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Clergy group embraces diversity

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By [SUSAN FRICK CARLMAN](#) scarlman@stmedianetwork.com

There is sometimes common ground in unexpected places.

Once they sat down and began getting to know a bit about each other, leaders in Naperville's Methodist and Muslim communities discovered they were on the same page on the issues of gambling and youth concerns.

The Rev. Lynn Pries wasn't too surprised by that. The chaplain at North Central College since 1994, he has been watching the community's faith base broaden along with the region's demographics for a while. He has a pretty good view of the changing landscape now, as a meeting organizer for the Naperville Interfaith Leaders Association.

Rooted in communication, the alliance works to put its shared philosophies into practice for the greater good. Talking, and listening, is what the association does -- in more ways than it did in the days when the city's belief sets were more uniformly Christian. Mindful that many of the world's major religions trace their origins to Moses and Abraham, the interfaith group celebrates their common threads.

Pries said by the late 1990s the group's earlier incarnation, the Naperville Ministerium, had begun re-examining its mission.

"It was a time to think, 'Do we want to be a much broader, inclusive organization, or do we want to serve only Christians?'" said Pries, who attended North Central in the 1960s. "There were a lot of mixed feelings. There was a lot to give up."

A bigger umbrella

The membership of the late '90s, then primarily clergy from Protestant and Catholic congregations in and around the city, knew the community was changing. Pries said they agreed, among other things, that Christians needed to become better at acknowledging and understanding the sanctity of other religious holidays.

"We also felt that Naperville was becoming multi-faith, and there were people -- especially Muslims and Jews -- who felt excluded from that," he said.

Greg Schneck-Skiba, pastor at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Naperville, has been a member of the association since 1997. He saw the dawn of the new millennium as a fresh chance to promote interfaith understanding and build relationships among the community's believers, when the ministerium helped coordinate a community-wide interfaith prayer breakfast on New Year's Eve 1999.

"That was kind of a kick-off, I think, to cooperatively working in a new way," he said.

The attacks on New York and Washington by Muslim extremists in the fall of 2001 gave the association's mission renewed urgency, which persists today.

"Since Sept. 11, 2001, there's been a significant issue of prejudice against Muslims," Pries said. "And I think the religious community is uniquely positioned to be sensitive to that, and to raise it as a concern as people who understand the importance of religious freedom."

Ahmed Qadeer understands it. A founding member of the Islamic Center of Naperville, the 33-year resident preceded the ministerium's renaissance when he joined the group in 1998. He considers its discourse quite productive.

"I think we have a very congenial group of people who want to understand one another," he said, adding that the presentations from people of other faiths such as Baha'i and Buddhism have been particularly informative. "We learn from each other."

Congregating consensus

The area's broadening diversity has brought with it not only a wider variety of faith traditions, but also a new set of common concerns that transcend religious holidays and worship format. The association addresses those social issues as well.

"We don't just limit ourselves to faith groups," Qadeer said. "Sometimes we focus on issues of social concern, like housing and security."

Pries said past agendas have included discussions with the superintendents from Districts 203 and 204, whose shared interests included the obsession many young people have with material possessions and the stresses of competition and overbooked schedules. Public safety officials have come to talk about emergency preparedness. Naperville attorney Scott Day spoke to the group about the efforts of his former client, the Irshad Learning Center, to open a Muslim school and meeting place on 75th Street just east of the city limits. The exchanges have enlightened those involved.

"It's certainly had some benefit for those who attend the meetings," Schneck-Skiba said.

Rabbi Marc Rudolph of Congregation Beth Shalom in Naperville doesn't think he would have found many opportunities to engage with clergy of other faiths if he hadn't begun attending NILA's monthly meetings. The time spent together has had mutual benefit, he said.

"I think a lot of times other faiths read about Judaism, but they don't often sit down with a rabbi and learn about the faith," he said.

Jews and Muslims are entitled to the same rights to worship, observe holidays and acquire property as everyone else, Pries said. The way the interfaith coalition sees it, treating those groups differently is an injustice.

Today the group sees as much currency in its purpose as ever.

"It may be met in a variety of ways, but to me it's an increasing need that must be addressed," Schneck-Skiba said. "Naperville itself is very eclectic in terms of the many faith communities that are represented. ... This is America, the land of freedom of religion, and that's something that we need to emphasize and promote."