



CENTER FOR INTERFAITH PROJECTS

Promoting Understanding and Respecting Differences

E-NEWSLETTER: MARCH 2011 *David B. Myers, Executive Director*

WHAT WE DID IN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY

January 30: Dr. Ahmed Kamel's Presentation: *A Conversation About Islam: Truths and Misconceptions.* Fargo Public Library



On an unusually frigid Sunday afternoon, a very warm audience listened to Dr. Kamel (Muslim, Professor at Concordia College, & Center Board Member) discuss recurring myths about Islam, including views on women, Sharia law, jihad, and a number of other topics. There was a lively question and answer period: good questions and thorough responses. This is part of the Center's ongoing project to educate the community about Islam and correct misunderstandings of this faith.

February 6 & 13 FM Communiversity Course at Concordia



Class Title: ***Three Faiths: One God?***

Pastor Sue Koesterman (ELCA Lutheran), Dr. Ahmed Kamel (Sunni Muslim), and I (Reform Jew) discussed how we, from our different faith perspectives, understand God, talked about the core message our faiths, and identified the greatest misunderstanding of our faith. Although I do not have the space to sum up all that we said about these topics, I will simply say that, despite important differences—for example, in how each faith views Jesus—our common ground is a perspective called *ethical monotheism*. This means that Jews, Christians, and Muslims (1) affirm the oneness of God (monotheism), and (2) share the view that God calls us to live lives of love, compassion, and justice (the ethical dimension). In the final session, we told the class that the values of our traditions motivate us to engage in interfaith work. Judaism and Christianity share scripture that instructs us to love neighbor as self: increasingly our neighbor is religiously different. The Qur'an calls upon Muslims to value and respect religious diversity. One more thing: as a result of our interfaith conversations with each other, and our cooperation in creating the *Center for Interfaith Projects*, Sue, Ahmed, and I have not only developed a deep respect for each other but have become friends. I think this often happens as people from different faiths work together on various projects and get to know each other: relationships deepen and friendships form.



February 27 How My Faith Helps Me in Difficult Times:

The Voices of Six Traditions The Lotus Studio of the Spirit Room

In what for some panelists were very personal, even emotional, statements, we told an attentive audience how our traditions enable us to cope with trying times. The six voices (see the symbol for each above) were: Prairie Rose Seminole: Native American Spirituality; Mary C. Stuck: buddhadharma practice; David B. Myers: Judaism; Brandon Baker: Humanism; Elise Tweten: Christianity; and Rick Henderson: Baha'i Faith. While there was no attempt to deny our differences, common themes emerged, including the importance of a supporting community and the value of the compassion of others as we struggle with difficulties. In the question and response session, more than a few audience members noted the common themes and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to hear so many different faith perspectives on this subject.

What We Are Doing and What We Are Planning



THE CASS COUNTY JAIL PROJECT

The Center has begun to work with the Cass County Jail. We have offered to provide devotional materials requested by inmates when the jail cannot do so. In the past few years the jail population has become much more religiously diverse. For example, the jail recently requested Qur'ans and Tanakhs (Jewish Bibles). The Islamic Center of Fargo (the local mosque) provided us with 10 Qur'ans and Rabbi Janeen Kobrinsky purchased and donated 5 Tanakhs. I delivered these to Jail Chaplain Mike Sonju. We will soon be exploring whether it is possible for inmates to organize alternative forms of worship within the jail (for example, whether Muslims can conduct Islamic worship services), and whether inmates on work-release can attend places of worship other than the Assembly of God (now their only "choice"). Jail officials seem open to exploring with us new opportunities for inmates, as long as they are consistent with the requirements of jail and community security.

FM Coalition for Homeless Persons



I have begun attending various subcommittees of the FMCHP as well as regular board meetings. The Center's partnership with this organization overlaps in some areas our work with Cass County Jail. For example, we hope to help FMCHP's Committee to End Long-Term Homelessness explore how Cass County Jail inmates might establish connections with faith communities prior to release.

Support from a religious community might be the key for some inmates to finding a place to live and a job upon release. We also plan to work with FMCHP on other problems: for example, we hope to offer our services to homeless shelters that are seeing a higher number of Muslims—by, for instance, providing staff with greater understanding of basic practices and beliefs of Islam. To explore this, I will be meeting with the new Executive Director of Churches United for the Homeless, Jane Alexander.

Upcoming Interfaith Panel: Sunday, 2PM March 20—*Mysticism & Mystical Experience: Perspectives of Three Practitioners*: Laurie Baker (Executive Director, FMCFHP), Phil Mouch (Professor of Philosophy, MSUM), Reza Saberi (author of books on mysticism and translator of mystical Persian poetry). Lotus Studio, Spirit Room at 111 Broadway, Fargo.

A Wonderful Volunteer: Stacey Miller is a new volunteer who has the title *Assistant to the Executive Director and Student Liaison*. She is a gift. Stacey is helping me with almost every aspect of the work of the Center: interfaith events, publicity, the website, Facebook, drafting a grant to the Bremer Foundation, and much more. She is taking a semester's break from her studies at NDSU. Stacey will also host the Center on Saturday afternoons.

Saturday Interfaith Talking Circle

One of the interfaith activities Stacey will be organizing is an interfaith talking circle that will meet one Saturday a month. Individuals from different religions (or no religion) will engage in respectful conversation on a topic of their choice: the idea is that we all have much to learn from and to teach each other. For more information call Stacey: 218 422-6521.

Website: Please check out the Center's website. See, for example, the Sources of Information page where you can click on images of the cover of each book in our library and on links that will provide you with information on world religions and interfaith dialogue. www.centerforinterfaithprojects.org

Facebook: Please befriend us on Facebook. Our Facebook site is always looking for new friends. Befriend it and spread the word.

Guidance: Keep in mind, spiritual searchers, that we provide one-on-one guidance. We not only recommend books and discuss them with you—but connect you with practitioners from different spiritual communities and traditions. Make an appointment by calling 701 388.7368.

Volunteers: *We need your help with a variety of things, depending on your time and talents: ideas for interfaith panels, help designing flyers, creative fundraising ideas, help with social media (Facebook, Twitter), doing publicity, collecting information about faith communities, hosting the Center, preparing & hosting interfaith dinners, etc., etc.*

Donations: Without individual donations we will not survive. We are a 501c3 nonprofit. So, donations are tax-deductible. To fund our events, purchase books for the interfaith library, pay the rent, insurance, and meet other costs, donations are needed.. Checks only. Payable to: *Center for Interfaith Projects*. Send to: *Center for Interfaith Projects* 111 Broadway Fargo, ND 58102

The mission of the *Center for Interfaith Projects* is to:

- 1. educate the community about different faiths;**
- 2. promote respect and understanding among different faith communities;**
- 3. foster cooperation among local faith communities to solve common community problems; and**
- 4. help individuals in search of a spiritual home to find one.**

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