

Wanted: More religious tolerance in West Michigan

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By [Charley Honey](#) | [The Grand Rapids Press](#)

An Amway employee hosting a visiting research scientist decided to show him a night on the town. He took his guest to a Grand Rapids nightclub, where the visitor was asked to remove his turban. The man explained he was a Sikh, and the turban was an essential expression of his religious faith.



He wasn't allowed in.

Mayor George Heartwell told that story this week to illustrate the need for better religious understanding around here.

"These sorts of small intolerances happen every day, even in our community," Heartwell said at a news conference Monday.

Happily, Heartwell was introducing an exciting initiative that might prevent similar incidents in the future. It's called the **Year of Interfaith Understanding 2012**, an unprecedented effort to bring together West Michigan's increasingly diverse faith community.

Let me put it plainly right now: This could be big.

It could change the way people relate to each other across faith lines for years to come. It could forge personal friendships and congregational partnerships. And, it could make our famously devout area known as a place where people of all faiths are not just tolerated, but embraced.

Heartwell formally lit the fire Monday, in a declaration urging citizens to "devote energy to the thoughtful study of all faiths and engage in respectful conversation with people of other faith traditions."

It was no coincidence Heartwell and others announced the initiative the day after the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

They framed it as a positive faith community response to the terrorist attacks, which were fueled by a perversion of Islam and touched off much religious misunderstanding, suspicion and hostility.

Regardless of where you stand on the faith spectrum, this effort is worth getting behind. It's an opportunity to build community and promote peace in an era where military and ideological warfare have become the norm.

Led by Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University, an affiliation of congregational leaders, community groups and colleges has

begun planning events and activities. Think interfaith panels, sacred space tours, congregational study groups and public service projects.

For those geeked about next week's opening of ArtPrize, they're even planning an interfaith exhibit for the 2012 event. Drama, music and food events also are in the mix. Hey, how about interfaith supper clubs?

What happens here will not be determined by some central organizers, but will spring from the creativity of congregations and community groups themselves. You can check out the details at 2012gr.org.

Full disclosure: I have been involved in this effort from the outset as part of a small steering committee. That's because (a) I was asked to help, (b) I thought it was a great idea and (c) I love this community. If there's something I can do to make it a better place, count me in.

In such a highly religious area as ours, this is one way to do that, in a big way.

Our religious landscape, traditionally dominated by Dutch Reformed steeples and Catholic spires, in recent years has seen a new Muslim mosque, Hindu temple and Sikh gudwara. It's time we got to know the people with whom we work, study and live.

Note to skeptics: This is not about pushing any religious perspective. It's not about minimizing differences, asking anyone to endorse someone else's beliefs or water down their own. As Kindschi put it, "We're not promoting faith. We're promoting understanding."

Nor is there a hidden agenda to proselytize. In fact, that is one thing participating congregations may not do. The only agenda is to better understand other faiths and get to know the people who practice them.

The years since 9/11 have seen more people doing this. The recently released Faith Communities Today study finds a doubling of congregations' involvement in interfaith worship since 2000, and a near tripling of their involvement in interfaith community service.

Still, the numbers are small. West Michigan, with its strong tradition of faith-based service, could become an inspiring example for other cities in the coming year.

Last Sunday, dozens of us stood in front of St. Andrew's Cathedral, listening to American Indian singers and Christian, Jewish and Muslim speakers honor those who died Sept. 11, 2001. They spoke of that dark day's legacy being hope, not fear, of souls coming together for the common good.

At the end, we all clapped softly as fire trucks and police cars drove by under a fluttering American flag.

It was a lovely moment. Could we make it last for more than a day?

Here's our chance to try.