The Dynamics of Interfaith

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Special thanks to my primary advisor Dr. James F. McGrath and my second reader Dr. Brent Hege
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Foreword

I would like to extend a word of thanks to my primary advisor, Dr. McGrath, who helped from the beginning to the end of this research. He encouraged me to continue throughout the entire process. Then, Dr. Hege inspired my work by teaching a course on religious pluralism that introduced me to the larger interfaith debate at hand. I am also grateful that he became a second reader to finalize the research. In addition, I am very thankful to have had the opportunity to work with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation. This organization and its board members helped shape my passion for interfaith work, and they offered insights that will affect how I pursue dialogue and understanding in the future. The board members that participated in this study include: Charlie Wiles, Dr. Anita Joshi, Ashley Wagner, Reverend Brian Shivers, Dr. Pierre Atlas, Reverend Bruce Garrison, Dr. Vimal Patel, Jim Cotterill, Muzaffar Ahmad, Reverend Anastassia Zinke, Yanev Shmukler, Ala’a Wafa, Uzma Kazmi, Judge Shaheed, Imam Mikal Saahir, Chris Melton, Betty Brandt, Don Knebel, Tony Wiederhold, Aarti Shah, Daniel Meyers, Canon Bruce Gray, Maria Pimental-Gannon, and Father Rick Ginther. All of their interview responses are transcribed in the appendices, and they reflect each participant’s natural way of speaking. Unfortunately, some of the dialogue could not be correctly deciphered, but the meaning remains nonetheless. These individuals are so enthusiastic about the mission behind interfaith, and they clearly portrayed that in their answers. I am very grateful that they were willing to share their stories with me. Last, I want to give a shout out to Sarah Frischmeyer, Reilly Voit, Rainie Grant, Megan Fraider, Alli Koehler, and Julie Vaughan for helping me transcribe some of the interviews. Their help made meticulous work much easier. I cannot say thank you enough.
Abstract

Today, there is an ongoing debate within and between different faiths regarding the correct way to interact with religious diversity. For example, exclusive language is found in several religions, which states that individuals can only experience the Ultimate through a specific faith practice. This belief directly challenges the relevance of interreligious dialogue, but a spectrum exists amongst adherents of different faith communities in how they understand religious diversity amid absolute truth claims in their own tradition. The goal of this research is to illustrate this debate so readers have a foundation on which to build. Then, the Center for Interfaith Cooperation (CIC), which is a local Indianapolis organization that seeks peaceful dialogue in an interfaith setting will act as the case study and offer real-world practice to the conversation. The board members within the CIC will be interviewed to get their perspective on why interfaith work is so important. Their input will add to the conversation not to provide an inerrant approach to religious diversity or reach a conclusive answer to the debate, but to offer personal stories and rationales behind their pursuit of interfaith relationships.

Through this project, people will be able to recognize the importance of interreligious dialogue and gain some insight on how dedicated members of the CIC have reconciled interfaith to their own faith. Hate crimes against religious communities is a real, current threat, so conversations that unite rather than divide are extremely important.
Introduction
My research seeks to evaluate how interfaith is realized within the Indianapolis community, and I hypothesize that interfaith is valuable and can be considered so within traditional, religious doctrine. To conduct my research, I will use interviews and focus on a specific case study: the Center for Interfaith Cooperation. They are a local interfaith group that promotes peaceful dialogue amongst different faith groups in Indianapolis, Indiana. I want to collect the CIC board members’ stories and reasons for participating in interfaith work. Then, I will analyze noticeable trends and compare their answers to scholarship on religious diversity in a Christian context. Through this study, we will gain insight into the value of interfaith dialogue and understand why CIC board members are attracted to it. Then, we will attempt to contextualize their responses within Christian scholarship that seeks to reconcile a religiously diverse world to particular religious commands, such as the Great Commission.

This research is especially critical because of the prevalence of hate crimes against religious groups in the news. In the fall, the synagogue massacre against the Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh, which killed eleven people, gained lots of attention (Robertson et al.), and recently, there have been mass atrocities against the Christian and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka and New Zealand, respectively. Then, locally at the end of last July in Carmel, Indiana, anti-Semitic graffiti was found on a synagogue (Mack), which disturbed and frightened community members. According to the Uniform Crime Reporting Program’s annual Hate Crime Report in 2017, 7,175 hate crimes were reported, which had increased from the 6,121 hate crimes reported in 2016 (“2017 Hate Crime Statistics Released”). Of those hate crimes, the FBI found that 20.6 percent of those were committed against religious groups (see Appendix A) (“2017 Hate Crime Statistics Released”). People deserve to practice their religion freely without
the fear of any violent measures or harassment being directed towards them so that is why I am interested in exploring interfaith work as a viable solution.

The Center for Interfaith Cooperation has worked to prevent these tragedies and acted as a united voice to combat this hate. For example, after the recent mass shooting at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, the CIC released the following statement:

We at the Center for Interfaith Cooperation are grief-stricken by the murder of at least 50 Muslims during Friday prayers at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. “We send our deepest condolences to victims, their families, and the Muslim community in Christchurch and throughout the world,” said CIC Executive Director Charlie Wiles (“CIC statement on the killing at mosques in Christchurch, NZ”).

Aside from sending their condolences, the CIC has taken action, too. They participated in a vigil at Butler University that was held in memory of the victims. They have hosted and advertised different ways that Indianapolis community members can meet Muslims along with other religious individuals to start de-othering these people and begin forming relationships. Also, several board members have worked tirelessly in advocating for a hate crimes law for the state of Indiana. At the beginning of this year, there were codes against hate crimes on the basis of religion, gender identification, sexual orientation, race, etc., but there was not a law that criminalized any hateful actions. Indiana was one of five states in the United States without a hate crimes law. There has been more progress in rectifying this situation; however, crucial language that protects groups on the basis of sex, gender identity, etc. was deemed irrelevant and left out of the bill (Lee). Therefore, there is still work to be done.

Several board members within the CIC have voiced their concern during this legislative journey, and they recognize the importance of protecting humanity regardless of identity. For
example, Dr. Pierre Atlas, who represents a Jewish perspective, states that “if you are attacked because of your identity and that's the reason you are attacked, it needs to be included [in law].” Dr. Anita Joshi, who offers a Hindu outlook, agrees by saying, “I’m optimistic that we can finally see this pass in Indiana and right this great injustice because really hate doesn't have a place. It is not something that we should allow to be a part of our society.” Then, Uzma Kazmi, who is a practicing Muslim, says, “I pray as a community, not just a Muslim, that we can pass the bias crimes bill...Everybody is created equal. Everyone bleeds red.” These board members, along with others, do not send just thoughts and prayers, but they act when they notice fellow human beings in distress.

For my case study, I have decided to further explore what is pushing these CIC board members towards interfaith dialogue. To start, the CIC is a non-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of peaceful dialogue amongst an interfaith community. It is located at the InterChurch Center in Indianapolis, and it consists of thirty-eight board members representing the diversity of faiths within the city. Some of the faiths that the members represent include Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Paganism, Sikhism, Islam, and Judaism. Together this group has formed around the vision of creating “a community that pursues peace through interfaith understanding and cooperation,” and their mission further reflects this attention to building relationships (“Mission & Purpose”). Due to their support of interfaith dialogue, the CIC is an intentional community that attracts people willing to work together peacefully; therefore, I have chosen to study a group that already values interfaith so that I can further unpack their own histories regarding interfaith and situate their commentary within a larger scholarly debate.
First, this study will look at the debate surrounding interfaith dialogue using Christian scholarship. Then, I will state my research design, which focuses solely on recording oral histories, recognizing trends, and contextualizing responses. After discussing my plan, I will reveal the results of the research and conclude with a discussion that explains the implications for my research and shortcomings to be fulfilled in future studies.

*Understanding the balance between the particularity of Jesus and reality of religious pluralism: Five Models*

Theologians popularly theorize about Christianity’s position in relation to other religions. There are five schools of thought that are distinct from each other, but all of them come with strengths and weaknesses. This debate will most likely never find a winning argument, since it surrounds theology. The following summary of the debate only gives brief insight into the multiplicity of voices that surround this topic. However, to ground this research, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* by Paul F. Knitter offers a general understanding of four models, the Replacement Model, the Fulfillment Model, the Mutuality Model, and the Acceptance Model. Then, other scholars have critiqued some of these approaches and crafted their model that reconciles the particularity of Christianity to a pluralistic society. One of them is the fifth model that will be discussed in this research - the Hybridity Model. The Replacement Model presumes that Christianity is a superior religion, and the only form of interaction amongst different faiths should be in the form of conversion (*Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Milbank, and Newbigin). The Fulfillment Model encourages interreligious dialogue, but despite different religious practices, individuals are saved through Christ, even if they think they have achieved

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1 Material within this section was taught by Dr. Hege in a class titled Religious Pluralism at Butler University. Then, it informed a final paper for that class, as well.
salvation in their own tradition (*Introducing Theologies of Religions*). The Mutuality Model portrays interfaith dialogue as necessary, and it recognizes that participants typically connect on similar values during this conversation (Hick, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, and *One Earth Many Religions*). The Acceptance Model values interfaith relationships, too, but seeks to preserve religious traditions as different from one another (Cobb, Heim, and *Introducing Theologies of Religions*). Then, the Hybridity Model realizes the importance of interfaith dialogue and works to engage in the similarities and differences found in each practice (Fletcher and Suchocki). These models all offer suggested ways to remain steadfast in Christian beliefs while navigating an interfaith world, but there are numerous other ways. These approaches are malleable and can be reconfigured.

The Replacement Model

The Replacement Model is the first school of thought, and it encompasses both the concept of “total replacement” and “partial replacement.” Total Replacement articulates the idea that “Christianity is meant to replace all other religions” (*Introducing Theologies of Religions* 19). Therefore, “the balance between the universality and particularity of God’s relationship with humanity clearly comes down more heavily on the side of particularity. God’s love is universal, extending to all; but that love is realized through the particular and singular community of Jesus Christ” (19). Karl Barth is a famous Protestant thinker in this space, and his analysis concludes that “there really isn’t much for Christians to relate to in other religions: no revelation, no saving grace, because no Jesus; and, therefore, no possibilities of dialogue” (26). The idea of religious pluralism, which states “what is true for us may not be true for them,...is the sign of approaching death” (Newbigin 135). Differences must be preserved, which calls for the continued work of
conversion (Milbank 190). Moreover, partial replacement advocates are new evangelicals who recognize “that God reveals in other religions, they just...clearly declare that God does not save in other religions” (Introducing Theologies of Religions 36). These Evangelical Christians do not dismiss interfaith dialogue like the Total Replacement Model does but rather they perceive “dialogue [as]...a way ‘to take the other person seriously as a fellow human being’” (40). In this situation, “dialogue [is] a matter of trading information about each other, especially to correct false notions they have of each other,” but at some point, the conversation will be directed towards the differences within each ideology that may be hard to reconcile (40). Also, “the exchange between religions becomes…[one of] religious competition in which no one cajoles but in which Christians hold to their certitudes about Jesus” (54). In addition, partial replacement believers are not equipped through this model to reconcile encounters they have with others that contradict the Bible when the Bible is “their primary source of understanding” (56).

Furthermore, the reasoning behind total replacement is “harsh” (33), and “in some sense the sole efficacy or even superiority of Christianity are claims we can no longer make, or can make only with great discomfort” (Gilkey 37). It is “self-impoverishment to refuse to learn from these differing ways of being human, however alien some of them may appear at first” (Kaufman 4).

The Fulfillment Model

The Fulfillment Model is the second school of thought, and “they believe that other religions are of value, that God is to be found in them, that Christians need to dialogue with them and not just preach to them” (Introducing Theologies of Religions 22). Karl Rahner, a German Jesuit, presents a Fulfillment Model perspective through the term “anonymous Christians,” which means that “those people who are ‘graced’ in and through their own religions are also oriented
toward the Christian Church whether they realize it or not (73). In other words, “they are Christians without the name Christian,” so one can obtain salvation in another religion unlike the view of the Replacement Model (73). However, the Fulfillment Model is still centered on Jesus Christ, so any conversation with others “will always be essentially only a clarification, a deepening of what they already know in Jesus...The fulfillment perspective of Vatican II doesn’t work because it doesn’t allow for the level playing field that a two-way dialogue requires” (104). There is a patronizing attitude exhibited in this model because a Christian practicing this approach is not seriously considering the faith of the other person.

*The Mutuality Model*

The Mutuality Model is the third school of thought, and “for these Christians, dialogue with other religions is an imperative, an ethical imperative” (110). They also understand “relationship [to be] more important than plurality...[and it] presumes...a ‘rough parity’ among religions” (110). Within this model, there are three bridges that have been constructed and argued: the philosophical-historical bridge, the religious-mystical bridge, and the ethical-practical bridge. Under the philosophical-historical bridge, religions are explained to be “different awarenesses of the Eternal One[which] represent different culturally conditioned perceptions of the same infinite divine reality” (Hick 52). This perspective runs the risk of relativism, and it concludes that all religions worship an “Eternal One,” with which many would disagree (*Introducing Theologies of Religion, One Earth Many Religions*, and Heim). In addition, this bridge reveals that “every religious (or secular) understanding and way of life we might uncover is a *particular* one, that has grown up in a particular history makes particular claims, is accompanied by particular practices and injunctions...” (Kaufman 5). However, in the midst of these particulars, it is
important to claim the absolutes, too, otherwise it eliminates “the very heart of the religious as ultimate concern,” and there is no foundation for dialogue (Gilkey 44). Furthermore, rather than starting from human understanding, the religious-mystical bridge begins with the Divine and “[lifts] up what they consider to be evident to all religious persons” (Introducing Theologies of Religions 125). For instance, this bridge is formed by the idea that “no religious tradition has a monopoly on [salvation]...and that we should not water down the tenets of any authentic religion in order to reach religious concord” (Panikkar 92). The Divine is revealed in this diversity. This bridge also emphasizes that “God does not reveal theologies...Every theological system or idea is a response. It is finite, is mundane, is a human construct” (Smith 56). Last, the ethical-practical bridge sees “human and ecological suffering [as] both universal and immediate [so] it can serve all religious persons as common context and criterion for assessing religious truth claims” (One Earth Many Religions 127). In this context, human suffering comes in the form of “poverty, victimization, violence, patriarchy, etc.” to promote interreligious dialogue (Introducing Theologies of Religion 137). Therefore, it is this similar desire to seek justice that unites traditions; however, this bridge fails to address the fact that people have different concepts of justice, and justice, itself, is a western-centric term that is not promoted in many eastern religions (163).

The Acceptance Model

The fourth school of thought is the Acceptance Model, which promotes the distinct differences found in each faith and works to recognize those particulars through interfaith dialogue. In fact “to reduce otherness – that means the real diversity – of the religions to some kind of higher or final unity is to reduce the otherness of God to what we can know and possess. But that’s another
word for idolatry” (221). Theologians, such as George Lindbeck, see religions similarly to language - “religions are really different because they have different languages” (192). Another theologian, S. Mark Heim, argues the reverse which is that “religions have different languages because they are really different” (192). Heim further expands this idea by stating that the “recognition of an actual diversity of religious ends offers a sounder basis on which to overcome oppression of one faith by another and to explore the distinctive contribution religious traditions can make to the resolution of human conflict” (Heim 209). This model also considers the question of “what is religion?” because it is easy to qualify ideologies as such based on “a common essence” when in reality “there is no such thing as religion” (Cobb 83). This postmodern way of thinking can prevent interreligious dialogue instead of encourage it because it focuses so much on differences. With this approach, it is harder to find ground to connect.

*The Hybridity Model*

The Hybridity Model is the fifth and final school of thought. This model works to recognize the similarities and the differences within religions in order to promote interfaith dialogue. As a result, there is an emphasis on humanity similar to the ethical-practical bridge. The Hybridity Model focuses on “constructing religions as communities of internal diversity [because it] allows for the partial identification of overlapping identities where a variety of identity features hold the potential for making connections” (Fletcher 91). Therefore, people of different religions can first connect on other parts of their identity, and then once a friendship is established, they can engage in conversations about religious differences because “friendship depends upon an honesty of relationship, even, and perhaps especially, in one’s differences” (Suchocki 83). However, critiques of this approach warn that it could be a form of racism if one is ascribing the “culturally
invented characteristics...to the permanent character of various different human populations” 
(Milbank 183). It is important to be mindful in these situations and not stereotype the masses 
based on one’s experience. Also, this approach could be characterized as another form of the 
Mutuality Model in some regard because people are still connecting on similarities. One 
difference is that these shared identities might not be religiously affiliated.

**Research Design**

There are currently thirty-eight board members at the CIC, and they have had others who have 
rotated out. Emails were sent out to approximately forty-five people, since those were the only 
addresses available (see Appendix B). Then, of those forty-five board members, twenty-four 
responded and were interviewed (see Appendix C). Depending on their availability, they either 
came to Butler University and were recorded in Irwin library’s sound booth, or they chose a 
place that was most convenient to them and were recorded via laptop. Both methods used the 
software Audacity to record the interview with the intention of uploading the material to a host 
website to air a podcast so the public can have access to the board’s stories, too. Generally, the 
interviews were fairly similar and covered related questions. They varied in length according to 
what the interviewee was willing to share and depending on what unique follow-up questions 
were asked. Typically, the board members were asked to give a brief biographical statement and 
discuss how they came to know the CIC. Then, they were encouraged to talk about their faith 
journey and some informative moments that they had along the way. These questions set up the 
interview to reflect a genuine conversation more than a script, so depending on the person a 
variety of topics were discussed. Board members were commonly asked about whether interfaith 
interactions challenged or strengthened their own beliefs and whether the drive for interfaith
dialogue contradicts some doctrine from their own traditions. Others were asked about some common misconceptions that they face regarding their faith and how they go about addressing those fallacies. Various members also mentioned the importance of exposing oneself to differences and how one might be able to overcome the fear of being uncomfortable in those circumstances. Each interview was different, but they built off a similar interfaith foundation. To conclude every recording, the board members were asked to define interfaith according to them, which alone offers content worthy of analysis.

