

Monmouth Center for World Religions and Ethical Thought
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Annual Report 2018

Looking ahead at 2019

We have been awarded a grant for \$6,000 from the *Islamic Relief USA* fund to support a “*Civil Discourse Project*.” The aim is to reverse the rapidly expanding isolation between the two sides of a burgeoning ideological divide in our country, such that meaningful dialogue, compassionate understanding and mutual respect can once again become the norm. Divisions in America along racial, religious and political lines are not new but the snowballing polarization between liberal and conservative viewpoints is reaching a proportion that is unwholesome and must be addressed quickly. Broadcast and social media have turned us into a set of echo chambers that serve only to deepen our divisions and reinforce our sequestration. Positive and willful steps are sorely needed to commence the process of healing this divide. We propose to conduct a series of Civil Discourse Forums in 2019.

Looking behind at 2018

- Liz Congdon shared a powerpoint presentation of her interfaith work with 20 Hightstown Woman’s Club members on 1/3.
- “How We Give Thanks” was the focus of an interfaith panel at the Applewood Long Term Care facility in Freehold on 1/16. Liz Congdon moderated and the panelists included Sarbmeet Kanwal (Sikh), Robert Smith (Buddhist), Nirmal Dosi (Jain), and Esmat Mahmoud (Muslim).
- 26 from the UUCMC Social Justice Committee and MCWRET cosponsored the showing of the Baha’i “Bicentenary of “Baha’o’llah’s Birth” on 2/17. Panel discussion followed the film.
- Stevi Lischin participated in the Quinn Chapel AME church African American Read-In on 3/4. Georgette Thomas served as Read-In Coordinator.
- Dr. Mary Carol Day led a discussion entitled “Understanding Our Righteous Minds and Ideological Divisions, A look at the Work of Jonathan Haidt” at the Annual meeting held on 4/4 with 32 in attendance.” The audience responded with much discussion.
- The MCWRET and the UUCMC Social Justice Committee presented “An Opportunity to Converse in a Civil Conversation in this time of Polarization” on 4/15. The 21 in attendance viewed a short video by Krista Tippett focused on speaking together differently in order to live together differently. In the video Tippett responds to the important question “Does conversation really matter when our disagreements are so stark and important?” Joe Ritacco and Stevi Lischin led the conversation.
- Liz Congdon moderated a panel of 7 MOSAIC students who talked about stereotypes at the Applewood Performing Arts Center in Freehold on 4/24. Students represented Jewish, Episcopalian, Hindu, Jain, Muslim and Agnostic perspectives. In attendance were 30 adults and a frequently heard response was “my hope in youth” or “my hope for the future has been restored.”
- Liz Congdon moderated a panel of women from different faiths on 4/25 talking about “The Role of Women in Different Faiths.” Women were Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. The audience of 28 Applewood residents were enthusiastic about the presentations.

-Sarbmeet Kanwal, Patty Whyte, Balvinder Kaur Gill and Liz Congdon participated in the first *We Are Monmouth* in a series of conversations between Monmouth County Law Enforcement and Faith-Based Representatives on the topic of police involved shootings and the community response from 10 – 12:30 on 5/8 at the *Triumphant Life Church* in Fort Monmouth.

-Joe Ritacco and Stevi Lischin led a “conversation on civil conversation in a time of polarization” on 8/22 at the Middletown Library. A Krista Tippett video was viewed and discussed. The focus was on speaking together differently in order to live together differently. There was an opportunity to practice what was learned.

-Uma Swaminathan and Sarbmeet Kanwal joined other speakers at the Comparative Religions Preservation at the Freehold YMCA on 9/20.

-Over 50 participated in the Shanti Lecture on 10/6 with Rev. Sarah Pirtle, author, recording artist, and Interfaith Minister who talked about “Hands Across the Hills Dialogue Success Bridging Red and Blue.”

-Eight Monmouth County Visiting Nurse Association Hospice staff participated in a multi-faith retreat with representatives from the Monmouth Center for World Religions and Ethical Thought Hindu, Sikh, Humanist and Muslim representatives on 10/16. They dialogued about end-of-life issues for 4 hours including such things as patient needs and role of family in end of life care, gender roles in decision making, addressing issues of death, burial, and grief.

-Ellie Kierson and Lata Phadke dialogued with about 30 residents at Applewood about gratefulness and forgiveness and how it is recognized in their religions on 10/17.

-Over 60 participated in a multifaith panel moderated by Joe Ritacco on 10/28 with Uma Swaminathan, Sarbmeet Kanwal, and Ari Jain talking about the lesser known faiths, of Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism. Attendees included Presbyterians from the Matawan and Lincroft churches.

On 11/7 Rev. Ellie Kierson moderated an interfaith panel with Lata Phadke, and Esmat Mahmoud representing their faith perspectives and holidays in Sikhism, Hinduism and Islamism at the Applewood Care Center in Freehold. About 25 participated.

-The MCWRET cosponsored the *Coalition for Peace Action* annual conference in Princeton on 11/12.

Over 60 attended a session on Civil Discourse in this Time of Polarization at the Toms River Presbyterian Church on 11/7 moderated by Joe Ritacco.

-Over 100 attended the 18th *United We Sing*, on Sunday, on 11/18.

-Uma Swaminathan, an advisor to the Monmouth Center Board, has been elected as the new president for *Association of Indians in America* (AIA) New Jersey Chapter.

We believe that what we are doing is critically important especially in this day and age with the Monmouth Center and with **MOSAIC** (*Mobilizing Our Students for Action to build Interfaith Community*.) The focus of **MOSAIC** is to learn about other faiths, serve the community and enhance student leadership skills. In this day of misunderstanding, bias, fear and hate it is critical to provide opportunities for dialogue about different faiths. That is accomplished at the faith sessions. Listening and asking questions respectfully are emphasized. Real team building occurs when students really get to know one another in community service projects. Let me share some of our recent accomplishments.

During the 2017-2018 school year (**MOSAIC 5**) we worked with 67 teenagers (45% male and 55% female) in grades 8 -12 from different traditions including Greek Orthodox, Reformed,

American Baptist, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Agnostic, Unitarian Universalist, Humanist, “none” and “undecided.” **MOSAIC 5** distribution was 33% Christian, 25% Jewish, 18% Hindu, 12% Muslim, 1% Jain and 7% “none” or “undecided.” The main event for community service this year was packing meals with *RISE Against Hunger*. Over 18,000 meals went to Africa. **MOSAIC** students participated in the MLK, Jr. Day of service with MOSAIC students offering prayers from Hindu, Jewish and Muslim faiths.

We are making a difference and empowering the younger generation to bring diverse people closer together. We began **MOSAIC 6** with 49 students.

MOSAIC ambassadors are given additional leadership opportunities. This year they spoke on a panel at the Applewood Care Center and at the Court Street School and Museum in Freehold.

MOSAIC was created by *the Monmouth Center for World Religions and Ethical Thought* and the *Monmouth County Human Relations Commission* and has received three prestigious awards. More information about them, videos, and photos can be found on www.GardenStateMOSAIC.org, www.Interfaithmonmouthcenter.org and Facebook page *Interfaith Monmouth Center*.