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Michael Kelly: Interfaith capital?



Michael Kelly

Heavenly happenings along Hell Creek bring hope to the planned site of a church, a temple and a mosque.

Omaha's unique tri-faith campus plan is taking early steps toward reality at the former Ironwood Golf Course. Ironically enough, the creek running through the site carries that devilishly delicious name.

And the project, in the works the past few years, is gaining wider attention.

David Liepert, an author and a Muslim from Canada, asks admiringly whether “Omaha, Neb., of all places” is “the interfaith capital of the world.”

Liepert spoke last month at Creighton University and met with members of the Tri-Faith Initiative. He later interviewed them for his online radio program, “The Optimistic Muslim.”

“People who live in Omaha, Neb.,” Liepert told listeners, “are up to something I don't think has ever been tried anywhere in the world.”

The tri-faith campus, if it happens, would take up the southwest corner of the old golf course, east of 132nd Street between Pacific Street and West Center Road.

Much money needs to be raised by each faith group for the multimillion-dollar project. But architects are being selected and fundraisers are being hired.

Typical of the goodwill among planners is that the local American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture has engaged Vic Gutman, who is Jewish, to help raise funds to build a mosque.

The focus isn't just on the campus, which would include a shared fourth building where people of different religions could strengthen their own faith while learning about and gaining more respect for the faith of others.

As they have for the past several years, interfaith gatherings continue. More than 250 people are expected for a Passover Seder this week at St. Martha's Episcopal Church, an event hosted by the Rev. Ernesto Medina. The ceremony will be led by Rabbi Aryeh Azriel of Temple Israel.

There will be 15 readers — five Jewish, five Christian, five Muslim. About 60 young people plan to attend.

Meanwhile, an event last week not specifically tied to the Tri-Faith Initiative underscored efforts in Omaha to bring people together. At the Rose Blumkin Home, the Anti-Defamation League honored a Muslim woman who, as a child, helped hide Jewish children and their families from the Nazis.

The ADL's "Courage to Care" award went to Deshira KumiVesili, who was 10 when she helped hide the Jews in Albania. The award was accepted by her granddaughter, Olta Gjoca, a graduate of Ralston High and Creighton University.

"Olta, looking into your eyes, I am immediately overtaken with emotion by the thought of lives saved and lives not saved," said Alan Potash, ADL's local executive director. "Your grandmother and your family risked their own lives to do something they didn't have to do."

Omaha might not be the interfaith capital of the world, but something is afoot here that could be a global model. Liepert, in his online interview, chuckled as he asked the Omahans, "What in the world are you up to?"

Bob Freeman, an attorney who is Jewish and chairman of the Tri-Faith board, said people talk to each other in Omaha in a spirit of neighbors. New ideas that help the common good, he said, find support from the business community and others.

The Rev. Tim Anderson, canon of the Episcopal church, said members of the three religions are strong in their own faiths. Each group agreed that the point of a tri-faith campus would not be to proselytize others and try to get them to switch religions.

Two years ago, more than a thousand people attended a stirring tri-faith dinner at Qwest Center Omaha at which each faith group conducted a worship service in the presence of the others.

Dr. Syed Mohiuddin, a Muslim who is chairman of the department of medicine at Creighton, said in the online interview that not everyone in the three faiths supports the idea of a tri-faith campus. But those who are opposed have indicated they won't try to stop it.

The three parties to the tri-faith plan are Temple Israel, the Islamic Center and the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska. Those three surely don't represent all local Jews, Muslims and Christians. But it has been amazing to watch the effort advance.

The Omaha tri-faith plan is also being watched by the "pluralism project" at Harvard University. A graduate student from the Andover Seminary in Massachusetts is writing a case study about Omaha.

Freeman emphasized that the tri-faith campus is still mostly a plan. "We don't have anything to go out and brag about yet."

Liepert called the plan brilliant in its simplicity. "It's just so mind-boggling that in the heartland of America — Omaha, Neb. — is the home of such an incredible tri-faith initiative."

Plans are to convert the former golf course, for years called Highland Country Club, into the Sterling Ridge development — residences, stores, offices and a hotel, besides the tri-faith campus. The latter is what could bring international attention.

If Omaha pulls off this audacious project, it would make the city proud for generations. The children and grandchildren of today's participants would know and respect people of different faiths.

A theme of the Tri-Faith Initiative, said its executive director, Nancy Kirk, is figuratively building bridges. If the tri-faith campus gets built, Hell Creek some day could be literally spanned by a blessed structure — by the name of Heaven's Bridge.

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