

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Different faiths come together around common interests



Douglas Kindschi Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

How do cellphones promote interfaith understanding?

The answer is described below in the description of a new effort called photovoice. Calvin College professor Roman Williams led this project, and it will be featured at the opening reception Monday at First United Methodist Church, where you will be able to view the results and interact with the participants.

We plan to continue with another cohort of interfaith participants this spring. It is a wonderful way to get to know and understand someone from a different faith tradition. By sharing your cellphone pictures, you get to know other people and learn more about their faith practice.

This project is just one of many small

groups that were formed this past year to bring together people around common interests. It was a part of the 2018 — Year of Interfaith Friendship effort.

These interfaith groups are also continuing this year, involving such interests as book discussion, doing art, cooking various ethnic dishes, watching current cinema, knitting, exploring contemplative practices and doing service projects.

In each of these activities, people from various faith communities are coming together to share their common interests while developing new friends across faith lines. If you would like to join any of these groups, check our website at interfaithunderstanding.org or contact us at interfaith@gvsu.edu.

Seeing and believing

Roman R. Williams Assistant Professor of Sociology, Calvin College

If you are like most Americans, you carry a mobile phone with you wherever you go — in fact, you may be reading this piece on your smartphone. It is also likely that you frequently use your cellphone to snap and share photographs. People use these images to document their lives and communicate with others.

I recently texted my teenage daughter to ask what she was up to, and she replied, not with words, but with a photograph. After all, a photograph is worth a thousand words, right? Since photos are able to communicate meanings, we could learn a lot about each other by scrolling through our camera rolls. What would your photos reveal about your everyday life?

The idea that photos convey narratives is the starting point for an innovative approach to interfaith dialogue called photovoice. We bring together groups of people from different religious backgrounds to explore faith in everyday life through amateur photography and small group conversations.

Participants commit to five meetings that unfold over the course of several weeks. In each meeting, participants use their photographs to discuss faith in everyday life, including the challenges they face and the changes they would like to see in their community. At the end of a project, participants work together to select photographs for a public exhibition. And in this way, they extend their conversations and engage the broader community with their experiences, insights and concerns.

As a facilitator, I've watched people from different faith backgrounds learn a great deal from one another, form new friendships and develop empathy. Last fall, I watched this happen with a group of two dozen Muslims and Christians who met at the At-Tawheed Islamic Center in Grand Rapids.

In one conversation, Christians were enthralled by a Muslim's photos showing the challenge of fitting daily prayer into their life at work. As the conversation unfolded, he described the ways coworkers help him to create space to pray. He also described the challenges of being faithful in a culture that is not structured around Muslim prayer times. This prompted a Christian woman to share a photo of a box of prayer requests that sits on the conference table at her work, a private business owned by a Christian.

As they exchanged descriptions of their respective prayer practices, visual narratives about Muslims and Christians being faithful in prayer at work garnered a new appreciation and deepened connections. The experiences were unfamiliar until we discussed them. Most Christians are unfamiliar with what is involved in daily Muslim prayers and how challenging it can be to be faithful. By combining verbal descriptions with photographs, these unfamiliar worlds became



Participants show their photos during a photovoice session. Submitted photo

Photovoice Exhibit Opening Reception

When: 7-8:30 p.m. Monday

Where: First United Methodist Church,
227 E. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

The exhibit will run throughout February

more easily understood. And Muslims and Christians built a deeper appreciation for a practice — prayer — they share in common, even if their practices are different.

Photovoice builds understanding by empowering people with a process to explore experiences, needs and concerns in their community. This is where photovoice gets its name: using photos to give voice to people's narratives in a way that generates insights that impact communities. In an era when people of faith carry cameras in their smartphones wherever they go, photography represents a new opportunity for interfaith dialogue.

The Photovoice Initiative is international and unfolding in five sites: Grand Rapids; Richmond, Virginia; New York City; Fredericton, New Brunswick; and Muscat, Oman. The project is based at Calvin College, funded by the Louisville Institute, and conducted in partnership with The Kaufman Interfaith Institute in Grand Rapids, with funding help from the Issachar Foundation.

Participants and project staff will be present at the opening reception Monday. Join us for refreshments and a 20-minute introduction at 7:30 pm. Many of the participants will be there to share their experiences.

The exhibition is part of First United Methodist Church's annual Celebration of the Arts throughout the month of February.