

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In our political environment, for what can we be thankful?



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Although this is the Thanksgiving season, many people struggle with being thankful given the results of the recent election campaign.

While we are all thankful that it is over, not everyone is thankful with the results.

And while we try to avoid strictly political issues in these Insights, I must admit to great difficulty in supporting one of the candidates who spoke so negatively about women, as well as various racial and religious minorities.

How do we work for religious understanding and acceptance when those very concepts are being challenged at the national level? How do we live out the universal call from all religions to welcome the stranger, when the message has been promoted to close the doors, break up families, and ban whole religions from entering our shores?

But now I face a new challenge of tolerance and acceptance: How do I accept those who see the world with such a different set

of values? How does one practice tolerance in an atmosphere of intolerance, not only in regard to those groups identified, but regarding my own temptation to not tolerate or understand those who didn't vote the way I voted?

It is the essence of a democracy to make choices among candidates. Normally we accept the result and come together to move forward. Yet this election hasn't been so easy, and accepting the result has been as divisive as the campaign itself.

In spite of it all we can still be thankful that we live in a country that does transfer power peacefully, no matter how painful it might be for the side that does not prevail. There are many places in the world where the power is not given up so easily and violence is perpetrated by those in power refusing to lose that power and accept change.

On a personal level, I am also thankful that I have been able to do some of this processing while outside the United States, spending a week in the Middle East country of Oman.

Many people are not aware of this country, which strategically borders Saudi Ara-

bia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates and is across the bay from Iran. This Muslim country is known for its promotion of tolerance and openness to all religions.

Oman is considered by some to be the "Switzerland of the Middle East" because of its neutrality and efforts to bring differing nations together in the pursuit of peace.

Over the last five years it has developed and displayed its exhibit, "Tolerance, Understanding, Coexistence: Oman's Message of Islam." The exhibit has been displayed in over 100 settings in 30 nations throughout the world. It has been featured in seven locations in the United States, most recently at the World Parliament of Religions.

West Michigan was fortunate to host two of the seven U.S. venues.

Representatives from 10 of the exhibit sites throughout the world were invited by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Oman to consult on the next phase of this tolerance project.

There were representatives from Europe, Asia, Australia/New Zealand and I had the privilege of being the only one from the United States.

At this particular time in our country's challenge over acceptance of immigrants and refugees, I found it ironic that it would be in a Middle East Muslim country that I would find some respite from the tensions and controversies. I had the opportunity to tell the Minister for Religious Affairs that, at this time, the United States does need to hear Oman's message of tolerance.

Our consultation was also timed to take place on Nov. 16 during the International Day of Tolerance established by the United Nations in 1995.

The Director-General of UNESCO, Ms. Irina Bokova, in a statement for the occasion said, "Tolerance is not relativism or indifference. It is a commitment renewed every day to seek in our diversity the bonds that unite humanity."

So yes, I am thankful that at this time when our own country is struggling with internal conflict that I could experience in a Muslim country a celebration of tolerance. It is my hope and prayer that this message will continue throughout the world and in our own land as we "seek in our diversity the bonds that unite humanity."