



World Interfaith Harmony Week Celebrations at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, USA

A series of events promoting interfaith harmony on campus and in the region, culminating in a regional interfaith conference, February 2016

Organized or Sponsored by the following:

- Fr. Ray Herman Peace & Justice Center, Loras College
- Better Together, Loras College
- Loras College
- University of Dubuque
- Clarke University
- Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC)
- Children of Abraham

Introduction:

Located at Loras College but serving the wider community and region, World Interfaith Harmony Week events at Loras College culminated in an interfaith leadership and storytelling conference attracting participants from 6 regional colleges and universities and the surrounding community. This introduction will provide background and context for our interfaith work in general, and our work to celebrate WIHW 2016 in particular.

In 2014, the Corporation for National and Community Service honored Loras College with the first Presidential Award for Interfaith Service, due in part to the leadership Loras has shown in promoting interfaith dialogue on college campuses and in the Dubuque Community, including its role in the Children of Abraham organization (C of A). The organization consists of community members along with faculty from three area colleges, of diverse religious backgrounds including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and agnostic participants. The mission of C of A is to create an atmosphere of religious solidarity, cooperation and friendship by sponsoring initiatives from monthly conversations to shared use of sacred space to expressions of cross-cultural hospitality during religious holy days and a community-wide attitudinal survey.

Better Together is a student organization on the Loras campus working to voice religious/non-religious values, experiences and identities, engage others across lines of religious difference in meaningful conversation, and act together on shared values to make a positive impact in the campus and broader community. The organization strives to create a space for all people to voice and practice their values while engaging with differences. Better Together is affiliated with Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) in Chicago and also works closely with the C of A.

In September 2015, a group including faculty, staff, and students from Loras College, University of Dubuque, and Clarke University, all in Dubuque, Iowa, began collaborating on a way to bring the national interfaith movement led by IFYC, along with the strong interfaith relationships we had built in Dubuque, to other schools in our region of the upper Midwest United States. This led to the organization of an interfaith conference that would focus on participants learning to develop interfaith storytelling skills and interfaith leadership, including a goal of helping to celebrate World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW). With support from IFYC through a grant awarded in October, we scheduled the event for February 20 and continued planning over the coming months.

Meanwhile, Better Together worked on a number of other ways to bring interfaith understanding and harmony to the Loras community during World Interfaith Harmony Week. These included a poster campaign to dispel religious stereotypes, a Skype conversation with an alumnus abroad on his interfaith experiences in Mozambique, a presentation given by a Syrian Muslim on her experience both in Syria and moving to a different culture, and a campaign to promote “Love over Fear” in the face of differences among people.

The remainder of this document will elaborate on each of these events, including the culmination in the *River Crossing* conference on February 20. Supplementary documents include testimonials from student participants in these events, a testimonial from Alan Garfield, professor at the University of Dubuque, a testimonial from Becca Hartman-Pickerill, Stewardship Manager at Interfaith Youth Core, YouTube videos of a couple of the events, photos demonstrating the conference and poster campaign, and links to news articles about our events.

Better Together Events, February 1-7:

WIHW Poster Campaign, all week long, and beyond

The poster campaign was a week-long effort to promote interfaith solidarity and dispel religious stereotypes. As a primary goal of the campaign, representing diverse religious or non-religious perspectives in a personal, human light was essential to communicating a message of tolerance and appreciative knowledge of difference. Students, staff, and faculty were featured on posters placed throughout the main campus building (and in one collective location next to a large WIHW banner). Each poster featured the phrase “I am [religious perspective]... and I [statement of support for interfaith or dispelling of stereotype]” with that individual’s picture. Loras is a small campus, and featuring people on the posters that passersby would recognize or even know personally was a way to “bring the message home” that there is a person behind every identity label, stereotypes are harmful and misleading, and interfaith engagement and relationships are key to seeing others in a personal, human lens. Two students took the lead in designing and collecting statements for the posters, and this year, fifteen people’s images and statements were featured. These images have been submitted separately as part of the event report, and here is a photo showing some of them displayed during WIHW:



The posters were also hung at the River Crossing Interfaith Conference to help create an atmosphere for the event and allowing for extended exposure of the message. The campaign was so effective that it attracted the attention of college administration and a permanent display of the posters is in the process of development.

