

Kaufman Interfaith Institute

2025 2026

Year-In-Review



Our Mission

To advance equity and belonging for persons of all religious, secular, and spiritual identities by fostering human connection, interfaith understanding, and collective transformation.



GRAND VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY®



Sharing Purpose Through Interfaith Leadership

“Leadership is accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty.”

Marshall Ganz

At the start of this academic year, the Sylvia and Richard Kaufman Interfaith Institute set an audacious goal: to cultivate multi-generational interfaith leadership development in which community leaders, high school students, and university students will explore new horizons for human connection, interfaith understanding, and collective transformation. In this polarized moment, when uncertainty is high, we see the possibilities that come from creating the conditions for emerging leaders to thrive. In that spirit, the Institute has launched several initiatives to foster shared purpose and equip multifaith leaders to cultivate vibrant communities of belonging.

The **Interfaith Leadership Cohorts** - including both high school and Grand Valley students - strengthened leadership skills rooted in dialogue, storytelling, relationship building, and immersive excursions that explored Michigan’s rich cultural and religious landscape.

The **Made in Michigan Interfaith Lab (MIMIL)** brought together student leaders – and the staff who supported them – for a powerful multi-university conference to learn from one another, share resources, and put interfaith cooperation into action across Michigan.

The **Sacred Excursions** pilot program gave area seventh-grade students and educators an opportunity to enrich their classroom knowledge of world religions with the lived experience and places of worship of practitioners in our community.

Multifaith Clergy Lunches serve as spaces for religious, secular, and spiritual leaders in West Michigan to build relationships and discuss the most pressing issues facing their communities.

With a passionate team and a bold goal, the Kaufman Institute is investing deeply in the next generation of interfaith leaders—locally, statewide, and beyond. We accept the responsibility of creating conditions for people to meet, to hear one another’s stories, to see themselves as changemakers in a world in need of compassion. We do this with a commitment to continuing the impactful programming and relational work that, for years, has helped build a stronger multifaith West Michigan community.

Thank you for being a part of this journey!

Kyle Kooyers - Director

This amazing work would not be possible without the collective effort of the incredible Kaufman Staff:

Zahabia Ahmed Usmani
Youth Program Manager

Liz English
Campus Program Manager

Elamin Gasim Ibrahim Gasim
Office Coordinator

Doug Kindschi
Advisor and Sylvia and Richard Kaufman Founding Director

Kyle Kooyers
Director

Phil Oosterhouse
Technology Specialist

Rachel Robinson
Program Assistant & Pamela Kidd MD
Interfaith Ambassador

Roman Williams
Senior Research Fellow

Interfaith Understanding

Sacred Site Visits

Over **160 visitors** – including Lakers and community members – participated in visits to **7 different sacred sites** across the West Michigan area during which representatives of each tradition shared about their communities and their practices.

The 26th Annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration

This year's celebration saw **500 attendees** gathered at First (Park) Congregational Church around the theme of "Coming Together in Gratitude."

The evening, filled with music, recitations, reflections, and dance from a multitude of traditions, raised over **\$2000 for The Community and Service Center**.



VIDEO LINK



Land, Language, and People: Arab and Jewish Imagination in the Late Ottoman Empire

In partnership with the Jean & Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, we hosted **Dr. Mostafa Hussein** in conversation with GVSU **Professor Eric Covey** for the 6th Annual Padnos Public Engagement Lecture on Jewish Learning, exploring how modern Arab and Jewish identities emerged from overlapping historical and social contexts rather than isolated traditions.



VIDEO LINK



7th Grade Sacred Excursions

The Kaufman Institute has been building relationships with area seventh-grade Social Studies teachers to expand resources and experiential learning opportunities related to world religions. This effort included piloting supplemental curricular materials and a day trip to sacred sites in Grand Rapids for **25 students from the West Michigan Academy of Arts and Academics**. Positive feedback from educators – including the Social Studies Consultants for the Kent and Muskegon Area Intermediate School Districts – led to a similar experience for **25 teachers as part of the West Michigan Social Studies Collaborative conference**. A huge thank you to our friends at the Islamic Cultural Center Behar, the Sikh Society of West Michigan, and the Gurdwara Sahib Singh Saba of Grand Rapids for hosting us for these pilot experiences!



Human Connection

Unpacking Spiritual Heritage & Exploring Spiritual Legacy: The Interfaith Tuesday Table Talk Series

These bi-annual dinner conversations hosted in partnership with the **Dominican Center Marywood** at Aquinas College invited participants to examine how inherited traditions, personal experiences, and communal histories shape spiritual identity and determine our responsibility across generations.

Interfaith Community Iftar

During Ramadan, we were honored to co-host an iftar in partnership with the Shoulder-to-Shoulder Campaign, Intercultural Association of Michigan, and Boston Square Church, which brought together nearly **200 people** of all ages from diverse cultures and worldviews to share a meal, connect with their neighbors, and experience the beauty of Ramadan through art, story, and conversation.

