

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Thanksgiving a time to support human thriving



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It is Thanksgiving Week, the beginning of the holiday shopping season, parades (notably the Macy's Parade on Thanksgiving Day), families gathering, and the traditional turkey dinner. It's pretty much a secular holiday, but it does have its religious roots.

Throughout history, most religions have had special ceremonies and prayers of thanksgiving following the harvest. Following the English Reformation, the number of church holidays was reduced from 95 to 27, but days of thanksgiving were established to recognize special blessings.

For Americans, the tradition goes back to 1621, when the New England colonists and the Wampanoag Indians shared a harvest feast, which is acknowledged as the first Thanksgiving celebration in the new world. George Washington in 1789 proclaimed the first national "day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God." It was in 1863 that President Abraham Lincoln made it an annual event with his proclamation for a nationwide observance of Thanksgiving in November.

For the last 18 years, there has been an Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration in

Grand Rapids during this week. Last Monday evening at Trinity Lutheran Church, hundreds gathered from nearly a dozen faith traditions, as well as secular communities, to celebrate our common commitment to "Building Community Together." With music, readings, personal sharing, this theme was explored.

The event was sponsored by more than 20 organizations in the community from churches to Islamic centers; from Jewish congregations to the Dominican Sisters and the Cathedral of St. Andrew; and the Baha'i and Sikh communities, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and the Center for Inquiry.

MESSAGE FROM A LOCAL LEADER

Our keynote speaker for the event was a well-known community leader, Fred Keller, who founded Cascade Engineering and continues as its board chair. Cascade Engineering is a successful business with more than 1,600 employees making a variety of products serving a worldwide customer base. Fred and his company are particularly known for their leadership in areas of the environment and community responsibility.

From the beginning, Fred Keller emphasized the key role business can play in building financial, social, and ecological capital, often through partnerships with government and community agencies. His innovative management approach and work in advancing sustainability are featured regu-

larly in business and industry publications.

With a passion for making a positive impact, Keller has served on a number of corporate and community boards. He formerly was the board chair of the U.S. Department of Commerce Manufacturing Council, and is a past chair and member of the board of trustees for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Fred is also a trustee for the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Foundation. In addition, he has been part of many community organizations and change initiatives, including Talent 2025 and K-Connect.

Keller's talk emphasized the important role of the community in the thriving of the human spirit. As institutions and the community at large learn to appreciate the diversity and different perspectives we each bring to our life together, we become stronger. Differences need not polarize us but can be the source of a healthy and vibrant community. This is true for our companies as well as for our whole community. If we are all alike, it will not only be boring, but we will also lose the ability to think new thoughts and dream new ways for our lives to be enriched.

DIFFERENCES CAN BE OUR STRENGTH

He is convinced that communities have all the resources and capabilities to make the changes they need to enable everyone to thrive. Thriving begins with each of us and how we feel about ourselves. It means we have purpose and meaning; we love and

are loved.

It also reflects how we interact with those who are different from us — color of our skins, economic status, racial backgrounds, ideologies and political perspectives, religious traditions and commitments. The key to the thriving of the human spirit is how we handle these differences.

Too often religious traditions and political parties are "echo chambers" where we hear only that with which we agree. Technologies have highly refined this to the point where we only hear our own voice. Rather than pointing out where the "other" has missed the point, we need to acknowledge our own failures to live up to the ideals of our own traditions and the ways they teach the dignity of all persons "made in God's image."

Keller challenged the interfaith community to build on our efforts to understand and accept each other's faith traditions in ways that demonstrate to the whole community how differences can make us stronger. By quoting great leaders of the past and present, he demonstrated that this perspective and goal is not new, but is needed more now than ever before.

Let us make this Thanksgiving a time of coming together to listen to new voices, appreciate differences, and dream new ways to support the thriving of the human spirit in each member of our community.

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