

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Giving thanks for West Michigan's interfaith community

By **Katie Gordon**

Program Manager at GVSU's
Kaufman Interfaith Institute

During the past year and half of working for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, I have traveled to conferences and been introduced to interfaith programs on the East Coast, West Coast and everywhere in between. I've seen firsthand this growing interfaith movement, with more and more institutions adopting interfaith efforts all the time. However, there's something special about what's happening in West Michigan.

We have the whole community behind our interfaith efforts. Not just some pockets of the community, but the interfaith conversa-



Gordon

tion is engaging all sectors of the community. We've seen Grand Rapids' Mayor George Heartwell declare interfaith initiatives to be citywide efforts, the presidents of Calvin College, Calvin Seminary and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA all discuss "principled pluralism," and we see the media's refreshing openness to diverse perspectives.

From the beginnings of interfaith efforts in West Michigan, with Sylvia Kaufman coordinating the Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Muskegon in 1989,

this has been a communitywide effort. Again, in our 2012 Year of Interfaith Understanding, all parts of the community came together to promote dialogue, understanding and respect. Clergy and lay people, religious and nonreligious, art museums and public libraries, universities and high schools, service organizations and government offices, businesses and local media — all are part of a conversation ensuring our area is welcoming of people from any religious tradition.

By leaving our silos and coming together to promote a greater good, we model the potential of what interfaith can look like on larger scales, too.

West Michigan is not perfect.

But by building relationships among strangers through communitywide partnerships, we hold onto hope to become a place of ever-expanding inclusion and equality. And during this time of thanksgiving, I am grateful for a community that has a rich history and exciting future of interfaith engagement. I am grateful for those who participate in interfaith conversations that aim to humanize one another in a world that is polarized and divided. I am grateful a culture where interfaith cooperation is a social norm is becoming ever more possible.

Finally, I am grateful I am not alone in promoting respect and understanding; I am doing it

alongside an entire community.

CELEBRATE WITH US

If you want to celebrate this community with us, Grand Rapids is hosting its 15th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration at 7 p.m. this coming Monday, Nov. 24, at Westminster Presbyterian Church. We share our diverse expressions of gratitude and peace and explore how we can continue to grow as a local and global community. More information on this event and our other efforts can be found at interfaithunderstanding.org. We look forward to even more voices joining the conversation.

Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu