



CENTER FOR INTERFAITH PROJECTS

Promoting Understanding and Respecting Differences

E-NEWSLETTER: DECEMBER 2010/JANUARY 2011

A NEW BEGINNING David B. Myers, Executive Director

THE MISSION OF THE CENTER

To (1) educate the community about different faiths; (2) increase understanding and respect among people of different faiths; (3) foster cooperation among local faith communities to solve common community problems; and (4) help individuals searching for a spiritual home to find one. After a good start in 2010, we look forward to your help with projects and your attendance at interfaith events as we pursue our interfaith mission in 2011.

WHAT THE CENTER DID IN NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER



A MUSLIM-JEWISH ENCOUNTER



November 7. At the request of Lynn Gifford of Temple Beth El, the *Center* arranged for the synagogue's confirmation class to have a conversation with Sherbanoo Aziz, a Shia (*Ismaili*) Muslim who grew up in India. The dialogue took place in the *Center's* conference area. Sherbanoo—a longtime advocate of interfaith dialogue—introduced these young Jews to basic Muslim beliefs and practices. She then invited questions. Before the session was over, Sherbanoo had as many questions for students in the confirmation class as they had for her. It was a respectful exchange that furthered the *Center's* mission of promoting understanding and respecting differences.

A TRIALOGUE ON JESUS: MUSLIM, JEWISH, AND CHRISTIAN VIEWS

November 14. The second in the *Center's* series of interfaith dialogues at the Fargo Public Library was as a success. About 75 people attended the dialogue: *Three Views of Jesus—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim*. I (a Reform Jew), Rev. Sue Koesterman (an ELCA pastor, Elim Lutheran Church), and Dr. Ahmed Kamel of Concordia College (a Sunni Muslim) were the panelists. From our different faith perspectives, each of us responded to these questions: "How Do I Understand Jesus?" & "How do I understand the crucifixion of Jesus and its symbol: the cross?" After we explained our different views of Jesus, we discussed the common ground that motivates us to engage in interfaith work. We then took questions from the audience.



A DIALOGUE ABOUT ABRAHAMIC DIALOGUE

November 30: At the First Congregational Church in Moorhead, Ahmed Kamel, Karis Thompson, and I discussed the problems and promises of interfaith dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The moderator was Pastor Mark Pettis who led interested congregants in a series on Abrahamic dialogue. (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are called Abrahamic religions because each traces its spiritual heritage back to a common spiritual ancestor, Abraham, often identified as the first monotheist.) This was the last in the series. Obstacles such as constraints of time, insecurity about representing one's faith, and reluctance to leave the comfort zone of one's religious community were mentioned. We also talked about things conducive to successful dialogue—such as having clear rules of engagement, creating a safe atmosphere, and connecting interfaith dialogue with community service.

LEARNING NOT TO JUDGE ANOTHER'S FAITH ON THE BASIS OF APPEARANCES

December 5. I spoke to the Adult Education Class at Trinity Lutheran Church (Moorhead). The topic was the work of the Center, with a special focus on the educational component of our mission. As examples, I discussed how easy it is to misunderstand Hindu worship of *Ganesha*, the elephant-headed god (pictured below) and a Zen monitor's act of hitting meditators with a long, flat stick called a *kyosaku* (see picture). What, from the outside, *looks* like idolatry in Hinduism is really an act of showing reverence for particular qualities, symbolized by *Ganesha*, of the one true God for Hindus: *Brahman*; what *appears* to be Zen cruelty is actually a gentle tap welcomed by meditators to help them stay awake. Only accurate knowledge of spiritual practices can enable "outsiders" to distinguish misleading appearances from what practitioners are actually experiencing. (For a more detailed account of *Ganesha* worship and the use of the *kyosaku*, please email me.)



Ganesha & Kyosaku (Photos by Dieter Berninger)

MEMBERSHIP IN FM COALITION FOR HOMELESS PERSONS



At the December 12 CIP board meeting, the Directors approved my proposal that the *Center* become a member of the *FM Coalition for Homeless Persons*. The mission of the FMCHP is ***to work in partnership to achieve permanent solutions to prevent, reduce, and end homelessness***. The *Center* will be one of FMCHP's partners. This accords with the third component of our mission: *interfaith community service*. One contribution we can make to this important organization is to increase awareness of the spiritual needs and practices of homeless persons from different faiths. For example, staff and residents at homeless shelters who interact with Muslims need a basic knowledge of the beliefs and practices of Islam. Another contribution we can make is to provide representatives of different religions for interfaith events sponsored by the FMCHP. For *Homeless Memorial Day*, December 21, at which homeless persons who have died were remembered, the *Center* found individuals, representing five different religious traditions, to offer prayers

WHAT THE CENTER IS PLANNING

INTERFAITH DIALOGUES SERIES AT THE FARGO PUBLIC LIBRARY

Speaker-Audience dialogue. The third in the interfaith dialogue series at the Fargo Public Library will be Sunday January 30 at 2 p.m.: *A Conversation About Islam: Truths and Misconceptions*. After a presentation on Islam, Ahmed Kamel (Concordia College) will welcome questions from the audience. This will give members of the FM community an opportunity to better understand a religion that has been subject to attack and distortion in this country. We encourage you to attend this event.

Interfaith dialogue planned for Sunday, February 27: *How My Faith Helps Me in Difficult Times: Perspectives from Different Faith Traditions*.

MONITORING CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

In accordance with our commitment to promote respect for individuals in different faiths, the *Center* will begin monitoring local correctional facilities to determine if inmates have access to devotional materials of their faith and, if on work release, are free to attend their chosen place of worship. We will request meetings with those responsible for providing materials and approving transportation to places of worship. We believe that inmates in correction facilities have a right to practice the faith of their choice—always of course in a manner than is consistent with the requirements of institutional security and public safety.

GUIDANCE

Readers should keep in mind that the fourth component of our mission is “to help individuals in search of a spiritual home to find one.” If you are spiritually searching—or simply curious about other faiths—we invite you to explore various worldviews (religious and secular). The *Center* provides objective information for those who wish to explore different practices and belief systems; we do not push searchers in any particular direction. If you wish to make use of this service, please call or email me. Tell others who you think might be interested in one-on-one guidance that this service is offered at no cost as part of the work of the Center.

NEED FOR VOLUNTEERS

If you are interested in helping with one of our projects, please contact me. I am also looking for an assistant—indeed someone who can fill the role of *Assistant to the Executive Director*. This is an uncompensated position that is best filled by someone who has a passion for interfaith work and a strong commitment to our mission. The expectation is that the person will help me with day-to-day operations. An orientation for this position can be done quickly. Hours: 4-6 each week: spread out as the volunteer wishes during the hours the *Center* is open—Monday/Wednesday/Friday: 1-4:30 and Thursday evening: 6-8 p.m. We are also looking for volunteers to host the *Center* during these hours when I cannot be there. Those interested need to be open to learning about different faith traditions and comfortable greeting visitors to the *Center*.

FUNDRAISING

We are looking for people interested in helping us with fundraising. We continue to work on plans for an interfaith concert (dances, songs, chants, etc. from different religious traditions) for November (2011)—as a fundraiser. We welcome your ideas about how we might raise funds to support the mission of the *Center*.

DONATIONS

Please donate! Checks should be made out to *Center for Interfaith Projects*. They should be mailed to 111 Broadway: Fargo, ND 58102. No donation is too small: every contribution helps us to continue our important work in the community.

Center for Interfaith Projects

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