

Interfaith Voices

Each issue we ask a question of our Directors, here is this issue's inquiry:

Has there been a time, perhaps a very memorable moment, when you felt some kind of encouragement or hopefulness about the future of interfaith work?

Susan Nakao, PhD
Council At-Large Director, Sukyo Mahikari

Growing up in a protestant Christian Community, there was little talk about interfaith connections. In this community, we were taught that only those who accepted Christ as their personal savior would go to Heaven. We were taught that we were favored by God. By early high school, I had questions about the nature of God's Great Love and why a loving God would condemn so many, even if they had lived in a pure, righteous and God-centered way.

In college, my heart of loving God grew stagnant and fell asleep. I devoted myself to my university studies with the goal of becoming a university professor. In my first semester of university teaching my mentoring professor introduced me to Sukyo Mahikari. The warmth of the spiritual energy radiated through my body when I received True Light. It spiritually awakened my heart again, and I signed up for the three-day seminar to learn how to give True Light and began to study the teachings.

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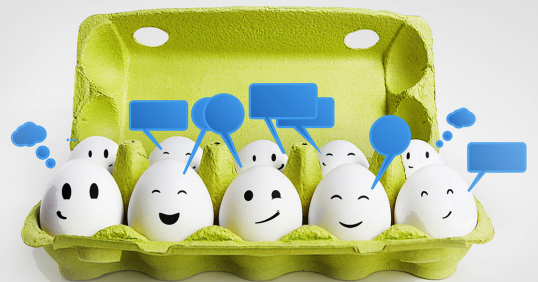
Every year, the Heartland Alliance of Divine Love, together with the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council, invite our community to give thanks together for our blessings and for each other.

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Remembering Hiroshima / Nagasaki

by Sirkar Ira Harritt

Through our 2021 strategic planning process the GKC Interfaith Council directors identified “Advancing Social Equity and Environmental Stewardship” as a new Council goal. This reflects a recognition that this goal is “integral to the success of all spiritual paths, understanding that the environment, community, and personhood are interwoven,” and protecting them should be a part of the Council’s work.

With this awareness the Council seeks to partner with area organizations to support their work and to initiate programming ourselves that further this goal.

This summer the Council was pleased to partner with PeaceWorks KC in support of their annual Hiroshima / Nagasaki Remembrance which took place on August 8. The event included a one-mile walk to the entrance to the National Security Campus (NSC) at 14510 Botts Rd., KC MO, which produces about 80 percent of the non-nuclear parts for US nuclear weapons.

In addition to supporting the event through social media and elsewhere, Council members offered prayers of

peace, joining those assembled wishing that the horrors of nuclear warmaking never again threaten the sanctity of life.

Prayers from GKC Interfaith Council directors were made by Alan Edelman, Rev. Michael Stephens, and Sirkar Ira Harritt, representing Jewish, Christian and Sufi faith traditions. Prayers from Sikh, Buddhist, and Catholic (Missionaries of the Precious Blood) faiths were sent by Council members and supporters and read, as well.

The event was poignant and moving. A highlight was the talk by Keiko Baker, the honorary principal of the Japanese School in the Kansas City area, who shared—for the first time in public—her memories from living in Japan in 1945 and the impact of the Nagasaki bomb on her and her family.



Ms. Baker spoke of the horrors she saw, the “beautiful valley, surrounded by mountains, once a thriving city, completely flat and smoking... What we saw, words cannot describe. People were huddled together, some were calling for loved ones, others seemed lost. It was hard to understand what we were seeing... They were charred, burnt, their bodies blackened, their skin loose and hanging, their hair was the color of ash...”

The most moving part of her talk for me were her concluding remarks, coming from a woman who personally suffered the consequences of the dropping of a nuclear bomb.

“I don’t blame American citizens for this tragic event; it was the result of warring countries. The bomb was made by humans, dropped by humans, and suffered by humans, and that is no way to resolve conflict. It is an utter devastation of precious human lives. It is my wish that we never use an inhuman weapon like this ever again, anywhere on this earth. Thank you for listening.”

