

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

## In gratitude for the past that leads us to the present

**The Rev. David Baak** executive pastor, Westminster Presbyterian Church

*NOTE: This week's Insight is taken from the reflections presented Monday at the 20th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration. The Rev. David Baak was an early leader in the interfaith discussions and involved in the first Thanksgiving event in 2000.*



**The Rev. David Baak spoke Monday at the 20th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Grand Rapids.**

Twenty years of Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebrations: I remember some of you from that first gathering, also here at the Cathedral of St. Andrew, in 2000. Father Tom Bolster hosted the gathering; Dr. Ali Metwalli and Rabbi Michael Schadick were both on the planning committee — they still are! I remember that it snowed something like 10 inches that day and we were worried that no one was going to attend. It was a beautiful night. And the cathedral was full. And now it's 20 years later. And the cathedral is full.

But, "in gratitude for the past," I want to talk about the 10 or 15 years before that time and some of what made that — and this — level of cooperation and enthusiasm possible.

Most of you are familiar with the Dialogue Decalogue developed by Leonard Swidler, a longtime professor at Temple University. He first published it some 40 years ago, and it has been revised and refined and used by many since then. But the 10 principles — he first called them "commandments" — rules, standards, guidelines — for how we talk and listen and understand each other across interreligious and inter-ideological lines have stood the test of time, and they are still relevant.

The first principle: "The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly." The purpose of dialogue is not to change someone's mind or belief: It is for each of us to learn; to grow and then to act — what changes is my attitude, my perspective.

The 10th principle, which for me is the most profound: "Each participant eventually must try to experience the partner's religion or ideology 'from within.'" A later expansion of that is very helpful: "trying to experience the partner's religion or ideology 'from within' requires a 'passing over,' even if only momentarily, into another's religious or ideological experience."

That challenges me, because it asks that I try to see through the eyes of the other's belief ... not just to walk in your shoes, but to actually get inside your head, to understand your religious experience, and even my own, from your point of view. It's a powerful principle.

It is powerful for me especially because it is an expression of what is fundamental to my understanding of the Christian gospel: "to love God and to love my neighbor." I believe that loving God is demonstrated by loving my neighbor. That means, as we often say at my church, Westminster Presbyterian, absolutely everyone. And I believe that essential to loving my neighbor is to be willing to "pass over, even if only momentarily," into the experience of my neighbor and, indeed, to see both of us in relationship within God's love.

I first learned about Swidler's Decalogue more than 30 years ago, from Lillian Sigal in her living room, along with Marchiene Rienstra and Ghazala Munir and several others who got together every month for an interfaith dialogue circle. I was invited because of my association with the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism (GRACE) and our attempt to apply many of the same principles for greater understanding and unity within the Christian community, and to try to expand that to greater openness to, and participation in, the interfaith community.

Lillian, Marchiene and Ghazala went on to begin the annual Rabbi Philip Sigal Memorial Lecture and to found the Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA), that has been led for many years by Fred Stella. There were early conferences and presentations where I first met and worked with Dr. Ali Metwalli. I remember planning sessions and long discussions in his downtown Western Michigan University office. IDA speakers went to congregations and schools and gatherings, and for so many of you sparked your interest and involvement and perhaps had something to do with your being here tonight.

At the same time, in Muskegon, Sylvia

Kaufman organized the triennial Jewish-Christian Dialogues that also drew many of us in over the years. To my mind, it was a natural when those two programming streams came together in the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University in 2006 through the generosity of Sylvia and Dick Kaufman and the leadership of Doug Kindschi.

Then came the expansion to the Jewish/Christian/Muslim dialogue, and the inclusion of the programming of the IDA, that still is sending representatives from many traditions to help us learn and grow and understand. Then, the development of the Years of Interfaith Understanding, of Service and of Friendship — and now includes the facilitating and planning for this Thanksgiving Celebration. The common theme, of course, is building relationships and then acting together.

Another milestone of those years came after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1993. Ghazala and others prompted and planned a service that was held at Temple Emanuel. If you know the building, we were set up on the west side of the movable wall — but as people came in, we had to move the wall (is there a better metaphor?) so that we could set up more chairs for the hundreds who came out of the trauma of that day to gather in support of each other across our differences. There is something significant that happens in such instances. Trauma prompts understanding and concern that can take priority over defenses, so that the power of relationships and solidarity takes over.

That same energy and those relationships prompted other gatherings, like the interfaith prayer for peace on the Calder Plaza, Tuesday dinner gatherings at the Dominican Center, meals shared in homes and restaurants, and time together in coffee shops. Through the years, and especially after our experience together in that Thanksgiving service 20 years ago, we were able on Sept. 11, 2001, in the trauma of that day, to put together a service also here at the cathedral, that included most of our faith traditions, in lament and pain and to support our Muslim sisters and brothers.

I would say this makes Grand Rapids distinctive, if not unique. It was because we had been learning and growing and developing our interfaith relationships that stimulated the energy and the commitment that came out for that Sept. 11 service. It brought us together again in the Thanksgiving week that same year, and in these 18 more years since. And, it puts us here together tonight.

And, most importantly, this celebration is a visible symbol of these three decades of our living together into the profusion richness of our faith traditions.

For all of that, I am truly thankful. For me it is wonderful and "hope-filled" to be a part of the interfaith partnerships among congregations, drawn together through the Kaufman Institute, and to recognize other neighborhood congregations and organizations working with each other. For me, and for Westminster Presbyterian, it is life-giving to be partnered with the people of Temple Emanuel, Trinity Lutheran and At-Tawheed Islamic Center.

Each time we get together — individuals, small groups and large — relationships are established, renewed, deepened. We keep getting to know each other better. We are not trying to change each other's minds; we are getting better at seeing life through the eyes of each other. And, I still think Swidler's 10th principle is the most important — and most profound — because we really do get closer to an experience of "passing over, even if only momentarily, into another's religious experience."

And that, my friends, gives me hope.

*The Rev. David Baak is executive pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church and past director of the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism (GRACE).*

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