

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Growing up and living in a multireligious world

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**Note:** This week's *Interfaith Insight* column is based on a sermon delivered at First United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids last summer as a part of an interfaith series. Dr. Aly Mageed will be the keynote speaker at this year's *Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration*.



**Dr. Aly Mageed will be the keynote speaker at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration on Monday.**

I lived my early childhood years in a four-unit apartment building in a suburb of Cairo, Egypt. Non-Muslim families lived in two of these units. In fact, we all lived together as one big family most of the time. Many days I returned home from school to the four mothers gathering in the platform between the apartments, cooking or preparing food. Many times, our families would gather and all eat together.

I grew up as a young child fasting on the first and last day of Ramadan, and on the first and last day of Lent, while my Christian friends would also fast the first and last day of Ramadan. I grew up hearing that fasting on this first and last day meant that I fasted the whole Ramadan or Lent. Later, to my surprise, I learned that this was not true, but what was true was the belief I grew up with — that God or Allah, as all Muslims and Christians called his name in Arabic, was central in the lives of all of us Muslims and Christians.

I carried this with me as I came here to the United States and started to raise my own family. We raised our children in this interfaith atmosphere. My daughter told me the other day how much it helped her to be comfortable in her setting, carrying her own different religious beliefs within a majority who did not share all her beliefs, but did share all her values.

We taught our children the common universal human values of upholding the law, respecting personal freedom, respecting the elders; values such as honesty, truthfulness, commitment to justice, equality, fairness, dignity, living a life of acquiring knowledge, volunteering and helping others and aiding the less fortunate. These are the true moral

ing on to service, collaboration, affinity groups and many smaller circles of friendship. Trust is being built, and now topics that are more sensitive can be freely discussed. These dialogues must succeed; failure is not an option. It will prove to be rewarding and enriching to all involved.

The primary objective is to learn rather than to debate or proselytize. We asked people to come and represent their faith honestly but also to accept the authenticity of the other's belief and respect them. We believed that one must not compromise one's own beliefs and commitments in order to engage in dialogue with opposing ideas. Tolerance is not enough, or even appropriate, as one can tolerate what one hates. Understanding is a start. One needs to learn to take seriously and respectfully the theological commitments of the others even when they clash with one's own beliefs. Therefore, acceptance and collaboration are better goals than tolerance.

In this spirit, let me share with you my faith. I believe in a creator who created the whole universe out of love and out of a desire to share with us. I believe that this creator is the ultimate essence of beauty, mercy, love, forgiveness and compassion. He is also the ultimate source of wisdom, peace, justice and kindness. These beautiful attributes and others led to our existence. He is what we call God, or, in Arabic, both Christians and Muslims call him Allah, which literally means "The God." I believe that this God has sent us many messengers to communicate with us from the very beginning, since it is impossible to communicate with each one of us individually. Those included Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammad (peace be upon them). There

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values shared by all religions and are the universal human heritage taught by all the messengers of God, which we all share and defend and teach our children. Those values are what make this life worth living.

We now face very diverse societies across the globe. Last time I was in Egypt, and certainly when I was in countries in the Gulf area, one sees an unmistakable level of diversity that was not seen before. This raises societal challenges that we must face.

Interfaith relationship is in the forefront of these challenges. It is challenging for both the majority and the new incoming minority populations. Even as a Muslim when I attend our Masjid (mosque) on East Paris, I meet with many Muslims from about 40 different countries. That experience has been extremely rewarding although at times challenging. Early reactions when meeting a person from a different background can be negative, but very often deeper and more sustained interactions prove extremely rewarding, enriching and mutually beneficial, providing all parties with chances of growth, understanding and appreciation.

That is why interfaith dialogue is extremely important. It is why, locally, many of us came together in 2011 and decided to change the potential path. As you know, this area of West Michigan holds religious beliefs very high and dear. We considered this an advantage rather than a liability. We decided to build upon it a strong foundation of congregational and individual activities, starting with interfaith understanding and mov-

are times when God is there with me with his watchful loving eye, wiping a tear trickling down my cheeks, patting me on my shoulder or putting someone in my path with a smiling face or a helping hand to lift me up when I fall.

Therefore, let us join hands in prayer remembering that what hurts one of us hurts all of us. Pray that what unites us becomes a lot more than what separates us. Pray that we all fight the real problems that truly threaten our existence and fight all forms of bigotry, from islamophobia to antisemitism. Let us all together face sexist, racist and xenophobic attitudes and behaviors. Let us build bridges, not walls.

As one of our speakers in this interfaith initiative said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced." So, let us face our challenges and work together to overcome them.

Amen and God bless!

*Aly Mageed, M.D., is section chief of the Pediatric Blood & Bone Marrow Transplant Program at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital.*

### IF YOU GO

#### The Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration

**When:** 7 p.m. Monday

**Where:** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2780 Leonard St. NE