

Reach out to 'Others'

At our March 10 service, Dr. Rob Stall and Dr. Feraas Jabi shared their experience with "Building Bridges in Western New York", an organization of Jews, Muslims, and others respecting each other's personal beliefs and working together for the common good. The fundamentals of the organization are expressed in their vision statement:

"As Muslim and Jewish residents of Western New York, we seek to promote understanding, trust, and friendship between our faith communities, by coming to know one another as individuals, by learning more about each other's religious, cultural, and life experiences, and by sharing our learning with the public. We also wish to help the less fortunate among our WNY neighbors through joint projects for the benefit of those in need. We trust that our efforts will contribute to building a more open, kind, and tolerant American society, so that our children and grandchildren may grow up together in peace, friendship, and cultural harmony." And their mission statement: In order to fulfill our vision, we commit our organization to the following principles and endeavors: -We honor the inherent dignity of every human being and the sacredness of human life. -We commit ourselves to considerate and respectful behavior in our interactions with one another. -Whenever incidents of intolerance or violence occur against our own or other faith communities, we will stand together to defend the rights of all. We invite the public to participate in educational and social events, for the purpose of advancing knowledge and fostering wider friendships and trust. -We are eager to work together with other faith groups to foster projects of benefit to the larger Western New York community. -We are interested especially in efforts that will assist our neighbors in need of food, health care, and other necessities of life.

Initially, a course at the High School for Jewish Studies, the organization was formed in 2009, co-founded by Dr. Stall.

Projects include 1. Twinning of Mosques and Synagogues, annually. 2. "Building Bridges Health Services" intended to make services available to everyone, with special attention to equitable access and care for those who are underserved or uninsured. and 3. "Feeding the Homeless and Hungry", a developing project. Building Bridges also includes an internet list serve with 250 members that Dr. Stall noted "includes 'spies'"; The group is regarded with suspicion by some! Among the things I learned from the presentation, I found it especially interesting that the Arabic word "Jihad" means "struggle" and comes from "the struggle with God to be a better person". I also appreciated the notion that "An enemy is someone whose story you haven't heard."

Most of our members in attendance for this service found the presentation inspiring and challenging. Of course the vision and mission fit our own Unitarian principles and our membership come from a variety of faith backgrounds including Muslim and Jewish. We found the active attempts to bridge differences exciting, and the presenters challenged us as a congregation and as individuals to review what we are already doing to build bridges and to consider some new activity that involves "reaching out to people who are different culturally or religiously". Dr. Stall encouraged each of us to find one person of another faith or belief system with whom to connect and share views. As a congregation, our program planning committee -- who arrange our Sunday services -- will be exploring possibilities for having Rabbis, Muslim clerics and clergy from other faiths speak at intervals throughout the year. We have done this in the past and will make it a special focus for the coming year. This fits well with our commitment to be a caring and loving community not because we all believe the same thing, but regardless of the diversity of our faiths (from our website).

Readers who would like to know more about Building Bridges in Western New York can visit their website at

<http://buildingbridgeswny.org>.