

Community leaders seek new era of religious unity with 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding

Published: Monday, September 12, 2011, 7:07 AM Updated: Monday, September 12, 2011, 10:06 AM

By [Zane McMillin](#) | [The Grand Rapids Press](#)



The people behind the interfaith initiative "designed to cultivate community interest and engagement in the critical issue of interfaith understanding in West Michigan." From left, Marchiene Rienstra, Ghazala Munir, Dr. Doug Kindschi, Mayor Heartwell, David Baak, Petra Alsoofy, and Whitney Belprez.

GRAND RAPIDS -- It was a brisk fall day in 1989 when Marchiene Rienstra and Lillian Sigal made good on a plan they'd hatched to foster understanding among the world's religions.

The duo had assembled a group comprised of people of different faiths, from Christianity to Islam to Judaism, in Sigal's living room to, in some sense, see what made them tick.

"We talked about our dream," Rienstra recalled, speaking of the group's common goal to understand, rather than fear or dislike, one another's religion. "We began by having yearly living room dialogues."

None of them would have guessed those humble beginnings helped kickstart what decades later would become perhaps one of the **largest interfaith efforts in Grand Rapids**.

At a news conference today, Mayor George Heartwell was to declare **2012 to be the Year of Interfaith Understanding**.

Organizers purposely scheduled the announcement the day after the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to highlight the need to emerge from an era of mistrust between religions.

"Certainly, connecting it to 9/11, we want to honor our heroes; we also want to look forward to the future and see, to understand and find better acceptance of people who are not like ourselves," said the initiative's creator, Dr. P. Douglas Kindschi, director of Grand Valley State University's Kaufman Interfaith institute.

"The look back is important, but the look ahead also is important if we're going to be a community of understanding."

The idea to devote a whole year to interfaith understanding was born of the Kaufman institute's triennial dialogues between practitioners of various faiths.

Kindschi and the Rev. David Baak, a member of the Kaufman institute's advisory board, approached Heartwell with a framework of the yearlong initiative.

The mayor said he "quickly embraced" the idea.

"One in 10 living in Grand Rapids today was born outside of the United States, and as people here are immigrating from Africa, from the Middle East, from Asia, they're bringing their religions with them," Heartwell said. "So where Grand Rapids used to be a fairly homogeneous, Christian community with a small Jewish population in the 1980s, today we have the religions of the world represented here in our community."

Organizers said a turning point in religious understanding came in the months following 9/11, when it became known the plotters carried out the attack in the name of Islam.

In the decade since the attack, the U.S. saw the rise of a vocal, anti-Islamic movement, organizers said. Estrangement, too, has grown among other religions, they said.

"Clearly what is important for us is to announce this weekend the Grand Rapids community's response that regardless of how negative it might have been and when that started, our response is a strength-based, abundant response," Baak said.

Three councils will address what organizers identified as key areas: congregations, community and campus.

In the Congregations Council, various churches, synagogues, temples and the like will work with one another to devise interfaith events, education opportunities and other projects.

The Community Council incorporates various organizations, including The Grand Rapids Press, ArtPrize and the Grand Rapids Public Museum, who will help create interfaith projects in the city.

Seven colleges, including Hope College, Calvin College and GVSU, make up the Campus Council.

Each institution has agreed to host public events, student discussion groups and service projects under an interfaith banner.

Despite 2012 being the designated Year of Interfaith Understanding, multiple events tied to the effort already are scheduled for this fall.

A list of scheduled events is at www.2012gr.org.

The yearlong effort is expected to culminate Oct. 30, 2012, with the Kaufman institute's triennial dialogue, which will feature Jewish, Muslim and Christian scholars.

Organizers hope the effort creates a solid foundation beyond 2012 for years and even lifetimes of better understanding among religions.

Much like the group that met that brisk fall day in 1989, recent GVSU graduates Whitney Belprez, a Roman Catholic, and Petra Alsoofy, a Muslim, are working for a future rich in interfaith understanding.

Belprez works with Kindschi at the Kaufman institute, and Alsoofy plays parts in various interfaith organizations in West Michigan.

But unlike those in the 1989 gathering, Belprez and Alsoofy grew up in a post-9/11 era.

To the duo, uncertainty and dour domestic and international outlooks have been commonplace. The Internet has allowed people to ingratiate themselves with one another, for better or worse.

For Belprez, there's simply no other route than onward.

"Citizens have to operate from places of mutual respect and understanding to address the common good," she said. "Otherwise, it just doesn't work. I don't see any other choice but to move forward, acknowledging those differences."

Alsoofy, too, said there is but one clear option.

"To have a healthy future, not just for me as an American Muslim, but as an American, we have to move past being uncomfortable around each other's faith" she said. "There are other problems (to address)."