She was thirteen years old and living in Saga, Japan, about an hour and a half outside of Nagasaki on the day of the dropping of the nuclear bomb. A couple of days after the bombing, she joined her aunt and uncle who wanted to go to Nagasaki to look for their son, who was attending University there.



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Through my studies, I discovered that the founder of Sukyo Mahikari proclaimed that the age of religious separation had ended, and now was the age of “supra-religious cooperation.” He explained that essentially there are two basic classifications of religion: monotheistic faiths and polytheistic faiths. And he followed up by stating that there is only one Original God, and that this One God, created many deities. Thus, he taught that actually there should be no barrier of separation between monotheistic and polytheistic faiths.

In a lecture entitled, “The Dawn of the Spiritual Civilization,” which was presented to Japanese religious scholars in 1964, Mr. Kotama Okada, the founder of Sukyo Mahikari, explained that humankind was entering a new era, where race and sect would be transcended and people of religion would clearly grasp the spiritual laws and unite for the sake of humankind. He reminded religious leaders that the great souls on which various faith traditions were founded, such as Moses, Buddha, and Jesus, understood that their mission was to bring hope and spiritual awakening to all God’s children. He encouraged all people of faith to positively understand the present situation, and to transcend the barriers of religion for the sake of humankind by working for the fulfillment of God’s Great Prayer, to move the hearts of humankind away from separation and into the realm of “peace and harmony” by uniting God, humankind, and nature in a three-dimensional cross.

Through these studies, I discovered the meaning of “supra-religious” interfaith work, and my heart again opened spiritually. After moving back to Kansas several years ago, I discovered the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council, a place where interfaith dialogue, friendship, and service are put into action. What a blessing it is to be a part of this amazing interfaith fellowship.

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A Virtual Table of Faiths September 23, 6:30-8:30pm

In 2020, the world moved online, and while we are all eagerly awaiting the progress that recent medical advances are bringing to fruition, we are still dealing with the real-world consequences of a global pandemic. Because of this the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council was pleased to hold for the first time in its 32-year history, a Virtual Table of Faiths on Thursday, September 23rd from 6:30-7:30 pm, entitled “From the Front Lines: Spirituality in Times of Crisis.”

The focus of Table of Faiths is to be found in people of different faiths sharing their experiences. This year, we highlighted how spirituality has helped us meet life’s challenges, novel and familiar alike. Participants took part in a virtual pilgrimage through diverse religious teachings and experiences which have helped us cope, adapt, and support one another in myriad ways.

We honored community members and organizations that have excelled in exemplifying the values espoused by the Council. We also recognized healthcare chaplains, first responders, and many others who have played such a critical role in our lives over the past many months. Uniquely for this year, to enhance the experience of our virtual program in a safe and meaningful way, ticketed participants were provided an event package, which included an event keepsake, snacks, and items from different

faiths specifically designed to augment the digital broadcast.

We are aware that the past couple years have been filled with numerous events reincarnating as digital presentations, and that for some this is a disappointment. Indeed, it could be easy enough to allow another digital program to fade into the background. However, as we seek to continually know and be known, the work of the Council continued in the most responsible way possible, with the important support of its directors, advisors, supporters, and well-wishers to make the event a success.

Congratulations to Denise Hill, recipient of this year’s Steve Jeffers Leadership Service Award

The Steve Jeffers Leadership Service Award is named in honor of the late Director of Spirituality in Health of Shawnee Mission Medical Center, who was a major contributor to the interfaith community.

Congratulations to Calvary Community Outreach Network, recipient of this year’s Table of Faiths Award

The Table of Faiths award, which dates to the early days of the Council as a community organization, is given to an organization that exhibits interfaith values in the community.

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Geneva Blackmer

Council At-Large Director, Zen Buddhism

Almost six years ago, I came to Kansas City for an internship with the Rev. Dr. Vern Barnet and the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council. Despite Vern's best efforts to talk me out of it, I was deeply drawn to Kansas City as a model for interfaith work. I sincerely believe that Kansas City's rich ecumenical and interfaith history offers an approach to interfaith work that can, and should, be studied for its broad applicability in both rural and metropolitan communities. I even dedicated my master's thesis, the Kansas City Interfaith History Project, entirely to the subject.

