



Spiritual Exploration Project

The Spiritual Exploration Project is a multi-faceted community-based initiative that seeks to involve various faith expressions. It appeals not only to those with established religious traditions, but also to those who seek a different type of spiritual community. It is a multi-pronged approach to faith renewal that features: interfaith dialogue among Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other faith expressions and those who are not part of any religious community; an interracial task group to promote understanding and harmony within our community; the development of a contemplative community and a focus on social justice concerns, especially local; programs and opportunities to enhance the spiritual lives of all peoples; use of the arts — poetry, spiritual memoir, film — to help persons express their inner needs, pain, hopes, etc., and to challenge to action. It would also incorporate the use of storytelling as a means of understanding one another and building community.

The Spiritual Exploration Project is relatively new and still in its formative stage, but we have identified four areas in which we are engaged:

Interfaith Dialogue

While interfaith dialogues among Christians, Jews and Muslims have been in existence in the Reading area for several years, we need to recognize that there are other groups with whom we should be in conversation: Buddhist, Baha'i, Taoist, Sufi, Zen, Wiccan, Sikh, Rastafarian, Hindu, Shinto, None, and many others, as well as other variants of the major faiths. Sharing of faith stories, discovering common ground, protecting religious freedom for all, are just some of the ways in which meeting together might broaden our appreciation for each other's faith. The Interfaith Dialogue group is co-chaired by Steve Ohnsman and Elsayed Elmarzouky. Two Community Forums have been held on "Violence and God – An Examination of the Biblical Texts" and "A Faith in Common."

Contemplative Spirituality

The Contemplative Spirituality group has as its goal the development of an interfaith approach to the understanding of God as God is known through many faith traditions. The group has been exploring various disciplines and methods of contemplation. It meets on the fourth Monday of the month at 10:00 a.m. in Christ Church United Church of Christ, Temple. Topics in the past have included "Holy Listening," "Centering Prayer," "Praying with Icons," "Stories as a Spiritual Discipline," "Poetry of the Heart." Future sessions will be on "Celtic Spirituality," "Feminine Face of God," "Labyrinth Walking," and "Rocking Chair Meditation."

Storytelling

Everyone has a story to tell. They have formed the basis of countless films, memoirs, poems and have excavated layers of memory and have become the foundations of future lives. People living in the inner city have come from many backgrounds, traditions, ethnicities, nationalities and we have been enriched by the contributions to our culture. This project would help gather these stories and perhaps become the basis for sharing in a common forum, poetry reading, booklet, film, etc. Perhaps our poets and writers, as well as students can work together or independently toward a shared presentation.

While storytelling is an essential part of developing interfaith relations and a spiritual community, it is vital to understanding one another. We want to be able to hear and relate the personal stories of individuals, those who have come to our area from other places, those who have had new beginnings that have given hope to their journeys and nourished their dreams and aspirations.

We have begun gathering these stories and will be looking for ways to present them in the future. If you know of someone whose story is crying to be heard, or if you would like to be involved in the interview process, please let us know. This particular storytelling endeavor will be presented under the title of "Who Is My Neighbor?"

Justice and Mercy

This group will be looking to engage in work that will create better understanding and acceptance of one another in our community. We will be looking to identify areas in which volunteers can help improve the quality of life for many of our neighbors.

We will also be in conversation with others who are already doing important work to help create a community of acceptance, understanding, and mutual support.

Organization

We recognize that all persons who have expressed interest in the Spiritual Exploration Project may not want to be involved in all aspects of the program, nor have the time or inclination. Consequently we have asked you to indicate which of the areas (any or all of them) that you have an interest in. We will send general information to everyone, and notices of specific meetings to those on the individual lists.

If you, or persons you know, desire to be part of this evolving project, please send contact information and area(s) of interest to me. We are also pleased to send this to those who just want to be kept informed.

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