

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Bringing campuses and communities together in interfaith service

By Douglas Kindschi

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Last weekend, I attended the annual meeting of the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge.

This program was an outgrowth of President Obama's 2009 inaugural address when he said: "For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers.

"We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth. And ... we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in

ushering in a new era of peace."

In the first annual report of the Campus Challenge project, the president said: "Based on the simple truth that Americans of all faiths, or even no faith, share a common destiny, we asked higher education institutions to develop or strengthen their



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interfaith and community service programs. We called for partnerships between religious and non-religious campus organizations, local community organizations, and houses of worship."

And added, "As a Christian who became committed to the Church while serving my community, I know that an act of service can bring people together in pursuit of a brighter tomorrow."

There are now more than 500 campuses involved in this effort and we at Grand Valley State University are proud to be a part.

Every year, some of the campuses are recognized by being on the Honor Roll and five were announced as the finalists for the 2015 Presidential Award.

We were surprised, and honored, when GVSU was selected as one of the finalists. The winner will be announced later in the fall.

One of the main speakers at the Campus Challenge conference was Eboo Patel, the founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core.

He will be coming to Grand Rapids on Oct. 8 and speaking at Aquinas College and at GVSU's Allendale campus.

Patel has been an inspiration behind much of the campus focus on interfaith service

throughout the country.

There is limited seating available to community members at the Grand Valley talk at 8 p.m.

More information and free tickets can be reserved at: gvsu.edu/interfaith/

Patel pointed out that America is both the most diverse country in the world and probably the most religious. But diversity is not always good; it can lead to conflict. And diversity combined with religion can also lead to violence.

In a democracy such as ours, we are free to speak out openly about our ideas and our religious views. That means we must always be vigilant to maintain respect as we interact with others who have strongly held views and religious beliefs that might be very different from our own.

Patel called us to engage in the public arena with a spirit of

respect, a desire to develop new relationships and a commitment to the common good.

This year's conference also featured a number of international guests. One representative from Lebanon called us to a three-part commitment to learn: "learn about" (each other and our differences); "learn from" (others' insights and ideas from which we can benefit); and "learn with" (by learning together we promote understanding and respect).

Can we be a part of a world effort to turn diversity toward understanding and respect? Can we join a movement that goes beyond understanding to working together? Can our communities join with the campuses to promote interfaith service? Let this be our prayer and our commitment.

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