While these interviews were being conducted, it was important to understand the current debate on religious diversity from a Christian perspective. This perspective was chosen because Christianity is the majority religion within Indianapolis, so this research can be most broadly applied through the selection of this perspective. Christianity is also a religion that conducts proselytizing practices, so adherents have to determine how to respond to the Great Commission (Appendix D) amid religious diversity. In addition, for the sake of time and variable limitation, it made the most sense to focus on the perspective of one religion; however, with more time, it would be worthwhile to explore all of the religions and their scholarship on religious pluralism.

After reading about the different models, which are used to explain interreligious dialogue from a Christian perspective and hearing the stories of CIC board members who are living out interreligious dialogue, it was important to find trends in the interviews alone and then weave their narratives into the Christian debate. With this approach, one can better understand what type of person is attracted to interfaith dialogue and how theories presented in scholarly articles can be directly applied to everyday life. It also provides more background for why interfaith dialogue is so important and how one can reconcile it to their own faith practice without denying any part of the religion’s doctrine.
Interview Analysis

Twenty-four board members were interviewed from the CIC, and there were five detectable trends based on their responses. Through these similarities, one can gain insight into the qualities that interfaith leaders possess within the Indianapolis community. Then, this data can be used to attract more people to the CIC by marketing this behavior or implementing new CIC-sponsored events to involve people outside of these trends.

Noticeable Trends among the Board Members

Trend #1 - Multicultural Life

Fifteen of the board members who were interviewed mentioned an experience abroad that influenced their decision to participate in interfaith work, and these multicultural encounters can be divided into three distinct categories. There are board members who are immigrants to the United States, and they acknowledged this transition as a significant part of their faith stories. Other board members have parents or relatives who emigrated from another country to the United States, thus their influence guided these members towards interfaith dialogue. Thirdly, several board members have traveled outside of the United States, and these opportunities to truly engage with new cultures have encouraged them to pursue interfaith relationships.

To start, there are five board members who specifically mentioned immigrating to the United States as they described their faith journey. For example, Aarti Shah, a Jain voice, states, My mom has had and continues to have a profound impact on me and who I am...there would be rituals, and we would go and follow and go into the temple...I did all of that
stuff, and then when I immigrated to the United States, I realized how important it was for me, for my identity, but more importantly for me to just survive in a new country. Shah found that being active in her faith once she moved to the United States was necessary in order to maintain her identity. This perspective is understandable since her faith is so closely tied to her family. In addition, Maria Pimental-Gannon, a born-again Catholic Christian, says, “I’m originally from Mexico, Mexico City. I’ve been in the U.S. for a long time. In Indianapolis, I’ve been here for thirty-seven years.” Her Mexican heritage has influenced her career path and various volunteer trips. She is an interpreter and trains in “the area of multicultural education.” Pimental-Gannon “love[s] to build bridges between the Hispanic, Latino community and the community that is from Indianapolis or from the U.S.” She has also volunteered her time to go to the border in Delhi, Texas to interpret for immigrants who need to share their story for asylum, but this passion did not come without some challenges. Pimental-Gannon mentioned that growing up she did not fit in with other Mexicans because she was too American. Then, her American friends would tell her that she was a minority, so she sought out the African-American groups, but she did not fit in there either. When she was introduced to multicultural education, her eyes were opened to “more than just black and white...diversity was in culture, was in the language, all these other things,” so she “became very interested in the international arena...” Furthermore, Muzaffar Ahmad offers a Muslim perspective and says, “I am an immigrant to the U.S. I was born in Pakistan and came to the U.S. in ‘98. My background is that I was born in a religious minority in Pakistan, which is persecuted because of their faith.” Ahmad and his family felt this persecution directly. His brother “was murdered, and [they] never found out who killed him, but the only reason [they could] think of is that he was part of this religious community, and he was the only member of this community who was a professor at the university.” Ahmad sees
interfaith as a way to honor his brother and work towards minimizing hate. Hopefully, as more and more interfaith initiatives get under way, their work will affect the margins and delegitimize radical action in the name of religion. To contribute to these three narratives, Uzma Kazmi, who is also Muslim, explains that “[she] actually moved to Indianapolis three and a half years ago from Cleveland, Ohio, and [her] family spent about nineteen years in Cleveland, Ohio, and originally, [they] had emigrated from Canada.” These transitions encouraged her to immediately look for ways to get involved in these new communities, and almost instantly upon moving to Indianapolis she was invited to get involved with different interfaith celebrations. Last, Yanev Shmukler, a Jewish voice, says that “[he] was born in Israel, and [his family] moved to the US when [he] was ten.” Therefore, the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict actually...played a huge role in [his] life and a huge role in [his] interfaith work.”

In addition to the four immigrant voices, five other board members have family members who were born outside of the United States and impacted the way that they viewed the world. For instance, Dr. Pierre Atlas, a Jewish perspective, had a mother who was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt as a Jew and then came to the U.S. This familial background “gave [him] a different perspective...in terms of different experiences and her experience of growing up in a predominantly Muslim country with the stories that she told [him].” Atlas was also in the Army, and this exposure allowed him to come “into [his] own sense of Jewishness,” since other soldiers resorted to practicing their own religion. Furthermore, Atlas had an educational experience that was multicultural because he attended the University of Toronto for his undergraduate degree. Then, Charlie Wiles, the Executive Director of the CIC who is Catholic, states that “[his] mother had a grandfather who was from Lebanon in the Middle East...so [he] did a lot of exploration and understanding [by asking] ‘when did his father come to the United States?’, ‘why did they come
to the United States?” etc.” Moreover, Wiles’ other side of the family had Scottish and Irish roots. This multicultural genealogical trend intrigued Wiles, particularly when he was a child and realized that not all families had Lebanese grandparents and so forth. Next, Daniel Meyers, who is a Christian voice, has a dad who “is Jewish and grew up Jewish in the 1950s in New Jersey. His story is that he was bar mitzvahed and then didn’t continue in a real strong way with his Jewish religious identity but still always connected to Judaism.” Then, “[his mom] is from Holland. She grew up in a pretty devout Dutch protestant home,” but became disconnected from the tradition once she entered her teen years. Next, Dr. Anita Joshi, a Hindu voice, and Ala’a Wafa, a Muslim perspective, briefly mention their families’ backgrounds. Joshi states that “both of [her] parents are originally from India,” and Wafa alludes to her family coming “from overseas.” In addition to these five board members, Uzma Kazmi and Yaniv Shmukler, who are both immigrants themselves, discuss how their families emigrated from India and the Soviet Union, respectively.

Furthermore the last category deals with travel experiences, and six additional board members brought up short-term trips and how they impacted their desire to pursue interfaith dialogue. For example, Reverend Bruce Garrison speaks from a Christian perspective, and he “spent twenty-one years in England and...did a lot of stuff in Asia, Africa, and Europe.” He had a much longer and more immersive experience than most, but because of that exposure he thrives off interactions with other cultures, and his “journey went from a pretty conservative, relatively narrow perspective to one that’s gotten pretty wide.” In addition, he has published magazines that circulated “in about seventy countries in around sixteen languages, so on a daily basis, [he] was hearing usually from four continents,” which showed him the multiplicity of ways that people are religiously devout even within a singular faith like Christianity. Like Garrison,
Reverend Brian Shivers from Second Presbyterian Church adds a Christian voice; however, he did not expand as much on his experiences. He merely mentions that he has never felt unwelcome to a place of worship either “here or abroad.” Moreover, four board members discuss trips to the Middle East and how that exposure largely influenced their decision to pursue interfaith work. Imam Mikal Saahir, who is one of the founding members of the CIC, says that the formation of the CIC came out of trip to Jordan where participants “built a house with a Palestinian family on the Habitat for Humanity model.” Therefore, abroad connections are deeply ingrained in the fabric of the CIC. Also, Chris Melton, a member of Second Presbyterian Church and volunteer with St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, decided after a trip to Israel, Palestine, and Jordan that interfaith dialogue was a necessary next step because she “wanted to connect on a deeper level with people that were not like [her and]...more like people that [she] met over there.” During her trip, she had “the opportunity to meet people of the three major faiths and discuss things on...a faith level, a political level, a sociological level, etc.,” and she was “captivated” by these conversations. Similarly, Betty Brandt of St. Luke’s United Methodist Church brings up her travel experiences when asked about impactful moments during her faith journey, and these trips include countries with a majority Muslim population and Jewish population, such as Morocco and Israel. Both of these countries involved interfaith dialogue and visits to holy sites, and she states that “there was a language barrier, but there was no emotional barrier” during these encounters. Brandt also addresses the idea that “had [she] been born in India, [she] would undoubtedly be a Hindu,” and Don Knebel of Zionsville Presbyterian Church mentions this realization, too, after talking with his Muslim tour guide in Egypt. Over the years, Knebel has traveled to several countries, such as Israel, India, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt, which caused him to become “more interested in religious tradition.” Then, upon returning to the
United States, he was asked to give presentations on his travels and host foreign ambassadors in Indiana, such as the Jordanian ambassador to Israel, Marwan al-Muasher. Moreover, it is clear that interacting across country boundaries influences a desire to pursue interfaith dialogue, especially when it involves exposure to the Israeli and Palestinian conflict.

_Trend #2 - Interfaith Upbringing or Conversion Experience_

Board members also frequently referenced being encouraged to form interfaith relationships as a child. In fact, fourteen board members mention experiencing a different faith from their current one as they grew up, and this involves converting from one practice to another, as well. First. Muzaffar Ahmad, who is Muslim, says that “when [he] came to the US, [he] met people from so many different faiths: Christianity, of course, to Judaism, Hindus, Sikhs, Bahá’ís, and [he] just loved learning about people.” It was through this process that he realized how important his own faith is to him, and how important faith can be to other people. Father Rick Ginther of the Catholic faith mentions how he was able to “encounter other Christians and even go to synagogue” as a part of his education starting in high school through seminary. It was through this opportunity that he began “to see, ‘okay, there’s another way. We are Judeo-Christians.’” So Ginther gained an appreciation for Judaism, in particular. Ala’a Wafa of the Muslim faith recounts how “[she] grew up in a household and in a community that really prioritized interfaith work.” Therefore, “[she] spent time as a kid in churches and synagogues.” Wafa frequently “welcomed people of other faiths into the mosque,” and her masjid was located next to a church, so they often shared spaces. Then, in college, she had the opportunity to intern with Senator Feingold in Washington D.C., who was a Jewish legislator, and because “[interfaith work] was weaved throughout [her] life” this partnership was not unusual to her. Moreover, Charlie Wiles,
the CIC’s Executive Director, who is Catholic, states that “as [he] grew older and started at a Jesuit high school on the northside of Indianapolis, [he] met some Jewish friends. [He] would go over to their house and then [he] would hear stories about the Middle East,” and they were different from the stories he was used to hearing from his Lebanese family members. This introduction interested him in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular. Then, “when [he] was in Arizona [for college], he was fascinated with [the] creation stories [of the Native Americans] and their rituals and their practice and how that informed how they lived their lives.” Canon Bruce Gray, who serves at the Holy Family Episcopal Church, mentions that “[his] parents were both thoroughly convinced of the need to be involved in [their] communities and to reach across boundaries.” Some of these relationships include “friends from at least a dozen different faith backgrounds..., so [he] got to experience what it was like for a Jewish family, for various eastern religions, for atheists, for all sorts of different brands of Christianity.” He remembers going camping with an atheist family and having deep fireside chats where they wondered about the universe. These experiences influenced his lifestyle so much so that “everywhere [he has] lived [he has] been involved with a local interfaith group.” Tony Wiederhold, a Buddhist, mentions how working out with his friend Pondu, a devout Hindu, allowed for “these conversations about Hinduism and Buddhism and trying to understand each other’s background perspective.” It was this exposure that got Wiederhold interested in interfaith work. Then, Reverend Anastassia Zinke, a Unitarian Universalist, says “When [she] was going through late elementary school, middle school, and high school, [she] went on an interfaith religious pilgrimage with [her] mother in the context of New York City.” For her, this journey involved leaving her childhood Unitarian Universalist Church to try a Xen-do Temple where she felt as though she had “no cultural orientation or practical training about how to be religious in a Xen-do community at that
time.” Following this experience, Zinke and her mom went to an ethical cultural society, but it was hard in this environment to give up a belief in God, which was a common perspective for those a part of this group. Meanwhile, Zinke also went to a majority Jewish high school, grew up studying the Torah, and dated a boy hoping to be a rabbi. Then, later her mom dated a Muslim man who was set on marrying her. Zinke has truly lived an interfaith life, and this exploration was ingrained in both her school and church education. After this pilgrimage, she settled back into the Unitarian Universalist church, and today, her passion for interfaith continues to influence that ministry. Last, Yanev Shmukler of the Jewish community has “been really interested in interfaith work, since [he] was a kid. When [he] was in high school, [he] founded a club called the Coexist club, [and]...when [he] was in college, [he] was the president of the Jewish Student Organization.” Through these experiences, he interacted with several people of different faiths.

Within this trend, there is also a pattern of attending Catholic school despite not adhering to that faith. For example, Uzma Kazmi, a Muslim voice, states that “for [her] parents it was important for [her] to get a complete religious outlook, so [she] attended Catholic school all of her life.” She also had several “friends who were from the Hindu tradition, from the Jewish tradition, from the Buddhist tradition, etc.” Kazmi says that growing up in Canada gave her many opportunities to interact with diverse faith backgrounds, and she is very thankful for that environment. Dr. Anita Joshi, who is a Hindu, had a similar experience in New Jersey. Her small town “was primarily Italian Catholic, so [she] spent a lot of time singing in mass and learning choir music...[she] really enjoyed learning about the Catholic faith.” She also describes her childhood as “a journey of exploring different faiths - Christianity, Judaism, a little bit of Islam.” Then she “came back to feeling comfortable within [her] own tradition.” Aarti Shah of the Jain faith says that she “went to a convent school all the way from kindergarten to twelfth grade.”
Therefore, she went to mass at the church, and some of her “close friends [were] from different traditions, different faiths, [different] denominations…”

Furthermore, there are three conversion stories that demonstrate a broad understanding of multiple religions at a younger age. Ashley Wagner, a Pagan, states that “[she] got kicked out of Sunday School when [she] was really little for asking too many questions and the wrong questions apparently.” However, she continued to ask more questions and became interested in better understanding witches and witchcraft. As “[she] learned about the spirituality of it, the more [she] thought that this [practice] is really the right path for [her] to go on.” Like herself, she recognizes that “most pagans are converts of some other religious practice, usually Christianity, a lot of times Catholicism,” and through this process, “their soul [becomes] lighter.” Judge Shaheed and Imam Mikal Saahir both converted from Christianity to Islam for comparable racial reasons. First, Judge Shaheed “grew up in [the African American Episcopal Church], but as [he] became a young adult there were certain aspects of Christianity that [he] had difficulty with and the more [he] learned about Islam...it appealed to him.” When he “was introduced to Christianity, the concept of Jesus was always depicted as a Caucasian young man and all the angels [were] Caucasian,” so Shaheed was conflicted “because [he] could not imagine a loving, compassionate, all-encompassing God that would only anoint as His chosen Caucasian people.” He found more representation within Islam. This attraction was also rooted in the fact that many of the African Americans sold into the slave trade were Muslim, so “there was a natural reconnection for [him].” Likewise, Imam Mikal Saahir grew up in the Church of Christ during “the turbulent sixties,” and he recalled someone selling a newspaper on the street corner beside his church “with a picture of a Caucasian man and his wife...looking real sad and dejected in a row boat because their town had flooded,…[and] the caption said...‘As long as white people keep
abusing black people, God is going to punish them.” After a couple of encounters “[Saahir] thought maybe what he is selling is true. So the voice of Islam from the African-American community from the 1930s to the 1970s, the dominant voice...for Islam, was Elijah Muhammad’s message, which is the Islamic message in its purity. It was a message designed to appeal to dissatisfied black folks.” During that time, “there was a lot of dissatisfied black folks and justifiably so.” This encounter was Saahir’s introduction to Islam, and since his conversion, he has felt “a growing peace.”

