

## INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

## Facing the issues and making everyone welcomed and wanted

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Last week, Grand Rapids celebrated, for the 17th year, its Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration. The event was sponsored by 18 organizations in the community from churches to Islamic centers; Jewish congregations to the Dominican Sisters and the Cathedral of St. Andrew; and the Baha'i community, Hindu and Buddhist temples, the Meditation Circle and the Center for Inquiry.

Over 600 people came together at Central Reformed Church to celebrate and give thanks for the diversity in our community around this year's theme, "Coming Together: Welcoming All." In a year of political divisiveness, as well as increased threats to refugees and religious and racial minorities, it was inspiring to affirm and celebrate the diversity in our community and signal again that all are welcome.

Following a call to celebration by the Central Reformed chancel choir, they were joined by the speakers and other choirs in a lively processional featuring the African chant, "Fanga Alafia," meaning welcome and peace. The response, "Ashe, Ashe," — a phrase that represents the power to make things happen — was soon joined by all in attendance. And things did happen as we heard from Baha'i and Buddhist choirs, a reading from the Christian Scriptures in Spanish, and the antiphonal singing of Psalm 145 as well as recita-

tions from the Quran. We learned from the Jewish tradition of another thanksgiving celebration called Succoth, and from a secular humanist who reminded us that "we are all made of the same stuff."

The keynote address was given by Faye Richardson-Green, the executive director of Partners for a Racism-Free Community.

She urged us to face the sexist, racist and xenophobic attitudes and behaviors in our society. For her, a quote from author and social activist James Baldwin has been a constant beacon in times of uncertainty. Baldwin, who left America to live in France because of the social conditions in the mid-20th century, said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."

Richardson-Green urged us not to become isolated and withdraw into the insular companionship of family, close friends, and people with whom we agree. That is what the rest of the world is doing by shutting out those who seem to be different in culture, race, religion or political viewpoints. We must face the issues; it is the only way to seek change.

Her goal is that which her organization has defined: "The individual and systemic condition achieved when all persons, regardless of skin color, feel welcomed and wanted in all places and treat others the same way." The key here is "welcomed and wanted," and this applies to religious differences as well as racial and ethnic differences.

The world is too small for a separation of "Us and Them." We are bound together and must not be driven by fear, but by facing the fear and making sure that everyone is indeed "welcomed and wanted." It is the challenge for America at this time but also a worldwide challenge, as religious differences and misunderstanding seem to be increasing in so many places.

We are reminded again of the statement by Hans Küng: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions"

Richardson-Green concluded by quoting Karen Armstrong from her recent book, "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life." Armstrong sets forth the challenge: "We can either emphasize those aspects of our traditions, religious or secular that speak of hatred, exclusion and suspicion or work with those that stress the interdependence and equality of all human beings. The choice is yours."

Yes, we choose. Choose to face the issues or withdraw to those only like us. Choose to make all people "welcomed and wanted" or focus on difference and fear.

*For those in other Michigan communities, let us know if you have a similar interfaith Thanksgiving event we can feature or if you would be interested in initiating such in your community. Feel free to contact us at [interfaith@gvsu.edu](mailto:interfaith@gvsu.edu)*