

## HIGHLIGHTS OF TWENTY YEARS OF THE INTERFAITH COALITION OF WASHINGTON COUNTY 2002-2021

**Early Years:** Do you remember where you were, and what you were doing on the morning of September 11, 2001? That was the day of the airline hijackings and suicide attacks against New York City and Washington, DC. The twin towers of the World Trade Center were destroyed, the Pentagon was hit, and a plane went down in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. There was great loss of life – the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil in US history. It triggered an enormous effort by our country to combat terrorism. We were all traumatized that day. It certainly changed the trajectory of American focus toward fear and anxiety of those who would want to destroy our nation.

Just a year earlier, Rev. Don Stevenson, pastor of Christ's Reformed Church in Hagerstown, had been installed as the President of the Washington County Council of Churches. One of his key objectives was to encourage the Council to "begin listening to other religions that had an emerging presence in our community." He had instituted some early morning public meetings in the old Argosy Room of the Tortuga Hotel for people to learn about other religions.

When the tragedy of 9-11 took place, he and other clergy of the Council of Churches were stunned and lock-jawed by what happened. Suddenly they knew they were ignorant about the Abrahamic religion of Islam, from which Christianity also descends. He asked, "*What do we, the churches of WCCC, do to speak to the pain and pathos of a devastating occurrence?*" So was planted the seed of an idea for the Interfaith Coalition.

Don gathered a group of church people that fall and winter who shared his concern. He made contacts with Dr. Shahab Siddiqui, Lu Yumlu, and Imam Burmi of the Islamic Society of Western Maryland, as well as Rabbi Janice Garfunkel of Congregation B’Nai Abraham. In February of 2002 Don proposed to the Council “*an Interfaith Coalition Committee that would seek out and develop an on-going connection with other non-Christian religions.*” It was approved unanimously. Under his leadership, a very active group of 13 clergy and lay leaders began meeting regularly to speak to this very important concern.

The very first public gathering was held on April 11, 2002 in the Kepler Theater at Hagerstown Community College. The evening program was a panel discussion on “Faith and Tolerance” with a panel of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian leaders, followed by questions and answers. Three hundred-fifty people attended. It was a watershed event in our local community. While there was growing suspicion in our nation against people of Islamic faith, it was gratifying to see that efforts were afoot in our community in another direction -- to reach out and find common ground with our newer neighbors.

I was a witness to this groundswell of interfaith consciousness. Having recently come to Hagerstown to serve as pastor of the downtown Church of the Brethren. I too was moved by this challenge. Having grown up in an historic peace church, I was always looking for ways to be a peacebuilder. And I’d always been interested in connecting with the various leaders of the Christian community -- Catholic and Protestant. And I had some head-knowledge of other religious traditions. But this baptism in

interfaith dialogue was new to me. I had some growing to do. So began my participation in this new initiative as a member of the planning team.

Early on, the newly formed Interfaith Coalition developed a mission statement. It read, very succinctly: *“We seek to bring together members of the Jewish, Islamic, Christian, and other traditions for the purpose of strengthening community and building up tolerance and civility among all God’s people. We declare through public witness our desire to build relationships across religious and cultural lines and to do so by learning about each other, removing misinformation about each other, and increasing understanding, respect and tolerance.”*

As our founder Don Stevenson was retiring from full-time pastoral work, the coordination of the group was passed on to me. The coalition met together monthly. We planned three kinds of events: first, educational forums on a variety of interfaith subjects; second, public vigils at various locations in Hagerstown to raise awareness; and third, informal gatherings to get to know one another on a person-to-person basis. There was much energy and creativity that went into developing interfaith dialogue in Washington County. And this has continued over the 20 years.

[Open Powerpoint]

**Summary of Programs with Photos:** (Over 200 events planned)

### **Educational Forums, Retreats**

1. Forum on “Separation of Religion and State” at Hagerstown YMCA, April 2006, speaker was John Langan, from Georgetown University.



2. HARC Interfaith Meeting – Dr. Faheem Younus, a physician and member of Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Baltimore, “An Open and Frank Conversation on Islam,” at Christ’s Reformed Church, 2014.



3. Forum on “Interfaith Dialogue: The Next Generation” at Christ’s Reformed, 2016, with student leadership from Smithsburg High School.



4. Small Group meetings that evening.



5. Maheen Hag, pictured at the Hagerstown Cultural Trail. Maheen is now a law school student at Georgetown University.



6. Cowboy Hay, sharing tales, music and human from the 1800's as new spiritual paths came to be know; at WC Library 2014, Baha'i' tradition.



