aquinas College, where Shirley was dean of the School of Arts and Sciences. She and Rabbi Lewis both taught at Aquinas' Emeritus College for adult learners, which Rabbi Lewis directed after his retirement. As a rabbi who served the broader faith community, he championed social justice and interfaith understanding in his longtime column for *The Grand Rapids Press*.

For many in Grand Rapids, religion was not only discussed freely at the dinner table but also in the coffee shop, the local newspaper, and at public meetings. This made the city ripe for interfaith initiatives that eventually grew into a community movement.

## Sharing Faith in Living Rooms

This is the context in which Dr. Lillian Sigal and Reverend Marchiene Rienstra began informal, living room interfaith discussions. In 1985, Lillian's husband, Phillip, died; he was Congregation Ahavas Israel's beloved rabbi. Rabbi Sigal was well known within both the city's Jewish and Christian communities for his academic studies of the Judaism of Jesus and the message of the Gospel of Matthew. Rabbi Sigal was also well known for his long-standing commitment to creating a safe place for interfaith dialogue. After his death, a group of educators who had worked closely with him established the Dr. Phillip Sigal Peace and Justice Memorial Fund.

This gesture of generosity from his friends and her own inspiration moved Dr. Lillian Sigal to take up her husband's dream. She was joined by Rev. Marchiene Rienstra, a Christian minister and close friend. They reached out to Ghazala Munir, a Muslim woman, who along with her husband, were founding members of the Islamic Center and Mosque of Grand Rapids. Ghazala recalled, "[Our] discussions were so inspiring. We



From left: Ghazala Munir, Marchiene Rienstra and Lillian Sigal, the founders of the Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA).

formed good friendships, and we have remained close friends ever since.”<sup>25</sup> In 1989, the three women invited a group of faith leaders from across the community to meet at Lillian’s home with the intention of moving beyond their informal gatherings.

That initial gathering included people from a wide array of institutions and faiths: faculty from Aquinas College, Calvin College, and GVSU; leaders of GRACE and the Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters; the pastor of Fountain Street Church; and a Jewish lawyer. Together, they decided to call their group the Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA) of Grand Rapids. The group committed to regular meetings for interfaith discussion. Soon



Fred Stella (left) with young community members at a Hindu Temple.

others began to join them. Eventually, they formed small discussion groups that met monthly in members’ homes. Their diversity was remarkable: Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Presbyterian, Catholic, Reformed, Bahá’í, and others. The IDA was formally organized in 1990, with Sigal and Rienstra the first co-presidents.

A typical IDA monthly meeting began with a ritual blessing, followed by discussion of a text or a theological theme. The discussions themselves followed clear guidelines, while also fostering valuable friendships and enjoyable social interactions. They used a model developed by Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, called the “Dialogue Decalogue.”<sup>26</sup> The ten guidelines are distinctively practical, laying out what Swidler called

“ground rules.” They do not dictate the content of the discussion, but rather set forth the rules of fair play: of what might be productive as well as what could derail discussions among persons who clearly had differences despite wanting to understand each other.

Lillian Sigal was teaching in GVSU’s English Department; GVSU President Arend Lubbers participated in some of the home meetings. Inspired by IDA’s successful gatherings, together they organized a conference for the spring of 1990. That conference featured Swidler as the keynote speaker. A second conference brought in Huston Smith, author of the classic world religions text *The Religions of Man*. A third conference in 1993 hosted Dr. Riffat Hassan, a Muslim feminist and specialist in Quranic studies.

Although IDA remained small, its influence grew with continuing conferences and other initiatives. Members formed a speakers bureau and were invited to schools, churches and synagogues, and community organizations. The group published a newsletter through which it shared discussions on interfaith matters.

In 1997, Sigal retired from GVSU and moved to Philadelphia. Her post as president was filled by Fred Stella, an IDA participant since 1994. He was the leader of the local Self-Realization Fellowship and de facto spokesman for the West Michigan Hindu community, and spoke about the faith to area schools. He had worked closely with Sigal in creating *Common Threads*, an interfaith interview program on WGTV, the university’s NPR affiliate. Stella continued to host the program for many years while serving as the pracharak (outreach minister) for the West Michigan Hindu Temple.

As IDA members reflect on the passage of thirty years, one sentiment surfaces repeatedly: their experience with IDA was precious because of the opportunity to have deep discussions, to creatively pursue their curiosity, and to form lasting friendships. “We cannot overestimate the role of developing friendships played in all of this,” Stella observed. “While our efforts at convening conferences, lectures, academic involvement, media, developing a presence online, etc. had tremendous value, many would agree that it was cultivating interpersonal relationships that really influenced changes in heart and mind.”<sup>27</sup>

25 Munir, Ghazala. Interview by Mary Vandergoot. (2021).

26 Appendix D.

27 Stella, Fred. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).



## Coming Together in Thanks, Then in Grief

Faith leaders decided to hold Grand Rapids' first interfaith Thanksgiving service on November 20, 2000 amid the religious and cultural changes in the community. Although people of many faiths had previously gathered to mourn the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and to plead for peace in Kosovo, clergy and lay leaders felt the time was right to simply focus on gratitude.

"We all live together," Reverend Thomas Bolster, rector of the Cathedral of St. Andrew, told *The Grand Rapids Press* at the time. "We ought to be able to come together to thank God on Thanksgiving."<sup>28</sup>

Bolster had proposed the service as a board member of GRACE. A planning committee of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Islamic, and Bahá'í adherents organized the service in the hallowed cathedral.

"I think this way of building bridges is ultimately the best way to solve problems in the Mideast or anywhere else,"<sup>29</sup> Rabbi David Krishef of Congregation Ahavas Israel told *The Grand Rapids Press*.

The service was well-attended and planned as an annual event. Before the next Thanksgiving arrived, however, an unimaginable attack on the United States brought these faith leaders together again – this time in shock. Leaders of GRACE and two dozen other faith leaders gathered in a conference room on the afternoon of September 11, 2001 after that morning's devastating attacks unfolded. They quickly convened an interfaith prayer service for that same evening, returning once again to St. Andrew's Cathedral. They drew on connections they had formed through the Thanksgiving service the year before to grapple with how to respond.

Close to 800 people filled that historic sacred space to collectively express their grief, with nearly twenty speakers offering Psalms, Hebrew prayers, readings from the Quran, as well as hymns of hope. The bishop of the Diocese of Grand Rapids offered a prayer, as did the general secretary of the Christian Reformed Church and the rabbi of Temple Emanuel. White Protestant ministers, Black Baptist preachers, a Muslim imam, and Hindu and Bahá'í leaders all joined in giving voice to a whole community's grief and hope. "We gather here as one American family, as one human family," Ghazala Munir, the Muslim founding member of the IDA, told the gathering. "With heavy hearts, we mourn for members of our family."<sup>30</sup>

For those who came that night, it was a powerful way to process a horrific attack on their country just hours earlier. They felt the communal kinship that comes from weathering a common terror and the spiritual bonds of opening their hurting hearts to one another. It was an experience that none of them would forget, and that many would build upon with interfaith efforts in the years to come.

## Increasing Awareness of Islam and Beyond

The events of September 11, 2001 drew attention as never before to the status of Muslims in the United States and underlined the urgent need to engage in dialogue with Muslim neighbors. For many, heightened



Thanksgiving event at St. Andrew's Cathedral.

28 Charles Honey, "Interfaith Gathering Plans to Focus on Thanksgiving," *Grand Rapids Press*, November 18, 2000, B1.

29 Ibid.

30 Charles Honey, "We Gather Here as One American Family," *Grand Rapids Press*, September 12, 2001, A9.

interest in Islam post-September 11 took the form of alarm and Islamophobia; West Michigan was no exception. It also energized many people's curiosity about the faith's core teachings and how their Muslim neighbors lived them. It helped lay the groundwork for a citywide initiative that extended that curiosity and goodwill to all faiths in the community ten years later.

In many places, residents had grown accustomed to having mosques in their cities and neighborhoods. It was not unusual to have a coworker observing a Muslim holiday such as Ramadan in schools and workplaces. Yet, when a small group of terrorists co-opted the reputation of a peaceful Islam, interfaith communities saw an opportunity to pursue solidarity with their Muslim friends.

Grand Rapids residents offered private gestures of support to local mosques. Christian college students attended Jummah, or Friday prayers, to better understand the faith. Congregations sought Muslim speakers to educate them, and book groups added titles about Islam to their reading lists. Ali Metwalli, a longtime leader within Grand Rapids' Muslim community, remembers a surge of kindness and concern from the larger faith community after September 11. "We received overwhelming support from the religious community all around town," Metwalli recalled twenty years later. "I can remember a number of the religious leaders from the Jewish and Christian communities coming to visit us at the mosque days and nights. Many of the leaders offered to allow us to use their churches and synagogues for our worship."<sup>31</sup>

The role of GVSU was crucial to the success of that initiative, bringing together the interfaith activities of Muskegon and Grand Rapids with the institutional structure and support of a growing public university.

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31 Metwalli, Ali. Interviewed by Charles Honey. (2021).



## CHAPTER THREE

# A University Brings Two Cities Together

Grand Valley State University (GVSU) has been involved in various capacities from the very beginning of these interfaith efforts. GVSU also brought greater visibility and institutional stability to these initiatives. The public university brought together the interfaith initiatives of Muskegon and Grand Rapids under the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. The institute is located on campus and has received the consistent support of successive university presidents.

The university was a community partner in hosting an event during the Muskegon Jewish Centennial Celebration in 1988-1989. Then GVSU President Arend Lubbers was an early participant in the Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA); GVSU hosted IDA's first conference in 1990. It was natural that Sylvia Kaufman, and eventually the IDA, would look to GVSU for institutional support for their interfaith efforts.

### Broadening the Scope

Sylvia Kaufman looked to area colleges and seminaries to broaden the base and increase the frequency to which interfaith events would appeal beyond Muskegon. She approached the presidents of several area academic institutions and asked them to join with the West Shore Committee in planning an annual conference on Jewish-Christian relations in 1999. The idea was that each institution would have a faculty member on the committee and that schools would take turns hosting the event.

**The West Michigan Academic Consortium consists of Aquinas College, Calvin University, Calvin Theological Seminary, Cornerstone University, Grand Valley State University, Hope College, Kuyper College, and Western Theological Seminary.**

The first jointly sponsored event was held at Calvin College (now University) in 2001, attracting between 100 and 150 attendees. Shortly afterward, consortium leaders agreed to continue the conferences in the offset years of the triennial interfaith dialogues.

The conferences featured prominent scholars including Paula Fredriksen of Boston University, Scott Appleby of the University of Notre Dame, and Elaine Pagels of Princeton University speaking on her 2018 bestseller, *Why Religion?* In 2010, the conference featured its first Muslim keynote speaker, Omid Safi of Duke University.<sup>32</sup>

### Establishing the Kaufman Interfaith Institute

The West Shore Committee, led by Sylvia Kaufman, recognized that an ongoing program needed an institutional base. GVSU was a natural place to look. Kaufman approached GVSU to ask if the university would host the 2006 Jewish-Christian Dialogue as planning for the event began to take shape. She also suggested the event include a Muslim speaker. The path to yes was smoothed in an earlier conversation between Sylvia Kaufman, Richard Kaufman, and former GVSU President Lubbers, who encouraged their interest in making the university a permanent home for the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue.

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32 Appendix B.



**"I was enthusiastic about the prospect. My wife Nancy and I invited Sylvia and Dick Kaufman to dinner. Before many minutes passed, I put forth the dollar figure for a Kaufman gift to secure the Dialogue's future at Grand Valley. Dick asked his usual intelligent questions, then turned to Sylvia and asked, 'Sylvia do you really want to do this?' She replied, 'Yes, Dick, I do.'"**

**-Arend Lubbers, GVSU president, 1969-2001**

The resulting 2006 Dialogue addressed a timely topic: "Religion and Power: the Power to Create, the Power to Destroy." It featured a discussion between Rabbi Donniel Hartman, of the Shalom Hartman Institute; Catholic author James Carroll; and Vincent Cornell, a professor of Middle East and Islamic Studies at Emory

University. The conversation was received by about 250 people, including many university students.