_Trend #3 - An Emphasis on Education_

Thirteen board members emphasize the value of education within their own religion. Dr. Vimal Patel from the Hindu tradition mentions that in the first stage of living a Vedic lifestyle “is a learning stage and a building-character stage, not so much as a trade or skill for gaining a job but learning what it is to be a human being.” Within “the student life,...you learn skills and relational aspects of life[, and you realize] that you are part of the whole not independent of anything else.” Patel himself is well-educated and is a PhD recipient in biochemistry, which he has used to teach neuropathology at the IU School of Medicine. Moreover, Dr. Pierre Atlas from the Jewish tradition is also a professor at Marian University in their political science department, so the CIC is attracting some well-educated individuals. Next, Aarti Shah of the Jain tradition discusses Jain school and like Patel’s experience learning is a part of the religious practice. Shah says that the first phase of Jain school is about all religions. When elaborating on the process, she could not find “the words to explain that experience” because it was so impactful. Then, Reverend Anastassia Zinke’s education within the Unitarian Universalist Christian denomination is similar to Shah’s experience because her church, All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York,
taught world religions, so Zinke learned about “the teachings of Siddhartha Buddha. [She] learned about the Hebrew alphabet and played dreidel. [She] studied mindfulness of Buddhist meditation. [She] was in a Christmas pageant, so it was a whole gamut of things.” For Ashley Wagner, a Pagan voice, seeking more and more knowledge was how she was raised. Wagner mentions that “it was thanks to [her] parents encouraging [her] to look it up and learn it for [herself] that [she] started on this path [towards Paganism]. They encouraged questions of [their] surroundings, about things [they] saw on the news or on TV about [their] religion,” so learning was deeply incorporated in her upbringing. Then, Father Rick Ginther played the opposite role, so when he taught Catholic school, he “[let] students ask their questions and struggle with the answers…[he told them] go take a look at that book over there” to find the answer. This perspective has influenced his own faith because he is “not afraid to ask questions.” Instead, he confronts tradition by asking “Okay, where did this come from?” such as the belief that “Protestant brothers and sisters weren’t going to heaven because they left the true church.” Charlie Wiles, who is also a Catholic, discusses being “curious about [his] Catholic roots.” For example, he had questions about the liturgy regarding the beginnings of prayers and the origins of the sacraments. Wiles promotes a curious mentality when connecting with different faiths. “[He] thinks that there’s so much to learn and gain from one another if you can [curiously] approach it that way.” Similarly, Bruce Garrison, who is a Christian, states “that if you hold on to a true curiosity, you are continuously looking for more and [that’s] something that keeps making our world just a little bigger.” Jim Cotterill seconds this idea “by saying that we have to be open to learning first,” especially when it comes to community service. It is important to listen to the needs of the people and implement strategies that will accurately address the problems of the area.
Furthermore, Daniel Meyers of the Christian faith works at Butler University as the Executive Director of the Center for Faith and Vocation, so he is constantly working with students in intrafaith and interfaith ways. One way that he has “defined interfaith programs [is by] using two words, education and networking. The slightly longer way to say that is learning about others and being able to meet with others.” Then when Judge Shaheed, who practices Islam, was asked about how to encourage others outside of their comfort zones to meet people of different faiths, he says “that’s the difficult part because as you know with education, part of the process of enrolling in a college or university is the admission that [you] don’t know everything.” Therefore, the process of interacting with new people is an educational opportunity, but in order to fully commit, it is necessary to realize that both parties have room to learn. Shaheed states, “the more we expand our intellect and our souls to learn, the more that we are able to appreciate how all-encompassing God is.” Both Uzma Kazmi and Ala’a Wafa of the Muslim faith see education as the solution to combat pervasive religious discrimination. In fact, Kazmi says, “the antidote for hate is not just love but education...limited knowledge and groupthink is what festers and grows to become the popular belief system. That’s what we have to breakdown.” She urges others to become deliberate in “reaching out to people outside of [their] comfort zones.” Wafa has encountered misconceptions surrounding Muslim women, and she responds by “always [trying] to take the opportunity to educate people.” Then, on a different note, one thing that “[she] has gathered through [her] experiences [with the CIC] thus far is that [she] still [has] so much to learn.” Education is a significant trend that connects many board members.

*Trend #4 - Embraces Uncertainty*
Although this trend is not as obvious, seven board members did confidently address that they welcome uncertainty into their understanding of faith. For example, Dr. Anita Joshi, who is a Hindu, says that “[she doesn’t] think any of us knows everything about everything and medicine taught [her] that more than anything, which is that we know very little about things, but [she] thinks it’s important to understand that we really need each other, and we really are the same human family.” Then more specifically to faith, Joshi says, “it’s hard to know the unknowable, so I think I’m always a little bit careful when people say ‘well I know that’s true.’” Next, Yaney Shmukler, a Jew, says that he is “a big believer in challenging and questioning all...beliefs.” Moreover, Judge Shaheed, who is Muslim, thinks that “interfaith means...a willingness to open your heart and mind to how vast and unknown God is.” Then, Reverend Brian Shivers and Daniel Meyers both speak from a Protestant Christian perspective about the certainty they have that everything is uncertain. Shivers states:

I find that to be a frightening concept to think that I will ever have the Divine figured out.
I hope that it’s never the true. I’m pretty confident it won’t ever be true because theology is one of those fields that the deeper you get in the more questions you have, which is a powerful thing….There are more mysteries. It’s like peeling an onion.

Meyers adds his beliefs by saying that “a big part of [his] conviction is the lack of certainty. [He’s] pretty sure [he doesn’t] know it all...Ultimately if it’s something infinite, and [he’s] finite [then he’s] not going to be able to grasp the whole 100% of it.” Additionally, he thinks “there’s a real worry when people operate from faith as though they know it to be true,” but he recognizes that most everyone is guilty of this action of superiority. Both Father Rick Ginther and Charlie Wiles agree from a Catholic perspective. As Ginther discusses his faith journey, he says, “it’s always new, because there’s always something [he doesn’t] know, always, which [he enjoys].
[He] is not afraid to say [that he doesn’t] know.” Then, Wiles states that “a big part of how [he follows his] Christian understanding is [around the fact that he doesn’t] have a firm grasp of who God is or how God represents. [He] calls it ‘mystery’.”

_Trend #5 - Equally committed to own particular faith and interfaith work_

This last trend includes fourteen board members, and they all see their participation in interfaith dialogue as complementary to their particular faith. In many instances, learning about different faiths has caused them to become stronger in their own faith. First, Daniel Meyers responds from a Protestant Christian perspective with “I wouldn’t say [that any of my experiences within the interfaith community] leads me to change my own practice, but [instead I gain] just an appreciation.” In addition, Yanev Shmukler, who practices Judaism, “[thinks] the more you talk to people who have different beliefs the stronger your own faith becomes.” Then, Maria Pimental-Gannon, a born-again Catholic Christian, briefly answers that her personally held beliefs within Catholicism and the concept of interfaith “absolutely” encourage one another. Canon Bruce Gray, an Episcopal priest, also does not elaborate much, but he answers without a hesitation that interfaith encounters “always strengthen” his own faith. In fact, the Episcopal Church “has been one of the leaders in interfaith efforts probably for centuries.” Bruce Garrison from a Protestant point of view, says that interacting amongst different faiths strengthens his views, but makes him “question the cultural role imposition that occurs in any faith tradition.” Once Garrison took a group to the Hindu temple, and one person mentioned after observing everyone that it “feels like a spiritual gymnasium.” The pastor of their church heard about it and began thinking about “what’s the difference between a spiritual gymnasium and a spiritual classroom, which is what most churches tend to be where you just sit and listen.” This visit to the
Hindu temple “transformed the way [that the Dwelling Place] now conducts services.” Reverend Brian Shivers’ faith has also grown since becoming involved with interfaith. For example, witnessing the dedication that Muslims have when they pray five times a day “[drives him] to discover...the ways that [he] can also practice religious devotion.” One day, Dr. Vimal Patel was nervous that he would offend Shivers by telling him about temples in southwestern India that “have Jesus as an avatar” and believe that “Jesus didn’t die, that Jesus moved with his family to southwestern India and was basically a shaman.” Shiver responded to this story by saying, “[Dr. Patel] actually helped me. [He] didn’t offend me. [He] helped my faith develop even deeper.” To Shivers, Christianity’s “own identity...is interfaith” because of its Jewish roots, so interfaith dialogue is an affirmed step within his faith. Father Rick Ginther has a similar reaction and says that interreligious dialogue “encourages us to clearly listen, learn, share, find that which is good, holy, wholesome in all religions, and let others ese that in ours, and where do we connect, especially as human beings.” By his understanding and experience, the Catholic Church encourages these cross religious relationships. Dr. Pierre Atlas, a Jewish voice, responds with similar insights - “you become more aware of your own identities and qualities when it becomes contrasted with others. It was really in a situation of being with people of other faiths that I became more aware and appreciative of my own.” Then, Ala’a Wafa, a Muslim, states, “these types of [interfaith] engagements often reinforce your own faith because you learn about another’s faith and maybe you’re not sure about that particular aspect in your own faith, so then you go research your own faith, and you learn more about it, and then, it may reinforce what you believe.” Wafa also sees the concept of interfaith and Islam complementing each other, since “Islam respects people of all faiths...The Quran talks about Christians and Jews as people of the book or family of the book.” In addition, Don Knebel offers another Protestant Christian
perspective that reflects the aforementioned beliefs. He says, “you can learn as much as you want about other religions, and it doesn’t shake your faith...any more than you going to someone else and saying I would like to tell you about my religion will typically shake their belief of what they believe.” Others like Dr. Anita Joshi of the Hindu tradition do not feel compelled to convert others to their religion, so Joshi says that during interfaith exchanges, “[she doesn’t] feel the need to have [her] mind changed, but [she] certainly [doesn’t] feel the need to have to change the minds of others.” Although Imam Mikal Saahir practices Islam, which seeks to convert others, he realizes “that this is not about going to an interfaith event and bringing my Quran under my arm looking for people to convert. I want to bring the Quran in my heart and see what I can get from the Quran in my heart that is in common with anyone else.” Judge Shaheed of the same religion quotes the Quran, “which says, ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion’ and [continues with] no one should be compelled to do something outside of their own conscience because conscious is something that is God given and so no human being has the authority, based on [Shaheed’s] understanding of religion, to impose [their] belief system on another person.”

Furthermore, christians like Chris Melton also have to reconcile this call to evangelize with interfaith work. She “[believes] in respecting other people, and if they have another name for a God, another way of worshipping the Divine, [she doesn’t] think we’re supposed to be judgemental.” Melton states that Christianity encourages interfaith work because “when you understand that a loving God created all of us...no one is to be excluded from our faith.”

Connections to Christian Scholarship

Of the five models that were introduced, the Mutuality Model, the Acceptance Model, and the Hybridity Model were most significantly considered by the CIC’s board members; however, it is
important to note that these individuals were not aware of the models when they were
interviewed, so their answers may have been different had they been properly equipped with all
the information.

The Mutuality Model

Views held within the Mutuality Model are mentioned by fourteen board members. Daniel
Meyers, Judge Shaheed, and Dr. Patel all have analogies that fit this approach from a Christian,
Muslim, and Hindu perspective, respectively. Meyers says, that “if we all shared the little bits
that we [have], we’d actually get a larger picture of what is true.” He describes that “[he] might
get a whole new couple pixels by learning from somebody within the Christian community as
well as outside of it.” Judge Shaheed references the ocean for his analogy because “if you’re on
the seashore in Florida, you’ll see one concept of your ocean. If you’re in Alaska, it’ll look
different, but as you’re looking out at the body of water from the sea shore…[it’s] still a creation
of God.” Therefore, “the person in Florida can’t criticize the person in India saying that what
they see is not correct because what they see is what they see, what they feel is what they feel
and it’s still a creation of God.” Then Dr. Patel introduces his perspective with “the story of the
elephant and the four blind men.” Each man describes their part of the elephant from the ear to
the foot, and it sounds completely different from each other but really it is one part of the same
whole. Patel states that “each religion has either the leg or the trunk or the ears or the body, and
they think that is the whole things and that is where the conflict arises,” so it is important to
come together on common terms to avoid universal claims to the ultimate.

Many board members refer to the ethical-practical bridge. For example, Imam Saahir
mentions that going to Jordan and building “a house with a Palestinian family on the Habitat for
Humanity model” began formational conversations for the CIC. Also, the Quran by his interpretation presents a Mutuality-model perspective because it says, “come together on common terms,” so Saahir believes that “[We’re just] all saying the same thing differently.” He also sees “interfaith [as] the new religion,” which in a sense minimizes the differences of each tradition. Yanev Shmukler of the Jewish tradition is another proponent of the ethical-practical bridge through the descriptions of his past experiences. He went to Philadelphia on “an interfaith service trip [, and] the participants were from all different backgrounds.” Shmukler states that it was “a really impactful experience.” Then, when he was asked about the nature of his interfaith conversations, Shmukler says he “definitely [finds] more similarities, but [he thinks] differences are a good thing. It’s not that we should shy away from our differences or only focus on similarities but talk about our differences and celebrate the differences.” This assessment could be interpreted as an Acceptance Model approach, but he emphasize the similarities later by saying that the Abrahamic faiths are “almost exactly the same.” Furthermore, Ala’a Wafa of the Muslim tradition, says that interfaith to her means a “coming together as fellow human beings for the betterment of your community and for the betterment of the world.” She also says that the CIC board “lets her appreciate the commonality amongst all those different faiths as fellow human beings and as people of faith.” Dr. Pierre Atlas of the Jewish tradition offers a similar outlook. He recognizes that “the more [he engages] and [meets] with people of different faiths the more [he learns] that we actually have a lot in common than we have that separates us.” Part of these attributes include the same desire for a “sense of justice and tranquility” that reflects that of the ethical-practical bridge. Father Rick Ginther is similarly focus on this bridge of the Mutuality Model. He recognizes that “interfaith means the ability of people of different faiths to appreciate each other, to find ways to work together for the common good, to reveal to each
other the wonder of common longing, and too, all of us together, leave the world a better place.”

In addition, Jim Cotterill, who is Protestant, states that “people use different words, but they say basically the same thing, so whether people [are] Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, the same things [are] being said about taking care of your brothers and sisters and your neighbors, not just meeting the people next door but the whole city.” Betty Brandt from St. Luke’s United Methodist Church says:

> it becomes apparent pretty quickly that we are more alike than we are different. We may have theological differences, but there are the core principles of almost all the traditions about taking care of the poor and serving others and being compassionate, and leaning into those kinds of values - universal values - is what strengthens all of us.

Like Hick’s approach to interfaith dialogue, Brandt articulates the concept that “multiple paths” lead to the Divine, and Muzaffar Ahmad agrees by saying “there are different highways going to the same destination.” He also mentions that the Ahmadiyya of the Muslim community teach “that anybody who believes in doing good deeds has nothing to fear whether they’re Christians or Jews or other religious people, as long as they believe in their faith and do good deeds,” which again emphasizes the concept of service. Bruce Garrison offers a Christian voice, and he says, “traditions in a lot of ways, especially when you start getting into spirituality are not that different. The language starts becoming a lot the same.” He has been able to connect with people of different religions in other countries through service, such as “water well projects,” which is an approach Knitter suggests in the ethical-practical bridge. Last, Chris Melton from Second Presbyterian Church follows the Mutuality Model when she says that “we share so many of the same core values and tenants. The golden rule is almost universal. It may use different words, but the meaning is the same.”
The Acceptance Model

There are four board members that explicitly address concepts within the Acceptance Model. Don Knebel, who attends Zionsville Presbyterian Church, says that the CIC’s “goal is to make sure that people understand that they can have different beliefs and still be friends with people.” Knebel, like Lindbeck, says “that our religions are something that we’re born into just like our language, so we don’t typically pick our religions.” Canon Bruce Gray, an Episcopalian priest, cautions against leveling the playing field by only recognizing the similarities in religions, and he recognizes that the CIC is a community where “[people] are able to pray together using all sorts of different forms and formats and not water down what anyone believes, but instead be open to praying in the form that someone else does every week or every day.” Next, Reverend Brian Shivers clearly promotes an Acceptance Model perspective. He corrects common misconceptions of interfaith work that include the idea that people of faith are asked to give up their own convictions when entering into dialogue by saying “that actually is a disservice to true interfaith work. It becomes this wishy-washy nothingness if we’re not also willing to have the conversations about our differences.” To Shivers, “interfaith...means seeing people for who they are and knowing that their experience is completely different than mine.” Then, Maria Pimental-Gannon, a born-again Catholic Christian, states:

The important thing is to just fall in love, for me it’s a higher power. Whatever you would want to call it, fall in love with it. Get to know it and embrace it. Let it help you become the best person you can become...I think that’s what life is about, and I’m having fun working towards that.
This quote represents the Acceptance Model, but also exhibits elements of the philosophical-historical bridge, since she mentions a Divine reality that goes by different names. However, additionally Pimental-Gannon’s view demonstrates the importance of fully grasping one’s own particular approach to faith and embodying it.

The Hybridity Model

Several board members discuss a commitment to humanity that lends to interreligious dialogue. Some people specifically state connecting on identities outside of their faith like Bruce Garrison from a Protestant perspective. He says, that “no matter what your religious tradition, there are some simple foundational things that everybody pursues. They want the best for their kids. They want the best for their family. They want to make some kind of a positive contribution to society.” These are the common character traits that encourage relationships. Then, when Aarti Shah, a Jain, was asked to describe her faith journey, she mentions “first and foremost [that her] first title is...mom.” This identity is clearly important to her and one that influences her relationships with others along with the pursuit of her own faith. Dr. Anita Joshi of the Hindu tradition also discusses “these different identities that spring from [her] feminism,” and the concept that one has “to use the opportunity...to meet people first to connect with them just as human beings.” Then, it is easier to converse about different ideologies and remain respectful through this dialogue. Joshi also recognizes similarities and differences. She says, “I see far more similarities than I do differences[but]...it’s not to say that we’re all the same. We have very different ways of practicing things.” Moreover, Ala’a Wafa practices Islam, and she emphasizes that “sometimes it’s really just getting to know someone on the human level to understand that you have the same fears, that you have the same goals, that you really care about your children
growing up in a safe environment, getting a good education, being well fed and protected, etc.”
These are the factors that influence one’s ability to connect. Last, Uzma Kazmi offers a Muslim
voice, too, and she believes that “if [she does] good deeds, [treats] human beings with the respect
that he or she deserves, and [elevates] humanity more than any one faith tradition, people will
realize that and see the goodness.” This approach is a blend of the ethical-practical bridge and
the Hybridity Model.

**Discussion**

This research sought to understand the interfaith landscape within Indianapolis by interviewing
board members of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, and the hypothesis stated that interfaith
is valuable and can be reconciled to traditional, religious doctrine. By the nature of this study, the
hypothesis was already proven because of the subject chosen for the case study. The board
members would not have joined an interfaith organization if they did not find the mission
appealing or could understand it in conjunction to their own faith. This research is meant to
record oral history and add real-life commentary to an endless interfaith debate rooted in
Christian scholarship. As a result, there are identifiable trends found within the character of these
board members, such as multicultural lifestyles, interfaith upbringings and conversion
experiences, valued educational opportunities, beliefs in the uncertain value of the Divine, and
similar commitments to particular faiths along with interfaith. These are just a few of the many
connections that can be made based on the answers from some of these board members, so
another study could continue analyzing their responses or ask new questions of these faith
leaders. Furthermore, future studies could have these interfaith leaders fill out a survey that
includes demographic questions along with specific questions regarding denominations, political
party affiliation, etc. Then, these answers could be analyzed to further understand who is attracted to interfaith dialogue. Furthermore, the Mutuality Model, the Acceptance Model, and the Hybridity Model were most identifiable in the respondents answers. The Mutuality Model represented the majority; however, it is hard to make a concrete analysis because some of the material is based on interpretation. I am a Methodist from Nashville, Tennessee, and I also identify as a white, heterosexual, cisgender female. All of these lenses played into my questions and my following analysis, so there could be some bias due to my personal background.

