

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Honoring a man of grace, justice and community

Charles Honey for Kaufman Interfaith Institute, Grand Valley State University

Editor's Note: Today's guest Insight is written by Charles Honey, who has been a member of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute Planning Committee since its beginning 10 years ago. He also served as the religion editor at The Grand Rapids Press for 15 years.



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Of the many images I have of the Rev. David Baak in the 25 or so years I've known him, one comes immediately to the fore. He's sitting at a long table, surrounded by other religious leaders from the Grand Rapids area, on the afternoon of Sept. 11, 2001. My mind still racing and my heart still pounding from the morning's catastrophe, I watched in admiration as David and his fellow faithful calmly planned a prayer service for that very evening.

When we all showed up at the Cathedral of St. Andrew, there were close to 800 worshippers filling that sacred space. Leaders from Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other faith families spoke prayers of lament, helping ground us all in the inconceivable darkness of the moment yet offering a glimpse of hope in the very fact of our presence together.

That the Grand Rapids faith community was able to rally so quickly was due in large part to David's steady hand as director of the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism — aptly known as GRACE — the nonprofit agency of Christian unity which a year before had helped organize the city's first Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, also at St. Andrew's.

Under David's longtime leadership, and in cooperation with other faith leaders, GRACE had laid the groundwork of goodwill that brought people together as "one American family," in the words of Muslim activist Ghazala Munir that sorrowful night. It was a coming together of people who followed different beliefs and practices but who knew and trusted each other, from previous conversations and convocations, enough to gather in grief and solidarity.

"That's how GRACE works," David told me some years later, for a story I wrote for The Press on his retirement from the agency in 2007. "To have that conversation become a program or a response."

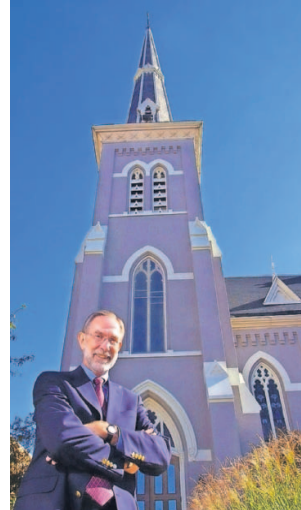
He was moving on then from an organization he had led since 1983 and stepping into the post of interim pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. Now David is moving on again. He retires as executive pastor of Westminster at month's end, and will be honored there with a luncheon Sunday.

For someone who's been such an integral part of our faith community — and in Grand Rapids that means the larger community as well — David's retirement is a relatively quiet event. Yet that is the kind of leadership he has provided for more than 35 years — quiet, yet firm, and ultimately reassuring. He has not been much in the limelight, but his influence is everywhere, reliably shining light on the ways we can learn from and serve each other.

A Reformed Church in America minister and son of a Christian Reformed clergyman, David has been involved in most of the major religious doings of this highly religious community. He came to Grand Rapids to lead GRACE after serving congregations in Manhattan and Flint, as well as pre-trial services programs in Genesee County and Salt Lake City.

At GRACE, he helped coordinate ministry efforts of hundreds of Christian congregations and oversaw programs such as the annual Hunger Walk, working closely with Program Director Lisa Mitchell. GRACE spawned and spun off Access of West Michigan, which continues its vital food pantry and anti-poverty programs. It initiated the Racial Justice Institute, led by the Rev. David May, and Partners for a Racism-Free Community.

Though rooted in the Christian tradition, he was not bound by it. He took part in the Interfaith Dialogue Association. apply-



The Rev. David Baak stands in front of the Westminster Presbyterian Church, 47 Jefferson Ave. SE. Baak, former director of the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism, is retiring and will be honored Sunday with a luncheon at the church. MLive.com files

ing the principles of greater cooperation and understanding within the Christian community to the larger interfaith community. He's been active in the Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogues organized by Muskegon's Sylvia Kaufman. And he's been a key adviser to the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, helping launch the 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding, ushering in a decade of activities that brought our increasingly diverse faith community closer together.

His work at Westminster has likewise centered on bringing people together to serve faith and justice. It was only fitting, then, to see him at the podium of St. Andrew's Cathedral this past November, addressing the 20th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, once again to a nearly full house.

"This celebration is a visible symbol of these three decades of our living together into the profound richness of our faith traditions," David told all of us gathered there. "We are not trying to change each other's minds; we are getting better at seeing life through the eyes of each other."

In retirement, David will continue serving the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, volunteering with food and medical aid agencies, and traveling with his wife, Betty Zylstra.

Besides writing about David and GRACE at The Press, I have worked alongside him on the planning committee of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. I have sipped strong tea with him in people's homes in Turkey as part of an interfaith tour. As a longtime Grand Rapids resident, I've seen and appreciated the quiet work he has done to help make our community a more just place, and its people of faith more understanding of and gracious toward each other.

"What GRACE has always done is gather people around a table ... to create something that's larger than the sum of its parts," he told me for that 2007 Press article. "That's reconciliation."

Yes. And, I would add, that's grace. Thank you for that, David, and for much more.

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