Based on the event's success, GVSU agreed to take over coordination of future conferences. Under the leadership of President Mark Murray, and with a gift from the Kaufman family, GVSU established the Sylvia and Richard Kaufman Interfaith Institute, whose stated purpose is "to promote interfaith understanding and mutual respect in West Michigan." President Murray asked Dr. Douglas Kindschi, the school's former dean of Science and Mathematics, to assume administrative responsibility for organizing the Kaufman Institute's programs. Dr. Kindschi had a wealth of experience in bringing people on board and getting things done in his over thirty-five year career at GVSU. In addition to his doctorate in mathematics, he also studied at the University of Chicago's Divinity School and later served on the Board of Trustees of McCormick Theological Seminary.

This was an extraordinary move for a public university. On the one hand, a public university must be non-preferential in matters of religion and faith. On the other hand, a university takes seriously the opportunity to foster deep exploration of basic values that build the social and moral consciousness of students during their formative years. President Murray envisioned an institute that meshed well with a broader program of student services, and at the same time, served as a think tank for the university's midwestern community.

The Consortium Committee, with the support of the newly formed Kaufman Institute, set to work organizing the Academic Consortium conferences for 2007 and 2008, as well the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue for

2009. Both would continue as signature Kaufman Institute events through the next decade, featuring renowned scholars and timely topics in an age plagued by religious divisiveness and violence.

The decision to move the events and their administration to GVSU proved to be positive. The national and international

reputations of the speakers added visibility to planned events. They were attended by a diverse audience, including students from various universities. The Kaufman Institute established a reputation for sponsoring large interfaith events, which was welcomed by the community.

The next GVSU president, Thomas Haas, named Dr. Kindschi as the first director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute in 2010. Haas enthusiastically embraced the Kaufman Institute after succeeding Murray in 2006. Known for his deep commitment to the professional and social development of students, President Haas' support of the Institute always came with his insistence that the Kaufman Institute's programs keep the



**"We knew the passion that Sylvia and Dick Kaufman brought to questions of faith, civil and probing dialogue, and intellectual depth. Dean Kindschi offered the interconnection with Grand Valley as he had been responsible for essential elements of the curriculum. Worthy purpose. Credible people. Right timing."**

**Mark Murray, GVSU president, 2001-2006**

university's commitment to diversity and inclusion clearly in its sights. The Kaufman Institute was able to support persons of all faiths, as well as invite participation from all of the religious groups within the community thanks to Haas' encouragement.

## Expanding the Institute's Scope and Audience

Under Dr. Kindschi's leadership, the scope of Kaufman Institute-supported activities expanded. In addition to organizing the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogues and the Academic Consortium conferences, the Kaufman Institute oversaw other community events including:

- **The Interfaith Leadership Lecture**, a continuation of the IDA's annual memorial lecture in memory of Rabbi Phillip Sigal. It brings important voices in both religious and social movements to West Michigan and was facilitated when the IDA came under the Kaufman Institute's administrative structure.
- **The Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion**, an inter-institutional, interdisciplinary, and interfaith exploration of science and religion. The Kaufman Institute affirms the possibility of exploring these complex issues in a spirit of mutual respect by bringing a variety of perspectives to a common forum.
- **The Abrahamic Dinner**, organized each year through a partnership between the Kaufman Institute and the Intercultural Association of Michigan. Its purpose is to strengthen friendship and understanding among three Abrahamic Traditions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Attendees from churches, synagogues, and mosques, as well as members of the wider community, enjoy dinner and presentations from the three faiths.



President Thomas Haas  
with visitor from Oman.

*"The Institute aligns well with the university's mission of shaping student lives professionally and socially. We thank Sylvia Kaufman for her initiative and profound understanding that diversity is an intellectual asset, and for bringing the Institute to life at Grand Valley State University. I was pleased to honor both her and her husband, Richard, in their unwavering support for interfaith understanding and acceptance."*

Thomas Haas, GVSU president, 2006-2019

The Kaufman Institute, along with the IDA, played a key role, alongside an informal committee of clergy and lay persons, in organizing the annual Thanksgiving Interfaith Celebration. The IDA and Thanksgiving Interfaith Celebration both benefited from the Kaufman Institute's support.

West Michigan's interfaith identity, in what would become known as "The Year of Interfaith Understanding" and its subsequent iterations through the 2010s, was significant for the broader community. Initially launched as an interfaith response to the tenth anniversary of September 11, 2001, it grew into a community-wide initiative involving hundreds of events in congregations and civic and cultural institutions. It transcended religious borders to embody a citywide commitment to better understanding, cooperative service, and much-needed healing.

GVSU's commitment to the Kaufman Interfaith Institute was underlined in the spring of 2022. The university honored the institute's director, Dr. Douglas Kindschi, with the Arend D. Lubbers Award, which recognizes longtime faculty members for service to the university and community. Thus, former President Lubbers' longtime support for the West Michigan interfaith initiative came full circle.



President Philomena Mantella with honorees Douglas Kindschi (right) and William Pickard (seated).

**"Coming to Grand Valley, a public university, I was most pleased to see the commitment to relate to all components of our community, including the faith communities. Our mission for inclusion and diversity includes support for an active pluralism, welcoming all races and all faith and philosophical traditions."**

**Philomena Mantella, GVSU president, 2019-present**

It is remarkable how many elements came together in the formation of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. What began with individuals whose vision for interfaith communication was strong enough to lead to action – and was confirmed by friends and coworkers who joined in their efforts – eventually found its place in a public university. From that secular

institution, the Kaufman Institute reached out to the community to promote "interfaith understanding and mutual respect."<sup>34</sup> Each of its programs, some of which started almost thirty years ago, remained important in the life of the West Michigan faith community.

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34 "Kaufman Interfaith Institute: Who We Are." Grand Valley State University, January 4, 2021, <https://www.gvsu.edu/interfaith/who-we-are-25.htm>.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Interfaith Understanding Becomes a Community-Wide Effort

Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell formally declared 2012 as the Year of Interfaith Understanding on September 12, 2011, one day after the tenth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. He made this declaration at a news conference convened by the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. Heartwell said there was a need for a community-wide effort to foster understanding among the area's increasingly diverse faith groups. His mayoral proclamation urged citizens to "devote energy to the thoughtful study of all faiths and engage in respectful conversation with people of other traditions."<sup>35</sup>

At the news conference, Heartwell spoke of an incident of interfaith misunderstanding. An employee of the Grand Rapids-based Amway corporation was hosting a research scientist from India. The research scientist from India was Sikh and wore that faith's traditional turban. When they tried to enter a nightclub, however, this individual was not allowed in because the nightclub wanted him to remove his turban. "These sorts of small intolerances happen every day, even in our community,"<sup>36</sup> Heartwell said to emphasize the need for the Year of Interfaith Understanding in Grand Rapids.

The mayor's proclamation acknowledged the long history of faith in the region and its strong tradition of religious-public cooperation. This church-ordained mayor understood this city: not just in its high religiosity, but also in its comfort level with the role of faith in public life and human services. In a front-page story about the 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding in *The Grand Rapids Press*, Heartwell noted that one in ten city residents was born outside of the United States. "So where Grand Rapids used to be a fairly homogeneous, Christian community with a small Jewish population in the 1980s, today we have the religions of the world represented here in our community,"<sup>37</sup> he said.

The Year of Interfaith Understanding began an initiative featuring hundreds of events involving congregations, civic and cultural institutions, as well as the Academic Consortium of eight colleges and seminaries. One year of activities gave rise to a long-term interfaith effort, much like Muskegon's Jewish Centennial Celebration. It was the Grand Rapids interfaith community's sustained response to the September 11, 2001 anniversary as people chose understanding over stereotypes, friendship over fear, and service over suspicion.

### Grand Rapids Year of Interfaith Understanding: Minds Shared

The Grand Rapids 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding was fostered by the structure and support afforded by the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. When Dr. Douglas Kindschi became the Kaufman Institute's director in 2010, he pulled together a group of people who knew the faith communities of Grand Rapids well.

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<sup>35</sup> Appendix E.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Honey, "Wanted: More Tolerance - It Takes You and Me Cooperating to Spread More Interfaith Respect," *Grand Rapids Press*, September 17, 2011, C1.

<sup>37</sup> Zane McMillin, "Community leaders seek new era of religious unity with 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding," *Grand Rapids Press*, September 12, 2011.





Mayor George Heartwell (center) meets with early planners for the Year of Interfaith Understanding (from left): Marchiene Rienstra, Ghazala Munir, Douglas Kindschi, David Baak, Petra Alsoofy and Whitney Belprez.

Along with David Baak, Fred Stella and Ghazala Munir, the group also included Sheldon Kopperl, a Grand Valley State University (GVSU) professor and religious educator at Temple Emanuel; Charles Honey, a longtime religion editor at *The Grand Rapids Press*; and Julie Mushing, a diversity coordinator of the Kent Intermediate School District (Kent ISD). Others joined this steering committee at various times as Kindschi sought to reach every aspect of faith life in Grand Rapids.

The group began to assess whether there would be support for a citywide year of events. They witnessed the success of Muskegon's Jewish Centennial Celebration and wondered if something similar could involve the entire diversity of faith traditions in the region. When surveyed

for their support of the idea, community faith leaders and educators viewed it as a way to promote religious literacy and counter negative stereotypes that had proliferated in the decade since September 11, 2001. Equally important were offers from *The Grand Rapids Press* and WGTV Public Media to serve as co-sponsors. The wholehearted support from Mayor Heartwell was key to its success.

## A Collaboration of Congregations, Colleges, and Cultural Organizations

Three councils were organized representing various sectors of the community to assist the Kaufman Institute in developing programs for the Year of Interfaith Understanding.

- The Congregations Council was composed of clergy and leaders from fifteen local religious communities, including both local synagogues, the Hindu temple, two mosques, the Catholic Information Center, a Dominican spirituality center, and several Protestant churches.
- The Community Council drew together representatives from major civic institutions, most of them secular: local theaters, the symphony, the public library, the public museum, the art museum, the intermediate school district, the Economic Club, the World Affairs Council and others.
- The Campus Council was made up of the faculty representatives from the eight member schools in the West Michigan Academic Consortium, all of them Christian institutions except for GVSU.

The partnership between the organizers and those who added an interfaith theme to their own programs was very successful in Grand Rapids, as with the Jewish Centennial Celebration in Muskegon. Many organizations created events that would encourage not just attendance, but also interaction among persons of diverse faiths. The Catholic sisters at the Dominican Center sponsored a series of interfaith dinners where people sat at mixed tables. Temple Emanuel held an interfaith Seder meal. Fountain Street Church and the West Michigan Hindu Temple shared an interfaith Diwali celebration. Habitat for Humanity of Kent County held an interfaith build where people from different faith traditions worked side by side to build a house.

Religious communities took the opportunity to educate their members during worship framed by a community-wide interfaith effort. For instance, the Conservative Jewish Congregation Ahavas Israel hosted non-Jewish speakers, including a Muslim imam, on the first Shabbat service of each month during the celebration. Imams from two different mosques also spoke at several Protestant churches. An Episcopal congregation welcomed non-Christians to comment on biblical texts. The Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue that was first held at GVSU in 2006 and 2009 was also a highlight of the 2012 year, with prominent international speakers from the three traditions addressing a difficult issue: "Living with God in a Time of Suffering."



The Grand Rapids Symphony, The Grand Rapids Art Museum, the Grand Rapids Public Library, and the Grand Rapids Public Museum each had special events with religious themes. It made for an impressive array of public events.

