

Why the Press wants to help make 2012 a Year of Interfaith Understanding in Grand Rapids

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By **Paul Keep** | **The Grand Rapids Press**



If anyone wonders why The Grand Rapids Press is supportive of a local effort to improve interfaith understanding, let me offer Exhibit A.

It comes in the form of a letter submitted to Public Pulse last week. Its focus was a front page news article from the **Sept. 1 paper with the headline: "Muslims saddled with 9/11 backlash."**

"My question is why shouldn't they be?" wrote the author. "It wasn't Methodists who flew those planes on that infamous day. It was Muslims, and they lived and trained here on American soil."

The illogic continued.

"Islam is said to be a 'sister faith' to Christianity. I don't understand how, when Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and Mohammed teaches his followers to kill their enemies."

That's hardly fair.

"I am so glad to be able to express a dissenting opinion concerning Islam. I'm sure under **'Sharia Law'** to do so would not be an option."

When the facts aren't with you, introduce a scare tactic (that **radical Islam somehow would trump the American justice system**).

One hopes that most people take a more sophisticated view of Muslims that doesn't lump all people of that religion into one category based on the actions of a misguided few.

But if not, help is on the way from a group of concerned Grand Rapids area residents who are pushing 2012 as a Year of Interfaith Understanding. They are kicking off their awareness effort early (a news conference will be Monday) to contribute constructive dialogue on faith issues to the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Their effort will include congregational open houses, interfaith discussion programs and a common study curriculum for congregations. The Press is a co-sponsor and will cover the activities so its readers can benefit from the exchange of ideas.

"The spiritual landscape of West Michigan is much broader than (the Muslim-Christian relationship)," said Fred Stella, an outreach minister for the Grand Rapids Hindu temple and head of the local Interfaith Dialogue Association. "Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jews, etc., will benefit from the greater community learning more about them."

But **today's anniversary** presents a learning moment the group could not pass up.

"If we insist on treating all Muslims as enemies, we will certainly discourage those doctors, teachers, health professionals, ministers, business persons, students and others in our community who happen to be devout in their Islamic faith," said Douglas Kindschi, a Christian who is director of Kaufman Interfaith Institute and a professor of mathematics and philosophy at Grand Valley State University.

Brian J. Bove, a practicing Buddhist and visiting assistant professor of journalism at Grand Valley State University, said: "We often have a difficulty separating ethnic, political and cultural issues from religious issues, and as a result we tend to look at Muslims monolithically... One of the best things a project like this can do is break down those habits of thought."

Ghazala Munir, a Muslim who has worked on interfaith issues here for decades, wants people of differing faiths to be comfortable talking to each other.

"The best outcome would be more interaction between diverse communities on a social and religious level, that we become involved in each others' lives as human beings, taking care of each other as God takes care of His creation," she said. "To be ignorant of the other is to be fearful of the other."

Shared knowledge could also help the community's needy.

"The power of getting to know each other will be the growth of interfaith programs addressing hunger or providing affordable housing or jobs programs, etc." said the Rev. David Baak, who for 25 years was the director of Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism and is an ordained pastor in the Reformed Church of America.

How will this play out?

"It is our hope that this grass-roots effort will involve over 100 congregations, as well as colleges and community groups, creating their own events and experiences that will encourage greater understanding of the diversity of people and faiths that make up our community," Kindschi said. "By getting to know personally persons of other faiths we are convinced that better understanding and less polarizing of attitude will lead to a better community for us all."

While the Year of Interfaith Understanding will involve many events spread around the community next year, a major highlight will occur in the fall.

"One special event being planned for October 2012 will be the Triennial Interfaith Dialogue which will feature international scholars representing the three Abrahamic faiths," Kindschi said.

People or congregations that want to get involved can obtain more information at the group's website, www.2012gr.org.