



CENTER FOR INTERFAITH PROJECTS

Promoting Understanding and Respecting Differences

***E-NEWSLETTER FROM DAVID B. MYERS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
JULY 30, 2010***

News: Past, Current, and Future Projects

The Center for Interfaith Projects, which officially opened in May, is committed to making a difference in the community. We seek ***to further understanding of different religions, promote respect among members of different faith communities, foster interfaith community service, and help those who are spiritually searching to find a home.*** With your help and support we can make this a place in which barriers between different faith communities are constantly falling. Our various interfaith projects will be designed to make our mission a reality. Plans include interfaith workshops, interfaith dinners, interfaith dialogue, interfaith panels, lectures about world and native religions, opportunities to join with members of other faiths to solve community problems, and one-on-one guidance for those who wish to find out about different faiths.

What the Center has done since its May opening:

May 26. I conducted a workshop on religious diversity for chaplains employed by Hospice of the Red River Valley. The main topic was the challenge of spiritually caring for dying patients of different faiths. These hospice chaplains, I discovered, are well trained to help dying patients continue their faith practices in this final period of life. Proselytizing is not allowed, and the chaplains have been given special training that makes them sensitive to the spiritual needs of their patients. They were interested in getting a list of resources on different faith traditions—which I provided.

As part of our mission of promoting respect for different faiths, it is important that the Center monitor the spiritual care of those who are in vulnerable situations—for example: patients in hospitals and inmates in jails—to make sure that their right to practice their faith is being respected and to make sure they have access to appropriate devotional materials and ritual objects. For instance, in the case of Muslim patients or inmates, this means providing them with Qur’ans and prayer rugs if they request these items. If a jail or hospital does not have devotional materials from different faiths, the Center will contribute them.

June 2. At their request, I met with a group of Presbyterian women from Grandin, ND to discuss the need for interfaith dialogue and education about world faiths. This was a session to inform them about work of the Center. It was heartening to engage in dialogue with individuals who, although firmly committed to their own faith, clearly see need for interfaith cooperation and education. The leader of the group, Gloria Porter, indicated in a thank you note that those attending found the meeting very worthwhile. I look forward to working with them on interfaith projects.

June 10: Phil Mouch, the Chair of Board of Directors, of the Center was a guest on the Christopher Gabriel Show (WDAY): he was interviewed about the Center. Phil did a great job of explaining the work we are doing. We have a recording of this.

June 12: I introduced Jitendra Vaidya, an Indian Hindu who is member of the Center’s Board of Directors, to two representatives of the Bhutanese Hindu community—New Americans--for the purpose of exploring the idea of establishing a Hindu temple in Fargo. This was the beginning of what we hope will be an ongoing discussion between members of two Hindu communities--the Indian and Bhutanese—about ways in which they might work together to achieve common goals.

June 23: I brought together members of the Bhutanese Hindu refugee community and a representative of a local funeral home to find a way for the Bhutanese to perform their special cremation rituals when there is a death in their community. (Although the first refugees arrived several years ago, on one in their community has died!) Helping New

Americans preserve and continue special rites is a way of showing respect for their distinctive religious practices.

July 22: I met with the new executive director of FM Coalition for the Homeless, Laurie Baker, to see how the Center might contribute to the work of this organization--by helping to bring together members of different religious communities to work toward the goal of reducing homelessness in the FM area. Faith communities, whatever their religious differences, share a commitment to common moral values—such as compassion, generosity, and justice—that can inspire them to work together to solve community problems. If you are interested in joining an interfaith service group to work on the problem of homelessness, please email me.

Goals for the end of August:

--Creation of an Interfaith Speakers Bureau: a list of speakers representing different faiths and the creation of interfaith panels on particular topics. This is one way we will work to realize our mission of educating the community about different faiths. If you would like to be listed as a speaker—to talk about some aspect of your faith—or know someone who would be a good spokesperson for your faith, please contact me.

--Creation of religious guides for those who wish to visit different faith communities. The Center will encourage and help arrange such visits. This is one of the ways the Center will promote understanding of other faiths. If you would like to facilitate visits to your religious community, please provide us with a one-page description of a typical service, informing potential visitors of what they can expect, the rituals (if any) will be performed, and basic beliefs.

What we are planning for the fall:

September 12: The Center is one of the sponsors of the local Ganeshotsav—an annual Hindu festival honoring Ganesha, the most popular god in Hinduism. This year the event will be at the Avalon in downtown Fargo. There will be a procession from the Center to the Avalon during which an image of Ganesha will be carried. Jitendra Vaidya, a board member of the Center, will perform Ganesha worship rituals at the Avalon. After the Hindu service, an Indian meal will be

served. This event--by invitation only because of limited space--will be attended not only by hundreds of Hindus, but also by the mayor of Fargo and possibly the mayors of West Fargo and Moorhead. Board directors of the Center are also honored guests. For the first time, members of the newly arrived Bhutanese Hindu community have been invited to attend what has been for years a largely Indian celebration. The Center helped facilitate the cooperation of these two Hindu communities in the planning of this event.

September 25: *A Civil Discourse between An Orthodox Christian Priest and an Atheist.* Fargo Public Library: 2-4 pm. Father Oliver Herbel and Davis Cope will talk about their very different spiritual journeys and discuss two controversial topics: fundamentalism and evolution. While articulating their significant differences, they will seek to find common ground. The Center is the sponsor of this event that is open and free of charge to the public.

November 14): A triologue is being planned. Tentative title: *Three Views of Jesus: Muslim, Christian, and Jewish.* Each panelist will present a view of Jesus grounded in his or her particular Abrahamic faith. Fargo Public Library. The second in a planned series of interfaith dialogues.

Ongoing:

Guidance: I have, so far, helped five individuals in their spiritual explorations. In each case there was a book in the Center's interfaith library to meet their needs. The Center has a policy called dialogue-based borrowing: a book is loaned with the understanding that that borrower will discuss it on a particular date with a representative of the Center. This arrangement has worked very well so far. The spiritual interests of these individuals varied widely: Celtic spirituality, Jewish mysticism, the interfaith movement, spiritual types, and the theology of religious pluralism. Anyone interested in spiritual exploration, or in learning about a particular faith, please contact me to arrange a visit to the Center.

Islam Project: There has been a resurgence of prejudice and negative behavior directed toward Muslims in this country. As an ongoing project I would like to see the Center work to reduce negative stereotyping of Muslims. One way to reduce this prejudice is to create opportunities for

positive interactions with local Muslims and opportunities to learn about Islam. If you would like to volunteer to help with this project, please let me know.

Publicity: We need to find effective ways to get the word out about where we are and what we do. In addition to distribution of brochures, we are thinking about public service announcements and ads in local papers. There will be a story about the Center in a future issue of *Village Family Magazine*, and we are thinking about proposing to the *High Plains Reader* a series of articles by different board members on their faith perspectives. You can help: please spread the word about our work.

Funding: For those of you who have made a contribution, thank you! If you have not contributed, please do. No amount is too small! We seek help in fundraising. If you have talent in this area, or have creative ideas for fundraising, please contact me. We also need to explore grant opportunities. Anyone who has experience in writing grants, or who would be willing to learn how to write grants, please contact me.

Attention: The Center for Interfaith Projects will be closed August 2 through August 13. I will be on vacation in Berlin during this period. In the future we hope to find volunteers to host visitors when I am absent. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer, please email me. Feel free to communicate with me by email while I am in Berlin.

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