The Kaufman Institute was able to arrange mini grants with \$50,000 provided by the Grand Rapids Community Foundation to assist organizations who wished to join in the observance but lacked sufficient funding. This was especially helpful to religious congregations, which received mini grants funding more than seventy events.

A key component in the Year of Interfaith Understanding was an intentional engagement of youth. The Kent ISD received an Intercultural Harmony grant from the Minnesota-based Laura Jane Musser Fund. This grant enabled twenty-four students from eleven area high schools to participate in a yearlong Student Interfaith Leadership Council. Students were not selected based on their faith; some identified as “nones” with no religious affiliation, while others were Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and Sikh. The Interfaith Student Fellows were privileged to meet with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, whom The Economic Club of Grand Rapids brought to speak about the foundation he established to counter religious conflict, prejudice, and extremism. The students also took a three-day training on religious freedom led by Interfaith Alliance, participated in a community Holocaust commemoration at Temple Emanuel featuring the Grand Rapids Symphony, and visited local places of worship. Sarah Mageed, one of the Interfaith Student Fellows, looked back on that year as formative for her post-high school relationships, including with the Muslim Students Association at the University of Michigan. “I’m definitely glad I had the interfaith experiences that I had in high school which helped me foster relationships from people of all backgrounds in undergrad,”<sup>38</sup> she said.

Over the course of the Year of Interfaith Understanding, there were more than 300 events, many of them covered both in print media and on local news channels. The initiative also gained national notice in an early 2013 report<sup>39</sup> by *PBS Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, which called Grand Rapids “a microcosm of global religious diversity.”<sup>40</sup>

#### Year of Interfaith Understanding activities included the following:

- The Grand Rapids Public Museum created *The Rite Stuff*, an exhibition of artifacts related to the history of religious diversity in West Michigan, including garments used in Native American religious ceremonies, as well as Bibles, Torahs, and Qur’ans brought by immigrants.
- The Grand Rapids Symphony presented *To Be Certain of the Dawn* by Stephen Paulus; this was commissioned in 2005 to commemorate the liberation of the Nazi death camps sixty years prior.
- The public library offered free copies of *Have a Little Faith*, by Mitch Albom, accompanied by interfaith discussion kits, and published a list of recommended books on interfaith understanding.
- The Grand Rapids Art Museum featured *The Twelve Tribes of Israel* by Salvador Dalí and held an accompanying lecture by a Jewish scholar.
- ArtPrize, Grand Rapids’ large annual art competition, included a venue with an interfaith theme.
- WGVU public television screened the PBS series *God in America* in six weekly installments, offered companion study guides and DVDs, and worked with the Kaufman Institute to organize public discussions about the series.
- At a dinner event, three local business leaders – a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim – spoke about how their religious beliefs and values influence their business practices.
- *The Grand Rapids Press* published the events that were scheduled for the coming week each week.

38 Mageed, Sarah. Interview by Charles Honey. (2021).

39 Judy Valente, “Grand Rapids Interfaith Year,” *PBS Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, February 1, 2013, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2013/02/01/february-1-2013-grand-rapids-interfaith-year/14629/>.

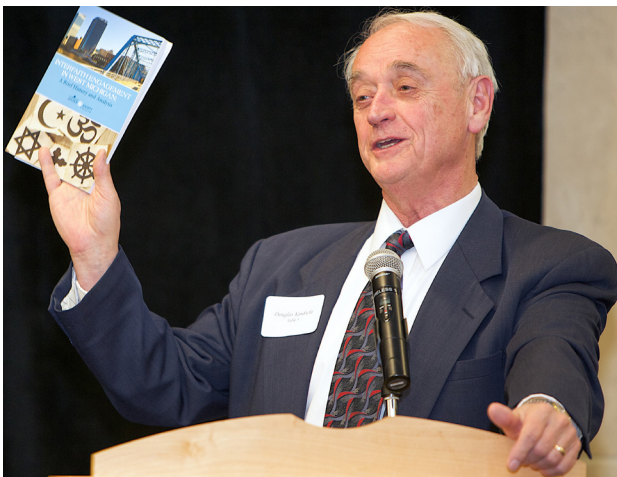
40 Ibid.

## Developing a Deeper Awareness

The Year of Interfaith Understanding succeeded in creating awareness of religious diversity in Grand Rapids. Sometimes the awareness did not extend beyond bringing to people's attention the mere existence of other groups; yet other times, there was a genuine effort to learn about other faiths, often with surprising results. Learning about a group's basic beliefs, daily practices, traditions of celebration, and forms of observance and worship inevitably led to the "I had no idea," moment for many participants.

Why did the Year of Interfaith Understanding succeed on such a large scale? In many ways, the reasons hark back to Muskegon's Jewish Centennial Celebration more than twenty years earlier.

- Drawing on a strong network of **personal relationships** that helped connect people to each other early in the planning process.
- Forming organizing committees that featured **broad representation** from various religious groups.
- Building on **existing resources** by involving cultural and civic institutions that were already key to the community's vitality.
- Focusing on celebration rather than need, thereby **offering something rather than asking for something** from congregations and community organizations.
- Cultivating community-generated events, from music and visual arts to festive meals and religious observances, that created a wide variety of comfort zones where there was **something for everyone**.
- Providing an **atmosphere of friendly inquiry** that made people feel welcome regardless of their religious faith or belief system.



Douglas Kindschi holds the 2015 Aspen Institute study, "Interfaith Engagement in West Michigan."

It was estimated that 30,000 of the city's residents had attended an interfaith event by the end of the 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding. For many participants, the experience left them with a greater understanding of other faiths. They gained a sense of what Dr. Kindschi often described arising from interfaith encounters: "holy envy," a concept he learned from Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl.

"Holy envy is understanding and accepting and seeing something in another religion that you wish your tradition could incorporate," said Kindschi, adding that the Initiative has deepened his holy envy. "It's made me very sensitized to those things in other traditions that I wish were more in my tradition, even though it doesn't prompt me to want to move to another faith."<sup>41</sup> Kindschi incorporates it into a six-point interfaith agenda he

frequently cites in public presentations: tolerance, hospitality, understanding, respect, acceptance, and holy envy.<sup>42</sup>

In interfaith dialogue, what once seemed peculiar is now devout: wearing a head covering, saying prayers at prescribed times, observing birth and death in certain ways. One may discover a mirror for their own practices in moving beyond surface impressions. All the world's religions and faith practices are trying to

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41 Kindschi, Douglas. Interview by David Baak and Charles Honey. (2022).

42 Appendix C.

deal with the big things that every human faces. Each religion and faith practice do this in very different ways, and the differences are significant.

There is another side to being an observer. It is the humbling moment of discovering a misperception that created a wall of separation, an obstacle to being a good neighbor. For those who took part, the Year of Interfaith Understanding provided an opportunity to remove obstacles, as well as to clarify genuine differences among people of faith. The idea of interfaith became more familiar, offering this traditionally conservative city a fresh vision of itself as an increasingly diverse and multifaith community.

Over the course of the Year of Interfaith Understanding, the tendency to use stereotypes to define those who are similar and different seemed less relevant. As familiarity with different faith traditions grew, so did the common experiences of gratitude. Mayor Heartwell offered an opening prayer at Bethlehem Church in the city's Heartside district at that year's interfaith Thanksgiving service. The event opened the possibilities of being grateful for each other, not in spite of our differences, but because we are different. The variety itself became a value; living together made Grand Rapids a better place.

## **Grand Rapids Year of Interfaith Service: Hands Outstretched**

Building on the success of the Year of Interfaith Understanding, the Kaufman Institute planning groups explored how they could carry those good experiences forward into a year dedicated to interfaith service. For congregations and individuals who had come to know each other better, it was a natural next step in putting their newfound bonds of faith into practice for the greater good. It was an organic way to be both more inclusive and coordinated in responding to human need for a community where service organizations were largely based in Christianity.

The Kaufman Institute launched the Year of Interfaith Service in 2015. The Kaufman Institute was in partnership with several local service organizations, including Habitat for Humanity of Kent County, and eight West Michigan hospice organizations for the Interfaith Year of Service. Working side by side with a person of another faith is a different interaction from exploring faith traditions intellectually. Eboo Patel, the founder of Interfaith America, calls such projects "laboratories of pluralism." Shared work puts a face on faith. It allows many small instances of sorting out similarities and differences while staying focused on a goal. People become more at ease and more respectful of each other as they learn to navigate the differences. They also realize that they do not have to agree on everything to cooperate. Interfaith service projects throughout the community were the ideal setting to experience laboratories of pluralism.

Mayor Heartwell again backed the effort with a formal declaration. Joining him at the kickoff event was Maddie Reeves, a Grand Rapids Catholic Central High School student who was an active participant in the Student Interfaith Leadership Council. The experience prompted her to become an ambassador of the national HOPE not hate project, a peace and justice response to the September 11, 2001 attacks around which Reeves had organized a local conference on understanding Islam in 2013.

Her interactions led her to a deeper appreciation of and curiosity about other faiths and cultures. This proved useful when she went on to Western Michigan University (WMU), where she helped international students learn English, and also worked in Tonga for the Peace Corps. "It's definitely broadened my perspective on the world and the fact that we all have different viewpoints, but we have that core commonality of values," said Reeves, who became an admissions counselor at WMU. "So regardless of what you practice, at the end of the day, every faith I've learned about and studied, it just comes down to treating people well and doing good while you're here."<sup>43</sup>

Faith communities joined together to do good in the 2015 Year of Interfaith Service, and young people were an important part.

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43 Reeves, Maddie. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

## Engaging Campuses, Connecting with Millennials

Significant support for connecting to young people was an initiative taken on by then-President Barack Obama in establishing the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. When President Obama announced the program, he referred to his own experiences in community service and how it shaped his understanding of how people working together can accomplish a great deal without erasing their religious differences. His administration created The President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge in 2011, where over 500 schools became involved over five years.



The Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll Finalist certificate, presented by the President of the United States to GVSU.

States for interfaith community service, and the only public institution so honored in recognition of its active service efforts. Kindschi was invited to a ceremony in Washington, D.C. along with Katie Gordon, a new Kaufman Institute program manager and Alma College graduate who helped create an interfaith student group at GVSU. She recalled the excitement of gathering with “a who’s who of interfaith organizations” as GVSU’s interfaith service work was honored. “It helped me see how special Grand Rapids was as a home base for experimenting with interfaith community-building, and for just having a wide community so invested in that type of community-building,” Gordon said. “It was like, Grand Rapids really has something going on.”<sup>44</sup>

In her tenure at the Kaufman Institute from 2013 to 2017, she became a key player in connecting with college campuses and engaging millennials and “nones” – people with no religious affiliation but interested in spiritual growth and community service. “In the time that I worked for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, we grew in profound ways: shifting our focus from dialogue to service, expanding the representation in our work across religious, spiritual and secular identity, and cultivating the next generation of interfaith leadership,” Gordon reflected. “[The] Kaufman [Institute] offers a wonderful model for locally-focused and relationally-rooted interfaith organizing.”<sup>45</sup>

Gordon went on to co-found the Nuns & Nones<sup>46</sup> interfaith partnership with religious sisters and spiritually diverse millennial seekers. Her partnership started with Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters and spread to a dozen cities nationwide. She joined the staff of Monasteries of the Heart after graduating from Harvard Divinity School. Monasteries of the Heart,<sup>47</sup> a web-based movement founded by Sister Joan Chittister, shares

GVSU was a participating school in the initiative. Many features of the president’s Campus Challenge made the Kaufman Institute at GVSU an ideal model. It appealed to millennials and persons not affiliated with traditional religions. These groups had been underrepresented in the Year of Interfaith Understanding. Furthermore, the hospitality that the Kaufman Institute enjoyed at GVSU made this an opportunity to serve the student body in a way that also fits the institute’s mission. What could be done on campus could also be done in the community.

