

Interfaith dialogue at GVSU explores whether variant religions can be respectful, work together

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ALLENDALE TOWNSHIP — The question among members of variant religions remains the same since the Crusades: Can we be respectful of one another's beliefs without resorting to hostility?

Take it a step further: Can the world's religions work together without making misguided attempts to convert someone from one religion to another?

For the panelists of an interfaith discussion held recently at Grand Valley State University's Allendale campus, it was a bit like the choir singing to itself: Yes on both counts.

Photos by Amanda Loman | The Grand Rapids Press



Panelists at "Speaking of Faith: Interfaith Dialogue in the 21st Century" this week at GVSU's Allendale Campus. From left, moderator and Press religion columnist Charles Honey and panelists the Rev. Jermone T. Glenn, Ghazala Munir, Sheldon Kopperl, the Rev. Brad Schoeberle and Fred Stella.

But they also agreed the path to some form of ecumenical harmony remains a rocky, pitted road.

All the panelists — Sheldon Kopperl, lay instructor at Temple Emmanuel and GVSU biomedical professor; the Rev. Brad Schoeberle, pastor of St. Luke University Parish; the Rev. Jermone T. Glenn, senior pastor of Revolution Christian Ministries; Ghazala Munir, one of the founders of the Interfaith Dialogue Association; and Fred Stella, West Michigan Hindu Temple's outreach minister — agreed there's much to be gained when people understand West Michigan's religious landscape has changed.

Charles Honey, Press religion columnist and moderator of the interfaith dialogue, noted Protestants and Catholics still may dominate the region, but West Michigan now is home to a core of non-Christian religions as well.

Fifteen years ago, there were two mosques in the area; now there are five, Honey said. Eleven years ago, the first annual interfaith Thanksgiving service was launched and, in 2008, the first Hindu temple opened its doors.

That's all the more reason why it's important cooler heads prevail when people of different religious persuasions engage one another, Glenn said.

"There's a difference between defending your faith and having a dialogue," Glenn said. "Part of the Christian faith involves studying the Jewish tradition. Jesus Christ was Jewish, and I need to understand why he went to the temple in his time."

Banding together

In times of disaster, such as the recent natural calamities in Haiti and Japan, people of faith do a credible job of banding together to provide humanitarian aid, Schoeberle said. That's a fact more political leaders need to take note of.



Grand Valley State University sophomore Brendan Miller listens to the panelists at the "Speaking of Faith" interfaith dialogue on Wednesday.

"Governments are very lucky religions have been around to feed the hungry and help the masses because without them, there would be anarchy," Schoeberle said.

As a scientist, Kopperl said faith satisfies something deep in a person's soul that the material world cannot.

"Judaism is far more than a creed," he said. "It's repairing the world and making it a better place."

But it's clear religious tensions abide in the U.S. and in the world, the panelists agreed.

In some circles, this is known as the new atheism or the ongoing battle between science and religion. Case in point is the planned \$100 million mosque and cultural center that's about one-tenth of a mile away from New York's World Trade Center site.

'Interfaith solidarity'

"We need interfaith solidarity," Munir said. "We need to stand shoulder to shoulder as people of faith and defend God's creation."

This is difficult for those who possess an attention span of a gnat, Schoeberle said. "People don't want to hear long answers; they want sound bites," he said.

For those who attempt to twist Stella into a theological pretzel, humility helps diffuse their evangelistic fervor, he said.

"Secularists help me shape my mental image," said Stella, also president of the Interfaith Dialogue Association. "If they can provide me with food for thought, I feel I need to investigate that."

For some religions, gaining converts is an imperative. Glenn wishes some of that religious zeal would get toned down a bit, or at least shone in a different perspective.

"Personally, it's not my responsibility to convert everybody," Glenn said. "I let my light shine by living my faith and if people are curious about it, I'm prompt to give credit to the source of what I believe. Conversion is a revelation."