

THE KANSAS CITY STAR. WEDNESDAY, JUNE 25, 2008 BLUE

Greg Clark: Keeping the Faith, Respecting Others

So, have you heard the one about the Baha'i, the Sikh, the Jew, the Muslim, the Buddhist and the Christian?

They all came together recently and showed that people can and should get along.

No joke.

But lots of smiles.

And lots of appreciation for sensitivity, inclusivity, a chance to express a smidgeon of their faith without fear of repercussion or judgment.

In terms of theology, the men and women who gathered for the interfaith event at St. Mark's Catholic Church in Independence represented the four corners of the Earth. In terms of humanity, they represented the hope that people can set aside differences and find common ground as neighbors — right here in eastern Jackson County.

Nobody said that his faith was better than the next guy's. Nobody put down another's convictions.

All upheld the virtues of peace, education and community-building through religion.

Sounds almost like a theological love-in, doesn't it?

But things aren't always that way. The moderator for the Independence Ministerial Alliance's event was Josef Walker, a community chaplain with the Center for Religious Experience and Study.

His remarks at the outset, spoken quietly to an audience of mostly Christian leaders, crackled with meaning:

"My experience is that my community doesn't make a real effort to recognize others among us."

Ouch.

No matter what their faith, that's a damning statement for folks who preach forgiveness, compassion and the worth of people.



Participating in the faith panel were (from left) Ralph Lesh, Baha'i; Marie Svaglic, a Buddhist; Zarrieff Osman, a Muslim; Gurdit Singh, a Sikh; Henri Goettel, a Reform Jew; and William Czarlinsky, a Reform Jew.

The interfaith activity was a small step toward righting that wrong.

The panelists started by breaking down barriers, describing their homes and work places — most

in spots such as Independence, Raytown, Lee's Summit and Kansas City. When you recognize a man or woman as your neighbor, you've immediately established commonality.

And commonalities flowed through the panelists' comments.

- Ralph Lesh (Baha'i): "In our faith, you're always trying to be a better person."

- Marie Svaglic (Buddhist): "I pray to remove from life all that is not good. ... Our main goal is to pursue world peace."

- Zarrieff Osman (Muslim): "We don't have bandoliers with bullets, a machete or look like (Osama) bin Laden. Most Muslims here love America. We are here to make a contribution to America."

- Gurdit Singh (Sikh): "We have three precepts: work, worship service... We pray for the uplifting of all humanity."

- Henri Goettel (Reformed Jew): "My practice tells me I'm God's hands in the world, so it's important to ask regularly, 'What is God asking of me now?' Every person, I believe, is put on Earth to do a special job no one else can do."

- Will Czarlinsky (Reformed Jew): "On the Sabbath, I light two candles and say a blessing. The blessing is to thank God for creating the world and making the light."

Despite the similarities in state-

ments, the event did not attempt to steer participants from their own faiths or toward a universal religion. Panel members talked openly about their theology and the differences from Ejack's mainstream Christianity.

The panel did, however, push for mutual respect and urged greater education of others' heritage.

"Liberal Jews believe there are many paths to God," Goettel said. "As I've listened to my colleagues on the panel, that's been confirmed, time after time."

Osman expressed it another way:

"Stepping into another's faith center is not a betrayal of faith," he said. "It's an act of faith. Let's use education to make America's fabric strong, and we will still be able to grow in our own faith."

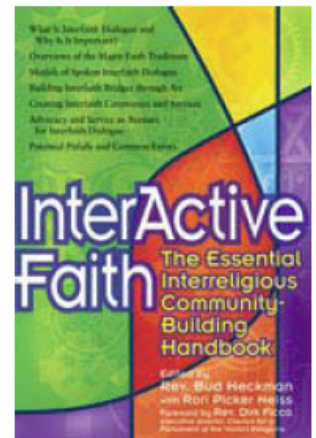
That's no joke, either.

But it did bring lots of smiles.

CRES Staff Cited in New Book

The latest national recognition for our work comes in citations of CRES staff members Vern Barnet and Josef Walker in the new book,

InterActive Faith: The Interreligious Community Building Handbook, edited by Bud Heckman of the Hartford Seminary.



[W]e consider Kansas City to be truly at the forefront of interfaith relations. This is — in no small part — due to the tireless efforts of Vern Barnet, whose work and writings have been an inspiration to all of us at the Pluralism Project. —Ellie Pierce, principal researcher for *The Pluralism Project at Harvard University*

Please support CRES to continue this work.

Thank you.