GVSU was one of just five schools named in 2015 as a national honor roll finalist by the President of the United



Katie Gordon (left) with Religion and Society Program Executive Director Simran Jeet Singh (center) and local Sikh leader S.P. Makkar (right).

44 Gordon, Katie. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

45 Gordon, Katie. Interview by Mary Vandergoot. (2021).

46 "About Us," Nuns & Nones, <https://www.nunsandnones.org/about>.

47 "Monasteries of the Heart," Monasteries of the Heart, <https://www.monasteriesoftheheart.org/>.



Benedictine spirituality with contemporary seekers and counts over 23,000 members worldwide. Now living in a monastery with Sister Chittister in Erie, PA, Gordon looks back on her five years at the Kaufman Institute with gratitude. “It was such an exciting role to play in such a beautiful community,”<sup>48</sup> she said.

The Kaufman Institute continued broadening its reach and diversifying young adult leadership following the Year of Interfaith Service. Kyle Kooyers succeeded Gordon as program manager in 2016, then became associate director in 2019. Kooyers is an ordained Presbyterian minister with a Master of Divinity degree from Calvin Theological Seminary. Zahabia Ahmed-USmani later succeeded him as program manager, leading the Kaufman Institute’s Youth Interfaith Scholars and Summer Service Day Camps programs. She brought to the institute a passion for the intersection of interfaith work and social justice as a Muslim studying for a Master’s in Public Administration at GVSU. The Kaufman Institute also welcomed Buddhist and Jewish staffers as the organization sought fresh perspectives and new ways of involving the community.

## Working Together for the Greater Good

The community’s response to the 2015 Year of Interfaith Service was enthusiastic and far-reaching. A broad array of schools and organizations intentionally built interfaith inclusivity into their projects, touching on everything from building homes for low-income populations and serving the dying to ladling out food to the hungry.

Another contribution the Kaufman Institute offered during this Year of Interfaith Service was sharing information about inclusive gatherings. Many service organizations required participants to sign an agreement to the mission of the organization, which often included specifically Christian religious language. For example, Habitat for Humanity offers a prayer before every build. The Kaufman Institute worked with Habitat for Humanity and other organizations to create more inclusive prayers. It was a subtle and significant change. Service organizations saw they could host events without a pledge to any particular religion, while preserving their own religious perspectives. This offered a much more inclusive space to volunteers of all religions, spiritualities, and secular ways of being. Members of the Center for Inquiry-Michigan, a Grand Rapids-based secular nonprofit, joined the faith community in providing volunteer help.

Many of the activities initiated during the 2012 Year of Understanding continued into the 2015 Year of Service, as did the triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogues. Appropriate to the Year of Interfaith Service, the daylong discussion among focused on the question, “To Repair the World: How Does Religion Help or Hinder?”

The need for understanding only grew more consequential. The end of the Year of Interfaith Service and the 2016 election saw a surge of Islamophobia and political divisiveness across the United States.

### Year of Interfaith Service activities included the following:

- An interfaith group at GVSU partnered with a local mosque at its food pantry.
- The Salvation Army added an interfaith theme to training sessions for homelessness care.
- Catholic Charities added culturally inclusive meals at its community food program.
- Habitat for Humanity organized ten interfaith build days.
- Aquinas College held an Interfaith Day of Service.
- Hospice programs held Interfaith Understanding of End of Life sessions.
- Masjid At-Tawheed partnered with Calvin University for a clean-up of Plaster Creek.



*Interfaith workers and faith leaders meet at beginning of Habitat for Humanity build.*

48 Gordon, Katie. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).



Relationships built during the years of understanding and service provided a basis for firmly pushing towards better relations. This included the organizing of “Standing Together,” which were Christian-Muslim partnerships. Temple Emanuel, Masjid At-Tawheed Islamic Center, Trinity Lutheran Church, and Westminster Presbyterian Church formed one such partnership, which led to an interfaith clergy trip to Israel. The Islamic Center of Grand Rapids and Boston Square Christian Reformed Church formed another partnership that resulted in an annual interfaith Iftar each Ramadan. In the tumultuous time after the 2016 election, the interfaith Thanksgiving gathering had its highest attendance ever.

## Grand Rapids Year of Interfaith Friendship: Hearts Opened

Over the course of these years with special and meaningful themes, the Kaufman Institute’s programs became widely known throughout the Grand Rapids community. A broad range of people in age, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and associations participated in programs with intentional themes for that year. The year of understanding in 2012 was addressed to the head. The year of service in 2015 was addressed to the hands. It only follows, then, that 2018 focused on hearts. The Kaufman Institute’s organizers designated 2018 as the Year of Interfaith Friendship. The theme was well-suited to the moment as individuals found themselves increasingly polarized, isolated, and alienated by politics and social-media echo chambers. The triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue of the 2018 Year of Interfaith Friendship even took a deeper dive

into a timely topic: “Religious Identity: Dividing or Uniting?” The work of previous years provided fertile soil to grow new meaningful interfaith relationships in Grand Rapids.



Debbie Mageed (left) with Ann Trost.

The previous years brought together diverse peoples from diverse communities. When they participated together in interfaith programs, this laid the groundwork for developing meaningful friendships. Hospitality and camaraderie were earned and created when people discovered what they had in common. There are several longstanding examples of how being invited to gather in homes or sharing a meal together offered a beginning point for these strong and long-lasting friendships. One such friendship started before the Year of Interfaith Friendship, and yet models how the year’s theme developed. This friendship is between six couples: a mix of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, who met periodically for meals and fellowship. They met at a large interfaith gathering in 2007, led by author and former Catholic priest James Carroll. Though that

gathering at times generated lively debate and passionate feelings about deep convictions, the couples’ group continued the conversation and formed friendships over dinners in each other’s homes until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Another example of lasting interfaith camaraderie that also developed before the 2018 Year of Interfaith Friendship is between Asif and Tahira Azeem, Muslims from the Grand Rapids suburb of Ada Township, and Paul and Carol Hillman, United Methodists from Rockford, a small city north of Grand Rapids. They, along with their children, began sharing meals and social occasions during the 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding. Their friendship continues years afterward. Dr. Azeem, a Spectrum Health gastroenterologist, called it “a beautiful experience,” adding, “All the nice things we have to say to each other, they go back to the fact that we come from the same Lord.”<sup>49</sup>

At the 2007 interfaith gathering previously mentioned, Debbie Mageed, a Muslim, asked Ann Trost, a Christian seated next to her, if she had read *The Faith Club*. *The Faith Club* is Ranya Idliby’s account of three Muslim, Jewish, and Christian women coming together to understand one another. Mageed had read the

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49 Charley Honey, “Year of Interfaith Understanding 2012 a Success; Will Continue into Next Year,” *Grand Rapids Press*, December 18, 2012.

book while Trost had not. They read the book together with other women. Thus was born the Sisters of Faith, an interfaith gathering of around a dozen women who have been meeting monthly for fifteen years.

The Sisters of Faith first met in homes, then at a Congregational church. The group grew close friendships and endured hardships, from COVID-19 to personal tragedies. At the beginning, the gathering was mostly Muslim, Christian and Jewish women; over time women from other faiths and “nones” also joined the group. Sometimes the meeting centered on a theme; sometimes there was no theme and they met just because that’s what they did as friends. Friends don’t need a reason to gather. Food was always there. The group always took time to go around the circle and catch up, sometimes about things to celebrate together and sometimes to share in worries and mourning.

The group has been a source of comfort, caring, and wisdom through times of social isolation and personal loss for Debbie Mageed. “To me it’s a way of making non-Muslims see that our faiths are just hairs apart,” she said. “They really aren’t different. They come from the same creator, and so they can’t be different. It’s been great,” she said of her Sisters of Faith. “I count each one of them as friends.”<sup>50</sup>

## Having an Affinity for One Another in Interfaith Friendships

In this 2018 Year of Interfaith Friendship, people with common interests were encouraged to form affinity groups and the Kaufman Institute helped them find one another. The range of interests was marvelous: there were food groups, book groups, artists creating together, groups discussing film, a running group, a chess group, a group gathered to practice meditation, and people who gathered on Saturdays for service projects.

## Cooking Up Delicious Dishes and Deep Discussions

Some affinity groups took hold in a way that went beyond the single year and went deeper into friendship. Not surprisingly, one of these centered on basic human interactions: cooking and eating.

The “Interfaith Foodies” group began with participants going out for meals at restaurants which featured ethnic and farm-to-table fare. Zahabia Ahmed-Usmani, the Kaufman Institute staff member who was tasked with coordinating the group, reflected that sharing a meal was a wonderful way to foster friendship. “I think from the very first time we had it we were like, ‘This is a real unique space. It accomplishes what we think the purpose of [the] Kaufman [Institute] is, to have authentic relationships and dialogues over shared points of interest,’”<sup>51</sup> she said.

It wasn’t long before the foodies found a more meaningful way to share their particular point of interest by moving from restaurants to the kitchen of Genesis United Methodist Church. The kitchen layout provided a supportive space to bring up spiritual issues while preparing dishes such as *pakora* (fried graham flour

### Year of Interfaith Friendship affinity groups included the following:

- **Science and Religion:** Read and discussed the relationship between science and religion.
- **Contemplative Traditions:** Entered into and experienced the contemplative traditions of other faiths.
- **Interfaith Book Group:** Explored and discussed different interfaith books and authors.
- **Interfaith Foodies:** Shared culinary experiences with interfaith friends.
- **Interfaith Imaginations:** Created art while learning about the faith traditions of other artists.
- **Interfaith & Interwoven:** Knit, crocheted, and weaved for a good cause with interfaith friends.
- **Interfaith Photography:** Shared cell phone pictures that illustrate how people practice their faith in everyday life.

50 Mageed, Debbie. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

51 Ahmed-Usmani, Zahabia. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).



*The Interfaith Foodies group meets to prepare ethnic meals.*

fritters) for an Iftar meal. “The whole idea of cooking together is different than just sharing a meal together,” Ahmed-Usmani said. “You let your guard down a little more when you’re just conversing over chopping up a salad. It just kind of opens up authentic close-proximity relationships with other people.”<sup>52</sup>

Once a month, up to twenty people would gather at the church on Thursday evenings. This affinity group also observed religious occasions, such as a seder for Passover and the Iftar during Ramadan. Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, and Jews enjoyed everything from Middle Eastern fare to the Indian dishes Ahmed-Usmani enjoyed preparing. She recalls an evangelical Christian who became one of the most enthusiastic participants with his fascination with food

providing an entry into an interfaith milieu he might not have otherwise experienced. “That’s why you do this. It breaks down those stereotypes you have about people,”<sup>53</sup> Ahmed-Usmani said.

## Knitting Together Relationships

The foodies continued to dine and discuss until the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. One group that continued to meet through the quarantine era was Interfaith & Interwoven, a knitting, crocheting, and weaving group that went from in-person gatherings to Zoom during the shutdown. The group started during the 2015 Year of Interfaith Service as a peace and justice project; it was still going strong in 2022, with seven to ten women meeting weekly. A mix of Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Bahá’í members joined online from as far as Illinois and Kansas.

Co-conveners Yehudit Newman and Karen Meyers found the group spiritually enriching, even when meeting virtually. “I have a greater understanding and comfort level with their faith traditions and a greater appreciation of my own traditions,” said Newman, who is Jewish. “Especially during the isolation of COVID, I have felt the benefit of their warmth and caring.”<sup>54</sup> Meyers, a Christian, said, “Over the years of meeting with these women, the spiritual aspect of my being has been deepened in ways I never expected.” She continued, “Spending time knitting and sharing each week, I have found wisdom in our interactions that have revealed the strength that comes from diversity. I have come to realize that our faith traditions are bound together by the common values of service and compassion.”<sup>55</sup>

## Sharing ‘Raw and Authentic’ Truths

Kyle Kooyers has similar sentiments about Contemplative Traditions, a gathering focused on spiritual issues and personal challenges. The group met monthly from early 2018 to the spring of 2021 at the Dominican Center Marywood at Aquinas College. The COVID-19 pandemic forced them online.