In addition, these board members were not aware of the models that I was imposing upon their answers. Ideally, in another study, these board members would be briefed on these models and be able to defend their faith and its connection to interfaith using this information. However, there are several moving parts to each and many critiques to all of them, so it is hard to fully comprehend and support a single one. Also, it would be worthwhile to include scholarship from all religions and how they reconcile interfaith to their particular traditions because some of the scholarship was too Christian specific that it could not be applied to the responses by these board members. Despite not fitting completely into one of the molds made by these five models, these CIC board members commonly seek to help humanity through their participation in interfaith dialogue. Therefore, a new model that blends both the ethical-practical bridge with the Hybridity Model may be in order, since the CIC works to connect on similarities but maintain differences.

It was also frequently stated by these board members that it is important to recognize one another as humans first, maybe serve alongside each other, and then, discuss differences. With this model, everyone can bring their full selves to the dialogue and work towards an idea of justice for all faiths. This concept may be naively mistaken as a universal call to serve, but several individuals emphasized the importance of listening and being curious about the “other” so that
they can accurately understand them and help in an appropriate way. It would be interesting to compare this concern for humanity with other international interfaith groups because the fact that this study took place in the United States, where justice is a common value, could have influenced the answers of these board members, who reside in Indiana.

Although, to conclude, there is a vibrant interfaith community in Indianapolis that genuinely seeks to understand differences through interreligious dialogue. All board members perceive interfaith dialogue as complementary to their own particular spiritual practice, and often, this interreligious exposure strengthens their commitment to their religion.
Appendix A

Bias Motivations
Law enforcement agencies reported 7,106 single-bias incidents to UCR in 2017. A distribution of victims by bias type shows the following biases:

Race/Ethnicity/Ancestry 59.6%
Religion 20.6%
Sexual orientation 15.8%
Disability 1.9%
Gender identity 1.6%
Gender 0.6%

Hate Crime Statistics, 2017
Appendix B

Sample Email

Hi Kiahna,

My name is Rachel Koehler, and last semester I had the great opportunity to intern for the Center for Interfaith Cooperation. As a part of my internship, I decided to develop a podcast so the CIC could appeal more to younger generations, have an archive of all the rich stories from the CIC's board members past and present, and have the opportunity to articulate the importance of interfaith. So far, I have recorded interviews with Judge Shaheed, Dr. Anita Joshi, Daniel Meyers, Bruce Garrison, Aarti Shah, Charlie Wiles, and Ashley Wagner. My goal is to record everyone's stories. Please use the link below to schedule a time for us to record your insights. I would love to hear from you. [https://calendly.com/podcastparticipation](https://calendly.com/podcastparticipation) If there is not a time that works for you, email me back and we can figure something out. There is a recording studio in Butler's library, which is where I attend school so that is open for us to use. However, if you need to meet at an alternate location, we can make that work too. Let me know what is best for you! As for the podcast itself, I want to hear about your involvement in the CIC, your faith journey, any and all faith-related stories, your reasons for interfaith, etc. There is no strict script of questions. I typically follow the conversation and insert questions as they come. As of now, the recordings have been roughly 20 min long. Thank you for your consideration, and I hope that we can set something up soon.

Best,
Rachel
# Appendix C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the CIC board member</th>
<th>Faith affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Wiles</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Anita Joshi</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muzaffar Ahmad</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverend Anastassia Zinke</td>
<td>Unitarian Universalist Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanev Shmukler</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Vimal Patel</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverend Brian Shivers</td>
<td>Presbyterian Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverend Bruce Garrison</td>
<td>Incorporates Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox teachings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canon Bruce Gray</td>
<td>Episcopalian Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Rick Ginther</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley Wagner</td>
<td>Pagan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don Knebel</td>
<td>Presbyterian Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Pierre Atlas</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ala’a Wafa</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Melton</td>
<td>Presbyterian Christian</td>
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<td>Betty Brandt</td>
<td>Methodist Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge Shaheed</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aarti Shah</td>
<td>Jain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imam Mikal Saahir</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel Meyers</td>
<td>United Church of Christ Christian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uzma Kazmi</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Wiederhold</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Cotterill</td>
<td>Protestant Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Pimental-Gannon</td>
<td>Born-again Catholic Christian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20)

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (New International Version)
Appendix E: Interviews

Charlie Wiles Interview

Rachel: Hello, everyone. My name is Rachel Koehler here, and we're starting our first episode of the podcast, and today I have the executive director of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, Charlie Wiles, with me, and to start things off we’re going to get a brief history of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation and the purpose behind it. So welcome Charlie!

Charlie: Thank you, Rachel, and it's really an honor to be here and to be starting this podcast where we can really collect people's stories for what religion means to them and how that religious identity intersects or interwinds with other people's religious identity.

Rachel: Yeah definitely. I know I've enjoyed my time with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation and I would love to hear more about the history and the purpose that you see behind it.

Charlie: Great! I was the director of an organization called Peace Learning Center, prior to the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, where we really explored conflict in a lot of different dimensions, so where conflict comes from, how we manage conflict successfully or not. We always said that violence was one way to address conflict. But what are other ways, and what are the consequences of trying to engage other ways, and what can we learn and how would that benefit our own lives and also benefit the communities we live in? So from that experience I became very interested in religion and what role religion plays particularly in conflicts around the world, but also just in own personal conflicts as we try to understand. I would say religion gives us an opportunity to really try to explore what is our relationship with the cosmos; why are we here; why were we born; why do we die; what is our relationship with our sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers; and then when you look collectively, what is our relationship with the community at large with government; and then how do we relate to the other faith communities that are in our community? So that's essentially where it started – where does religion and conflict and how we organize ourselves as people, where do those fit together?

Rachel: Interesting. And what part of your story do you think shaped your interest in interfaith and understanding this conflict and getting through it with people who may have different views than yourself?

These interviews reflect natural speech patterns. Therefore, there are parts that remain undecipherable and grammatically incorrect.
Charlie: Well that's an excellent question. I think it started with my grandparents. So I was born – my mother had a grandfather who was from Lebanon in the Middle East, beautiful country that didn't become Lebanon until the end of the Ottoman Empire around the end of the First World War. But I was always fascinated by going to my grandfather – his name was George Parker. His family name was Abu Faisal. So I did a lot of exploration and understanding – when did his father come to the United States, why did they come to the United States? I learned a lot about Lebanese culture, particularly through the foods. Whenever we would have a big meal at grandpa Parker's house, there was a lot of what I called “ethnic food” at the time when I was a child growing up. It was just like it was normal, right? Everybody had a Lebanese grandpa, and on my father’s side – my grandmother and grandfather on my father’s side – my name is Wiles which is kind of Scottish and Irish, and their family history didn't go back too far. He was a big fan of baseball. He distributed beer, lived on the southside of Indianapolis. Grandpa Parker and grandma Parker Genevieve were different. So I think that was the beginning part of understanding diversity just within my own family, and then as I grew older and recognized that other kids didn't have Lebanese grandfathers or grandmothers; their lives were a little different; the foods that they ate were a little different; and so that, I guess, started to be part of my identity. And then as I grew older and started at a Jesuit high school on the northside of Indianapolis, I met some Jewish friends. And I would go over to their house and then I would hear stories about the Middle East that were much different than the stories that I heard at grandpa Parker's house about the Middle East. And growing older I got interested again in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular, but really the Middle East as a whole, and how that all fit together. And I was always curious about identity. It wasn’t until I was twenty years old that I actually traveled to the Middle East, and I was fascinated by the people I would meet. Some would begin telling me their stories through their religious identity. Some would begin by talking about their ethnic identity, whether they were Arab or Jewish or Phoenician or Turkish. And then others would begin by talking about their national identity – “I am Israeli.” “I am Lebanese.” “I am Jordanian.” And so those identities, I think, really struck a chord, and I again began to explore my own identity and my own faith tradition. I grew up Catholic, so I started to take that a lot more seriously and wanted to understand the history of that and why did I end up becoming Catholic and exploring that with my parents and my family. And so I think that's kind of the birth at least for my own curiosity and why I was interested in forming something called the Center for Interfaith Cooperation.

Rachel: Yeah definitely, that's really cool. So looking at Catholicism and interfaith, do you think that you have this basis of Catholicism that has then been shaped by various faith traditions or how does this community, I guess, shape your faith, and the way you perceive others?

Charlie: Another good question because as I explored my Middle Eastern roots, I talked to my father. He actually converted to be Catholic. His grandparents were Seventh-Day Adventists, or his grandmother was – he said his grandfather didn't want to have anything to do with religion.
We just had this conversation the other day, but his grandmother was very devout Seventh-Day Adventist, and they study the Bible. In fact, she could quote the Bible almost verbatim at any time, and he was very impressed by that. He would go to the Bible study meetings. He remembered they always had really good food and a lot of good fellowship. And so even though he never took a real deep interest in the Bible, like I said, when he started elementary school, he was at a Catholic school downtown Indianapolis and he converted to Catholicism. My mother on the other side, the Lebanese side – my great grandmother was Maronite Christian, and they are a sect in the Middle East that identifies with the Vatican. The Pope is not their patriarch, but they do identify with the Vatican. And then my great grandfather was an Orthodox and the Orthodox have their own way of organizing that’s outside of the Catholic Church or the Pope. But everyone in the family said great grandma Parker – actually her name is Susie Freije – had the strong will, and when they came to the United States, that's why they ended up following the Maronite tradition of connecting with the Catholic community rather than an Orthodox community. And so that story always fascinated me. So I was really curious about my Catholic roots. When I was fourteen I stopped going to Catholic church. As a child I was enamored by Native American culture and I always romanticized Native Americans. I loved moccasins. And I loved being outdoors; I built tents in the backyard; I built fires; I love camping and hiking. I just love nature. And I thought Native Americans were identified very much with nature. I even moved to Arizona to go to college when I first started college in Flagstaff, Arizona. But I stopped going to church, and it wasn't until I came back, honestly, and after I started doing the interfaith work and became interested in people's identities, how their relationship to the cosmos was formed by their religious identities. And even the Native Americans that I lived in a group home with – several different Native American friends – when I was in Arizona, I was fascinated with their creation stories and their rituals and their practice and how that informed how they lived their lives. And so it wasn't until my mother died five years ago that I actually started going back to Catholic church on a regular basis. I became what I call a “practicing Catholic.” And my interfaith experience really did help form that because I was very curious about the liturgy – why do we start our prayers like this; what are the sacraments; where do they come from; how historically? Going to visit some of my Jewish friends going to the synagogue, a big thing the Center for Interfaith Cooperation does is host what we call “sacred places tours,” and we go to different houses of worship. We typically have a docent or someone knowledgeable, clergy, that will lead us on a tour and answer questions. And so I was very curious about the Torah and the Ark of the Covenant which is on the bimah in a synagogue and to be able to go up and open that and see, this is where our story begins as Christians through the story of Abraham, or honestly through Genesis through Adam and Eve and then through Abraham, through Exodus in the day of Abraham. And so I just found that very fascinating, and watching a Shabbat service gave me a lot of insights in how Christian services are organized because there's just a very deep connection. And so that has just really enriched my journey. I'm really fascinated by the Hebrew Bible – I say the “Hebrew Bible;” some people say the “Old Testament” – and how the Hebrew Bible connects through the prophets to Jesus Christ, the Messiah. I became much more of a
follower of Jesus Christ through my interfaith work and then reclaiming my Catholic identity and going to church with my father which I've been doing faithfully for the last five years.

Rachel: Interesting, so it sounds like your work with interfaith has strengthened your faith as a Catholic which is interesting. Have there been moments where it's challenged what you've thought and made you question your faith and your beliefs?

Charlie: Very much so. I used to say, when people asked, I used to say, “oh I come from a Catholic community. I'm a product of a Catholic community.” Because I wanted to give a lot of credit to the way my parents raised me and to the faith of my parents. And now I say, “I'm a Christian that practices a Catholic tradition.” Because I see all the different denominations, Christian denominations, whether that is one of the mainline Protestant – Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal – or Catholicism, or the underlying evangelical movement. We're all followers of Jesus Christ and he is our teacher. I call him our guru. He's the one who teaches us how to live our lives particularly through his example and through the Word. I love the concept of ‘the Word became flesh’ through the gospels. Quite often I'm challenged by the Catholic Church as an institution. And one thing I've learned about my interfaith, Rachel, is that all the different faith traditions are human institutions, right? We had a wonderful nun, Sister Norma Rocklage, she was one of our first Center for Interfaith Cooperation board members – and at one of our trainings she said, “I'm pretty sure God was here before there was ever a mosque or a synagogue or a church or any temple that was there to worship him,” and I can even use gender neutral language. I don't think God… I think God transcends gender from my perspective. Again, a big part of how I follow my Christian understanding is I don't have a firm grasp of who God is or how God represents. I look at almost every part of creation and say, “that's a miracle that was given to us by God,” so I see God in everything. But I have a hard time actually articulating, “This is God. This is the message.” The one thing I love about Jesus Christ and his teaching is the other thing that Jesus said was so important when the scribes challenged him was “to love God with all your heart, soul, mind” but he also said “love your neighbor as yourself.” And that's the part that I can take to heart and I can go out and love my neighbors and my neighbors of all faiths, of all stripes, of nonbelievers and believers and try to understand this massive creation that I'm a part of. And so that's how I try to understand my relationship with Jesus Christ through my relationship with my neighbors. And so it helped me shape it because in the Catholic Church time and again there are very challenging and troubling things that come from the Catholic Church – most recently, all the abuse scandals and how they've been covered up. And so that human institution, I have a lot of concerns about, doubts about, but I decided that I would like to be a change agent from within the Catholic Church, as opposed to outside, being critical. So I am a Catholic. I own that. I want to make the Catholic Church a better institution, more true to the Word, the way I understand the message of Jesus Christ. And so I picked Catholicism as a vehicle for me to try to understand and live my relationship with Jesus Christ.
Rachel: I completely understand that. I feel like I come from a similar viewpoint of just being uncertain in my faith which I'm completely comfortable with. And the fact that my faith... there's no way, in my opinion, to know that it is the complete truth, that there's a heaven, like being a Christian and all of this. But saying that somebody else is wrong... I just don't understand how you can do that if it's just built on uncertainty. I think that's the point of faith in general: to take that step and invest in something that is so uncertain. Once you become certain about it, then it's no longer faith.

Charlie: I call it “mystery.” When someone asks me, “Who is God? What is God?” I say, “that's the mystery, right, that I'm trying to unfold and trying to unfold it again by following the example of Jesus Christ.” And of the two messages that he said were most important or the two laws that were most important, the one that I can follow is “love my neighbor as myself,” and I fall short every day. But that's why I love, for instance, the Lord’s Prayer which again was handed down through our Jewish tradition. Jesus Christ was a wonderful follower of the Jewish tradition. He was a good adherent of Judaism when he lived here on the earth, so I'm sure that prayer – when the disciples asked him, “How should we pray to God?” and he gave them the Lord’s Prayer – came from Jewish tradition, so again part of that lineage and I love it: “forgive me for the things that I’ve done that are wrong and the things that I’ve failed to do that I could've done much better.” And that is a daily lesson for me.

Rachel: I completely understand. And then too, so some listeners may or may not have access to an interfaith community to uncover these differences and interconnectedness too, like with the Lord's Prayer, so what would you say to somebody who sees somebody of a different religion as an “other,” and coming from a Catholic perspective, what would you say to de-“other” Catholicism, if that makes sense? What are some common misconceptions?

Charlie: So how could people be comfortable trying to learn from and understand Catholicism, and how would a person who follows a tradition deeply and faithfully engage someone else and learn about their tradition? I think a lot starts with curiosity. We've been talking about this a lot lately because of the heated rhetoric that's in our society and some of the divisions. And we've seen god-awful violence, that’s been created, some people say, “in the name of religion,” whether that comes from Muslim tradition or Catholic tradition or Jewish tradition. And we see it everywhere. It's just so disparaging. But I think one thing – and this is something I've noticed about most of the folks – we have nine different distinct faith traditions on the CIC board of directors and then with denominations, we probably have twenty-five different denominations, so it's a rich gathering of people from all different traditions. But I think the one thing that's required – and you mentioned it earlier – I think if your faith doesn't teach you humility, then you probably would not have much interest in learning about other faith traditions or being part of a Center for Interfaith Cooperation. But I do feel like one of the first things I learned from my
faith is humility – that I am a mortal human being, that I have a limited time on this planet, to be in this dimension of creation. And then again, to love my neighbor as myself requires humility. So I think that's one of the ways that you could approach learning about someone else's faith tradition. And just simply asking, “What is the joy of your tradition? What are your rituals? Why do you practice them? What does that mean when you put…” you know the Hindus put a Bindi, a small dot on their forehead. And if you can approach someone with humility, I think they can really tell that you're curious and you just want to learn. I just went to a Diwali celebration on the request of someone who had visited one of our programs and said, “Come, come to the Diwali.” That's the Hindu New Year. It’s the festival of lights – a lot of food. And it just felt so warm and inviting to be inside their temple, to see all these amazing sights and sounds and colors and all the different statues and how they see the divine manifest on this planet. And they offered me all kinds of wonderful vegetarian food, and I just sat down and ate and I soaked it all in. I think that's probably one of the first steps: to be curious about someone else's tradition. And then once you've built trust and relationship, I bet they're going to be curious about what motivates you and your spirituality and your faith journey. And I think that there's just so much to learn and to gain from one another if you can approach it that way.

Rachel: Yeah, so looking at Catholicism from your view, how would you define it?