As a bright-eyed undergraduate student, I was eager about the possibilities for interfaith work to engage deep and meaningful social change. I believed that interfaith could change the world; and if we are being honest, I still do. Table of Faiths was my first real glimpse into the power of relationship as a path towards cultivating mutual understanding across lines of difference. I remember entering the event space at the Westin at Crown Center in complete awe of the Greater Kansas City community.

The uniqueness of the Table of Faiths event is its capacity to be both informational and relational. Moving around the room, you can visit informative tables representing the vast diversity of faith traditions throughout Greater Kansas City, engaging in meaningful exchange with practitioners and faith leaders. Gathering around the table together for a meal, relationships flourish naturally, and suddenly strangers become family.

In 2016, the theme for Table of Faiths was "Mosaic in Motion: Embracing a Changing World." Like a mosaic, the many faith traditions of the world each contribute something unique and beautiful to this complex and harmonious pattern of spiritual wholeness. By honoring the

sacred in others, we can behold, and contribute to, this beautiful and enriching web of religious and cultural diversity.

As a young college student, Table of Faiths gave me hope for a future beyond the polarizing divisions of our time. It demonstrated humanity's beautiful capacity for mutual understanding and shared idealism. This "mosaic in motion" is an emblem of how we all must come together to create a perfect whole. If we ever hope to adequately address the great crises of our time, we must look to the wisdom of all the traditions of the world, not just our own. Events like Table of Faiths embody the potential for us all to live cooperatively without the force of blind homogeneity. If anything, it is our multiteity that will save us.

Teresa Albright Nakao, PhD

Director, Council Liaison and Catholic Christianity Director

There are countless ways, and reasons, people engage in interfaith dialogue. And so, I think it is as it should be.

For some, "interfaith" means to be on one path among many. For others, "interfaith" is the acceptance of all paths.

For some, "interfaith" is civil tolerance for the sake of peace. For others, "interfaith" is necessary for survival.

For some, "interfaith" is where we share the things we have in common. For others, "interfaith" is where we celebrate diversity.

For some, "interfaith" is the natural progression of human development. For others, "interfaith" is both the cause and the result of lost traditions.

For some, "interfaith" is that moment we come together in times of crisis. For others, "interfaith" is that moment we decide to sit down at the same table.

In the twenty years I have participated in interfaith work, I can honestly say that each of these perspectives ring true to my own lived experience. But for

me personally, I am committed to the interfaith movement because it is what elevates my own spiritual practice as a "cradle" Catholic. I find it religiously edifying to witness the varied ways God is working in people's lives and communities.

In other words, "she [the church] regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people." (Nostra Aetate, No. 2).

Perhaps my perspective on "interfaith" is too self-serving? Perhaps it the most selfish of them all? Still, it is the vocation to which I have been called; and I choose it each day. I am confident that I am therefore a better Catholic because of YOU. And my sincere prayer is that you will be a better _(insert faith here)_ because of me.

Teresa is also the Pastoral Associate at Visitation Catholic Community, Ecumenical and Interreligious Officer for the Catholic Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph and Lay Associate at Congregation of Our Lady of Sion.

KartaPurkh Khalsa

Council Director, Sikh Dharma

My memorable interfaith event is a very personal one, in a very yogic way, in a very faithful way and of course in a very INTERFAITH way. It was the morning of the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council's Table of Faiths 2007.