As the Kaufman Institute’s program manager, Kooyers facilitated the group with Brian McCourt, a Dominican Center-trained spiritual director affiliated with the Grand Rapids Buddhist Temple. Fewer than ten to more than twenty people participated. The group learned about a different faith’s teachings and practices at each session, including *lectio divina* readings and meditation. “That group became very close very quickly,” Kooyers recalled. “What I found is you had people processing spiritual things that they didn’t necessarily feel comfortable processing or vocalizing in whatever their spiritual home context was.”<sup>56</sup> He

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Newman, Yehudit. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

55 Meyers, Karen. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

56 Kooyers, Kyle. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

felt the same comfort level to share his personal challenges with a very tight-knit group holding “raw and authentic” discussions. “That was really a godsend for me in terms of my own mental health. I felt like I had permission in that group to vocalize that in a way that felt sane and validated,” he said. “There were people in that group that had access to aspects of my life that no one else in the world did, just because I felt I could be transparent in that space.”<sup>57</sup>

## The Value of Knowing One Person

These affinity groups raised an important consideration. Many people who participated in interfaith events quickly discovered that knowing one adherent of a faith doesn’t merit the assumption of expertise about what that faith means. If an individual met one Muslim, Catholic, Sikh, Hindu, or Jew, that individual does not have a reason to assume that they know everything about those religions, as they are practiced by millions of other adherents worldwide. Even if an individual reads an excellent book about a religion, unless they have also gotten to know an adherent of that religion, can they really assume that they know how that faith works in real life? These questions point to the value of personal acquaintance and acknowledgement of intra-religious diversity. A 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center<sup>58</sup> found respondents had a more positive view towards other faiths (and towards atheists) if they personally knew someone from that group.

The success of the affinity groups, as with other Kaufman Institute programming, were groups evolving from the participants themselves. Kooyers emphasized. “There’s a very, very organic growth to a lot of what has happened, which has lent to its effectiveness.”<sup>59</sup>

As a Muslim whose faith was often been misunderstood or misrepresented, Debbie Mageed saw that truth play out through years of getting to know people of other faiths. “I truly believe that once you meet someone from a different faith, your opinion of that faith can be altered,” she said. “It can change. That’s the importance of living your faith. Because if you make a negative impression on someone’s opinion about your faith, it’s not the faith’s fault.”<sup>60</sup>

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57 Ibid.

58 “How Americans Feel About Religious Groups,” Pew Research Center, July 16, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/>.

59 Kooyers, Kyle. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

60 Mageed, Debbie. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).



## CHAPTER FIVE

# An Interfaith Year of Healing: Tending to Wounds in the Time of COVID

The organizing committees of the Kaufman Institute started planning for the next programming cycle as the Year of Friendship was ending. What they didn't anticipate was how the COVID-19 outbreak would radically change life in 2020. The Abrahamic Dinner took place on February 11, 2020 at Masjid At-Tawheed. An Interfaith Leadership Lecture by Petra Alsoofy, the Outreach & Partnerships Manager at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, was held on March 9, 2020. Everything shut down days after that lecture. The Grand Dialogue for Science and Religion, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, was canceled. Most other programs, including the summer youth camps, were also canceled. Staff searched for ways to stay in touch with partners and constituents. The much-anticipated annual interfaith Thanksgiving was only viewable online.

Partly because of the Kaufman Institute's extensive contacts in the community and its university support and infrastructure, the staff was able to pivot its energy in the spring of 2020 to engage and support the wider community. It participated in weekly Kent County Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Team meetings to coordinate COVID-19 vaccine efforts with Kent County Health Department and underrepresented communities in the area. The Kaufman Institute staff led two of the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) President's Networks of Support, sending medical supplies out to the community and supporting vulnerable populations with university and community resources. The Kaufman Institute was able to develop a strong relationship with the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan and other partnering organizations and congregations through facilitating the gathering and provision of emergency food with volunteers for distribution in the Center's neighborhood.

In response to the pandemic, Kaufman Institute staff pivoted to weekly Zoom affinity meetings: three interfaith book groups, two academic discussion groups, and the Interfaith Contemplative affinity group. It developed several social media campaigns, one in particular featuring cooking lessons from the Interfaith Foodies affinity group. A Weekly Watch video clip of pertinent past events and interfaith voices was launched that quickly became popular.

The Kaufman Institute encouraged a Shaping Narratives radio segment with WGVU Public Media to elevate assistance provided by different faith and spiritual communities during this crisis; this segment was hosted by Rishi Singh, a local Sikh business leader. The Cinematic Conversations affinity group was virtually rebooted in collaboration with Culture Creative's CEO Julian Newman, a nationally recognized and certified diversity and inclusion thought leader. This affinity group explored themes of social justice and racial equity through films and documentaries. Most of 2020's programming took place online. Hybrid in-person and virtual programs emerged and continued through 2021 and well into 2022.

## Grand Rapids Year of Interfaith Healing in a Time of Challenges

Kaufman Institute staff reflected on the realities in those early months of the pandemic shut-down while still creating programming for the greater community, even as virtual programming became the only available tool. "Healing" emerged as an appropriate theme in staff reflections as pandemic realities were



radically changing not just the Institute's programming, but also people's very lives. The Institute decided to declare 2021 as the Year of Interfaith Healing in response to the disruptions that people were experiencing related to the pandemic, the political tensions that were mounting, and the ongoing polarization related to immigration and racial justice.

The Kaufman Institute responded with four programming themes in the 2021 Year of Interfaith Healing as the pandemic continued and political and racial conflicts intensified. Those themes were: the healing of our bodies, the healing of our earth, the healing of our political divisions, and the healing of our racial disparity. Interested interfaith groups met virtually or in person for dozens of events and book studies to help process this challenging time for the United States and the entire world.

## Healing Our Bodies

Arguably, "Healing our Bodies" was the overarching concern for the many months of the pandemic. Actual physical protocols were as constant as was programming related to prevention and response to COVID-19 and its variants.

In collaboration with the GVSU vice provost of health, a conference in early 2021 on the role of religion in health care was held as part of the West Michigan Medical Ethics Conference and the DeVos Medical Ethics Colloquy. The webinar featured an interfaith panel on patient decision-making, included Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim speakers, and was moderated by Kaufman Interfaith Institute Director Dr. Douglas Kindschi. An evening panel presented perspectives on bioethics from scholars at Wake Forest University and The Ohio State University.



*Memorial service prior to the COVID-19 shutdown.*

Other events over the course of the year included:

- A screening and discussions of the films *Collateral Beauty* and *Patch Adams*;
- A program on the science and ethics of COVID vaccines;
- A panel discussion titled "Young Adult Interfaith Voices on Navigating the Pandemic"; and
- A program on interfaith considerations in patient care.

Interfaith leaders contributed segments to "Passing the Mic,"<sup>61</sup> an audio series focused on local voices and issues. This was an innovative collaboration with the nonprofit Community Media Center and *The Rapidian* citizen journalism site. Members of the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish communities responded to questions about how the pandemic affected them, and in turn, offered questions that elicited further responses.

In one such exchange, Reverend Yong Su Mark Hepper, a Mahayana Buddhism teacher, responded to a Muslim woman's question about whether the pandemic had changed any aspect of his faith. Rev. Yong Su said that far from changing his perspective, the pandemic provided an opportunity to focus on the Buddhist practices of meditation and relieving suffering. "Our whole world was turned upside down in some ways," Yong Su said. "But it just gave us a chance to practice more deeply, because we believe that everything is impermanent, and why are you surprised that things changed? They always change."<sup>62</sup>

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61 "Passing the Mic," *The Rapidian*, <https://therapidian.org/category/tags/passing-mic>.

62 Brett Townsend, "Passing the Mic: Grand Rapids Buddhist Temple's Rev. Yong Su answers, 'Has there been any aspect of your faith that you've changed your perspective on over this pandemic?,'" *The Rapidian Staff*, April 16, 2021, <https://therapidian.org/passing-mic-grand-rapids-buddhist-temple-yong-su>.

## Healing Our Earth

Perhaps the most ambitious and creative program during the pandemic's isolation was the April 2021 Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion. Kaufman Institute staff took advantage of the opportunity despite the necessity for online programming. It focused on "Healing our Earth," revisiting the theme from the canceled 2020 event. Spaces were offered throughout the month that amplified wisdom, insights, and work pertaining to environmental action from numerous traditions and organizations. Two panel discussions were featured, leading into the week of Earth Day on April 22, 2021.



*Franciscan sister planting a tree at the Dominican Center.*

The first panel, "Christian Imperatives for Environmental Care," featured leaders from various Christian traditions, including former Mayor Heartwell and representatives from area colleges and environmental organizations, who discussed how their faith traditions approach environmental action. The speakers focused on the questions, "Why Care for the Environment?" and "What Are You Doing to Care for the Environment?" Speakers included faculty from Aquinas College, Hope College, Calvin University, as well as evangelical environmental activists.

The second panel, "Interfaith Imperatives for Climate Action," explored how faith or values from various traditions prompt action toward addressing our climate crisis. Panelists representing environmental organizations and Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Indigenous, Jewish, and Muslim religious communities offered wisdom from their traditions.

They also spoke about their work regarding climate change with strategies for solidarity, adaptation, and mitigation. They responded to the questions, "How Does Your Faith or Values Inform Climate Action?" and "What Are You Doing for Climate Action?"

During Earth Week, the Kaufman Institute offered a series of interfaith Zoom workshops addressing the environmental crisis from an array of focal points: creation care, environmental racism, congregational action, sustainable practices, and spiritual approaches to worry and fear. Presenters included environmental educators, activist clergy, a West Michigan University faculty member, and a youth leader in the Sunrise Movement. All offered faith, wisdom, and opportunities for action in the face of the climate crisis.

## Healing Our Political Divisions

Although the Kaufman Interfaith Institute does not take political stances or advocate for political action, the deepening political polarization in the United States called for a constructive interfaith response. The Kaufman Institute sought to apply the bridge-building it had long practiced among faiths with different worldviews to extreme political partisanship that is now often commonplace.

"We saw an opportunity, given our community partnerships with organizations like One America Movement<sup>63</sup> as well as The Colossian Forum,<sup>64</sup> to engage what we see as one of the pressing issues facing faith communities, and that is political polarization," said Kaufman Institute Associate Director Kyle Kooyers. "Faith communities can play a vital role in healing that divisiveness."<sup>65</sup> Kaufman Institute staff and West Michigan religious leaders engaged with One America Movement, a national nonprofit that equips faith communities to overcome division in order to "solve problems that matter,"<sup>66</sup> in a training to ameliorate the polarization that inhibits work across political, racial, and religious divides.

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63 "One America Movement," One America Movement, <https://oneamericamovement.org/>.

64 "The Colossian Forum," The Colossian Forum, <https://colossianforum.org/>.

65 Kooyers, Kyle. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

66 "One America Movement," One America Movement, <https://oneamericamovement.org/>.

The day-long event drew a dozen participants from a broad range of faiths, as well as a member of the Colossian Forum, which helps Christian congregations deal constructively with conflict. The group tackled everything from social identity's connection to hate to isolated group echo chambers to answering the question of, "how to communicate effectively and non-threateningly across differences." The Kaufman Institute and Calvin University co-sponsored a OneAmerica-led program aimed at university students and staff titled "How to Talk to Your Neighbor."<sup>67</sup> The online training sessions explored the science of polarization and practices for having productive conversation around divisive issues like COVID-19 restrictions and defunding police forces.

Along with these programs, a book group began a three-month weekly discussion of *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. While the Kaufman Institute steered clear of advocating direct political action, it continued to address social problems through a faith lens that inevitably touches on politics. "Anything where you're engaging in people's lived experience or life together as a part of a city, that is a political conversation,"<sup>68</sup> Kooyers said.