Charlie: Catholicism. So I think there was a big split in the twelfth/fourteenth century. A church was not always defined as a brick and mortar building. The traditions of priest, I think, came along sometime late, maybe a millennium ago. So I think to go back to Catholicism, just go back to Peter, and how just spreading the Word and building a church is having organized groups of people. I truly believe in Luke’s story, the Easter story, the resurrection story, where Jesus came back and told the gathering, “Where two or more gather in my name, that's me.” So when I try to understand the Trinity, I see God again as this infinite being with no beginning and no end – and again something I think I'll spend the rest of my life trying to understand and comprehend – and the beauty all the creation provides; Jesus as a messenger; Jesus as the ultimate prophet; Jesus as, again, the guru, someone that you can model your life after and follow his example. And then when we put our hands together, when we put our hearts and minds together and try to create a better community, a better society, when we try to help someone else, then we are the active Spirit that's part of that Trinity. And so that's how I see the Catholic Church. Now, when it started to form in Europe during tribal times before there were nation states, before there were governments, people gathered around the church as the way to build community, a way to keep records of births and deaths, as a way that you would be able to provide charity, or the way that you would be able to get atoned for your sins, and in a way to organize your life and understand “what is my role as a human being on this planet? Again, my relationship with the cosmos?” So I think the church in general and the Catholic Church at the time became the dominant force for that, and as they started to build big temples with gold and high spires and everything, I think that was just a very attractive force, and still is today. People try to build bigger churches or
bigger mosques or bigger synagogues to attract people. And particularly you think before there was any type of entertainment, right, what did you do? The church was the attractive thing, and that's where righteous people went. So I think over time – and this is where I think it got a little corrupted – that became powerful; that became the source of power; that became the source of the money and the finer things in life. And you can almost look back at some of the legacies of some of the popes and I think human beings are easily seduced by power and money and all the things that that can bring in this planet. And so, far be it for me to judge people, but I kind of see that's how people organized and how power was wielded back in those days. At some point, nation states were formed, the Treaty of Westphalia, you know, the history of Europe coming out of the Middle Ages, in the terrible wars that were fought because of all of that and the power structures. So I think that's where the Catholic Church has failed sometime when they got too far involved in politics and government. But I do feel the message has always been the same. One of my favorite parts of our church services on Sunday is when we clasped hands. In our church we still hold each other's hands. I know my dad's going to be on one side. I don't know who's going to be on the other side, and I always find that kind of exciting. And we recite the Lord’s Prayer, and the fact that that prayer has been recited again for millennia, for thousands of years, makes me feel connected to a tradition that goes back to Peter. And so that's how I like to use the Catholic Church. Now, the Vatican and Michelangelo and the Sistine chapel and all that… I think those are all beautiful things. I think those are creations that human beings have made to try to glorify God. I think if you put too much stock in that, here for me and for my spiritual journey, that's not the path that I want to follow. I want to follow the tradition where human beings come together in God's name and try to create a better community.

Rachel: I like that focus on humanity. I think that's important because often I struggle with seeing these institutions and, more or less, corrupting religion for their own gains and their own agendas. And sometimes that's where I lose faith. The shift of the focus just causes me to rethink my own Christianity and everything of that sort, so that's interesting that you brought that up, too. But looking at, just in general, faith and Christianity, are there some times that you may disagree with the institution or the faith itself or looking at what leaders of these faiths are speaking towards? And how do you reconcile with the differences in your own beliefs and the other adherents of these faiths?

Charlie: Very difficult, it's very difficult. And I think it's the constant challenge. And that's why I always try to go back again to what I say: “the Word became flesh.” I try to go back to gospel. I always feel like – and this is what I gain from my Jewish brothers and sisters – we come to church and people go to synagogue to hear the Word and to share the Word and to celebrate the Word. Because I don't know how your church liturgy is organized, but we go to Catholic church and we say a welcoming prayer and we kind of get established and everything. Everything leads up to when we open the gospel and read the Word together as a group. That's the climax. That's the penultimate reason for being there: sharing the gospel in a community. And then our priest…
I like our priest. He does a very good job of trying to explain the Word and how that Word should help us become better human beings when we leave church and for the coming week, right? So that's what I see as the good thing. The challenging thing is, like you said, when it becomes about judgment. And I'm as guilty as anybody because as much as I want to say the institution is corrupted, I see how the institution can be very good, and I contribute to the institution. I do make a very modest contribution every year to keep the church walls up and standing. But I do get so challenged when I hear the bickering that goes on, the accusations that are launched back and forth, the cover-ups that have happened because of the scandals, the fact that we will put more time and energy into trying to sustain an edifice or a church or a building and not put that focus on “how can we create a better society? Why can't we share?” I love the edicts that come from the Pope about how budgets are sacred things and that there should be no reason that someone would go hungry or lack healthcare, lack proper shelter or education for young people. That shouldn't happen in this planet. And so we're not fulfilling our ultimate purpose, I think, which is to create a better humanity, and so that's frustrating. I think the church could do a better job. I know I could do a better job. I think our society and our government could do a better job. I'm hoping that our religious motivations, our religious teachings from all different groups – because I think all different groups say similar things: we should be serving others; that's our ultimate goal as human beings – can lead us to that point what we do form governments and we do challenge our religious and government leaders to say “let's get about the real business, not building buildings or bigger armaments or building walls around our community, but building a better opportunity for everybody to have just a very basic reasonable healthy life where they can educate their children and contribute meaningfully and be taken care of when they're no longer able.”

Rachel: I like that refocus, definitely. And concluding too, so looking at the Center for Interfaith Cooperation and say somebody wants to become involved. What are some of the best ways to do that?

Charlie: We have a website. That’s such a great way to communicate, and people can go on the website. It's pretty thick. It's got lots of things. One of our main mission statements is to promote anything in the community that's going on where people can feel comfortable to go and learn about another faith tradition. So whether that's a film – we do a film series, actually in conjunction with Butler University where we are today, and the films have some type of religious dimension to them. After the film’s over, we have a conversation. I know you led one of those one time. So we think that's one way someone could be interested and learn and talk to other people about some of the things they're curious about in their own spiritual journey and how they coincide with others. And we have everything even more in depth: going to visit houses of worship. We're putting together a schedule for the spring where people can visit different houses of worship. We had two Spirit In Place events last week. One was religious women speaking out about women's role in society and how that's an evolving role and some of
the challenges they're facing. We had another one just about food, just about the food hummus and how hummus is shared by many different cultures and for many different religions and how that can be contentious and how that can be a very nice way to bring people together to break bread at a table. And we explored both. So we do take on some of the edgy topics, but we try to do it through a common mechanism, like food, like religious practice. We try to celebrate different religions. So I mentioned there was a Diwali celebration, the Hindu New Year. We have a very vibrant Hindu community in Indianapolis, and it's a great way to visit and start a conversation with someone that might be Hindu or some neighbor or a coworker or someone at your school or someone on your soccer league or someone you might run into at the grocery store. So again we try to create lots of opportunities where people can start to explore the different religions that all call central Indiana “home,” and we really try to fashion it in a way where it can enhance your own faith journey. And I think to a person, anyone who visits and participates in our program says, “That was interesting. That made me more curious about my own faith journey.” It had them become a deeper adherent in their own religion and not necessarily challenge them to move to another. I think that's a very very rare case when someone would visit one of our programs and then join a different faith tradition. But if they do, more power to do them. But that is rare. In fact, I've never heard it happen in the seven years we’ve been in existence.

Rachel: Very cool. Well, thank you so much for joining us. And I know I’ve really enjoyed my internship with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation and would recommend for anybody to come to any of the certain events that they put on. But again, thank you so much for being here.

Charlie: Thank you. That was good.
Ashley Wagner Interview

Rachel: Today, we have Ashley Wagner. Welcome Ashley.

Ashley: Thank you for having me.

Rachel: Awesome, so Ashley could you give us a little bit about yourself, and how you became involved with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation?

Ashley: Sure. Well I am the board member that is representing the Pagan community. I myself am Wiccan...mostly. I became involved in interfaith work. Charlie Wiles actually approached one of our community members who does some events at the InterChurch and asked them if they wanted to be on the board. That group, which is IPCOD, the Indiana Pagan Community Outreach and Dialogue, decided to open it up to the entire community because one, they knew that the community is bigger than just that one group that the CIC had been exposed to and two, they were too busy and didn't have time to do anything like that. We got together, and they picked out community members who were active members of the community, people who were leaders of groups that were really active in the community - some of the old guard is what we call them for some of our elders. We had several meetings and let me tell you getting pagans to meet together is like herding ferrets. It's very difficult to get them all to agree on a time and place to meet. We managed to do it a couple of times. John at the CIC came and explained what the board membership would be like and what they were needing in a board member and we took a vote which was an interesting process as well. There were, I think, three or four candidates for the board membership. We took a vote within the pagan community, so it's even different than what was done for voting at the CIC. There were three or four people that were put up for the position. You had to be nominated by somebody else. You couldn't nominate yourself. You had to submit a resume. Writing a resume out as a Pagan was like what do I put on here? Then, people read those over. People submitted their votes. They were counted by an impartial third party who was actually not part of our voting process, and it was decided that I was the winner. They submitted that to the CIC, and the CIC has to do their process and everything. And here I am.

Rachel: Wow that's an accomplishment. You're representing.

Ashley: Getting them together to vote on something was an accomplishment in and of itself.

Rachel: That's awesome, so do you commit full-time to work in the pagan community or do you also have a job outside?

Ashley: I have a job. Like most pagans, we don't have permanent clergy where that's all they do.
When I say the pagan community, we are talking about a collection of hundreds of different religious paths. Pagan is not a religion. Pagan is a group of religious practices. There are literally hundreds if not thousands of different ways to be pagan, so having one representative for the entire pagan community in just Indianapolis is representing an astounding number of denominations. We don't have churches or synagogues or mosques or anything like that where our clergy can practice their faith full-time. We don't have anything like that. We don't have any funds or sacred spaces that are permanent to us right now. There are couple places in the world where they do have things like that, but that's a really rare occurrence, so most people that are clergy within the pagan community, which I am actually clergy, they have outside jobs. Unless they are retired from whatever job it is that they had before that, they mostly have day jobs, so I do have a day job. I work in an office. I talk to people on the phone and solve their problems for them and things like that.

Rachel: So how has this been a part of your faith journey? How did you become pagan and if that’s the right term? Would you consider yourself pagan or is there another term that you would take on?

Ashley: I do consider myself pagan, and I consider myself pagan because some of the more specific terms don't always apply to me. I came up being Wiccan, but sometimes even I don't think that fully describes my personal spiritual path because it is a very personal spiritual path. From a young age, I knew that I was different spiritually than other people. I got kicked out of Sunday school when I was really little for asking too many questions and the wrong questions apparently. They didn't want me coming back anymore which turned out to be fine because my parents really encouraged questions of all kinds. They encouraged questions of our surroundings, about things we saw on the news or on TV, about our religion… I remember being really frustrated as a little girl and I going to my dad and asking a question and he would say we'll go look it up. That was so frustrating to me at the time, and I said, “I don't want to look it up. I just want you to tell me the answer,” and it was “go look it up.” Then, I would come back, and we would talk about the answer and what it actually meant and if I understood the answer and if I didn't understand the answer he would explain it a little more in detail for somebody my age. That ended up being really beneficial for me later on in life because when I got to the age where I was in school, and they were teaching, I remember this really specifically, they were teaching us about stereotypes. What a stereotype is, and how people come up with stereotypes and if there's any kind of truth behind them or where that stereotype may have come from. I started thinking about how Halloween is my favorite holiday ever. I wondered why witches have green faces and pointy hats and nobody could tell me, so like my dad said to do, I looked it up. I went to the library, which you wouldn't think there'd be a lot of pagan information in the library in the early nineties, and there wasn't a whole lot, but there was some. One of the first books I found was the encyclopedia of witches and witchcraft, and I read it and the more I read about it the more I thought that's already something that I believe so that makes sense to me on an
intellectual level and then the more I learned about the spirituality of it the more I thought that this is really the right path for me to go on. It was thanks to my parents encouraging me to look it up and learn it for myself that I started on this path and I think that they kicked themselves about that later because they had a very hard time accepting my religious choice because it was so different from what I had been raised in. It's been twenty-five-year journey since then. I was ten years old when I started practicing and studying witchcraft and Wicca, specifically, and that sounds like a really young age to a lot of people, especially when I was a lot younger than I am now. It sounded really young and it kind of is, but when you think about how early kids are exposed to the religion of their parents, it is really quite old to be choosing a religion. Most people that are currently in the community choose a lot later in life. There aren't as many people that are like me that are in it from a very young age becoming Wiccan although there are some other forms of paganism and there's even fewer that are actually born into being pagan. Most pagans are converts of some other religious practice, usually Christianity, a lot of times Catholicism, so everybody has similar beginnings just maybe not at the same age. A lot of pagans you will hear when they talk about how they first came to paganism it's “I started reading about all the major religions,” because we all do we all read about the major religions first, and then they start coming to different forms of paganism, and they realize how much that already coincides with the things that they already believed and how much it contradicts things that they feel uncomfortable with in mainstream religion. For a lot of them, they describe it as “a coming home.” It feels right. It feels like their soul is lighter when they talk about paganism, when they think about paganism it's a lighter for them because the burden of following a religious path that's really not your own is very heavy no matter what your religious path is. If you're trying to follow something that doesn't actually feed your soul, it's a really heavy burden that you carry with you.

Rachel: I can imagine. That's the process, and I feel like it takes a lot for people to sit down and really develop their own beliefs. I feel like all my life, for the most part, I believed what my parents did. It wasn't until I came to college that I really was given that space to decide for myself what I wanted to commit to.

Ashley: A lot of people discover paganism in one form or another when they're in college because that is a really formative time in your life. It's the first time for most people that they are away from their parents. The first time that they have to do those things by themselves. They're exposed more to a lot more cultural differences than they were in their hometown and in their house and their high school. That’s a really common time for people to discover it. I guess I'm an odd person because I was ten.

Rachel: That’s fascinating. Now, looking at, and I know this is going to be hard to fully describe, but looking at paganism for somebody who has no idea what this looks like, is there any way that you could explain that to a listener?
Ashley: So paganism is a lot more about what we don't share in common with the major religions and about what we do share in common with ourselves. So pagans by and large and this is not… okay. There's no absolutes in paganism. The first time you say “we all pagans are like this” there's going to be some group who is going to say “no, we're not like that at all. In fact, here's six reasons why we're not like that,” but there's a lot of things that we do have in common. A lot of pagans are polytheistic, so they believe in many different gods even if they don't worship many different gods, they don't discount that those other gods exist within the greater work of the universe. You may only work with Isis and that's your main patron goddess. Isis is a really common one for people to worship. But you don't discount the existence of somebody like Freya or Bunagaya. You know many other different entities and gods and spirits and things like that. You know that they exist it's just not the one that you concentrate on. We believe in different gods. They're just not always the one that we work with primarily, and some people only ever work with one god, and they never work with any other ones, but some people don't work with gods at all. Some people only work with spirits of the land, and it depends on the person if they're working on spirits of the land that they currently inhabit or spirits of the land from their ancestors, which are different things especially here in the United States where most of the people that practice paganism are not from this country except for our immigrant parents and grandparents and great grandparents et cetera et cetera. There's also people that work with ancestors, solely. They don't work with any kind of divine beings of any kind. They work with their ancestral spirits only. And it's not just their ancestral spirits, but the ancestral spirits of all of humanity so it's not necessarily just by their bloodline, but it's other bloodlines too. They maybe pray to Nefertiti, as a great Egyptian queen, even if that's not in their bloodline. They feel some kind of kinship with her as a person in the world. You have to be careful with things like that though because you don't want to overstep the bounds of cultural appropriation.

Rachel: I didn’t think about that. So could you be pagan and also be Christian or another religion?

Ashley: There's some debate about that because one of the things that defines paganism is that it's not one of the big five. The big five being Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Technically the dictionary definition of somebody who's pagan is they don't belong to one of those five things. Now you have pagans and then you have the different denominations of pagans like Wiccans et cetera et cetera but then you have people who practice witchcraft while often part of pagan practices is not necessarily pagan. You can be Christian and practice witchcraft. You can be a Buddhist and practice witchcraft. You can be Muslim and practice witchcraft. You can be all of these other religions and practice witchcraft, and it's not the same as being pagan of any kind because it's a different type of practice.
Rachel: That’s a good distinction, and then looking at you, since I know there's so many different ways, how do you particularly practice?

Ashley: I am eclectic. Some people don't like people that are eclectic because they don't think that we have any kind of standards of belief in any way, but we really do. It's just more on a personal level and not on a level of everybody that practices this way, does things this way. It's this is my practice, and this is the way that I always do it so that's the way that I govern myself. I am eclectic, so I take practices from different types of paganism and the things that I like I keep and the things that I don't like I don't keep and I think that it's thanks to writers like Scott Cunningham that I learned that I was able to do that. Scott Cunningham is one my favorite pagan authors of all time and in one of his books he specifically states that if you don't like something and it's not working for you, don't do it because it's not going to give you anything. It's not going to help you on your special path in any way. It's not going to add to your experience during the ritual so just don't do it and that was one of the best pieces of advice that I ever got growing up being pagan. You don't have to do all the things that they say you have to do. You don't have to have all the things they say you should need to have in your practice as far as tools and spaces and things like that, clothing. You don't have to have all those things if it doesn't benefit you. One of the reasons why you would have those things is because it is a psychological tool to help you focus your mind and focus your energy. You have that in every religion. Catholicism has a lot of props. Paganism has a lot of props. Everybody's got props, and if it helps you focus, go for it. Use it. There are lots of props that I do use, but I can just as easily go and sit out in the middle of the woods and have a ritual with the sticks and the stones around me then I can have in my own home with my formal altar set up and all of my stuff that’s around me.

Rachel: So are there continuous practices that you do? Or do you just feel it in the moment and take on what benefits you most in the moment since you say you go into nature and you see these tools? Or is there a particular process that you go through each time?

