



culture

History-Making Model of Faith

Tri-Faith pioneers seeing the fruits of their interfaith collaborative take shape

by Leo Adam Biga

Omaha's not always embraced diversity but the local Tri-Faith Initiative may be a history-making model of interfaith cooperation. It's proceeding with an audacious plan to locate a church, a synagogue, a mosque and an ecumenical center on a combined 35-acre campus.

Organizers say they've not found an equivalent gathering of the three Abrahamic faith groups – Christianity, Judaism, Islam – in a single dedicated setting. Not surprisingly, the project's drawing much media and scholarly attention. Observers are struck by how this partnership between the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska, Temple Israel and the American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture has gone from concept to dawning reality in only six years.

One of the group's first public events in 2012, *Breathe*, is scheduled for this Saturday, July 14, at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church from 10 a.m. to noon. With the subtitle to "Expand Your Spiritual Lung Capacity," this event explores the common tradition that "Divine breath" sparks life.

The Reader met with the four pioneers behind the Tri-Faith experiment for their take on how the initiative has managed sustaining itself. They say one reason why the alliance has gotten so far so fast is that mere dialogue was never the end goal. Rather, it was a means to realize a brick-and-mortar sanctuary for promoting ongoing interfaith relationships.

"There are many wonderful dialogues going on across the country and around the world, and I've been involved in some of those, where people come together for great meetings to talk about interfaith issues," says Nebraska Episcopal Diocese for Tri-Faith Ministries Canon Tim Anderson, who will lead the unnamed Episcopal church slated for the campus. "But then you go back to your hotel, pack your bag, get on a plane and fly home. The uniqueness of this is that we are home. The next day we wake up and my neighbor to the right is still Jewish and my neighbor to the left is still Muslim and I

have to learn each day how to live in my faith to love my neighbor as myself."

Outside the pitched battleground of the Middle East, Jews and Muslims have every reason to be friends.

"I think Muslims are in a way in America the Jews of the past," says Rabbi Aryeh Azriel of Temple Israel. "I think there is a tendency from time to time to select a new scapegoat. Jews are extremely aware of the 'game' that was played with their lives. We paid a price for being a scapegoat for many, many years. Until the Obama presidency there were many opportunities for Americans to denigrate or to view Muslims as The Other, the stranger, the one that is not welcome, similar in a way to how Jews were treated."

Azriel says progress between peoples of different faiths or cultures can only occur "when you're able to step away from where you are and go to uncomfortable places." Getting past surface niceties to deep interpersonal connections, he says, is what's made the Jewish-Muslim relationship work in Omaha. Years before the Tri-Faith, he notes, Temple reached out to invite the Muslim community to celebrate holidays at the synagogue. Muslims have reciprocated by inviting the Jewish community to their celebrations.

"It's mainly about relationships. If you don't visit each other's home, if you're not in relationship with people, the dialogue becomes completely nebulous and artificial after awhile," says Azriel.

He acknowledges some Temple members resist the partnership. The other groups report similar reluctance. It's meant less than 100 percent buy-in. But that's where Azriel says leadership can make a difference.

"I really think a clergy that doesn't challenge his congregation, doesn't comfort those that are challenged, but also doesn't disturb those that are comfortable should not lead a congregation. Sometimes you need to be stubborn and continue with the dreaming. So we continue walking on the bridge, even though at times it doesn't look completely solid and safe. So what? There is a price to pay for daring and a price to pay for stagnation."

Dr. Syed Mohiuddin, Islamic Institute presi-

dent and co-founder and chair of the Department of Medicine at Creighton University, says the relationships hinge on mutual respect and trust. "That's where it starts."

In late 2011 the partners backed their words with financial stakes by announcing the purchase of adjoining parcels of land at the site of the former Ironwood Country Club, on the southeast corner of 132nd and Pacific, now part of the Sterling Ridge mixed-use development. The Tri-Faith vision took another major step to fruition when Temple, which completed its \$25 million building campaign, broke ground April 15 on its new synagogue. It's expected to open in August 2013. The other two partners are in the planning and fund-raising stages of their own buildings. A \$2.5 million anonymous matching gift kick-started the Islamic Institute's fund drive.

A fourth structure, the Tri-Faith Center, will be a shared, nondenominational facility for educational-cultural events and activities. It's also in the planning stage.

The level of support shown for this faith-based collaborative defies the tensions and conflicts that keep different religious traditions apart. The feel good story of the project's formation is already becoming lore.

Temple, the oldest and largest synagogue in town, long ago outgrew its present facility. Whereas the reform Jewish congregation traces its history back to 1872 and serves 750-plus families, the Islamic Institute formed only in 2006 and counts but a fraction of Temple's members. Still, the Institute needs a permanent home of its own to accommodate a growing Muslim population. Each cast its gaze out west, where most members live.

Temple already had the experience of a Christian neighbor in First United Methodist Church to the north and of a shared parking lot with the Omaha Community Playhouse to the east. The Jewish and Islamic communities already enjoyed a rapport strengthened when, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Azriel led Temple members in a cordon around the local mosque as a show of soli-

darity. He and his Tri-Faith brethren describe it as a “pivotal moment” that “forged” the relationship.

Temple’s search for a new home took a collaborative turn when member and now Tri-Faith board chair Bob Freeman broached the possibility of building with a faith partner. Not only would there be cost savings from a joint site selection and shared amenities, but opportunities to do inter-faith programming.

It wasn’t long before Azriel and Mohiuddin spoke about partnering. After consulting with their boards they decided to pursue an interfaith project with a Christian participant. After the Catholic Archdiocese of Omaha rejected the idea, the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska was approached. It just happened to be considering a new church in West O on land held in reserve. Then-bishop Joe Burnett asked Anderson to explore joining the two other faith groups in a joint venture. Anderson met Freeman over a game of golf to discuss the possibilities.

Ironwood proved a symbolic spot for the Tri-Faith. It was founded as Jewish-only Highland Country Club in 1924 in response to Jews being barred from other clubs. Owing to Omaha’s declining Jewish population and a desire to be inclusive, Highland eventually opened to all who could afford it. Tri-Faith partners now refer to Hell Creek, which runs through the property, as Heaven’s Bridge.

It’s in breaking bread and participating in celebrations with each other, they said, that people of divergent backgrounds and beliefs find their common humanity. That’s why the Tri-Faith sponsors events that bring people of different faiths together. 

