

MOVING BEYOND STEREOTYPES

2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding — by Mary Isca Pirkola

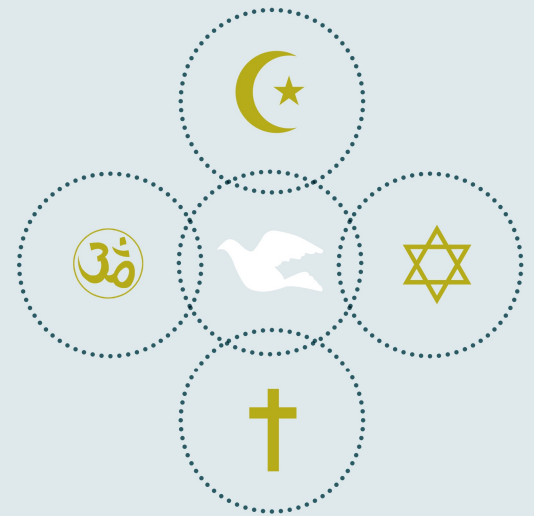


photo by Bernadine Carey-Tucker

Professor Sheldon Kopperl leads a class discussion to raise awareness of derogatory stereotypes.

Jews are cheap and always try to bargain, Muslims are violent extremists and Christians are closed-minded. Unfortunately, that's what some people think. Grand Valley is part of a yearlong effort to help change misperceptions.

These and other derogatory stereotypes were the topic of a lively discussion initiated by Professor Sheldon Kopperl in his Liberal Studies 100 class. The class discussions were modeled, in part, after interfaith dialogues occurring throughout West Michigan. They are part of a larger project, the 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding, designed to cultivate peace through community interest, understanding and acceptance of all faiths.

The endeavor was developed through a unique partnership led by Grand Valley's Kaufman Interfaith Institute, the *Grand Rapids Press*, WGVU Public Media, Grand Rapids mayor's office and three organizing councils representing campuses, congregations and community organizations. There was a conscious decision to kick off

events last September, following the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S.

"The world has changed dramatically since the events of September 11," said Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. "For many people, their introduction to the religious landscape of the Middle East was the terrorist acts of a few individuals. As misinformation overtook facts, there grew an increasing need to open up the channels of dialogue. The goal of this yearlong program is for participants to truly understand other religions and to learn how to live in community with respect for their differences."

Respect was paramount in Kopperl's class. So much so that students were at first hesitant to participate in the discussion of stereotypes, fearing they might offend someone of another faith.

Kopperl, who is Jewish and co-advisor of the Jewish students' group Hillel, set them at ease by explaining they could name a stereotype without actually believing it. He even got the ball rolling



photo by April Joy Galbreath

with his own comments about Jews. After writing comments on the board, the discussion turned more personal as Kopperl asked students to share a time when they felt uncomfortable when someone stereotyped them because of their beliefs, appearance or ethnicity. By the end of the class unit, students said they moved beyond stereotypes and misunderstandings as they learned about the many similarities between faiths. Some students also felt they enriched their own faith in the process of explaining it to others.

Congregational and campus events

Interfaith services, tours of sacred spaces of worship and interfaith dialogues are being conducted at Christian churches, Jewish temples and Islamic mosques throughout West Michigan, in efforts to take

away the mystique of unfamiliar religions. Eight West Michigan colleges, seminaries and universities are also featuring interfaith understanding events throughout the year. For example, the Migrations of Islam project of the Muslim Studies Program and Asian Studies Center at Michigan State University brought a number of events to Grand Valley, including the Hijabi Monologues and the Poetic Visions Tour, among others.

"People often have the misconception that participating in interfaith activities requires a compromise of their own faith," said Whitney Belprez, 2012 YIU project manager. "It's not about conversion, but rather about conversation, and people learning to move from tolerance to acceptance of each other as people of faith."