## Healing Our Racial Disparity

On May 30, 2020, what began as a peaceful protest in Grand Rapids against George Floyd's murder at the hands of a police officer in Minneapolis deteriorated into rioting and extensive destruction of property in the city's downtown. Mayor Rosalynn Bliss wrote in her June 2020 email newsletter: "In reflecting on this past week, like so many of you, it has been an emotional week. ... Listening and grappling with how best to acknowledge the deep pain that racism has caused to so many in our community. How to recognize the trauma associated with systemic racism. How to provide space for people to share their outrage. And how to identify ways to move forward together, as a community."<sup>69</sup>

The shock of Floyd's murder and the protests it provoked also brought the reality of racism anew to the Institute's interfaith projects. Douglas Kindschi addressed it head-on in his weekly "Interfaith Insight" column for *The Grand Rapids Press*. In a commentary titled "A Personal Confession: I Am a Racist," Kindschi wrote of his upbringing in a racially respectful environment and his positive relationships with African Americans. Yet Floyd's murder, he wrote, "shocked me into a realization of how deep the systemic racism is in our society."<sup>70</sup> In another column, he pondered: "Racial justice is certainly the critical issue we face today. The pandemic of racial injustice has even pushed aside the coronavirus pandemic. The murder of George Floyd and the worldwide response has brought this issue again to our consciousness. It also begs the question of how will faith communities respond?"<sup>71</sup>

Recognizing both the urgency of the issue as well as the importance of responding within one's capacity, the Kaufman Institute invited its interfaith book club groups to incorporate racial justice into their studies. The Institute held book studies for years organized around weekly study of individual chapters that enabled participants to dig more deeply into themes with constant and consistent conversation, rather than facilitating single discussions of whole books. A series of moderated multi-week discussions were held with the belief that an interfaith perspective is helpful in exploring subjects as racism and white privilege. Such studies can also help participants to move outside of their viewpoint with a willingness to learn, to grow, and to respond.

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67 Katherine Arnold, "GV asks 'How to talk to your neighbor?'" *Grand Valley Lanthorn*, February 15, 2021. [https://lanthorn.com/80394/laker\\_life/gv-asks-how-to-talk-to-your-neighbor/?fbclid=IwAR2Sds4hIRuzXAqlLh6xR\\_01AUKcXgJCVRglGTMXf59HvZMFktqkdmK22Y](https://lanthorn.com/80394/laker_life/gv-asks-how-to-talk-to-your-neighbor/?fbclid=IwAR2Sds4hIRuzXAqlLh6xR_01AUKcXgJCVRglGTMXf59HvZMFktqkdmK22Y).

68 Kooyers, Kyle. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

69 Rosalynn Bliss. "Reflections This Past Week." Email, 2020.

70 Douglas Kindschi, "A personal confession: I am a racist," *Grand Rapids Press*, June 25, 2020, B05, [https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/as-set/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/interfaith\\_insight\\_2020\\_jun\\_25\\_a\\_personal\\_confession\\_-\\_i\\_am\\_a\\_racist.pdf](https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/as-set/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/interfaith_insight_2020_jun_25_a_personal_confession_-_i_am_a_racist.pdf).

71 Douglas Kindschi, "Amid racism and protests, is there hope?," *Grand Rapids Press*, June 11, 2020, B05, [https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/as-set/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/interfaith\\_insight\\_2020\\_jun\\_11\\_amid\\_racism\\_and\\_protests\\_is\\_there\\_hope.pdf](https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/as-set/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/interfaith_insight_2020_jun_11_amid_racism_and_protests_is_there_hope.pdf).

With in-person gatherings prohibited due to the pandemic, such discussions took on even greater value as readers were able to join a Zoom meeting from places beyond Grand Rapids, such as Muskegon, Kalamazoo, and Ann Arbor. Lillian Sigal, one of the founders of the Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA), even reconnected with the interfaith community from her new home in Philadelphia.

From July 2020 through September 2020, a group of more than 25 people discussed *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* by Robin DiAngelo. Participants explored, as one commentator on the book said, a “road map for developing white racial stamina and humility ... loosen[ing] the bonds of white supremacy and bind[ing] us back together as human beings.”<sup>72</sup> In early 2021, the group dove into a historical perspective to explore the intersection of interfaith and racial justice as it discussed *Passionate for Justice: Ida B. Wells as Prophet for Our Time* by Catherine Meeks and Gibson “Nibs” Stroupe. In their book, Meeks and Stroupe, a Black female scholar and a white male pastor, shared their personal stories about racism; these stories helped stimulate conversation within the group. In May 2021 the group spent a session with *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* by Heather McGhee. The book study was supplemented by her video presentation addressing how a “zero-sum game” perspective ends up hurting us all.

Several participants later reflected on how these discussions deepened their understanding of the insidiousness of racism and white privilege. They also spoke of how their faith demanded that they take a closer look at their own culpability. “My main takeaway from this book discussion was that my faith can't automatically save me from racist thoughts,” reflected Dan Salerno, a self-described progressive Christian from Kalamazoo. “My faith should promote a deeper understanding of people who don't look like me or think like me or act like me. If it doesn't, then my faith can actually be a breeding ground for racist thought.”<sup>73</sup>

Cary Fleisher, a Jewish attorney, said that while he learned from the books, he also learned more from others in the groups, including insights about his own faith. “It's not the book,” he said. “It's the wonderful people discussing the book.” Sister Mary Brigid Clingman of the Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters was grateful to learn more about Ida B. Wells and for the participation of dozens of people in the study. “The Kaufman group lent a deepening understanding on the complexities of our coming to terms with immersion in our white culture of superiority,” Sister Clingman wrote. “There was an added dimension of how white religious traditions have influenced and have been influenced by that socio-political-economic bedrock of who we are and how we perceive ourselves in a place of privilege.”<sup>74</sup>

In one of his “Interfaith Insight” columns about George Floyd's murder, Kindschi expressed the Kaufman Institute's commitment in answering his own question of, “Amid racism and protests, can we find hope?”

“We cannot hide from the truth taught by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ‘that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.’ We may not be guilty of George Floyd's murder, but we are all responsible for systems that perpetuate racism, tolerate abuse of authority, and for our failure to act on our religious and ethical imperatives to love justice and mercy for all.”<sup>75</sup>

His words proved tragically prophetic when, in April 2022, the shooting death of Patrick Lyoya, a Congolese refugee, by a White Grand Rapids police officer provoked more protests. This tragedy once again highlighted the harsh realities of racial inequity and white authority in the United States.

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72 Resma Menakem, frontpiece under “Praise for *White Fragility*,” paperback edition, Beacon Press, Boston. 2018.

73 Fleisher, Cary. Interview by David Baak. (2022).

74 Clingman, Sister Mary Brigid. Interview by David Baak. (2022).

75 Douglas Kindschi, “A personal confession: I am a racist,” *Grand Rapids Press*, June 25, 2020, B05, [https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/as-set/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/interfaith\\_insight\\_2020\\_jun\\_25\\_a\\_personal\\_confession\\_-\\_i\\_am\\_a\\_racist.pdf](https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/as-set/843249C9-B1E5-BD47-A25EDBC68363B726/interfaith_insight_2020_jun_25_a_personal_confession_-_i_am_a_racist.pdf).



## The Pandemic Opens Up New Opportunities

As pandemic restrictions ended and the community reopened, Kaufman Institute staff continued to explore the opportunities and lessons of the past two and a half years. Partnerships continued to be important with community congregations and groups, such as a local broad-based organizing effort,<sup>76</sup> and continued collaborations with groups such as Interfaith America, whose nationwide initiatives aim to build bridges of cooperation through religious diversity.

The Kaufman Institute's increased attention to campus programming and on-campus interfaith internships at local colleges was an important outcome of the pandemic, while also continuing to grow new ventures with high school youth. The institute's engagement with younger generations brought new energy and ideas to its programming, while also creating promising connections for its future leadership. Two key Kaufman Institute initiatives in working with younger generations are its Youth Interfaith Service Day Camps,<sup>77</sup> held during the summer for middle-and high-school students, and Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Scholars,<sup>78</sup> which brings together eighth- through twelfth-graders throughout the school year to study common texts and put their learning into action through collaborative projects.



*Youth Interfaith Service Day Camp participants running to their next activity.*

Brothers Vishnu and Krishna Mano, students at City High Middle School, took part in both the day camps and the leadership scholar programs. They say it gave them a deeper appreciation of their Hindu faith, a greater awareness of other faiths around Grand Rapids, and how to work with other young people for the greater good. “Without the Kaufman Interfaith Institute and the work they did with that day camp, I feel like Krishna and I would have otherwise missed out on a very important part of being a part of the Grand Rapids community,”<sup>79</sup> Vishnu said.

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76 “Together West Michigan” Industrial Areas Foundation, <https://www.organizewmi.com/>.

77 “Youth Interfaith Service Day Camps,” Kaufman Interfaith Institute, <https://www.gvsu.edu/interfaith/youth-interfaith-service-day-camps-100.htm>.

78 “Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Scholars,” Kaufman Interfaith Institute, <https://www.gvsu.edu/interfaith/kaufman-interfaith-leadership-scholars-127.htm>.

79 Mano, Vishnu. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).



Vishnu and Krishna have both attended the leadership scholar program since 2019, connecting them with about a dozen other students in deep discussions about their faith and current issues. During the pandemic, the brothers created a website connecting volunteers with immune-compromised people who couldn't leave their homes for necessary supplies. Krishna said interfaith initiatives like the Kaufman Institute's are needed to educate young people about their own faiths and to help knit a torn country back together. "As America becomes increasingly divided and partisan, the future of not only America but the rest of the world is children," Krishna said. "So ensuring that these children understand that we can live together as one community, regardless of what we believe in, (means) we can still celebrate those differences and learn from one another about how to live life with as much happiness as we possibly can."<sup>80</sup>

## Cultivating Campus Connections

In addition to its secondary school programs, the Kaufman Institute also increased its involvement with college campuses partially as a result of the pandemic. The Institute took on new responsibilities for campus programming due to university enrollment losses and budget cuts created by COVID-19. The Kaufman

Institute worked to accommodate the needs of faith-based groups and elevate the diversity of GVSU's student body as a unit of the GVSU Division of Inclusion and Equity.



*Shelby Bruseloff at Temple*

The Institute coordinated the work of several campus interns from area colleges, including GVSU, Cornerstone University, Aquinas College, Calvin College, and Hope College. Some interns have gone on to do critical work in their faith communities and interfaith settings. Shelby Bruseloff assisted in structuring those internships. Bruseloff also served as the Kaufman Institute's communications coordinator in 2015, while completing her degree in social work at GVSU. She was president of the GVSU's Hillel Jewish student group, later became assistant director of Hillel Campus Alliance of Michigan, and is currently a senior planning associate at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit.

Bruseloff helped plan and coordinate events for the 2015 Year of Interfaith Service, working with dozens of community organizations. The experience "really helped to inspire my work," she said. "I think it helped me realize how everybody wants to work together, everybody wants to better understand each other, and everybody wants to be better understood and heard. Interfaith programming is a really beautiful space for that."<sup>81</sup>

Bruseloff said her work with the Kaufman Institute helped her recognize the value of interfaith dialogue for bridging the yawning divides in the United States. "That's one of the most critical pieces to helping our future, is taking the time to talk with one another and understand each other."<sup>82</sup>

Increasing understanding among people of different faiths has always been at the heart of West Michigan's interfaith initiatives and the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. The need for understanding and bridge-building in the United States has only grown since those efforts began. Much thought is being given to what will come next as the Kaufman Institute is continuously evolving their response to community and campus needs and interests.

