

different for this position. An outsider, so to speak. I have learned a lot. I think people are surprised by how open a place like this can be. I am not Lutheran, and I'm not really even sure how I feel about religion. People think they will be judged. People are surprised to hear that we're a neighbor in the community that will love you regardless of who you are."


From July to October, on Thursdays Trinity hosts the HEAL Farmers' Market from 5 to 7 pm, where people can buy fresh produce using SNAP vouchers.

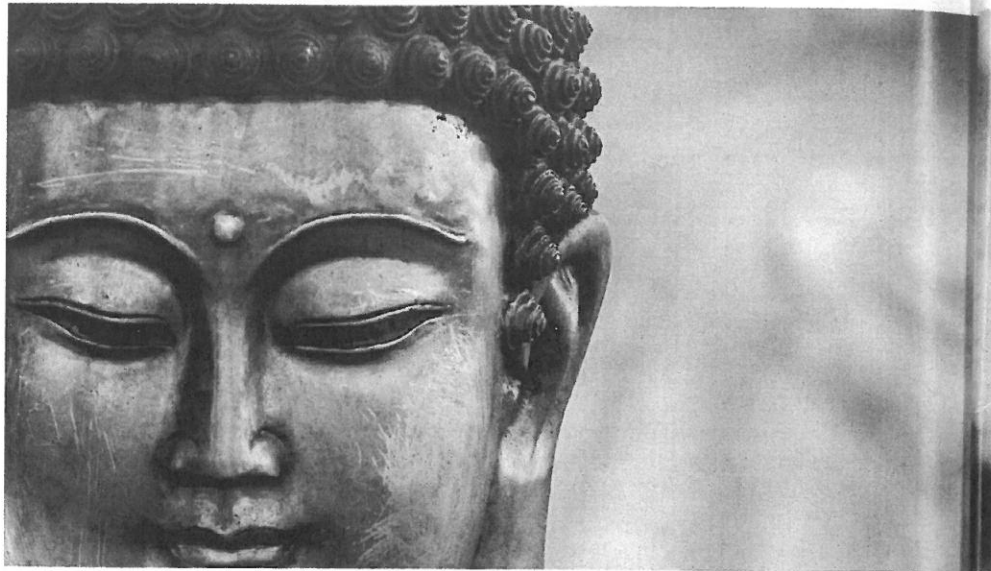
"At some churches, there are prerequisites for receiving help. A potential recipient has to show contrition for perceived misdeeds and demonstrate that they are mending their errant ways. They also have to become members," said Erdos. "We made a decision a long time ago. Everybody makes bad decisions. I make bad decisions on a daily basis.

"The starting point isn't to say, 'You should go to church and clean up your life and then we'll have a conversation,' When Jesus fed 5000 people in the Gospels, I'm going to guess that there was a whole bunch of sinning going on on that hillside. The question wasn't about, 'Everybody line up and tell me about your family structure before you can receive a fish and a loaf.'"

The church recently organized a get-together called A Night with Neighbors at Skyline Tower. And Schaefer said she is working to set up a regular God on Tap at a local brewery.

The church has also begun offering A View from Here, a talk about local issues that takes place at the top of the church's tower.

"At Trinity, a relationship with God is not about earning a place in heaven, it is about becoming a more authentic human being. That means being nice to your neighbor, being concerned about people whose lives are falling apart and being nice to the person who lives with you in your house," said Erdos. 



A CITY OF FAITH

APRIL IS DIVERSITY AWARENESS MONTH

In 1852, early congregants christened Fort Wayne as the City of Churches, as the number of steeples still dotting the cityscape proves. However, much has changed. The view from atop no longer captures the breadth of faith in Fort Wayne, nor does it describe what happens when people of different faiths come together.

Interfaith collaboration has gained significant momentum in recent years due to the community's changing demographics. While ethnic diversity continues to enrich Fort Wayne, an infrastructure welcoming newcomers, especially immigrants, is still lacking. Additionally, with one in three families struggling to make ends meet in Allen County, the number of those seeking additional support is swelling. How should the community respond? It responds through intentional relationship building, the gathering of resources and creative change-making.

Every May, different Christian denominations celebrate National Day of Prayer and an Interfaith Thanksgiving is held every November bringing Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Mennonites, Baha'is, Hindus, and Unitarian Universalists together.

The Welcoming Diversity Awards were established with a group of collaborating partners, including: Churches, non-profits, the City of Fort Wayne, Purdue University Fort Wayne, and Fort Wayne Community Schools.

The organizational investment in this important work is also increasing. Three years ago, the YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne hired Rev. Dr. Timothy Hallman as its first Christian Emphasis Director; his



primary responsibility is to strengthen the 'C' back in the YMCA. "By working across sectors, we peel away the layer of misunderstanding of those who are different than ourselves and discover our common core values," said Hallman.

As the Executive Pastor of Associated Churches of Fort Wayne and Allen County for the past 10 years, Rev. Roger Reece is a convener of interfaith collaboration. While this Christian association of 140 churches spans a wide range of theological perspectives, Reece's commitment to interfaith partnerships makes it possible for Associated Churches to serve the community.

For example, when two school systems reached out to Reece for help with challenged students, he found a solution by creating the Rising Stars program, which fosters non-proselytizing partnerships between elementary schools and churches.

Wellspring Interfaith Social Services has served Fort Wayne for over 50 years. According to Executive Director Jennifer Kasmier, it began in 1968 as an interfaith partnership between Trinity English Lutheran Church and First Presbyterian. Today, Wellspring remains true to its interfaith foundation by having Lutheran, Methodist, Catholic, Episcopalians Churches, Jewish synagogues, a

Mennonite Church, and Friends working together. "There needs to be a more collective voice involving a wide array of organizations. When faith groups recognize the power of their voices, great things can happen," said Kasmier.

Javier Mondragon, Many Nations Church lead pastor, is always looking for creative ways to collaborate with other organizations for the betterment of the Mount Vernon Park neighborhood. He has invested significant amounts of time, money and love into the neighborhood by fixing-up properties, creating parks and creating community gatherings. Mondragon's commitment to Mount Vernon Park has been transformative; so much so that other neighborhood churches are replicating his economic development model.

The Fort Wayne interfaith community also boasts a representative on the international front, University of Saint Francis Professor of Psychology, Dr. Carl Jylland-Halverson's work with victims of trauma has engaged him around the globe. Jylland-Halverson has long been interested in learning about different faiths, and since 2014 has served as an Ambassador to the Parliament of the World's Religions, an international organization seeking harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities.

"We're a changing community. We have become more sensitive to language and cultural nuances when working with different ethnic groups," said Reece.

Thinking of someone as a friend and neighbor versus a label is something interfaith advocates like Hallman, Reece, Kasmier, Mondragon and Jylland-Halverson champion.

"Pretending we think the same or believe the same God. Different is okay. We can play well, work well, and be well with others, and still hold our values close to heart," said Jylland-Halverson.

As faith communities join hands, barriers continue to be broken resulting in more good accomplishments for Fort Wayne. "As places of worship open their doors, there's nothing that can't be accomplished," said Kasmier.

Mondragon feels community issues should be addressed by faith and action coming together, "It's sad we have so many churches and still so many unresolved issues," he said.

For Mondragon and others, faith is more than buildings, it is for making substantive changes where needed the most.

Faith is a verb and building intentional relationships across different sectors is critical for the vitality of the community. *for*

—Melissa Rinehart