Ashley: I think that depends on your practice. Some people are really good at spontaneous ritual, and they open their mouth and all these beautiful poetic words flow out and some people even when it's written down and if you the paper in front of them, they stumble over the words. I think that depends on your practice. I do it both ways. Some rituals are very planned out. There are rituals that you're supposed to do every year during certain times of the year. We have a calendar, a religious calendar in Wicca. Specifically, it's called the Wheel of the Year. A lot of pagan communities use those holidays or similar holidays or some of the holidays and not all of them. In Wicca, you also have the 13 full moons and you have the dark of the moon as well and ideally, if you're really good and really devout you do all of those things, but again ritual is something that you do over and over and over again. It becomes part of your routine, so if your ritual whatever for the full moon is to have this big elaborate set up with wine and cakes and lots of candles and incense and chanting and flowy skirts and brooms, that's great. If that's your thing,
I applaud your dedication and your willingness to set up all that stuff and clean it up at the end of the night. My full moon ritual most of the time is saying “hey, it's a full moon. Let's talk to the full moon a while and see how she's doing, and let's talk to the spirits and let's talk to her ancestors and we'll share some drink and some food and maybe light some incense if we are really feeling fancy. My full moon rituals are usually really simple. It also depends on if you're in a group or if you're by yourself. Your solo rituals are probably going to be really different than if you're having a lot of people with you. It's also going to depend on if you're just a participant in the ritual, if you're just a witness in the ritual or if you're the leader of the ritual. It kind of depends on the situation. We don't always have the same people leading the ritual each time. Sometimes it changes depending on what the ritual is, who feels the connection to the god that's highlighted in that ritual, who really loves that time of year, or sometimes it’s just about whose turn it is. It really just depends. There's a lot of factors going in it.

Rachel: Definitely and you said sometimes that's community and sometimes that’s solo. So some people do share a commonality to come together to worship together?

Ashley: Yes, it's different than it is in some of the bigger religions. Pagan rituals are a lot smaller, generally. A typical group depending on what you call them a grove, a coven, a kindred, or just circle is usually between five and ten people. I mean that's pretty average for a group. They're usually very small groups. People work very intimately with one another. It’s a very different dynamic than if you go to church even if you go to a small church. You probably have more people than that there, and you probably don't know everything there is to know about everybody in your church. When you're in a pagan group a lot of times, you will pretty much know everything about everybody. It's very close knit. It’s an extremely intimate relationship, and I'm not talking like sexually intimate. It's emotionally intimate, which is sometimes so much more intimate than other types of intimacy. It's very small groups. Groups are usually not really formalized. They're not really connected with one another. I have belonged to several groups all at the same time and as long as our rituals don't clash with one another, I can go to all of those rituals at the same time, but probably I would say most people that practice paganism one kind or another are solitary practitioners. It’s because a lot of them don't know that there are other pagans in their community, or they know that there probably are, but they don't know how to find them. Pagan groups are usually really picky about who they let into their group. We don't want people that are there to just observe and that's all that they're there to do. We want people who actually want to take place in the spirituality and the practice of it. You can go to an open pagan ritual, but you're not just going to sit on the sidelines and do nothing. You're going to be in the circle with everybody else, moving with everybody else. If you know the words, you will be chanting with everybody else, you know raising your hand, standing, sitting, dancing, climbing trees, whatever it is the ritual calls for at that point. You're going to be active in the ritual even if you don't have an active speaking part in the ritual. You can't just be a casual observer for paganism, and some people come in and try to be that. They just want to watch, and we're not
really into voyeurism in that sense. We get a lot of people that are just doing it because they're trying to rebel against some kind of authority, usually their parents. Being pagan is hard, and it's not for the casual person and we really try to discourage people that are just doing it to do it. Well do it on your own for a while first because you work so intimately with people. You also want to make sure that you can work with those people, so you can't just go to pagan gathering and say “Hey, I want to be part of this group” and expect to say “Welcome aboard. Come along! Here's your athame.” You have to practice with these people for a while. You have to get to know them on a personal level because it's such a personal experience and emotional bond that you create with these people that you practice with. We do have groups that get together. There are a lot of groups that get together. Most groups don't really last that long because of many different reasons, but most people are solitary practitioners or the group will break up and go spread to other groups and be a part of those groups and then those groups will break up. It's just kind of like a life cycle and that's something that we pay a lot of attention to is the life cycle of earth and ourselves but also our groups too. When it's time to disband as a group, it’s time to disband as a group. That's what you do.

Rachel: That makes sense. So if someone were wanting to learn more or interested in pursuing this path, would you recommend making that their personal journey, so going about their research and understanding by themselves? Because it sounds like if you wanted to become involved in that community you’d want to know your personal understanding and beliefs going in.

Ashley: It's good to know your personal understanding and beliefs going in, but a lot of people do need help. They don't know where to start. There's a lot of information out there, and it's really hard to sort through the information that's good information and the information that's bad information. When I was really young studying, a teacher told me to read everything you possibly can. Even the bad things will give you information and usually that information is how to spot the bad things. That was when the Internet was really new. Today, there's so much information. People are inundated. There's websites you can go, there's Facebook groups that you can join at and there's just so much out there that people get really overwhelmed. They don't know where to start. There's quite a few New Age shops and pagan shops in the Indianapolis area actually, and even when you go into those shops, it's still really overwhelming to new people because they don't know what to look for. They don't know what they're supposed to be getting. They don't know who the good authors to read and the authors that well their theories may be good, but all of their information that they were basing this on has been debunked because it was written by Margaret Murray and she's been debunked. It's really difficult to know as a new person today where to start, so when starting, I like to have pagan show up at events. Every month, we have pagan night out. There is a Facebook event for it, so go check it out. We meet once a month, and it's really just a networking and socializing event. We have new people come in, and there are regulars. I've gone to almost every pagan night out every month for the
past six years. It evolves. People have come and gone. People show up sometimes and don't show up other times. We have people that come rarely and every time they come it's a big deal because they never get out of the house, and we have people that come all the time. We have new people who show up all the time. Just this past month in November, we had several new people that came that had never been to a pagan night out before. The month before that we had several people that had never been to a pagan night out before, so that's a good way and that's where I've met a lot of the people that I'm currently friends is as pagan night out because there is no obligation to be part of a ritual at that time. There's no expectation that you have to stick with this group. It's just for socializing and networking. You can learn the different groups that are there. You get a really good feel for the types of people that are involved in the community and are active in the community when you go to events like that. There are other things around the city. If you go to Facebook, which Facebook has its issues. I have issues with Facebook, but we do use it a lot for networking. So there are going to be a lot of events listed on Facebook for groups and then in the Indianapolis area or beyond that you can go to because we use that a lot for networking.

We have Pagan Pride Day. This year it's going to be October 5th, I think. It's the first Saturday in October at the Marion County fairgrounds and Pagan Pride Day is going to be in its 22nd year here, I believe, so it's been going for a long time and sometimes people come from not just across the state but from other parts of the country to come to our Pagan Pride Day here. For some Pagans that's the only time that they see other pagans is at pagan pride day, so we do exist. We do have community outreach through several different groups. We have community events that happen. It's just a matter of knowing where to start and that can definitely be really overwhelming, and I do recommend people starting with a friend to get some advice on what to read and where to go.

Rachel: Yeah definitely and I know that probably helps some misconceptions too. Looking at Paganism have you encountered those misconceptions, and how do you feel when somebody has this preconceived notion? How do you try to debunk that?

Ashley: Yeah so I am really grateful for pop culture because it has shown a favorable light, for the most part, on paganism, right now. When I was growing up, I was just like every other young pagan. I was angry about everything all the time. That's a normal stage for pagans to be in, so don't get offended if we're like that. I was offended really easily when people would get stuff wrong, and it wasn't just that they were getting stuff wrong it's that they were being offensive. They were literally trying to be offensive. They would call me a devil worshiper. They would ask me if I ate babies. Men often assume that I'm extremely promiscuous because I'm pagan which is really laughable. It's the things that people would say to me that you're going to hell constantly. People would say that I was going to hell I'm not going to lie. It's really difficult to date as a pagan because you can be having a really good date with a guy and then you know if a few dates in the subject of religion comes up and you say well I'm pagan. They're out the door faster than you can blink because they think that you're going to curse them or something like that. People
get scared of us more than anything. I really blame the teachings that they were given as a child of what pagan means. The people that study Christianity called pagans nonbelievers and that's not true. I mean we believe in a lot of different things. We just don't believe in what you believe and that's why we're called nonbelievers. Pagan actually comes from an old Roman word that really just means country dweller which all that actually meant was somebody you didn't practice the state religion, so at one time everybody was pagan. It just met somebody who didn't practice the state religion and in Rome, it was the Roman religion. Rome would go out and conquer all these surrounding peoples, and the people that didn't practice the Roman religion were pagans. They had their own country gods that they practiced with and that's where the term actually comes from. There's a lot of misconception about where the word comes from and what it means today and what pagans actually do. We don't eat babies. First of all, there's way too much fat on babies, and there's not a steady supply. That's a joke. That's really a joke. We don't worship Satan because Satan is a construct of Christianity and we're not Christian. There are people that count themselves as part of the pagan community that are called Luciferians that do practice with the archangel Lucifer, but that's not the same thing as Satan and even people that study Christianity will know that's not the same thing as Satan or the devil. There's a lot of gods in paganism that look like the devil or act like the devil as you see in Christianity, but that's where Christians got that idea of what the devil looks like and acts like. It's from these pagan gods of people that were eventually taken over once Christianity became the big thing. There's a lot of misconceptions about who we are and what we do. We do have a set of morality. It's just not predicated on whether or not we're going to be punished by a divine being later on for it in the afterlife. I don't kill people because I don't want to kill people. Taking away their life is wrong. It’s not up to me to decide what they do with their life. Now if they're hurting other people, yes I am going to stop them, but if they're not hurting anybody and all they are doing is living their life to the best of their abilities and trying to get through the world. There's no reason for me to tell them to stop.

Rachel: I feel like that's general humanity at that point, so looking at interfaith in particular and your interest in that and wanting to become a part of that community. How have you found a sense of support with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation? Has it been difficult to maneuver amongst different religions or is it easy to find a commonality?

Ashley: With some people in the CIC it's been easy to find a commonality because I think those are the ones that are more open to questioning what paganism is, and they have their assumptions but maybe my assumptions are not right because she looks pretty freaking normal to me. They're more open to asking questions and receiving answers and then saying, “oh well we do this in my faith, too. Wow, that's not really that different,” and I say, “No, it’s not is it.” There have been people that have not been quite as open, and I think they just don't know what to do. I don't know if it's because they're bad people or they are not accepting of my faith. They just don't know what to do. They've never been around somebody who's pagan. They sometimes don't know what to ask because they're afraid that I am going to be offended or they just don't know what to ask or
maybe some of them might actually just be afraid of me, which is fine. Working with the CIC in some ways has been harder and in some ways has been easier than working with in my own community. Within my own community, I am just another person. I don't have any special powers. I don't have any special authority really other than what they give me. Whereas with the CIC, I'm a novelty. If they have a question about paganism and what might be appropriate, they're going to come to me. I'm the person to go to. It's great, but it is a lot of responsibility. I have found that navigating the different religions within paganism is much more difficult than navigating the different religions within the CIC because again for the most part a lot of the people that are at the CIC are there to learn and are there to facilitate those interfaith relationships. Whereas in the pagan community, there is only now starting to be a sense of we really need to come together as a community and support each other as a community and not just as separate groups doing things. Just now within the pagan community, we've been having more of “Well your group is doing this. Is it an open ritual? Great I want to come to that. I'll get the details at Facebook.”

Rachel: So do you find that it may need to start in the pagan community, the sense of identity of some sort, in order to facilitate an interfaith dialogue amongst different faiths?

Ashley: Absolutely, we are having a lot of discussions right now and a lot of dialogue right now within the pagan community as to what our community is going to look like. My personal opinion about it is that we can't be exclusionary in our community. There's a lot of politics involved. There's a lot of “this is the way we've always done it, so this is the we were going to continue to do it” within the pagan community, which doesn't really work because if you wanted to stick with the way that it was always done just because we had always done it that way paganism would not exist in its current form in the first place. While I appreciate the old guard and our elders and what they did for us, the things that they did for us coming up in the fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties. I will always be indebted to the things that they fought for and the things that they accomplished for us. I mean I remember when in the state of Indiana you could get your kids taken away for being pagan, and I remember when you couldn't anymore get your kids get taken away. It was very recently. I remember when the very first times that they were allowing pentagrams on the headstones of soldiers who had died to be buried at Arlington cemetery and other military cemeteries. There was a time when you couldn't have that. Your choice was a cross or a Star of David or nothing, I think. Now, you can have several things on your tombstone. I know you can have a pentacle. You can have an awene and couple of other things, too, but I remember hearing on the news when you could finally have pentacle on your gravestone. I remember these things. These are within my lifetime as a millennial, so I will always be grateful for the things that I know our elders did for us. The wars they fought for us. The things that they championed when nobody else would champion for us, but their job’s done now, and it's time for the younger generations to pick up that mantle and continue to fight the continued fight for LGBTQ rights, to continue to fight for women's rights, and the rights of
immigrants and refugees, and things like that. People that we want to have in our community. We cannot have a strong community when excluding those types of people. We need them in our community to survive and to continue to move forward as a group and as a religion. If religion doesn't change with the times, it cannot be the religion of man. I don't remember who said that, but it was somebody who is much more famous than me. It is very true because if your religion doesn't change and stays stagnant it can't survive. We have religions within the pagan community that are dying. Traditions that are dying because they refuse to change. They refuse to update their old ideas of only having men and women in equal numbers, and you can't have anybody whose LGBTQ in that group because it goes against the tradition. Those religions are dying, and so be it, if they die out. If that's why they're dying, then we probably don't need them anyway. I'm going to get a lot of crap for this if somebody from one of those communities hear me, but it's true. We need to evolve as a community. We are in the throes of deciding what our community is going to look like, and I personally want it to look like so many shades of the rainbow and so many shades of gray and all of the colors in the world and every denomination. There should be no limits to how you worship the divine and excluding somebody just because they do it differently then you is not okay. I mean there are some caveats to that, of course. People who are just actually evil people and do evil things don't belong in our community, but other than that, it should be pretty open. We shouldn't be sequestering ourselves.

Rachel: That's the definition of interfaith.

Ashley: Yeah.

Rachel: From what I see it.

Ashley: Yeah, so it's been a lot harder within the pagan community because you have this reverence for the old gods and the old ways and therefore, you're supposed to have reverence for your older and the old guard, but they're not continuing to change. Their job is done. It's our turn. They're having a difficult time giving that up, so it's been a lot harder. It's been a struggle especially within the last couple of years.

Rachel: I feel like part of what's liberating about paganism is that you can make it your own, and it is an evolving faith whereas so many do have that rooted history that is institutionalized and “this is the way things are” mentality, and this is the way they worship, and there is nothing wrong with that, but I think that's one of the great things about paganism from what you've been saying.

Ashley: Yeah it certainly is a changing religion. The old gods that we worship these days and call by their ancient names are not the same ones that people at that time worshiped. Their personalities and their motivations have changed because ultimately the gods that you worship is
reflective of the people and the person that you are. If your God is vengeful and wrathful, what does that say about your society. If your God is loving and accepting what does that say about your society. If your God used to be one way and is now something different, what does that say about your society. The gods are reflections of ourselves. I know a lot of people are like “well the gods created us,” and that's fine if that's what they want to believe, but they are reflections of ourselves. There's nobody that's not going to argue that the gods are archetypes of human behavior, so how you work with those gods and how they reflect your behavior is very telling of your society.

Rachel: Thank you so much, Ashley for being here.
Judge David Shaheed interview

Rachel: Today we have a Judge Shaheed. Welcome Judge.

Judge: Thank you.

Rachel: Yeah and so if you want to just start out by introducing yourself, telling the listeners a little bit about what you do in your day-to-day life and your connection with the CIC.

Judge: Yes absolutely yes. I’m what I call a semi-retired judge in the sense that I still do work as a judge but in the state court for Marion County where I was a judge for over twenty years, they have what you call senior status, so I'm there as other judges who are elected need me but I also teach a class at IUPUI for the School of Public and Environmental Affairs on criminal justice. And then I'm also involved in boards and commissions. I'm on the ABA American Bar Association commission on lawyers assistance programs, and I will be the chair of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation starting January 2019.

Rachel: How did you get connected initially with the CIC?

Judge: My initial connection was really two-fold. One is that I've been involved in interfaith dialogue for a number of years for which I am very proud, but then I also am friends with Charlie Wiles who is the executive director. Charlie and I go back to a time when he was the executive director for the Peace Learning Center, so he has a very strong sense of justice and fairness. When I heard that he was trying to start the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, he asked me to be involved, and of course I wanted to be involved. Since I retired formally from being a full-time judge, I have more time to devote and that's how I ended up as chair for the Center for Interfaith Cooperation.

Rachel: So you have been a part since the very beginning.

Judge: Oh yes yes and even before the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, there was an organization called the Interfaith Alliance of Indianapolis, and I was president for that at one point, but that actually predates the CIC.

Rachel: Tell us first all about your faith journey and why that informs your desire to join in with interfaith work.

Judge: Yes, well I was actually raised as a Christian, and my parents went to Bethel AME Church, Bethel African American Episcopal Church and it was founded by Richard Allen
because at that time in the eighteen hundreds, blacks, African-Americans, couldn't worship with whites and so he started his own version of the Methodist Episcopal Church. So it was the African American Episcopal Church and so I grew up in that church. But as I became a young adult, there were certain aspects of Christianity that I had difficulty with and the more I learned in particular about Islam in many ways it appealed to me and because so many Africans who were brought to the Americas as a part of the slave trade were Muslim there was a natural kind of reconnection for me with the faith of Islam and so I became a Muslim shortly after college and started practicing.

Rachel: And looking too at your day-to-day how do you carry out your faith or live out your faith?

Judge: One of the aspects of Islam that resonates for me and is particularly helpful to me with respect to my life and how I live my life are the five daily prayers. As a part of you know the life of a Muslim if one takes advantage of the prayer life and I use those terms take advantage of the prayer life because God doesn't punish us if we miss a prayer. But for me, the prayer life, you know the five daily prayers, are an essential part of my life and a way of staying connected to the will of God because we say those prayers and as part of saying those prayers it causes us to disconnect from whatever we're involved with during the day at that particular time and when the prayers come in, you know there are certain times day of when the prayer happens if we break away from whatever we're doing and make those prayers, it is a way of reconnecting and orienting our lives to that which is the most important and that is trying to be a servant of God and one of the best ways that we serve God is with the prayer life.