Know Your Neighbor Dinner Series

These **campus meals with meaning** held once a semester brought Lakers together from diverse religious, spiritual, and secular backgrounds for intentional conversation centered on deep listening and connection.

Henry Pestka Art & Poetry Contest

As a member of the West Michigan Holocaust Partnership, the Kaufman Institute was proud to collaborate on the annual Henry Pestka Art & Poetry Contest. Students in grades 6-12 create poetry, prose, and artwork in response to the theme of Interwoven Histories. The contest received **over 80 entries** from students **across 7 school districts**.

Interfaith & Interwoven

Interfaith & Interwoven brings women of diverse worldview identities together through knitting, crochet, and conversation, transforming handmade garments into acts of interfaith service. In 2025, they created nearly **200 items** for the students of Godfrey Elementary.



Collective Transformation

Michigan Listens

Through our Talking Together partnership, we piloted Michigan Listens, a statewide initiative to amplify the values and experiences of everyday Michiganders. In a season of heightened polarization, this project brought together **9 Michigan storytellers** from diverse geographies, identities, ideologies, and vocations for an evening of silent, attentive listening that centered shared humanity followed by a family-style dinner and conversation. Michigan Listens was inspired by Idaho Listens and supported by Boise State University and GVSU's Office of the President.



VIDEO LINK



Multifaith Clergy Lunches

Our **monthly lunches** with local clergy bring faith leaders together in a consistent, relational space to share perspectives, build trust, and strengthen interfaith connections. These gatherings are designed to sustain long-term relationships that foster collaboration, mutual understanding, and positive change in the broader community.



King in Conversation: The Spiritualities of Nonviolence

As a part of GVSU's MLK Commemoration Week, this **table-talk-style event** explored the diverse spiritual and philosophical foundations of nonviolent resistance that influenced—and were influenced by – Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., highlighting shared ethical threads among figures Mahatma Gandhi, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh.



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Interfaith Leadership Cohorts

Our Interfaith Leadership Cohorts bring together small groups of people from a variety of religious, spiritual, and secular backgrounds to **build meaningful relationships** with one another, to **grow as leaders in community**, and to **shape the future of interfaith engagement** in West Michigan and beyond.

We kicked off the year with an opening retreat on Lake Michigan where we introduced Marshall Ganz's framework on **the power of public narrative** to connect personal stories to shared community values. Ganz's emphasis on the Story of Me, the Story of Us, and the Story of Now served as a theme for the year-long experience.



“Interfaith doesn’t always mean immersing yourself in every culture and religion, which is what I originally believed it to be. Now I see interfaith as a way to get to know people and as another access point to forming new relationships that I didn’t know I needed.”

Olivia Meisner - Youth Cohort Participant



Each semester involved a trip to cultural and religious sites across our state. During our fall trip, we visited the **Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeways** and the **Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia**, allowing students to see the profound difference between when communities are empowered to share their own stories and when those narratives are controlled by others.



Throughout the school year, both the Campus and Youth Cohorts met regularly to build relationships, reflect together, and practice the skills of interfaith leadership in community, guided by a curriculum developed by the Kaufman Staff.

“Over the past seven years at Kaufman, I’ve had meaningful conversations with people from diverse backgrounds, equipping me to connect with others on a deeper, more personal level as I plan for the future.”

Krishna Mano - Youth Cohort Participant



Our Campus Cohort had the opportunity to participate in the rebirth of the **Made-in-Michigan Interfaith Leadership Lab (MIMIL)**, where they were joined by 30 college students from across Michigan similarly engaged in



VIDEO LINK



interfaith work on their campuses. This two-day conference included shared meals, an incredible conversation with young interfaith leaders, and breakout sessions focused on storytelling, peer learning, and putting interfaith ideals into action.

“Visiting the Zekelman Holocaust Center [in Detroit] and hearing a survivor’s story was eye-opening. As a Hispanic woman aware of the fear our communities face, it reminded me that real change happens when we refuse to be bystanders. Even small actions can make a difference.”

Mayra Perez - Campus Cohort Participant



Our year of curiosity and connection reached a peak during our **winter trip to Detroit**, where students stepped into cultural centers and sacred spaces and heard powerful stories of resilience, hope, and community. In these shared experiences, learning came to life - expanding perspectives and shaping how our students saw themselves, one another, and their place in the world.



LEARN MORE



By embracing difference, practicing deep listening, and holding complexity together, our students built the skills and relationships needed to create change collaboratively. The

Scholars’ 2026 community impact project **“Youth Speak”** elevated the lived experiences of

West Michigan young adults by asking them to speak to how their life experiences have shaped their worldview and understanding of leadership.

“Over the course of this experience, I have found my voice and found myself.”

Campus Cohort Participant

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