7. HARC Interfaith meeting on “Being Muslim in Washington County” with members of the Islamic Society of Western Maryland, at St. John’s Episcopal Church, 2018. Hamza Siddiqui, HCC student.



8. Seeker's Circle Interfaith Book Club, started in 2015 with leadership from Gwen Skrabak and Kathleen O'Connell, at downtown library.



9. All day Interfaith Retreat at Shepherd's Spring Retreat Center started in 2008.



10. Forums on Thomas Kennedy, who championed the cause of full participation of Jews in Maryland. The park on Baltimore Street across from Congregation B’Nai Abraham. Rabbi Ari Plost.



11. Partnered with the Washington County Boy Scouts in providing a learning experience for American Cultures merit badge at a camporee at Shepherd’s Spring, 2017. Taught classes on Baha’i, Buddhism, Humanism, Islam, and Judaism. At least 50-60 scouts.



## Public Witness, Shared Religious Experiences

12. International Peace Day celebration with vigil and candlelight prayer walk through downtown Hagerstown, 2009.



13. International Peace Day "Song and Prayer Fest," at Dunker Church on Antietam Battlefield, 2012. 14 religious communities shared a song, a brief statement of peace, and a prayer for peace.



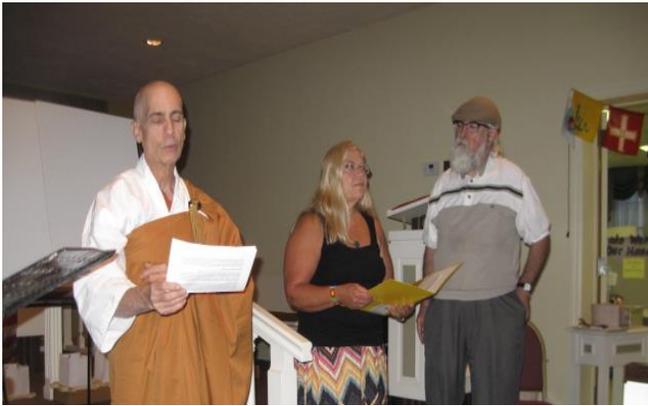
14. "Love, Not Hate" Interfaith Prayer Service at Dunker Church as an alternative to the Ku Klux Klan relay on Antietam Battlefield, 2006.



15. International Peace Day event, a "Lights of Peace" service at Haven Lutheran Church, followed by a procession to Haven Cemetery with lighted candles placed in Chinese lanterns set afloat on the lake. 2013.



16. International Peace Day event at St. John's Lutheran church, 2014.



17. Interfaith Prayer Vigil on the square in downtown Hagerstown, 2016.



- 18. "A Statement of Peace" developed by HARC 2016 calling upon all people of faith to encourage language that promotes respect and civility and discourage language that demeans other's beliefs or incites violence." Initiated by Lu Yumlu, Islamic Society of West MD.
- 19. Statement signed by over 500 citizens in our community.

**A STATEMENT OF PEACE  
FOR THE FAITH COMMUNITIES OF  
WASHINGTON COUNTY, MD**

The human family is an organic oneness that is acknowledged in all the major religions of the world. And that oneness is strongly evidenced in the sacred books of all the major religions, i.e., that love of God and love of others are paramount. Such original unity needs strong emphasis today, for it is this love in action that cuts across the differences of race, ethnicity, creed, color, or nationality.

As fear and violence have invaded the human family, pitting brothers and sisters against one another, and as war has become the final option for many and peace of secondary emphasis, we clergy and laity of the faith communities of Washington County, Maryland openly and boldly declare that ...

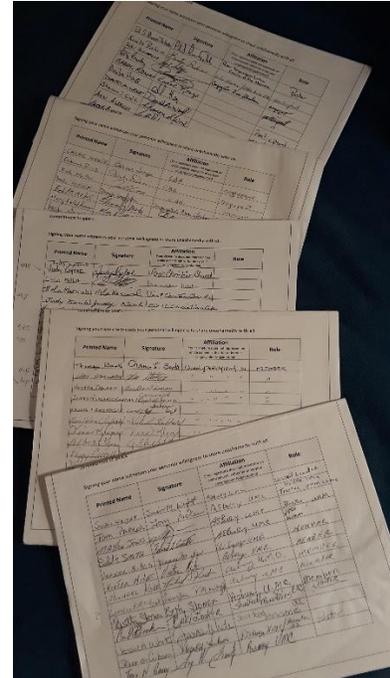
- > We are all of one human family;
- > We believe that the differences of race, ethnicity, creed, color, and nationality are a part of our oneness, not in opposition to it;
- > We believe that all religious and cultural differences are to be respected rather than contested;
- > We believe that the definition of neighbor includes anyone anywhere, not merely an amicable friend next door.