Rachel: Regarding that story in general were there challenges that you faced in figuring out faith because it sounds like you have a lot of questions going on so what did that process look like?

Judge: One of the main difficulties that I had with Christianity and because those who are listening will be unable to know my age and that is the easiest way to describe my faith journey so to speak is that I'm a child of the sixties and so the sixties are I think very much associated with the civil rights movement and effort of African-Americans to obtain civil rights with respect to housing, education, public accommodations, all those things were, voting. I can remember the struggle for those particular rights and for me, the church was for the most part silent in those discussions. There were some people of faith in the Christian church who stepped forward. There were many Jewish people that stepped forward, but the idea that as I was introduced to Christianity, the concept of Jesus always being depicted as a Caucasian young man and all the angels who are Caucasian and never saw any black angels I never saw any Hispanic angels or Chinese looking angels you know all of the angels were white and then you know if you look at representations in the arts of religion all the figures are depicted as white. So to leave that was a conflict because I could not imagine a loving, compassionate, all-encompassing God that would
only anoint as His chosen Caucasian people and so that caused difficulty for me and caused me to start looking in another direction for religious devotion and so Islam represented that for me because in Islam you know Jesus is a prophet. Moses is a prophet. Adam is a prophet. Mohammad is a prophet. So the prophet is seen as the most lofty position a human being can attain but at the same time that human being is still human being with flaws, faults, insecurities, difficulties, but that individual devoted to God is trying to please the one all-encompassing God who is the Creator of sustainable life and to me that resonated and it was easier for me to accept as a way to live my life respecting all the prophets but recognizing all the prophets as men and women you know who serve God and that God is separate and distinct and has no part, no associates, no sons, daughters or offspring.

Rachel: Yeah, some things that I've just never thought about before in looking at my own faith and representation because coming from a female perspective, there are certain issues I hold too in regards to my representation in Christianity, which is my faith tradition, so I can understand to some extent that challenge. Was there any controversy within your family maybe and growing up and then switching faiths?

Judge: Well actually my mother had no problem at all. She wanted to understand the religion because she didn't know anything about Islam until I started telling her I was thinking about becoming a Muslim so forth and so you know she actually visited with me and so she had a better understanding firsthand about what was involved. I was married and had been married about a year when I really decided to change my faith perspective. My mother-in-law on the other hand had some difficulty with Islam and especially when her daughter, my wife, decided to become a Muslim also because I became a Muslim first. My wife became Muslim and so my mother-in-law had some difficulties initially because we were living in a small community. People knew me and they were critical of my decisions. She heard about it, and she felt embarrassed that her family was involved in this religion that she knew nothing about but over time she came to appreciate that I was a better person as a Muslim than I was before. -

Rachel: Looking too at Indianapolis this has probably informed your reason to join interfaith in general too and just promoting that understanding.

Judge: Yes absolutely yes because unfortunately I have to admit in all honesty that there are some radical and extreme elements in Islam and those can't be explained away. I mean there are people that have what I consider a very extremist view of Islam that is not represented in the Quran as I've read the Quran and it is not represented of prophet Mohammed who is the prophet of the religion because prophet Mohammed was not hostile to Christians, was not hostile to Jews… Of course, he was trying to establish a religion but just outright hostility to the point that people are of a different faith was not part of his tradition and is not at all mentioned in the Quran and so I felt it was very important for me as a Muslim who knew and who knows what is
proper Islam to be involved in interfaith and let people know that what they see sometimes in Africa, some Middle Eastern countries is not representative of Islam as I've come to know and appreciate it and trying to live it.

Rachel: Have you found amongst the interfaith community that support and a mutual understanding?

Judge: Yeah, I think what happens is an interfaith setting people have committed to learn about other faith traditions, so they're open to learn. The difficulty is that a lot of people, and I wouldn't say the majority of people, but there are many people who are not willing to stray away from what is their belief system and so they take what is presented in the media when there are events that are unfortunate as oh that's what Islam is about you know they're trying to slaughter Christians, they have no regard for Islam or they're trying to destroy the sacred sites of Christians or Jews. So if they are not open to being educated as to what is proper Islam, they will get the wrong idea and they'll be stuck with that idea, and they’ll be fearful of Muslims so that's one of the reasons why I tried to engage in dialogue.

Rachel: Definitely and that's something that I have been trying to wrestle with too being an intern at the Center for Interfaith Cooperation is that it does attract those people who are interested in this dialogue. So how do you then expand it to reach those who may feel comfortable on their own beliefs and don't want to challenge their beliefs or their beliefs come in conflict with others?

Judge: That's the difficult part because as you know with education, part of the process of enrolling in a college or university is the admission that I don't know everything, and I want to learn some things. So the first step is I won't ever know everything and so I want to learn something. That's the first step and so you can't make somebody take the first step to know or learn what they don't already know because you can take somebody who says I don't need a college education, I just want a job. Okay that's a choice and you can't put them in the college and expect that they’ll succeed. The same thing works with religious and interfaith dialogue. You can’t push somebody into an interfaith setting and hope that they'll learn anything that they don’t already know. Just because the information is there does not mean that they'll accept it and grow from it.

Rachel: And that's part of my hope is that this podcast will reach somebody else, somewhere beyond and you have to start somewhere.

Judge: Right exactly.

Rachel: And that’s [what I have learned by] talking with Charlie too. That hopefully by creating
this environment [in the CIC] it will allow other people at some point [to feel comfortable joining] and have a ripple effect.

Judge: Yeah because the reality is that we never know how or when we will be touched in our lives to reach out to something that we didn't you even know was there or to embrace an idea that we had not thought about before. It is more or less like trying new foods. You know some people say well all I want is hamburgers, French fries and a Coke. Well if that's all you want that’s fine, but there are other food choices out there – Italian, Mexican, Middle Eastern, so forth. But the more we expand our intellect and our souls to learn, the more that we are able to appreciate how all-encompassing God is because God doesn't want us to just eat hamburgers, French fries, and a Coke. I mean there's a whole lot more to life than just one thing on the menu.

Rachel: That’s true. I like it. And too just switching gears a little bit and looking at your career and seeing how faith plays a part, I know there is an intersection that I've seen a lot in the news and amongst scholars too of the criminal justice system and faith. So how have you seen that play a role in your career?

Judge: Well you know in our legal system one of the symbols associated with being a judge is a black robe and the symbolism behind the black robe is black is sometimes associated with death and then the idea is that when you take on the black robe of a judge you don't take with you your personal biases, feelings and so forth. The only thing that you're really working to apply is the law and so regardless of my faith tradition when I take the bench that doesn't influence my decision. My decision is influenced solely by the law and that’s the kind of the symbolism of the black robe. However, I'm a human being also, so even though some of the facts that may be associated with a particular case and I've had numerous cases where the facts were very disturbing, but in the role as a judge, I can't be influenced by the emotions. I have still be focused on the law. I try to take with me is the character of prophet Mohammed you know of Jesus, of Moses, and their character was character of compassion and since as a judge, there are people that are there not just you know robots you know they’re people. Even though I'm applying for law to the particular circumstance of the case that doesn't mean I can't show compassion, understanding, and a willingness to listen to both sides. That is not a legal issue that’s a human issue because one of the things I've learned over the years being a judge is that one of the reasons why they call it hearings because you have trials and sometimes we have hearings. Hearings are associated with not the ultimate decision with respect to a case but is to address a particular issue associated with a case so there may be a pre-trial hearing or maybe a hearing on a motion but the whole idea is a hearing. So the idea is that you got to listen you know. You can't come in with a preconceived notion. You have to be able to understand what is being said and so what I've learned over the process is that everybody wants to feel that they were heard you know and so that to me shows the kind of compassion that is associated with a person of faith is that you have to be willing to put yourself into the situation. So that the human being that is involved,
everyone involved knows that you're there totally in fairness to hear what people have to say and then you make your decision but one of the worst things that can happen and we all have had that experience where there's a customer service representative or at the airport a one-way flight is being cancelled, and we have to talk to somebody about reconnecting we know what it feels like to be ignored. We know what it feels like when somebody is not really listening to us and that we're not really heard and it's not a good feeling, so what I've tried to do as a judge is to let everybody know that I'm there to hear all sides of the case. I haven't made up my mind. I want to hear what everybody has to say and then I'll make a decision on the law.

Rachel: I like that approach a lot. Have you seen religion, in general, come at odds with the criminal justice system or the law?

Judge: There's some aspects that can be problematic. One of the difficulties, well I don't consider it a difficulty but I've heard some present it as one and that is gender identification you know some religions are very strict about gender identification, but as a judge, I have to be fair to everyone, and I've seen some situations where one's sexual preference or gender identification might be a problem from a religious standpoint but that cannot influence how I treat that person and that person is still a person to be protected by the law and so that's what I try to do and so that does not affect or influence how I treat them with respect to the issue.

Rachel: So in a way, the law has protected people from religious discrimination.

Judge: Yes, that's how our system works and quite honestly as a human being, I'm much more comfortable with that idea. I know that in some countries the laws are different, but for me, as a person that has lived in a country that respects the choices of people, I find that to be compatible with Islam because there is a passage in the Quran which says, “Let there be no compulsion in religion” and that no one should be compelled to do something outside their own conscience because conscience is something that is God given and so no human being has the authority, based on my understanding of the religion, to impose my belief system on another person. How they live their life is between them and God and so I may have opinions about it but I'm not in a position to impose my belief system on them. That’s something they have to work out with God just like I did.

Rachel: Yeah, I think a lot of people need to hear that for sure. And so to summarize since we are coming near the end of this, but looking at interfaith, in general, what does interfaith mean to you, and maybe a broad definition of that.

Judge: I think interfaith means to me a willingness to open your heart and mind to how vast and unknown God is because the analogy that was sometimes given to me you know that I think is
very fitting you know that if you're on the seashore in Florida, you'll see one concept of your ocean. If you're in Alaska, it'll look different. But as you know you're looking out at the body of water from the seashore but that's still a creation of God and it's going to look different. The person in Florida is going to see what they see. The person in another part of the world is seeing what they see, but it's all part of God's creation and so the person again in Florida can't criticize the person in India saying that what they see is not correct because what they see is what they see what they feel is what they feel and is still you know a creation of God. God kind of orders what people see so to me and interfaith is the willingness to open your mind and heart to the fact that people may see something different and be totally correct and you can be informed by what they see and what you don't see because it's still a part of God's creation and what God wants you to understand because you can't learn everything just from what you see. There are many things that you can learn if you're willing to open your mind and your heart to another person.

Rachel: Yeah that's very true. Thank you so much for being here.
Tony Wiederhold interview

Rachel: Hi everyone, and welcome back to another podcast episode where we get to learn the great stories of our Center for Interfaith Cooperation's board members. Today we have Tony Wiederhold. Welcome.

Tony: Hi.

Rachel: It's so great having you today. If you could start by just telling us a little bit about yourself and what you're involved in here in Indianapolis, that would be great.

Tony: Okay. Who am I? Let's see. I've been living in Indianapolis now for about ten years. I identify as a Buddhist. You can find me sitting in meditation at the Indianapolis Zen Center a few times a week in the mornings.

Rachel: What kind of things are you involved in in Indianapolis? Do you work in the community or anything of that sort?

Tony: I do. I've worked at Eli Lilly, a company, for fifteen years. That's, that's my day job.

Rachel: Very cool.

Tony: One thing I do is, for several years, I've been teaching yoga, teaching a community, free yoga class that takes place in the summers over here in the Newfields 100 Acres and in the winters, in the Indianapolis Zen Center. That's a lovely way to bring people of all sorts of different backgrounds together and to have a contemplative practice.

Rachel: Very neat. How did you get involved with the CIC?

Tony: Um well, how did I got involved with the CIC. Good question. It was, maybe two or three years ago, they had an event at lunchtime, and it had to do with refugees and the children of refugees, and related to mental health issues and trauma. And my family, my parents, are Vietnamese refugees. And so, this was a topic of interest to me, so I showed up. I happened to sit at a table with Charlie Wiles and Ben. And yeah, just during the course of the day and conversing with different people and interacting within discussion, and at the end, they were like, 'Hey, would you be interested in joining the Interfaith Coalition for Mental Health's committee that we have that's involved with this work?' So I said, 'Sure.' So that's how I--I had actually not
heard of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation before that. That was my entry into it, working on the committee.

Rachel: Awesome. How long have you been a part of it now?

Tony: I joined that committee, maybe two years ago, two to three years ago, and at the end of last year, I was elected onto the board of the CIC. I'm really happy to join the board and work on projects and bring people of different backgrounds together.

Rachel: Yeah, definitely. Can you tell me a little bit about life of being a Buddhist and what that means to you and maybe your spiritual journey along the way, what that's looked like?

Tony: Yeah, so growing up, my mother and I would attend a Buddhist temple in Chicago, and one thing I hope people learn is that there are lots of different lived experiences in Buddhism. Buddhism isn't so familiar to people in the United States. It's very tied to different cultures, so Vietnamese Buddhism is different from Tibetan Buddhism. It's different from Burmese Buddhism. The temple I went to, that's where I first learned the story of the Buddha and what these things mean. I moved away from it as I became a teenager and into college. It was--I don't really know why, it just um… Anyway, it wasn't until several years later I was going through some things personally, and I became curious about it again. Actually, a funny thing happened. I was playing basketball at work, right after work. I don't play basketball during work. And I literally ran into a person on the basketball court. We literally crashed into each other, and then we became friends. This is my friend Pondu, and yeah, so he and I became friends, and we started to work out together. He's a devout Hindu. We start having these conversations about Hinduism and Buddhism and trying to understand each other's background perspective. At his recommendation, I attended a couple of retreats at a Hindu ashram in the Poconos at a place called Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, which is the Hindi ashram. And it was very interesting going to this as-- because I was one of the few non-Indian people at this retreat, and so people were curious as to 1. How did I find out about this place? Who am I? and I indicated that I was Buddhist, and so all of a sudden I became the source of information for all things Buddhist for this entire group of hundreds of Indian people, which--

Rachel: Was that a lot of responsibility?

Tony: Well, I definitely felt that, and it made me realize that, wow, my understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist practice didn't really evolve beyond my childhood understanding of it. And I thought, well, maybe I ought to learn more about it. So that led to a further exploration of that. But actually, I learned a lot at this ashram about the Swamis, and the ways of understanding their religious texts. I gained an appreciation for how precise they are. So, a Swami has to sit with their teacher for twelve years and memorize all of their scriptures and understand, not only
the scriptures, but also all of the commentaries that were written to explain. So there's a very precise way of unfolding knowledge that is in there. But anyway, that led me to return to find a Buddhist community to join. And so, I began sitting on Saturday mornings at An Lac Vietnamese Buddhist Temple here in town. I learned about it, and I was like, well, let's go sit and meditate with these people. I guess I neglected to mention I'd become interested in yoga and meditation along the way, which-- probably back in 2009--which kind of jump started this interest and understanding. And so, I sat there for maybe four years, and then, I ended up sitting at the Indianapolis Zen Center. And I've been there for several months now.

Rachel: Can you speak a little about Buddhism? And I know that is a lot of responsibility to speak to it, because I do believe that a lot of listeners may not be familiar, exactly, with the practices and what exactly goes into your journey and all of that. But can you speak a little bit about what, maybe, your meditation looks like or how you may worship, some things like that?

Tony: Yeah. For me-- and this is a contrast to what Buddhism was to me as a child and the Buddhism practiced by the people I was around in the temple. That Buddhism was very much devotional, and there was a lot of prayer. And there was a lot of appeal to Buddha and a couple of Bodhisattvas. One in particular is Quan Am, who is known as Guan Yin in Chinese, the Bodhisattva of compassion. The Vietnamese and Chinese names mean 'She who listens to the cries of the world.' Basically, she embodies compassion and listening. She's like the perfect listener.

Rachel: I like that.

Tony: Yeah. Over the years, my own practice of Buddhism has changed from that, which never really resonated with me, I think, and I think, maybe, that may be a reason why I stopped going to temple. But it definitely turned into a meditation practice. The reason is, it-- so the basic teachings of Buddhism involve something called as the Four Noble Truths, and then, the Noble Eight-Fold Path. And so, the first noble truth is that all beings experience suffering. The second is the suffering is related to craving. Third is, since suffering is related to craving, therefore, if you address craving, you can address suffering. And the fourth one is you can do this by understanding the Noble Eight-Fold Path. Really, the Noble Eight-Fold Path, as I've studied it and practiced it, to me, it is a map to the human mind and cognition. It's not like you do step 1, then step 2, then step 3. It's not sequential like that. But it really outlines the interrelationship between different factors of the mind. The first one is 'view.' The second one is 'thought.' The third one is 'speech.' The fourth one is 'action' and the fifth is 'livelihood.' So you can kind of see that, oh, your speech is related to your views and the thoughts that arise, and your speech, also, has an impact on your actions and the way you structure life, which is your livelihood. Really, by gaining insight into any one of these five, you can gain insight into the others. And likewise, if you change your behaviors and habits related to any of these five, you, therefore, change the
others. The remaining three are 'effort,' which is, I found to be more diligence in basically, keeping with the practice. Basically, it's just being kind no matter what. Don't be a jerk no matter what. That's what I think of right effort. And then there was 'mindfulness,' which is the understanding of, the awareness of everything going on, and finally, 'absorption.' That's a little more difficult to understand, but anyway, my practice is, basically, centered on embodying these qualities as much as possible.

Rachel: So just the practice itself involves, you've mentioned meditation. Are there other things in regards to that, that you also do?