As usual, I was in our meditation space on the first floor of Sat Tirath Ashram meditating! (I might also have been meditating on or thinking of my duties as part of the day's events at the Hyatt Hotel.) Sat Inder Kaur, my wife, was upstairs in our third floor apartment, "sleeping in" as she sometimes did because of her physical exhaustion from taking care of this and that, much of which had to do with helping in the planning and execution of the Table of Faiths event. It should be noted that this was, of course, in the days before personal cell phones. That morning she felt

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Rime Center Interfaith Prayer Picnic

by Lama Matt Palden Gocha
and Sirkar Ira Harritt

On Saturday June 5th, the Rime Buddhist Center hosted its first annual Founders Day. The event had originally been scheduled to occur in 2020, but due to the pandemic had to be postponed until this summer. Founders Day is an opportunity to celebrate and honor the legacy of the Rime Center's founders, Lama Chuck and Mary Stanford. In 1993 they envisioned the Rime Buddhist Center as a refuge for the nurturing of inner peace, kindness, community understanding, and world peace.

One of the events held on Founders Day was an Interfaith Prayer Picnic, with the theme "Nurturing Peace in Kansas City." Honoring Lama Chuck's decade-long membership on the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council as the Buddhist member, Lama Matt, the Spiritual Director of the Rime Center, wanted the Interfaith Prayer Picnic to honor Lama Chuck's legacy of interfaith work in Kansas City.

As a picnic the event was outside on the grounds of the Rime Center's new property. It was laid back with both hotdogs and veggie burgers, chips and other food provided. As part of the activities, members of the GKC Interfaith Council offered prayers of peace, including Barb McAtee (former Bahá'í Faith Director), Rev. Kelly Isola (Chair Emerita, At-large Faith Director - Unity), Uma Linda Prugh (Vedanta Faith Director), Ira Sirkar Harritt (Sufi Faith Director), Rev. Lee Slusher / Stumbling Deer



(American Indian Spirituality Alternate Faith Director) and Michael Stephens (Protestant Christianity Faith Director).

Music was provided by Bohemian Dandelions, Victor Dougherty, and Barefoot Bran (left). A highlight of the event was an entertaining and moving talk given by Eyyup Esen (above) of the Dialogue Institute of Kansas City.

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serious chest pains and had great difficulty getting to the phone to call 911. After a few attempts she was able to make the call. She remained in bed as the most restful place to deal with her back and arm pains. I was, of course, still downstairs, doing yoga, meditating, chanting, fairly oblivious to my surroundings which I thought were required to be "in deep meditation."

Our meditation space at the ashram is on the first floor just off the lobby where the front door was located. When the EMT's arrived along with a KCFD pumper and ambulance and tried to enter, no one was there to answer. They called her on the upstairs phone and she said I was there on the first floor, I was meditating!

They knocked on the door and window, no results from yours truly, I was meditating, chanting and attempting to quiet (ignore) the world around me at 5:30 AM. They tried a third time to get in, finally raising one of the other ashram residents to convince him that someone in the house was having a heart attack. Of course he couldn't believe that someone who lived in a house based on a healthy, happy and holy (3HO, Kundalini Yoga, vegetarian diet) lifestyle could possibly be having a heart attack.

Just about at this time my meditative experience for the morning came to a conclusion. As I walked out into the lobby area, a crew of fit young firemen and EMTs were tromping up the stairs to my third floor apartment. "Someone's having a heart attack," one of them said in passing.

I followed the ambulance to the hospital (St. Lukes) where she received some of the best care available in the Kansas City area. She survived that day with an assist by a few minutes of silent prayer by some seven hundred or so participants at that day's Table of Faiths. There was also the insertion of a surgical stent in one of the offending arteries. Lama Chuck Stanford visited her in at the hospital offering his kind Buddhist slant on illness as she was

emerging from anesthesia. He told her of all the people in whose prayers she was remembered that day.

As it turned out, it was not a minor cardiac episode but neither was it fatal. Nearly all of the arteries around the heart were clogged but only the single stent was required. We came to find out that Sat Inder had a genetic defect which prevented her liver from processing cholesterol correctly. That has been remedied by a prescription.

I know, I know, I could and should have been a more attentive meditator but I like to think that even though I was at the time partially deaf, perhaps my faint prayers played their part in her survival. Or maybe, it was all the sincere people praying for her well being. Or maybe it is the diagnosis that saved her life. But more likely it was all three.