And because of these beliefs, we now call upon all people in our religious communities to

- > cease forwarding any words, actions, and religious declarations that degrade and demonize another religion;
- > halt all religious rhetoric that attacks another's beliefs and/or faith practices; and
- > seek to understand and love one another.

Signing your name witnesses your personal willingness to share unashamedly with all.

Name	Congregation/organization, if applicable	Date
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- 20. Promoted "We're Glad you're our Neighbor" signs with HARC, 2016. Three languages: Spanish, English, and Arabic.



- 21. Buddhist Peace delegation from Massachusetts, 2017, peace walk from the synagogue on Baltimore Street two miles to the mosque on Day Road, organized by Temm Bikle.



- 22. Buddhist Peace walk 2018 from Antietam Dunker Church to Tolson's Chapel in Sharpsburg.



23. Prayer Service with Congregation B’Nai Abraham in 2018 after shooting in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, with Rabbi Ari Plost. (Also at Islamic Society of Western MD after shooting in a mosque in New Zealand.)



**Sharing Fellowship, Community Building**

24. Sharing together over a meal, in homes, picnics, etc.



25. Interfaith Habit for Humanity house-build in Boonsboro, 2004.



26. Japanese Noodle Float – Temm Bikle 2018-2021



27. Visit to Sufi Farm of Peace near Warfordsburg, PA for an Iftar Dinner during Ramadan, 2019.



28. International Peace Day Celebration, 2021 (during COVID), vehicles decorated with peace theme. Lu Clingenpeel, at St. Mark's Episcopal Church parking lot. (Global Feast for Peace)



29. Creating a Flower Mandela with Rev. Margaret Brack from St. Thomas Episcopal church.



**Interfaith Planning Team**

30. Planning Team 2016 – Lu Yumlu (Treasurer), San Rogers, Gwen Srkabak, Ed Poling, Mahmet Cicek, and Ed Branthaver.



31. Planning Team 2017 -- Julie Ferron, Ed Branthaver, Lu Yumlu, Zunny Miller-Matema, Faruk Post, Paula Myers, Tom Thorsen, Carol Haggerty, David Baker, & Margaret Becker.



32. Mission Statement of Interfaith Coalition.

*We exist to bring people of different beliefs together to promote peace, respect, and compassion in our local community. Through dialogue and public presence, we welcome each person's unique spiritual perspective, strive to learn more about each other, and seek to honor the diversity of our various traditions."*

As you can see, over this 20-year period, the Interfaith Coalition grew from a three-way dialogue with Judaism, Islam, & Christianity to include Buddhists, Baha'i, Hindu, and Secular Humanists. And it has required a broadened mission statement which was revised in 2011. It states, "*We exist to bring people of different beliefs together to promote peace, respect, and compassion in our local community. Through dialogue and public*

*presence, we welcome each person's unique spiritual perspective, strive to learn more about each other, and seek to honor the diversity of our various tradition."* These twenty years, since 9-11, have provided rich opportunities for building relationships with the variety of religious and humanistic groups in Washington County.

**Gratitude:** I must express a deep sense of gratitude for those who have provided leadership for this Interfaith initiative. It's has been a wonderful and creative group of volunteers who have given freely of their time and energy to carry out over 200 programs and events. I must acknowledge specifically those who have also served as Coordinators over these 20 years – Gwen Skrabak, a local college religion professor; Sandy Boyer, pastor of Unity of Hagerstown; Valerie Wills, retired Unitarian Universalist minister; and Paula Myers, active Baha'i member. And our faithful Treasurer, Lu Yumlu. My deep thanks to them and to all who have been a part of the planning team over these 20 years.

Has it made a difference in our community? Have our educational forums, our public events, our retreats, our picnics, and prayer events helped make Washington County a safer and more welcoming place for people of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds? Have we grown in our appreciation of our neighbors who practice their religious faith differently? I sincerely hope so. Unfortunately, the forces of bigotry, of white supremacy, of racial and religious superiority are still very much alive in our county and in neighboring communities. There is still much work to do and we'll need to continue to support all our religious communities in Washington County.

As we begin to emerge from two years of a COVID winter, and we move toward a closer relationship to the Hagerstown Area Religious Council, the challenge is for a new generation of religious leaders to step up and help continue fostering common ground with our neighbors of many religious traditions in Washington County. We need young voices to address the ongoing challenges of our day.

I'd like to close with a thought from John V. Taylor, who lived and worked in a religious culture much different than his own. This statement has guided me over the years. He said:

*"Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on people's dreams. More seriously still we may forget that God was there before our arrival."*