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<sup>80</sup> Mano, Krishna. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

<sup>81</sup> Bruseloff, Shelby. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER SIX

# Interfaith Initiative as a Public Square

In the spring of 2016, several hundred people gathered at the headquarters of the Grand Rapids Catholic Diocese for a program called “Welcoming Refugees: Do Unto Others,” organized with the help of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. Representatives from the City of Grand Rapids, Christian resettlement agencies, and the Michigan Office for New Americans came together with residents to learn about the refugees from around the world coming to the city and how the community could better serve them. They heard refugees’ testimonies, saw videos about immigrants who did well in the community, and learned about federal quotas restricting the number of refugees. A person who came to the United States in a desperate flight from their homeland was seated at each table. Sitting with them were residents who had long called this country home. The long-term residents learned more about the newcomers, including what brought them to the United States and what they needed to start a new life. Through these personal interactions, residents could get involved in helping refugees.

In advertising the event, a spokeswoman for Bethany Christian Services, which participated in the program, said, “We are hoping to engage the public in a meaningful conversation about how each of us can take a stand against terrorism by offering a home to refugees fleeing from it.”<sup>83</sup> The community responded to this invitation in a big way. Attendees outnumbered seats in the large meeting room, leaving many standing throughout the program. This was not a call to action, but it was an opportunity for action. It was not a political event, but it addressed a political issue through a familiar religious and non-religious value: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

This event was a prime example of how the Kaufman Institute worked in the community: the Institute promotes pluralism where everyone is invited to get involved, as well as creates event-oriented opportunities for engagement by focusing on understanding and relationships. Interfaith initiatives are essentially a public square, a place where people from diverse backgrounds can come together safely to learn about each other. In that learning, people can consider what they might do and build together. The development of the Institute has been a maturation of personal experiences becoming institutionalized. While people, relationships, events, and community efforts come and go, the Kaufman Institute’s “public square” became a framework that encourages and sustains the interfaith movement in West Michigan. Interfaith understanding, service, friendship, and healing are ongoing characteristics that are reinforced with relationships formed through every new project.

This question surfaces fifteen years after the founding of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute: How can the institute continue to sustain West Michigan’s interfaith community – and its own viability?

## Building on the Past, Bridging to the Future

The question invites a look back on what enabled the region to create a vibrant interfaith initiative thirty years ago. West Michigan is an area comfortable with the public engagement of faith in civic life, ranging from supportive municipal leaders as well as cultural organizations such as museums, libraries, and symphony

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83 Anya Rath, “Interfaith organizations to host refugee awareness event for community,” MLive, February 18, 2016, [https://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/2016/02/interfaith\\_organizations\\_to\\_ho.html](https://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/2016/02/interfaith_organizations_to_ho.html).

orchestras. Both Muskegon and Grand Rapids are predominantly Christian communities that have grown in religious diversity and are interested in diverse religious experiences. The successes of some of the interfaith initiatives is chalked up to having the right people in the right place at the right time. It took a lot of intentional time for these interfaith efforts to develop as people gradually got to know each other better and learned more about one another's respective faiths. This intentional time and effort for these initiatives was happening in West Michigan, even as the United States underwent dramatic changes at the turn of the millennium.

This question also invites a look ahead as to wonder and dream about what is needed to continue the Kaufman Institute's mission – and to also engage younger, less religiously affiliated generations in supporting it. “The goal should be truly intergenerational programming,” said the Kaufman Institute's associate director Kyle Kooyers, about the institute's future focus. “In order to achieve that, we have to lean heavily into the next generation.”<sup>84</sup> Reaching younger generations will benefit from preserving some of the core elements that made both the Muskegon and Grand Rapids interfaith efforts succeed, Kooyers said. Those successes grew from a region and time well-suited to an interfaith movement.

The steady hand of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) proved crucial to the West Michigan interfaith movement. In late 2020, the Institute formulated a model of interfaith collaboration as a kind of template for its efforts. This included identifying key partners, principles, funding, and other support that enabled the institute to thrive. Drawing on a wide range of community connections and assets, the Institute's home base at a supportive public university gave it a stability, credibility, and durability conducive to broad public interest and engagement. These interfaith efforts could have fizzled out without the assets and connections.

### A DEEPLY ENGAGED LOCAL INTERFAITH COLLABORATION MODEL

**Foundational Base:** Brought together community members who view interfaith work as a calling; secured buy-in from Grand Rapids city leaders; gained support of GVSU with its guiding values of diversity and inclusion.

**Funding:** Received gifts that formed the basis of an endowment; received program grants from foundations; provided mini grants to congregations.

**Communications:** Created a public launch of the Year of Interfaith Understanding; earned strong coverage from TV, radio, and print media, including national exposure; crafted ongoing communication through website and social media.

**Programming:** Planned ongoing signature events such as the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogues and Interfaith Academic Consortium; incorporated pre-existing science and faith programs, with foundation funding to engage in international projects; worked with high-school youth in summer day camps and leadership scholar program.

**Partnerships:** Worked with a consortium of eight higher-education institutions; bringing together congregations and faith communities for joint events; cooperated with cultural institutions, the intermediate school district and other community organizations; collaborated with GVSU for campus interfaith resources; developed college internships.

**Guiding Principles:** Built relationships based on invitations to collaborate; remained neutral on divisive political issues; emphasized intentional listening to learn and understand one another; embraced in dialogue the “thickness” of beliefs and traditions rather than watering them down.

**Organization-Building:** Assembled advisory councils to help inform interfaith work; recruited initial staff support and formalized work structure; not just event management but establishing a continual presence.

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84 Kooyers, Kyle and Ahmed-Usmani, Zahabia. Interview by David Baak, Charles Honey, and Douglas Kindschi. (2022).

The Institute also gained an agility over time that allows it to respond creatively to community interests and national concerns with sturdy assets from the collaboration model, Kooyers says. “One of the strengths of [the] Kaufman [Institute] is that while we have a few events that are really fixed, the whole operation feels like an interfaith lab to me,” he said. “It’s a constant experimentation in different events. So when somebody comes to us and they say, ‘We want to do a program that does this,’ we have a whole menu of program styles, set-ups, dialogue frameworks that we can then sift through and say, ‘This is the best type of format to have this conversation or to explore this topic.’”<sup>85</sup>

## The Challenges of Change

Today’s West Michigan is not the same place it was in the late 20th century when these interfaith initiatives took root. Along with the rest of the United States, the region has been buffeted by bitter political partisanship, rampant social media and inflammatory culture wars, as well as the traumatic COVID-19 pandemic. These deep divisions extended into traditional faith communities, from which more and more people have become disaffiliated.

The interfaith story of Muskegon and Grand Rapids shows that with tending and care, a community can grow. The West Michigan interfaith community initiatives form a rich case study of how people from very different faiths and cultures can come together in a spirit of understanding and cooperation. These efforts helped many people see their own community as a more diverse and interesting place than they had previously thought. For those who have taken part in these interfaith activities, the old pejorative label of “Bland Rapids” can no longer apply.

There is tension between what is currently happening and what is possible, happening in tandem with numerous social and political changes. With these shifts, how can even a vibrant interfaith initiative such as the Kaufman Institute sustain community interest when so many people are losing faith in community – and indeed in faith itself?

## Engaging Younger Generations, Growing New Leadership

Re-telling stories and remembering contributions from many sources demonstrates the Kaufman Interfaith Institute’s intention to honor all the religious traditions. This intention has contributed to weaving together a rich fabric of faith in West Michigan. However, the Institute now enters a new era in religious consciousness. Matters traditionally addressed from within religious institutions are still important and the influence of faith experience is still carried forward by individuals. Yet such concerns have become less connected to ecclesiastical settings.<sup>86</sup>

This is especially true with regard to young people, as surveys show that more than one-third of the country’s youngest generations do not identify with a religious tradition.<sup>87</sup> The faith profile of these “nones” includes atheist, agnostic, “nothing in particular,” and the increasingly common identifier: “spiritual but not religious.” The resiliency of the Kaufman Institute sees a new challenge in balancing its needs for institutional stability and continuity of vision with opportunities to embrace the new generation, while still retaining more traditional participants.

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85 Kooyers, Kyle. Interview by David Baak, Charles Honey, and Douglas Kindschi. (2022).

86 Gregory A Smith, “About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults are Now Religiously Unaffiliated,” Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

87 Melissa Deckman, “Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Shows,” *Religion in Public*, February 10, 2020, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/>.





Zahabia Ahmed-Usmani talks with community leader Johanna Osman.

Kooyers and Program Manager Zahabia Ahmed-Usmani understand the cohort of high school and college students whose interfaith interests begin with friendship and action and whose concerns prioritize justice, fairness, and dignity. They both understand that confidence in the future has been shaken by concerns about the health of the planet, systemic racism, and gender inequity. These concerns are also new opportunities to encourage young people, and to illustrate that they do not have to face such global concerns on their own.

“How do we expand from just religious to ‘religious and spiritual,’ and then how do we parse out the cultural in that?” Kooyers said. “It’s so hard to separate out what is religious and what is cultural. So the

future of interfaith generally has to be both.”<sup>88</sup>

If history is any guide, many younger adults may become increasingly involved in religion as they grow older, have children, and plant community roots. The Kaufman Institute thrived on the involvement of people with deep faith convictions informed by long-established religious teachings. Those bedrock strengths must remain its foundation, says Director Douglas Kindschi. “While we’re taking into account the younger generation, we need to continue the historic focus of the Kaufman Institute,” Kindschi said. “It still will have and should have a strong religious focus. Religion’s not going to go away. It’s going to broaden and become more inclusive.”<sup>89</sup>



Kyle Kooyers with Day Camp youth.

## Facing the Future with Faith – and Questions

As the Kaufman Interfaith Institute looks ahead to future work, its leadership team wrestles with what that work should look like in light of changing social conditions. This means asking tough questions.

- **How can the Kaufman Institute continue to address an ever-expanding list of pressing political and social issues without becoming just another partisan player?** The mission of promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation could easily become eclipsed by the urgent issues of the day, many of which increasingly divide religious communities. The Kaufman Institute has not taken stances on charged issues like abortion access, Israel and Palestine, gun violence, and LGBTQ+ rights; yet to ignore such issues glosses over the deep religious convictions of many faith communities. How to strike a balance between constructively confronting such issues while not further dividing communities is a growing challenge, but the interfaith initiatives of Muskegon and Grand Rapids prove to be promising models for doing so. As Kindschi put it, “We want people to be more understanding. We want them to be more hospitable. We want them to be more respectful and accepting. And that is a lens that [the] Kaufman [Institute] can apply as it does interfaith, and it’s that lens that can also help us understand the larger polarization that’s going on in our society.”<sup>90</sup> Through its programming, he added, the Institute can “use that interfaith lens so that we’re not contributing to more polarization, but we’re contributing to more understanding.”<sup>91</sup> The Kaufman Institute’s work as a public square can provide a model for brave conversations around difficult issues in contrast to the current raging culture wars.

88 Kooyers, Kyle and Ahmed-Usmani, Zahabia, interview with David Baak, Charles Honey, and Douglas Kindschi. (2022).

89 Kindschi, Douglas. Interview with David Baak and Charles Honey. (2022).

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.