Debabrata Bhaduri, Ph.D.

Council Alternate Director, Hinduism

In a pluralistic society it is important to have a platform where faith members can exchange their viewpoints on issues that affect society. We live in a world where the social dynamics are changing very rapidly and so an open exchange of ideas is key to our collective existence with peace and harmony. In an interfaith forum, it is not only my own faith that is important for me, but I also want to know from other faiths' perspectives to understand my faith better. I remember a discussion where it was emphasized that the word 'tolerate' should be replaced by 'respect of others' faiths. Historically, it was Swami Vivekananda in the first Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 who voiced this viewpoint so eloquently and forcefully. He said "I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true". His presentation was so widely applauded by the audience that he became an instantaneous celebrity in America. Although at his time there were only few who could appreciate the message, we have seen more and more

acceptance in the world today, especially through interfaith movements.

Bennette Seaman

Council At-large Director, Church of Scientology of Kansas City

Early in the pandemic, March and April of 2020, it became clear that boundaries were breaking down and people were coming together to help others. Prior to last year, I had met many people from other faiths, but there never seemed to be a way to come together, to find some common ground, other than of course through the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council or other interfaith groups.

Early in 2020 members of our church had started helping a local non-profit group distribute food to the community and then word of the shut-down began. The efforts increased – getting more food and even concentrated disinfectant to hand out. The lines of people in need continued to grow every week. Shortly after, other churches and even members of the City Council began setting up large food distributions, but they needed volunteers. Members of our church answered the call for help and within a month or so, our members were helping at 6 other churches in the area.

As we all worked together, we became more familiar with one another and established real friendships. It has been over a year now and both the friendships and the spirit of working together to help others has continued and expanded beyond just food distributions. To me interfaith work is not just learning about other religions, it is about accepting others for who they are and coming together without reservation, wherever there is common ground, to improve conditions in our communities. In the past, there seemed to be a divide that separated congregations from one another, sometimes even when they were of the same faith. I have seen this change in the past year and so I am more hopeful than ever that all people of religion will continue to build bonds and set an example for others, to truly show how we can all live together despite any differences we may have.



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Barry Speert

Council At-large Director, Biblical Religions

When compared to Biblical Christianity, Biblical Judaism can at times look like a particularistic religion with limited global concerns. As someone who grew up in a Jewish home, where the words “righteous” and “gentile” were often joined together (in reference to heroes and heroines of the Holocaust) I was eager to learn about world religions and religious role models.

My bar mitzvah occurred in 1967, just a few months after the Six Day War which brought about the “reunification” of Jerusalem under Israeli military control. Given all that was going on at the time, including the Vietnam War, I asked for and received for my bar mitzvah a shortwave radio that helped me keep up with international news. News reporting was very different back then, prior to cable television and the internet.

My parents were adamant that my sister and I learn the “story” of the Jewish people. They were just as adamant that we learn the “stories” of other peoples. To do otherwise would in their view be irresponsible. My parents (of blessed memory) would be very happy to see how involved I have become with the Greater Kansas City Interfaith Council. My father

was an attorney and regular synagogue attendee. He loved leading Passover seders in our home with lots of guests who would all leave with smiles on their faces and the satisfaction of an exquisitely cooked meal prepared by my mother.

My mother worked for a nonprofit organization that helped inner city children learn how to read. She loved the contrast in cultures given how she had grown up as the child of a rare Jewish farm family in the Midwest. I do remember my mother’s vicarious satisfaction as related to one specific GKCIC event. It was in 2015 when I and other Council members organized a meeting with local African Methodist Episcopal pastors to express solidarity and learn about their denomination. This meeting occurred in the aftermath of the 2015 shooting at Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina that took the lives of nine people.

For a variety of reasons, Jews do tend to live amongst themselves in clustered or cloistered areas. It is my hope that housing patterns continue to become more integrated, making it easier for people of diverse backgrounds to interact more regularly and productively. It serves nicely as a guiding principle that according to Genesis 1:27 we are all created (regardless of color or native language) in the image of God.

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