

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Evangelical students can make Muslim friends

Kevin McIntosh *coordinator of GVSU Campus Interfaith Resources*

“Who is my neighbor?” This verse from Luke 10:29 is on the front page of Neighborly Faith’s website. This passage starts the parable of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus challenges his followers to think deeper about who their neighbor could be. Neighborly Faith is an evangelical organization that seeks to build bridges between evangelicals and their non-Christian (specifically Muslim) neighbors.

It was started in 2015 by two evangelical and theologically conservative friends, Kevin Singer and his co-founder Chris Stackaruk. They were worried about the rise of Islamophobia, especially coming from fellow evangelical pastors who seemed to preach hate. Singer saw data that evangelical youth are less likely than their peers to know a Muslim. He tremendously benefited from his interfaith friendships and wanted young evangelicals to do the same. His hope was that by connecting young evangelicals and young Muslims, the two groups would build deep meaningful relationships that could increase positive attitudes between the groups.

Singer will be in the area Oct. 2 for an event being co-sponsored by Grand Valley’s Muslim Student Association, Campus Ministry (our Reformed Church of America and Christian Reformed Church student organization) and Campus Interfaith Resources.

When Neighborly Faith first started, Singer was laughed at. How could evangelicals be a part of interfaith advocacy? One person wrote to them saying, “I will be frank and up front: I wouldn’t put energy into it, and didn’t offer encouragement to you, precisely because I feel that you are bailing water when there is a hole in the ship.”

Singer ignored this feedback and distrust of evangelicals. Now, Neighborly Faith is at 18 campuses and partnered with the Interfaith Youth Core, Wheaton College and the Islamic Association of North America, among other interfaith and religious organizations.

Neighborly Faith’s mission is to build bridges between two groups that seem often to be on separate sides of many issues. They remind us that a pluralistic society isn’t a place where we all agree on every issue, but instead is a place where there is dialogue, understanding and an encounter of commitments.

As John Inazu, the Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion at Washington University in St. Louis, writes in an article about confident pluralism, “bridging relational differences is no small matter, and it can lead to authentic friendship across ideological difference. It reminds us that people are usually more complex than the labels we attach to them.”

How does one bridge these differences? Singer and his organization do it by bringing evangelicals into community with Muslims. It could be as one of their students did, by bringing their evangelical church to a mosque for a dinner and conversation; or it could be co-hosting a program, as an evangelical group



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IF YOU GO

What: Interfaith Leadership Lecture, “Evangelical AND Interfaith Advocate”

When: 4 p.m., Oct. 2

Where: Kirkhof Center, Grand Valley State University, Allendale

Information and free registration at: interfaithunderstanding.org

and the Muslim Student Association did at North Carolina State University. In both of these examples, both evangelical and Muslim participants were surprised about what they had in common. Singer says true interfaith work happens when we constantly are surprising each other.

The goal of these events and programs is not to convert the other, but to build genuine relationships with each other where each person can be their full authentic self. Right after the Christchurch, New Zealand, mosque shooting, Singer had his college fellows write letters to the Muslim community in their area. One student wrote, “As those who mutually share a faith rooted in hospitality, I pray in this time, I and my tradition may share our time, prayers, and dinner tables with you.”

While he takes pride in his evangelical students, Singer is frustrated by those in his own tradition who speak Islamophobic rhetoric from their pews or say Islam is not a religion. He constantly calls out fellow evangelicals and urges them to befriend instead of belittling people of various faith and non-faith traditions. He has warned people that strong freedom of religion means freedom of expression for everyone, not just those with whom one agrees. In fact, for him, helping others with their tradition is how he lives out the gospel.

How will you greet your neighbor and build genuine friendships? It could be reaching out to someone with whom you have strong theological differences and working to cross the relationship bridge. It might be attending a sacred site visit and learning about a tradition different from your own. It might be advocating for someone different from yourself.

You also may come hear how Kevin Singer and his organization work to continue to surprise people, and how they are pushing young evangelical Christians to build friendships with people from various traditions.