Love Over Fear, February 1 – February 5, 2016

Love Over Fear was a campaign with a goal to spread the interfaith message of love for each other, instead of hatred or fear towards difference. The campaign had two components. The first, was a pledge to choose love. In order to get people to sign the pledge, student volunteers sat outside the college cafeteria and asked individuals passing by if they would want to sign the pledge. After the campaign was over around a hundred signatures were collected. For the second part of the campaign, students handed out buttons that read "I Choose Love over Fear." Two-hundred of these buttons were made and distributed around campus, and people wore them on their clothes, their backpacks and on other accessories. Here is a photo taken midweek showing the signatures of Loras community members from to choose love over fear:



Kevin O'Brien: Peace Corps and Global Service, Wednesday February 3, 2016

Kevin O'Brien is a Loras alumnus from 2012 who is now serving with the Peace Corps in Mozambique. The event was planned by the Loras College Center for Experiential Learning and the interfaith group Better Together. The objective of the event was to hear Kevin's experience both in his service site as well as his life as a Christian in northern Mozambique, in an area populated by a Muslim majority. Nine people participated in this event, and Kevin answered questions from both staff and students. In addition to the Skype conference, refreshments were served to make the activity more informal and conversational. Here is a photo taken from the event:



ReligiosiTEA, Thursday February 4, 2016.

At ReligiosiTEA attendants discuss an interfaith topic while drinking tea (hence the name) and sharing in community. The goal of the event is to raise awareness of interfaith issues going on in the world, while providing a safe environment in which people can share their stories and learn from others. For World Interfaith Harmony Week, Better Together's officer Sara Alfayoumi shared her story of peaceful resistance in the beginning of Syria's civil war. The program started by watching a short documentary made by Loras College students about Sara's life in the past few years (this YouTube video has been submitted as part of the report). Then she proceeded to answer some questions about her experience. She emphasized her interactions with interfaith relationships at Syria, and explained the change in her perception of interfaith work throughout the years, culminating in her willingness to share her story as a Muslim in a community made up of a Christian majority.

Around twenty people participated in this event. Attendants were Loras College students, faculty and staff, as well as two community members who came to be a part of the discussion. The following photo shows Sara (right) with friend and Better Together president Samantha Eckrich.



RIVERCROSSING

Storytelling & Interfaith Leadership Conference



River Crossing: Storytelling and Interfaith Leadership Conference, February 20th, 2016

This conference was the culmination of our celebration of World Interfaith Harmony Week at Loras College, although for logistical reasons it was held two weeks later. The event planning and implementation were led by faculty, staff, and students from Loras College (including support from Better Together), in coordination with faculty and staff from the University of Dubuque and Clarke University (both in Dubuque), and with staff from IFYC. The 58 participants included students, faculty, and staff, at Loras College, University of Dubuque, Clarke University, St. Ambrose University (Davenport, Iowa), St. Mary's University (Winona, Minnesota), and Marquette University (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), along with several participants involved in interfaith work outside of academia.

The conference was supported financially in part by a \$3000 grant from Interfaith Youth Core, awarded on the strength of our goals and activities for the conference. As stated in our grant application, the goals were as follows:

“The primary goals for students and other participants are that they will:

- Develop skills in telling their own stories regarding faith, and learn how storytelling is important in their lives and in their development of strong interfaith relationships.
- Build competency in listening and acceptance of people with different religious orientations.
- Network and build on or begin forming relationships through dialog and action (including a service project).
- Be prepared to bring interfaith awareness and leadership back to their schools.

Goals for the community include:

- Forming a strong network of area campuses engaged in interfaith leadership.
- Building on the already rich interfaith activity in the wider Dubuque community, including Children of Abraham, whose leadership and participants are from diverse religious orientations and professions, but could benefit from greater student involvement from local schools.
- Holding the event as a celebration of World Interfaith Harmony Week, which Loras Better Together began celebrating last year with a poster campaign to dispel common myths about different religious orientations.”

The activities we used to achieve these goals are outlined in the following schedule:

8:30-9:00am - Registration, light breakfast
9:00-10:30am - Introductions/Opening Keynote
10:30-11:15am - Small group discussions & personal reflection
11:15-11:35am - Large group discussion
11:45 -12:30pm - Relationship Building - Lunch
12:35-2:20pm - Workshop: Storytelling & Active Listening- led by Interfaith Youth Core
2:30-3:30pm - Service Project
3:45-4:30pm - Connecting with community partnerships, panel discussion
4:30-5:20pm - School group visioning
5:30-6:30pm - Dinner and closing talk

Activities including small group discussions, a relationship building lunch with time for serious one-to-one conversations, and a service project consisting of working together to help bring food to those in need, allowed participants to learn from one another and share in a common purpose across differences of faith. The opening keynote speech by Anna Speltz, a recent Loras alumna who played a large role in building student interfaith work at Loras, helped to set the tone for the day and serve as a model of student leadership. The workshop facilitated by IFYC helped prepare participants to bring out their story. For the last activity before the closing dinner, participants were able to discuss with others from their school ways in which they can bring interfaith leadership to their schools and communities.

We put great focus on relationship building, storytelling, and listening, because of our belief that through building relationships and dialogue people come to understand, respect, and learn from each other's differences and similarities. The submitted testimonials from Alan Garfield of the University of Dubuque, Becca Hartman-Pickerill of Interfaith Youth Core, and student participants from St. Mary's University and Loras College describe how they saw the conference impacting themselves and other participants.