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Detroit Interfaith Group Teaches Tolerance Through Dialogue

By Brian Padden
Washington, D.C.
08 June 2007

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After September 11th, many religious leaders across the U.S. gathered to pray for peace and understanding. In the Midwest City of Detroit, one of the most ethnically diverse in America, Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders continue to meet on a regular basis. The Detroit Interfaith Partners try to talk through their differences, despite underlying religious friction at home and ethnic conflicts overseas.



In a scene from the documentary "Reuniting The Children of Abraham," a Christian actor says, "Where I grew up there were only two kinds of people. You were either a Christian or you were someone who did not believe in God."

A Jewish actress offers her own story, saying, "My family came here from Russia where life was hard for Jews. But life as a Jew has not always been simple here either."

A performance of "Reuniting the Children of Abraham"

Then a Muslim actor says, "Everyone I grew up with was a Muslim like

me. I was told to stay with my own people. We were the only ones we could trust in this country."

This documentary is about a project that began in Detroit, Michigan that teaches religious tolerance to young people. The idea for this initiative was born in the aftermath of the tragedy of September 11th.

Muslim community leader Victor Begg says, "We would have been locked into the Middle Ages if it was not for Islam."

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It was then that Victor Begg, a leader in the Muslim community, along with Jewish and Christian leaders, formed Interfaith Partners to counter religious extremism through increased dialogue and understanding. "If we do not really get to know each other, I think, we are in a time when the religious differences could be very harmful, misunderstanding in particular, and there are wrong people that are going to use that to the detriment of our welfare."



Discussion between Christian leader Bob Bruttell, Israeli Tali Ben-Josef and Muslim leader Victor Begg

The documentary and workshop "Reuniting the Children of Abraham" are the most visible results of interfaith efforts in Detroit.

The name refers to the fact that all three religions share the same origin. As an actress in the documentary says, "When Abraham died, his two sons Isaac and Ismail laid him to rest."

Christian leader Bob Bruttell says the group also grapples with the distinct differences between the religions. Bruttell teaches religious studies at the University of Detroit Mercy. "One of the best benefits that we get by living in close proximity to one another is that we can learn from one another and learn that there are other ways of dealing with the ethics of how you would kind of grapple with a certain kind of situation, certain ways of dealing with say, modesty, ways of dealing with family formation, ways of dealing with sexuality and sensuality that are different and clearly different understandings within the different religious groups," he comments. "And as people grapple with those, they come to new understandings."

For the most part, Interfaith works behind the scenes, keeping open channels of communication between religious groups. This can at times be challenging. During last year's war between Hezbollah guerrillas and Israel in Lebanon, there was increased tension between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Detroit. But they continued to talk.



The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah

Tali Ben-Josef, who comes from Israel, says over time she hopes to export the lessons of tolerance and diversity that she has learned here back to the Middle East. "I think if we work here and we get to an understanding here, then the kids can take it back there. And they can tell the family there, 'Look I am sitting in a classroom with a Muslim kid. She is a religious Muslim kid and she is wearing the hijab but she is my friend.' And if you can do it here, which is easier, I am sure you can do it there."

For such a peace to be achieved, the Interfaith Partners believe voices of moderation must constantly confront religious extremism

through dialogue and education.



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