Many such conversations are taking place at Grand Valley, where students, faculty and

staff members participate in interfaith dialogues. "We started with 11 trained facilitators who each coordinate a group of interested people," said Aaron Haight, assistant director for the Office of Student Life. The groups will meet about four to six times during the year; participants will share their faith background, explore other faiths, discuss the role of religion in world politics and society, and talk about how to work together on social issues.

Also working from the Office of Student Life is student

Patrick Lawrence, a senior from Almont, helps Sister Lucia Treanor with yard work during a community workday at the Franciscan Life Process Center.

intern Emrie Carlton. She is coordinating service-learning opportunities for students via participation in the White House Interfaith & Community Service Campus Challenge, which kicked off at Grand Valley in January. Student leadership and cross-campus

"I really felt the stresses of college life melt away while there."

Patrick Lawrence, who attended a community workday at the Franciscan Life Process Center



photos by April Joy Galbreath

Audience members interact with Muslim musicians from the Poetic Visions Tour, which features spiritually inspired folk rock music and hip hop poetry, brought to Grand Valley as part of the Migrations of Islam project of the Muslim Studies Program and Asian Studies Center at Michigan State University.

partners are encouraged in initiatives that address specific service priorities. Grand Valley participants have put their emphasis on the areas of education and poverty.

Many faculty members have incorporated aspects of interfaith understanding into this year's curricula, ranging from business ethics and philosophy to history and journalism. Jeremiah Cataldo, assistant professor of history, teaches an Honors College Special Topics course, "Alliance & Conflict: Religion & Society," over two semesters. By studying the history of early religions as informed

by the political and social mores of the times, Cataldo has equipped his students with a broader perspective to address historic and current issues of conflict and to develop possible solutions.

"Though most students in the class are quick to reject stereotypes, they also needed to expand their sphere of knowledge," said Cataldo. "By providing students the means to look beyond their own worldview, they are given the opportunity to study and better understand others."

Another aspect of the course is a required service learning experience. Every student



spends at least 10 hours with a religious organization of which they are not affiliated.

Alice Munday, a freshman from Canton, chose to visit St. Gregory's Abbey in Three Rivers. It is the home of a community of men living a contemplative vocation under the Rule of St. Benedict, within the Episcopal Church.

"I chose to spend time at St. Gregory's because I wanted to challenge some commonly accepted stereotypes of monks and learn more about how they practice their religious beliefs," said Munday. She attended all seven of the daily services spread throughout the day from 4 a.m.-8 p.m. "It was interesting to see how they schedule their life around God, rather than squeezing their worship into an otherwise busy day," she said.

She also had a tour of the grounds, free time to explore and shared her meals with the monks, prepared by them from ingredients mostly grown in their garden. She learned that no talking is allowed during meals, although one of the monks read aloud. "During my visit, they were reading and listening to a biography of Dr. Seuss, which was interesting," she said. "It wasn't an awkward silence, but a shared intentional

one. When there was a funny part in the book, the monks would laugh freely."

Several other classmates spent time at the Islamic Center and Mosque of Grand Rapids. Muslims, who are called to prayer five times a day, gather on Fridays at their mosque for communal prayer. Classmates attended a Friday worship service and a Sunday School class, and then spent time after each with the imam, who leads the prayers and addresses the congregation. Levi Bauer, a freshman from Reese, said his experience was very positive and enlightening. "While I had some confusion about the rituals and practices during the service, the imam later explained their meaning to us," Bauer said. "He also shared some of the doctrines of Islamic faith and how they are similar to Christianity and Judaism, but also how they differ."

Katelynn Chase, a freshman from Paw Paw, expected the mosque to be extravagant inside, but noticed the lack of seats in the prayer hall, because Islamic prayer involves standing, kneeling and prostrating on prayer rugs.

Nicole Summers, a freshman from Livonia, visited Temple Emmanuel, a Reform Judaism

synagogue in Grand Rapids. "When I first arrived at the synagogue, it was not what I expected," she said. "They have a school attached to the building, so we saw many little kids running around — all very excited to be learning. It was a very relaxed and peaceful environment." Summers, following a tour by Rabbi Michael Schadick, attended a couple services and a Torah class. She said she thought the services were interesting, and even though they were mostly in Hebrew, she was able to identify a few patterns similar to other faith practices.

