

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Past developments lead to new interfaith focus



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As we begin this new year, I want to take a different approach to this week's column and discuss the origins and development of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute and some plans for the future.

It was in Muskegon in the late 1980s that Sylvia Kaufman conceived and led a community celebration of the Jewish community's presence in that city. It attracted national interest with articles in *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. The *Tribune* article began:

"Which of the following statements is true?"

"(A) Muskegon County, Mich., is a bastion of Jewish culture, hosting exhibits, concerts, films and scholarly studies and dissertations on contemporary and historic Judaism. Or..."

"(B) Muskegon County's 150,000 population includes only 250 Jews."

"The second statement is true."

"Nonetheless, the first statement is also true, at least for eight months beginning last weekend, when renowned violinist Itzhak Perlman flew into town on a private jet."

A consequence of this celebration was the beginning of a triennial Jewish-Christian Dialogue, which brought to West Michigan famous theologians from both traditions for a day-long interaction. In 2006, the dialogue was moved to Grand Rapids and expanded to include the Muslim faith, bringing together the three Abrahamic faiths. This then led to the establishment of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, housed at Grand Valley State

University.

The institute continues to coordinate the triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue every three years as well as the Interfaith Academic Consortium conferences in the intervening years. The consortium includes eight colleges, universities and theological seminaries in West Michigan. Thus, every year there is a major conference focusing on interfaith issues drawing participants from throughout the state and beyond.

With the establishment of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, the vision was expanded beyond these annual events to involve more of the community in an ongoing emphasis on seeking understanding and acceptance for all faith communities. In 2012, with a proclamation from then Mayor George Heartwell, the Year of Interfaith Understanding was created, which led to more than 300 events throughout the community. Churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques hosted educational and other events seeking better understanding of the religious diversity in our community. The colleges, universities, and seminaries all had events with the same goal. Community organizations, including museums, the symphony, the Economic Club, and theatre groups all had events that related to the theme. The effort led to coverage on the national PBS program, "Religion and Ethics NewsWeekly" (video available at bit.ly/2012interfaith).

Three years later, we engaged the community in "2015 — Year of Interfaith Service," bringing together various faith communities with service organizations to engage in working together to do service with food

pantries, Habitat for Humanity, hospice organizations and environmental groups.

As we look to this coming year, we are launching "2018 — Year of Interfaith Friendships." We are building on efforts of this past year to make connections among Jewish, Christian and Muslim congregations to stand together and learn from each other in times of anxiety, distrust, and polarization. We anticipate this will expand to involve other faith communities as well.

You might think of the development in these past years as involving the head (understanding), then the hands (service), and now the heart (friendships).

BUILDING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

This coming year we are developing interfaith affinity groups bringing families and individuals around common interests in ways that develop personal relationships and friendships. There are 10 groups in process of forming, with others to be added in the near future. They are organized around such interests as cinema, book reading, fitness, scriptural reading, knitting, art, medicine and contemplative traditions. If you would be interested in learning more, visit the website interfaithunderstanding.org.

For those from other cities or communities who would be interested in participating in developing interfaith friendships in your area, let us know at the appropriate link on our website.

During this year we will continue the other events that are a regular part of our schedule, including the Abrahamic Dinner and the Sigal Lecture this spring, and the Triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dia-

logue and Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration in the fall. You can keep informed on these and other developments by checking our website and signing up for our weekly e-newsletter, *Interfaith Inform*, which comes to your email address each Tuesday.

Following all of this history and information, what is our interfaith insight for the week?

One insight is that the efforts of one woman, who in the 1980s sought understanding and acceptance for all religious communities, is having long-term impact. Let us each commit our own individual effort to build such impact in our increasingly diverse communities.

In these days of increased anxiety and polarization, it is a time for building bridges between and among communities and individuals. We seem to be more and more isolated into our own echo chambers where we listen to and relate to those with whom we agree while disparaging those with whom we don't agree. Technology has made this even more divisive, since social media and computer programming repeatedly take us to sites for which we have already shown interest.

Our challenge is to learn from those who are different from us: different in politics, in religion, in social class. In so doing, we become stronger as individuals while also building community. In seeking interfaith friendships, we find a truer identity for ourselves and build a richer, more diverse and stronger society. Let this be our goal in the new year.

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