- **Should the Kaufman Institute remain at its core an enterprise centered on the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam?** People from the Abrahamic faiths are still the prime audience at Kaufman Institute programming, but the organization is seeing considerable interest among other religious communities, including Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Bahá'í, as well as a well-organized community of secular activists. Given GVSU's commitment to inclusion and diversity, a university-based institute should robustly reflect those values. As the Kaufman Institute continually seeks to be more pluralistic – not just interfaith, but multifait – it will need to intentionally involve all sectors of the faith community. The Institute invites such involvement by encouraging dialogue that respectfully recognizes differences, says Fred Stella, the former president of the Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA). “While many devotees in the multifait arena tend to ignore significant theological differences and are offended by claims of religious exclusivity,” Stella said, “IDA and [the] Kaufman [Institute] have encouraged participants to speak their truth honestly but politely.”<sup>92</sup>
- **What lessons can the Kaufman Institute learn from the interfaith experiences of Muskegon and Grand Rapids, and could those lessons be useful for similar initiatives in other communities?** Some elements of West Michigan's interfaith experiences are unique to the area. The area is rich with religious resources, including Christian colleges, publishing houses, social outreach programs, and ministries. Both Grand Rapids and Muskegon's initiatives were led by individuals with extensive religious, civic, and academic connections. The Kaufman Interfaith Institute benefits from the support of a public university. While the scope of the region's interfaith initiatives is limited to the geographic community, it also attracts international religious figures and scholars. The two cities' interfaith activities feature common elements that can be applied to similar efforts in other communities:
  - Building on **personal relationships** and ensuring broad representation of faith groups.
  - Reaching out to **existing community resources and institutions**.
  - **Offering something** to community organizations rather than asking for something.
  - Providing **something for everyone** with a wide variety of events and venues.
  - Programming **created from the ground up** rather than imposed from above.
  - Inspiring a **ripple effect of enthusiasm** that extends beyond the immediate community.
  - Cultivating an atmosphere of friendly inquiry that makes participants feel **comfortable and welcome**.

The Kaufman Institute, as an effective example of these principles developed in West Michigan, can inspire others to engage in interfaith relationships distinctive to their own communities.

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92 Stella, Fred. Interview by Charles Honey. (2021).

# Reflecting on the Beginning

To conclude this review of West Michigan's interfaith movement over the past three decades, it's important to return to the beginning: the centennial celebration of a small Jewish congregation in Muskegon. This centennial celebration was spearheaded by one woman with a great idea. That great idea encompassed the entire faith community and, eventually, extended its influence to the much bigger city of Grand Rapids. The yearlong celebration of Temple B'nai Israel served as a template for the area's larger interfaith initiatives over the coming years.

Sylvia Kaufman, a prominent B'nai Israel member and co-owner of a local company with her husband, Richard, applied her business knowledge and community partnerships to transform her congregation's centennial in 1988 into a yearlong citywide celebration. It involved the art museum, civic theater, symphony orchestra, public library, and Christian churches. It all came together to celebrate the history of a congregation of fewer than ninety families, but whose members contributed greatly to the city's cultural and civic life.

That centennial celebration year taught many Christians about the faith of their fellow Jewish citizens. A Lutheran marketing director for the Muskegon County Convention and Visitors Bureau told *The New York Times* that, prior to the celebration, she knew little about Judaism aside from Hanukkah. She was proud of the town's celebration "when other communities are showing prejudice."<sup>93</sup> Muskegon's Jewish residents also learned more about their own faith through the centennial. The Muskegon centennial celebration set a pattern of ambitious programming addressing weighty theological questions and timely public issues alongside encouraging personal reflections on faith.

Learning about other faiths was also a hallmark of the IDA, formed around the same time by a group of women in Grand Rapids. Ghazala Munir, a Muslim woman who was one of the IDA's founders, later told *PBS Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, "It seems to me that no matter what you believe, it all comes out to be the same; our dreams, our hopes, our fears are all the same."<sup>94</sup>

Self-learning became an enduring byproduct of West Michigan's interfaith interactions, whether from lectures by renowned scholars or from conversations with new friends over delicious dinners. Shelby Bruseloff, a college student and Kaufman Interfaith Institute staffer in 2015, said the experience helped her better understand her Jewish faith: "I was in spaces where you're talking more about what your faith really means."<sup>95</sup>

These interfaith gatherings, whether in university lecture halls, houses of worship, or living rooms, had the effect of making "interfaith" a familiar part of these two cities' cultural vocabulary over time. These gatherings helped people come together in times of crisis in public solidarity, creating what former Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell called "an elevated sense of community."<sup>96</sup> As Ghazala Munir said at an interfaith prayer service the night of the September 11, 2001 attacks: "We gather here as one American family, as one human family."<sup>97</sup>

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93 Wilkerson, "Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise."

94 Judy Valente, "Grand Rapids Interfaith Year," *PBS Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, February 1, 2013, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2013/02/01/february-1-2013-grand-rapids-interfaith-year/14629/>.

95 Bruseloff, Shelby. Interview by Charles Honey. (2022).

96 Joseph DeMott, *Interfaith Engagement in West Michigan: A Brief History and Analysis*, (Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2015) 59. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Interfaith-in-W-Mich-online-version.pdf>.

97 "'We gather here as one American family' - Jewish, Muslim, Christian and leaders of other," *Grand Rapids Press*, The (MI), September 12, 2001, A9.

Since the turn of the millennium, the Kaufman Interfaith Institute has broadened the reach and deepened the discussions of interfaith interactions in West Michigan. Through high-profile public programs, a commitment to “thick dialogue,” and citywide campaigns of understanding and service, the Kaufman Institute carried the spirit of those early interfaith efforts to an ever growing audience of people and faiths. In the process, it brought these faith communities closer together and enhanced their understanding of who they are and where they live in the long history of the United States. As the Kaufman Institute’s work continues through the coming decades, it will face new challenges around shifting social and political realities. But it, and the communities who seek to follow in its footsteps, will have the solid foundation of the West Michigan interfaith initiatives to build upon.

## APPENDIX A

# Triennial Dialogue Programs

<b>1991</b>	Rabbi Dr. David Hartman Bishop Krister Stendahl	Faithful Interpretation: A Jew And A Christian Reflect On Continuity And Change
<b>1994</b>	Rabbi Dr. David Hartman Professor Martin E. Marty	Religion That Kills, Religion That Heals: Bringing Out The Positive Side
<b>1997</b>	Rabbi Dr. David Hartman	The Word Of God And The Interpretive Communities: Possibilities For Self-Correction
<b>2000</b>	Professor Harvey Cox Rabbi Dr. Irving Greenberg	Old Boundaries, New Boundaries: Taking The Next Step
<b>2003</b>	James Carroll Rabbi Dr. Irving Greenberg	Self-Criticism And Mutual Affirmation: The Future Of Jewish-Christian Relations In A Religiously Inflamed World
<b>2006</b>	James Carroll Professor Vincent Cornell Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman	Religion And Power: The Power To Create, The Power To Destroy
<b>2009</b>	James Carroll Professor Vincent Cornell Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman	Religion And The Challenges Of Modernity
<b>2012</b>	Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman Dr. Cynthia Campbell Dr. Omid Safi	Living With God In A Time Of Suffering
<b>2015</b>	Rabbi Dr. Donniel Hartman Dr. Cynthia Campbell Dr. Ingrid Mattson	To Repair The World: How Does Religion Help Or Hinder
<b>2018</b>	Rabbi Dr. Elliot Cosgrove Dr. Eboo Patel Professor Jennifer Howe Peace	Religious Identity: Dividing Or Uniting?



## APPENDIX B

# Interfaith Academic Consortium Conferences

<b>2001</b>	Professor James Kugel	Can Jews And Christians Ever Agree On What The Bible Means?
<b>2002</b>	Professor Paula Fredricksen	Before The Divide: Jews And Christians In The Early Centuries
<b>2004</b>	Professor Arthur Green Professor Bernard McGinn	Jewish And Christian Mysticism: Convergences And Divergences
<b>2005</b>	Professor Karen King	What Is Gnosticism?
<b>2007</b>	Professor Alan Segal	Life After Death In Western Religions
<b>2008</b>	Professor David Nirenberg	One God, Three Scriptures: Judaism, Christianity, And Islam
<b>2010</b>	Professor Omid Safi	Islam Beyond The Headlines
<b>2011</b>	Professor Martin E. Marty	The Presence Of The Religious Stranger
<b>2013</b>	Dean Margaret Mitchell	Religious Polemics And Religious Fairness
<b>2014</b>	Professor William Schweiker	Does Religion Have A Future?
<b>2016</b>	Professor Amy-Jill Levine	Understanding Jesus Means Understanding Judaism
<b>2017</b>	Dean Scott Appleby	Can Religions Collaborate For The Common Good?
<b>2019</b>	Professor Elaine Pagels	Why Religion?
<b>2022</b>	Professor David Nirenberg	Judaism, Christianity, And Islam: How Do Our Faiths Shape Our Prejudices And Our Ideas?

## APPENDIX C

# Religious Understanding Leading To 'Holy Envy'

Krister Stendahl was one of the first speakers in Muskegon's Jewish-Christian dialogues, and his rules of religious understanding have had a major impact on interfaith relations in West Michigan and internationally.

### Krister Stendahl's Three Rules of Religious Understanding

- (1) When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
- (2) Don't compare your best to their worst.
- (3) Leave room for "holy envy." (You should be willing to recognize elements in the other religious tradition or faith that you admire and wish could, in some way, be reflected in your own religious tradition or faith.)

### The Kaufman Interfaith Agenda

This agenda was developed by the Kaufman Interfaith Institute director Douglas Kindschi, and served as the basis of over 30 presentations in the community during the 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding. Rotary groups, congregations, college and university classes, conferences, etc. hosted many of these presentations.

**Tolerance** – The avoidance of violence against another person or tradition

**Hospitality** – Doing something nice to someone with whom you might disagree

**Understanding** – Through conversation and listening seeking to understand the other person

**Respect** – Through dialogue learning to respect a belief or perspective different from one's own

**Acceptance** – Accepting another person's faith without seeking to convert or change the person

**Holy Envy** – Finding aspects of another tradition or faith that you wish could be reflected in one's own religious faith or practice

# Leonard Swidler's Dialogue Decalogue

Leonard Swidler, "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20:1 (Winter 1983). Available online: <http://institute.jesdialogue.org/resources/tools/decalogue/>

## The Dialogue Decalogue

### FIRST PRINCIPLE

The essential purpose of dialogue is to learn, which entails change. At the very least, to learn that one's dialogue partner views the world differently is to effect a change in oneself. Reciprocally, change happens for one's partner as s/he learns about oneself.

### SECOND PRINCIPLE

Dialogue must be a two-sided project: both between religious/ideological groups, and within religious/ideological groups (Inter- and Intra-). Intra-religious/ideological dialogue is vital for moving one's community toward an increasingly perceptive insight into reality.

### THIRD PRINCIPLE

It is imperative that each participant comes to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity. This means not only describing the major and minor thrusts as well as potential future shifts of one's tradition, but also possible difficulties that s/he has with it.

### FOURTH PRINCIPLE

One must compare only her/his ideals with their partner's ideals, and her/his practice with their partner's practice. Not their ideals with their partner's practice.

### FIFTH PRINCIPLE

Each participant needs to describe her/himself. For example, only a Muslim can describe what it really means to be an authentic member of the Muslim community. At the same time, when one's partner in dialogue attempts to describe back to them what they have understood of their partner's self-description, then such a description must be recognizable to the described party.

### SIXTH PRINCIPLE

Participants must not come to the dialogue with any preconceptions as to where the points of disagreement lie. A process of agreeing with their partner as much as possible, without violating the integrity of their own tradition, will reveal where the real boundaries between the traditions lie: the point where s/he cannot agree without going against the principles of their own tradition.

**SEVENTH PRINCIPLE**

Dialogue can only take place between equals, which means that partners learn from each other — *par cum pari* according to the Second Vatican Council — and do not merely seek to teach one another.

**EIGHTH PRINCIPLE**

Dialogue can only take place on the basis of mutual trust. Because it is persons, and not entire communities, that enter into dialogue, it is essential for personal trust to be established. To encourage this it is important that less controversial matters are discussed before dealing with the more controversial ones.

**NINTH PRINCIPLE**

Participants in dialogue should have a healthy level of criticism toward their own traditions. A lack of such criticism implies that one's tradition has all the answers, thus making dialogue not only unnecessary, but unfeasible. The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, which is impossible if one's tradition is seen as having all the answers.

**TENTH PRINCIPLE**

To truly understand another religion or ideology one must try to experience it from within, which requires a “passing over,” even if only momentarily, into another's religious or ideological experience.



## APPENDIX E

# Mayor George Heartwell's 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding Proclamation









[www.aspeninstitute.org/religion](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/religion)