

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Responding to diversity by building bridges



Douglas Kindschi
Director, Kaufman
Interfaith Institute

It has been observed that for most of human civilization the vast majority of people have lived their whole lives without going more than 50 miles from their place of birth. Not only do people travel and move more frequently now, but communication has taken the whole world to our living rooms via television as well as to the cellphones in our hands. The diversity of the world is very present in our consciousness and at the same time more and more present in our own neighborhoods. The question is not the fact of diversity, but how we respond to that reality.

In a recent interview, Diana Eck, professor of comparative religion at Harvard University and director of the Pluralism Project, responded: "If you ask what my fear is, it's that if our diversity becomes isolated enclaves in which we really do not allow ourselves to encounter one another and don't take on the difficult task of creating a positive pluralism in which we're engaged with one another, we may end up with communities that are more isolated."

The very technology that brings the larger world into our homes and cellphones can also create "echo chambers" where we interact only with people like us and with whom we agree. It can actually lead to an isolation that removes us from real personal interaction with the diversity in our community. Diversity can lead to an exclusion response in which we reject the opportunity to engage with those who are different and seek the isolated enclaves of which Eck warns.

We can also respond to diversity by expecting everyone to assimilate and become "just like us." They are expected to change their practices, dress and beliefs so they are not seen as a threat or even an alternative to that which we have found comfortable. This is sometimes referred to as the "melting pot," where cultural differences and practices are left behind, and one conforms to the predominantly Anglo-Protestant culture.

Another response is active engagement with diversity and accepting the other's distinctive contribution to the "orchestra" of American society. This is the "salad bowl" or pluralism response, which respects as well as learns from the diversity in our communities.

To accomplish this acceptance response requires getting to know personally people who are different in culture and religion. When someone has a personal friendship with even one person from a minority religious group, it not only changes one's attitude toward that group but toward other minority groups as well.

In his latest book, "Interfaith Leadership," Eboo Patel, founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, points to the questions we ask when encountering diversity: "Who am I? Who are you? How do we relate to each other?" As we explore these questions, we have the opportunity to grow and expand our own identities.

It has certainly been my experience in our recent interfaith activity. It has not only enhanced my understanding and broadened my vision, but has also deepened my own faith. It can also contribute powerfully to one's identity. Patel points out that, "Gandhi

read the Bible as a young man in law school, and King read Gandhi as a young man in seminary." No doubt these interfaith influences had major impact on their identities and life direction.

Patel also explores four ways that we can respond to diversity:

Bunker. We can remove ourselves from interaction with people who are different, thus bunkering ourselves into a silo apart from the rest. This retreat shields us from the world around us, and ultimately from people who could enrich our lives.

Barrier. We can build barriers that further separate us from those who are different. These walls between us can be built by denouncing, demeaning, or dehumanizing others.

Bludgeon. The most harmful of the negative responses is to pick up bludgeons, or use violence against those who are different. Far too often throughout history this has led to causing physical harm to others.

Bridge. The best choice is to build bridges of cooperation across differences. These networks of engagement help create relationships among those who orient around religion differently. In this way, we build understanding that can lead to new friendships.

The Kaufman Interfaith Institute has announced 2018 as the "Year of Interfaith Friendship," as we explained in last week's column. To accomplish this, we are forming a number of "affinity groups" which will bring together persons from different faiths around areas of common interest, from book reading and cinema experience, to fitness activity, eating and cooking together, knitting or sharing contemplative practices. You

can learn more at our website: interfaithunderstanding.org.

Another opportunity to meet and learn together is the upcoming return of the National Geographic IMAX production of "Jerusalem," which presents the city through the eyes of three young women, Jewish, Christian and Muslim. This is an exclusive opportunity with only two showings, and will also include a panel of four local clergy, from the three faith traditions, who will have just returned from an interfaith experience in Jerusalem. The personal friendships among these clergy serves an example of building bridges.

Patel also writes: "Bridges don't fall from the sky or rise from the ground. People build them."

We can all join the effort to build such bridges of personal friendship and relations using our differences to strengthen our communities and bring us together. Let us all have this vision for our community and for a world that builds bridges of understanding, acceptance, and friendship.

— interfaith@gvsu.edu

Coming up

Join us for the film "Jerusalem"

Celebration North, Grand Rapids

Feb. 7 and 12 at 6:30 p.m.

\$5 per person or \$15 for a family

Tickets available only at interfaithunderstanding.org