Community Service and Programming

Many community organizations, from the Grand Rapids Symphony to the World Affairs Council, have incorporated issues of interfaith understanding into their regularly scheduled programming for 2012.

Sister Lucia Treanor FSE, teaches in the Writing Department at Grand Valley. She is also the faculty advisor for Gatherings, the Catholic Student Association on campus, and Students for Life, a non-sectarian pro-life group. She welcomes the 2012 YIU as an opportunity to invite more people to participate in Community Workdays, held the second Saturday of each month, as one of many programs at the Franciscan Life Process Center, just outside Lowell.

Treanor lives at the center

with a dozen other sisters, who share the workload of self-sustenance on the 230-acre land. They raise rabbits, sheep, cows, horses and chickens; maintain gardens and orchards of apples, cherries, pears, peaches and plums. Each sister is responsible for a farm animal and a garden section. They always welcome help, from spring weed whacking and planting, to harvesting, canning and general maintenance tasks, like cleaning out the barns and washing windows. All ages are welcome and helpers are treated to a hot lunch following a morning of work.

Inspired by the philosophy and practice of St. Francis of Assisi, the program helps individuals accept each other as unique persons as they learn about life on a farm, working alongside the Franciscan sisters.

"We don't have a teaching focus on community workdays, but often answer questions from workers about our faith practices, or deep concerns they have about their own life, inside and outside of faith," said Treanor. "Following the teachings of St. Francis, we 'Preach always. If necessary use words.'"

Patrick Lawrence, a senior from Almont, said that for years he had heard about students going to the workdays, but this was the first time he participated. "The sisters' welcome, not to mention their homemade lunch, was heartwarming, and they

shine with a great love of life," Lawrence said. "I really felt the stresses of college life melt away while there." Lawrence is a member of St. Luke's University Parish and as a peer minister with Campus Ministries, hopes to organize events that are geared to a wide audience.

Goals and opportunities

One of the highlights of the year will be the Grand Valley Triennial Interfaith Dialogue, an all-day event at DeVos Place on October 30, 2012. Featured speakers are three internationally respected experts in the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith traditions: Rabbi Donniel Hartman, Episcopal priest Marilyn McCord Adams, and Islamic studies professor Omid Safi. They will focus on resources and scriptures in their faith traditions that address the conference theme of "Living with God in the midst of suffering."

Community and campus groups, and individuals, continue to ask how they can get involved. The 2012 YIU website, www.2012gr.org, is constantly updated, providing details and contact information for the many campuses, congregations and community participants. Together the three councils have launched grass-root efforts to engage as much of the community as possible. Organizers hope their efforts create a solid foundation for continued growth and understanding, beyond 2012.

"Diversity is not only a racial or ethnic concern, but it also includes religion," said Kindschi. "As the population throughout the world and West Michigan changes to include more diversity, it becomes essential to confront the uncomfortable feelings and unwarranted fear inherent in the lack of true understanding."

NEW RELIGIOUS STUDIES MAJOR, MINOR PENDING

A new religious studies major and minor could be added the Grand Valley curriculum beginning in the fall semester, pending approval from the Board of Trustees. The program reinforces the idea of religious understanding and sensitivity as yet another dimension of campus diversity.

Faculty member Judy Whipps, co-chair of the Religious Studies Task Force, said the committee has been working on this proposal for more than five years.

"We're pleased that this new major would coincide with the Year of Interfaith Understanding," said Whipps. "The committee placed the major in Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies because we want the program to function as a university-wide major, including faculty and courses from all the colleges."

The study of religion includes courses in the humanities and social sciences, and understanding religious diversity is important for many professions, including medical fields, global business, politics and global social justice issues. Whipps said it is anticipated that students in these fields may double major or minor in religious studies.

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Whitney Belprez,
2012 YIU project manager