

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## Coming together every year in thanksgiving and hope



Douglas Kindschi Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

"Gratitude for the Past; Hope for the Future:" This is the theme for this year's Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration being held Nov. 25 at the Cathedral of St. Andrew, where, 20 years ago, the first Interfaith Thanksgiving event was held. One of the people involved from the very beginning was Dr. Ali Metwalli, a professor at Western Michigan University and member of the Muslim community. He reflects on the beginning as follows:

"My gratitude in the past started when I received an invitation from the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism ... to attend the First Interfaith Prayer for Peace on April 20, 1999, at the Calder Plaza.

"Representatives of several faith groups offered prayers for peace in their own traditions, especially for the people affected in the Kosovo conflict. I, a Muslim, joined with Rev. David Baak (Protestant), Fred Stella (Hindu), Bishop Robert Rose (Catholic), Rabbi Albert Lewis (Jewish), as well as other representatives of the Eastern Orthodox, Buddhist and Baha'i traditions along with other Christians. The gathering reflected a special community caring for each other and the larger community, locally and globally.

"This beginning gave us all hope for the future planning of an Interfaith Thanksgiving service that took place on Monday, Nov. 20, 2000, exactly 20 years ago at the Cathedral of St. Andrew. As a member of the Muslim community in Grand Rapids, I was thankful and grateful to be a part of the interfaith community, and was determined to do my best as a member of the planning team to keep the Interfaith Thanksgiving service an annual tradition. The yearly planning created an activity that all the participants look forward to attending.

"The Muslim community in Grand Rapids was shocked and shaken by the 9/11 tragedy, but the interfaith community support was overwhelming and totally standing in solidarity with the members of our local Muslim community. The faith community became closer in understanding and supporting each other in the good and bad times. We learned to understand and accept each other's belief system, which helped remove the barriers of negative perception and misunderstanding.

"In the past 20 years, the Grand Rapids interfaith community developed the strength — and devoted the resources and the skills — to overcome many challenges to the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Baha'i and Buddhist communities both here and globally.

"The involvement of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute helped in making the interfaith community stronger and more effective in building future activities, and planning more effectively to bring our many faiths together to withstand any challenges.

"Looking to the past, I am very optimistic about the future bonding of the interfaith community in Grand Rapids and West Michigan. As Kahlil Gibran said, 'In understanding, all walls shall fall down.'

My own reflection on previous Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebrations doesn't go back as far as Dr. Metwalli's. However, I have appreciated the variety of traditions involved and the wonderful mix of music, recitations, talks and readings that mark

The Cathedral of St. Andrew in Grand Rapids will host the Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration Nov. 25. *MLive.com/files*The cathedral was the location of the first iteration of the annual interfaith Thanksgiving 20 years ago. *MLive.com/files*

each event. I remember five years ago, when a Protestant minister reminded us that the Pilgrim story often told about the "first Thanksgiving" is really about how the Native Americans helped save the lives of the first European immigrants who came to this land.

I remember four years ago when we heard Baha'i, Jewish and Buddhist choirs sing about giving thanks in their various traditions. We also heard from Joe Jones, president of the Grand Rapids Urban League, who challenged us to value diversity, work at it and not be afraid of getting out of our comfort zone.

He shared a quote from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton: "The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them."

Jones urged us to embrace diversity and see it as a strength in our community.

In 2017, our Thanksgiving Celebration focused on Building Community Together. Business and community leader Fred Keller emphasized the role of the community in the thriving of the human spirit. He pointed to the importance of diversity in business success, as well as for a vibrant community. If we are all alike, he said, we lose the ability to think new thoughts and dream new ways for our lives to be enriched.

Last year, our Thanksgiving keynote featured Dr.

**If you go**

**What:** Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration

**When:** 7 p.m. Nov. 25

**Where:** Cathedral of St. Andrew, 215 Sheldon Blvd. SE in Grand Rapids

**Information and free registration at:** [InterfaithUnderstanding.org](http://InterfaithUnderstanding.org)

Aly Maged, a bone marrow transplant specialist at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital and active member of the At-Tawheed Masjid and Islamic Center. He shared his experiences growing up in a multireligious world in Egypt and his involvement in providing medical services in a Syrian refugee camp. He pointed to the challenge that societies now are facing in the increasing diversity of our communities, which could potentially create a detrimental fear. Dr. Maged urged us to see interfaith relationships as a key to making our society stronger as we embrace this diversity.

He concluded, "Let us join hands in prayer realizing that one hurts one of us all of us. Let us pray that what unites us becomes a lot more than what separates us. Let us build bridges, not walls."

Again this year, we have the opportunity to come together, celebrating "Gratitude for the Past and Hope for the Future." Join us on Nov. 25 at the Cathedral of St. Andrew.

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