Tony: For me, one thing I've learned from meditating is that there's no difference between my habits and how I'm meditating versus how I'm sitting here with you versus how I live at any point in my life outside. They're all related, and there's really no barrier. There's no border in between these. Through the meditation practice, I can see things about myself. In a basic way, a basic explanation of meditation is--I'd explain it this way--your body has no choice but to be here, in the present, right? It's here. And now is now, and that's that. But maybe you've experienced a time where the rest of you wasn't here at the same time as the rest of your body.

Rachel: Like your mind is elsewhere?

Tony: Things are on your mind. You might be thinking about something from the past, maybe it's a regret, or a memory. Or maybe you're imagining some future scenario, maybe it's a positive thing or a thing you don't like. Or maybe you're just trying your--what I call the thinking muscle--is spinning, generating all kinds of things, right?

Rachel: I can connect with that.

Tony: Right. I like to summarize all of that as being lost in your thinking. And, for me, meditation has become this practice of unclenching that and just letting that thinking muscle--I know it's not a muscle, it's a brain thing, but--but allowing it just to coast to stillness.

Rachel: Is that easy now after your meditation to do? I feel like that would be--I need to meditate more, for sure, to understand that, but my mind is constantly going. So do you find that it's easy to release?

Tony: Yeah. If I notice that I'm clenched, that I'm tight and I'm lost in my thinking--that's really, that's the meditation practice. Once you notice that, and one thing you might notice, when you catch yourself lost in your thinking, and if you tune into your body at that moment, you might notice that there's a physical tightness, maybe in your jaw or your neck or your chest. Or maybe you clench your fists or something else. But you can practice 'Oh, I am lost in my thinking. Oh,
look at these physical things that are associated with that.' If you learn to release those, it's related to your thinking. And so, that's how you influence your thinking. It takes a lot of practice because there are a lot of signals all around us that tell us we ought not to be satisfied. We always need to be striving for this or that. To learn what I just described to you, I had to do it through experience. And what I feel is my life's work is showing people this and reducing barriers to showing people this, so that they, hopefully, learn it at an earlier age than I did.

Rachel: Yeah, definitely.

Tony: May I tell you one story about where--

Rachel: Please.

Tony: This is a story of how I found the articulation of my life's purpose.

Rachel: I love it.

Tony: So it was-- I don't remember if it was last summer or two summers ago. It had been a long time since my mother and I had gone to the temple in Chicago. The temple is Chùa Quang Minh on Damen Avenue in Chicago. My mother had moved down to West Lafayette near my brother after my dad passed away, and it had been maybe ten years since we went up there. One day-- my mom very rarely ever asks for anything. One day, she said, 'Hey, can we go to the temple?' I was like, 'Sure.' So we went up, and it was a wonderful reunion. Mom saw her best friend at the temple there. They hadn't seen each other in ten years. They had a lot of catching up to do. It was between services, so I decided to go meditate in the Buddha hall by myself. There was time to do that. The thing about this temple is, everything is the same. The tile is the same, the red carpeting was the same, the statues were the same, the people were the same, but ten years older. Everything. The food… It was like stepping back in time. And so I sit in the back of the hall, and I notice something I had not noticed before. So, I'm sitting in the back of the hall. In the front are a statue of the Buddha, and on the right is the Quan Am, the Bodhisattva of compassion, and on the left is Dizang, the rescuer. And above the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas was written some words. On the left side in Vietnamese and on the right side in English, and on the English side it said something like 'Do no evil. Do good things. Keep your mind pure. These are the teachings of the Buddha.' And I was like, I don't know, it just struck a wrong note with me. Anyway, I read the Vietnamese side, and it was much more clear and precise. The Vietnamese side said, 'Refrain from doing cruel acts. Performs acts of healing. Purify your mind. These are the teachings of the Buddha.' And in that moment, I realized something. When we say, when I say 'evil' or I think 'evil,' what I really mean is 'cruel.' Cruelty is evil. It's not like evil is some characteristic in a person. It's cruelty. They want to do harm or create suffering. The second part is healing, perform acts of healing. In other words, be kind to people, love them, hold space for them. This is how
you heal emotional pain. Because there's a simple fact-- this is an example of how you can find wisdom anywhere. This was a very wise statement I heard at a speech at the Indiana Economic Club. There was this speaker there, and he was like, 'Hurt people hurt people.' And I remember hearing that, and I was like, wow, that's really true. You know, people do things to hurt other people--

Rachel: When they are hurt themselves.

Tony: --when they, themselves, are hurt. And maybe, they don't even acknowledge that they are hurt. If you think about it, or if I reflect upon my own life, those times when I really wanted to be a jerk and I really wanted to 'teach someone a lesson,' or make somebody feel the pain that I'm feeling, is when I'm hurt. But when, over years of healing from various things, those are the clouds that obscure the radiant kindness that is, I believe, our nature. And so, in that moment, everything lined up for me, and I was like, wow, this is the articulation of how I want to live my life.

Rachel: That's so neat. It was just this epiphany moment. I love when things like that just light up, and you're like 'Yes! This is gonna happen.'

Tony: Right.

Rachel: Awesome. And you spoke a little before we started recording about different things you're doing in the community to try to engage people in meditation and with the Buddhist community. Can you explain a little bit about what you're doing there?

Tony: Yeah, so, I mentioned the free friendly yoga class. That's the main way I'm working with people and the general Indianapolis community. I've been leading efforts to develop a mindfulness program at Eli Lilly, started two years ago. I had just started offering free drop-in classes to my colleagues once a week, and now, with the help of some other volunteers, my friend Cheryl Ingram and my friend Manisha Kokitkar, now we offer live guided meditation five days a week at Lilly. And now we have Skype access, so people all over the corporation can call in and participate in these sessions.

Rachel: I can imagine that would be such a dichotomy between the corporate world and then taking a second for yourself. I feel like that is so necessary.

Tony: Yeah. You know, there's-- it's been the last few years. There's been a growing interest in this. I think people really want to express kindness and learn how to do that, and 'How do I do the right thing?' in all kinds of contexts, right? I mentioned to you earlier, through meditation practice and introspection, I learned there's no line, there's no such thing as work-life balance.
There's your life, and there's how-- what is your relationship, what is my relationship to other people and situations and things that caused me pain. How can I overcome suffering, which goes back to Noble Truth #1. What can I do to be a kinder person and really-- the impact that each of us have. Another thing I've learned is that each of us is so powerful, and each of us is so influential to the people we come into contact with. I'm having a wonderful time here, talking to you. Our conduct affects the experience of other people.

Rachel: Yeah. I can definitely see that.

Tony: Yeah. How can I help heal and alleviate the suffering of other people, which then allows them to be a force of healing for the people in their lives, and so on. This is how world peace happens, right?

Rachel: Let's hope. I really want that. I think we could all use that.

Tony: Did I answer your question?

Rachel: Yeah, definitely. I loved all the different diversions, too, so it's really great. So it sounds like interfaith just works hand-in-hand easily with that concept, right? How have you seen interfaith work with your own personal faith?

Tony: You know, it's kind of an old way of thinking to think there's a Buddhist community, and a Muslim community, and a this community and a that community. It's true that there are these communities. There are Methodists. There are Buddhists. There are Muslims. There are Jews. But the boundary of community doesn't stop there. Really, we all need each other, and if I have to create some kind of mental justification to be cruel to you. First of all, I think there's a lot of that that happens. People justify their cruelty to other people because of, you know, pick your reason. 'God told me so' or whatever. Or 'They're Godless.' I think these are all justifications of, what am I trying to say? This is actually something I heard at the Interfaith Banquet on Sunday. 'Interfaith is the new religion.' We start from where we are, and we can speak within our community that way, but if we want peace on this earth, the boundaries of community are infinite. They have to go beyond what you imagine is your community, and we have to embrace all of humanity. There was actually a Sikh quote by Mr. K.P. Singh at the [Interfaith] Banquet. I think he said something like, something about the circle of God's compassion. 'In God's kingdom, no one is outside the circle of love and compassion,' and I thought, 'Wow, that's something...'

Rachel: After all of your experience with interfaith and what you've said here, to summarize it all up, what is 'interfaith' to you in a couple sentences to conclude the podcast?
Tony: What is 'interfaith' to me?

Rachel: Yeah. What would you define it as?

Tony: It's building a big community. It's working together for the betterment of all of us.

Rachel: I like that a lot. Thank you so much for being here and offering your perspective and your own personal story as well.

Tony: You're welcome, Rachel. I'm happy to be here.
Dr. Anita Joshi Interview

Rachel: Today, we have Dr. Anita Joshi. Welcome! I would love to just start learning about a little bit about you and how you came to the Center for Interfaith Cooperation.

Anita: Sure, so I am a pediatrician. I was born and raised in New Jersey, so a little bit of a ways from here, but my family grew up Hindu, and I grew up Hindu, and when I came out to the Midwest I found that you know at that time we didn't actually have a Hindu temple, and it was a little bit different for me from where I grew up in New Jersey and so I got more involved in the building of that temple and got more involved in having to talk a lot about my faith and answer questions for people and so I had met Charlie at several interfaith events and decided that I thought this would be a really interesting group of people to get to know, and it would help me not only get to talk about my own faith, but in fact really to broaden my horizons and get to understand and learn about other people's faiths as well.

Rachel: Can you tell me a little bit about your faith journey and how you came to be Hindu? Is that how you were raised? Did you ever question that identity?

Anita: Well, I think we all question our identity as we grow up. I was raised a Hindu. Both of my parents are originally from India. Both are practicing Hindus. I grew up in a very small town in New Jersey, which was primarily Italian Catholic, so I spent a lot of time singing in mass and learning choir music because I enjoyed that when I was younger and so really loved learning about the Catholic faith and then started to question what makes me a Hindu and why do I believe these things or should I believe these things. I really went through a journey of kind of exploring different faiths – Christianity, Judaism, a little bit of Islam - and really came back to feeling comfortable within my own tradition and so I felt like it spoke to me and decided that I would stay in that tradition.

Rachel: For me, I am going to be honest and say that I don’t know too much about Hinduism so for people like me, could you give a little bit of back story of how you practice Hinduism.

Anita: Sure, I think one of the biggest misconceptions that people in the West have about Hinduism is they've been taught many things through textbooks which we know are written by people who don't always know the background as well as they should and Hinduism is often described as a polytheistic religion. It's often described as very primitive. It has ancient roots, and they talk about things like caste system. I think a lot of these misconceptions are things that people just learn and hold on to. In fact Hinduism is very much a monotheistic religion. We believe in one supreme being. One divinity that we all share and the principle of Namaste which means that I bow to the divine in you that's also in me and so not only do I recognize the one
divinity, but I recognize that each of us have a small spark of that divinity that lives within us and so that we can connect to each other at a much deeper more meaningful level. In fact, we recognize that really we are all part and parcel of the same great Oneness. I think another misconception that often gets translated into the West is this idea of a caste system in a way of discrimination and creating negativity whereas in the faith itself and the religion it really was just a way of describing what people's roles were within this particular life cycle and obviously for Hindus, we don't believe that we have one go around to get this right. We believe in reincarnation and the idea that we are on a spiritual journey of elevation that will ultimately end when we recognize that relationship between the self and the divine and really understand our connection to that divine and then we can escape that cycle, but those concepts of differentiation in castes were often used to marginalize people, but they were used and exploited by many of the forces that came into India to try and stratify the population and so fortunately it's not really part of religion in the way that people understand it and so it really is also misunderstood. Then I think probably the third largest misconception is the idea that we worship animals or cows, in particular, and that's often another misconception that you hear in the West but really for Hindus the concept of one God goes even beyond that and I would say it really is the concept that all living beings of all living creatures have some spark of divine energy within that and so that all living creatures including animals and plants and even rivers and mountains should be respected and should be treated with dignity and so should not be exploited or misused and that's where that concept and that idea comes from.

Rachel: Interesting yeah, I would have to say that there's a lot of those things that I didn't realize. You've alluded to the West a lot, so do you find that you can still find your place here in Indiana and that you have that community despite these misconceptions?

Anita: I think that we all have misconceptions about other faiths and other religions and other races and other ethnicities and other cultures. I don't think any of us knows everything about everything and medicine taught me that more than anything, which is that we know very little about things, but I think it's important to understand that you know we really need each other, and we really are the same human family. We are really a one world family, and there is a concept in Hinduism that talks about that called Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which actually means we are a one world family and so I don't feel separate or distinct I think when I say the West it is just to make the distinction between Western religions which fall under the Judeo Christian Islamic umbrella of Abrahamic faiths and Eastern traditions which fall under the sanatana faiths, the sanatana dharma faiths the Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, Sikhism. These are faiths that fall in a different realm because they have a different understanding of divinity. So it isn't to say that somehow we are distinct from one another. It's just to give people an understanding of the ideas that we hold.

Rachel: Looking at your connection with interfaith, in general, do you see that this community
coming together and being able to share maybe some misconceptions and allowing people to understand your religion has been beneficial?

Anita: I think it's beneficial to everybody. I think I've certainly benefited from learning more about the faith of my sister and brother Hoosiers who share different faiths, and I've enjoyed that. I think that's been a great awakening and understanding for me. I see a lot of commonalities between us. I see far more similarities than I do differences, and I think when people explore the universal truths that we all share that you should care about one another, you should be kind to one another. There are certain ways you should treat each other. You shouldn't take what's not yours. You shouldn't harm other things or people. I think those are all universal values that every religion shares, and I think we can find a great commonality. It's not to say that we're all the same. We have very different ways of practicing things, but that doesn't make us incapable of understanding one another.

Rachel: Do you think that being exposed to things and people that are different than you make you stronger in your personal beliefs, or does it make you question other views of the world?

Anita: I think if you're smart you'll always ask questions, right? Just like you're doing right now. I think we always ask questions. We want to know, and we need to know more. It's the very basis of science, right? It's the very basis of exploration and so I think questioning is always important. I think it is the nature in which you ask the question. If you ask it in an honest way, wanting to really hear and understand the answer. Then you open yourself up to truly learning things. If you ask a question because you have an answer that you'd like to give and a viewpoint that you would like to convince the other person of and I don't think you're actually asking a question. I think your guising your question in a statement or guising your statement in a question I should say, so you're not really asking a question. I think questioning is very important. I think has it strengthened my own faith? Yeah. I think I am very comfortable answering those questions for people and feeling confident that what I believe works for me, and I think that's the other thing about a religion like Hinduism. There is no conversion in Hinduism. There is no me sitting here and telling you that Hindus know and we are the only way and the right answer. I think the concept is to drive your own understanding of God deeper within you so that you can really connect at a deeper level. It really doesn't matter what you call yourself, and too for Hindus, it’s never been an issue of going out and trying to change other people's minds, so I don't feel the need to have my mind changed, but I certainly don't feel the need to have to change the minds of others.

Rachel: I like that a lot. I've said this in several other interviews, too, but I feel like you can't know because there's so many uncertainties, so trying to tell people what to believe doesn't really seem productive in my mind if it's an uncertain realm.
Anita: Yeah it is you know, and I think you're right. I think it is very interesting. It's hard to know the unknowable, so I think I'm always a little bit careful when people say well I know that that's true. I think there have been many times and again I kind of go back to my practice of medicine where you know against all odds something turned out differently than I thought or given all the odds that it should have come out right it didn't and so I think there are things that we simply don't know and can't always predict even given the best facts, knowledge and resources and so if we can't do that in the concrete mundane world. I don't know how we could possibly think that we could do this in the much larger cosmic universe. I'm not sure that we have the ability to see that.

Rachel: Would you say that science and your background in medicine has somewhat strengthened or helped you believe more so in Hinduism?

Anita: For me it's worked pretty well because I think the Hindu faith has a lot of scientific principles that guide it. Science and religion don't fight with each other quite so starkly as maybe in some other faiths and that helps me because I feel like I can still understand the universe and how it works and not have to abandon my faith and beliefs in order to do that. So for me it works, yeah.

Rachel: Awesome and too just the power of the interfaith community, would you say that just in Indianapolis… what power does that hold?

Anita: I think it holds tremendous power. I think when you are in a city like Indianapolis. I think a lot of people look at Indiana, and they think of Indiana as being very homogeneous in some ways and certainly you know there is a majority population and there are minority populations and so we're not going to argue statistics and numbers here, but I do think that Indianapolis’ diversity is tremendously strong and that it actually leads to a stronger society, in general, when we can understand one another and stand with one another and work on universal principles of goodness and kindness and real Hoosier hospitality. I think we show the best of ourselves, and the interfaith community absolutely allows for that to happen because of its very nature of working for the ideals of peace through understanding one another. That is really the mission of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation here in Indianapolis and I think it really is one of the most important things that we do is to bring groups together that you never would've thought could really be in a room working on a project, working on an issue together and do so in great harmony and with great love and respect for each other, so I do think it’s a very important part of what happens here in the city.

Rachel: Have there been current events recently and that have created this as such a community of support that you've realized and noticed maybe in light of certain vandalism in the city or hate crimes across the nation?
Anita: Sure absolutely. I think the unfortunate incidents that occurred both in the Carmel Synagogue and also obviously nationally in Pittsburgh as well as you know the targeting of African-American populations in a variety of different places in the country even a targeting of a business here of one of our Hindu members of the temple simply because of the faith that they practiced. I think there are people who are intolerant, and I think the reason that that exists is because there is a lack of understanding, misconceptions and often just fear that is really in many ways baseless and so if we can get to that understanding of that fear we can help to dispel those myths and misconceptions and fears that people have and lead to a better understanding.

Unfortunately, Indiana does fall into the dubious category of being only one of five states without a hate crimes law, and I think that that is unfortunate, and I am very optimistic that with the governor's support and with the support of business leaders here in the community and health-care industry leaders and other leaders that we can finally see this pass in Indiana and right this great injustice because really hate doesn't have a place. It is not something that we should allow to be a part of our society. I don't think that you're going to eliminate hate, but I think you can eliminate the consequences of crimes when they're committed with those intents to harm a greater community. I think that is the important part of the hate crimes law.

Rachel: Can you give a brief history or what it looks like coming up with this hate crimes legislation in Indiana?

Anita: Wow so this has been a long process. We have been trying to get a hate crimes law passed Indiana for quite some time now and really I think it has finally dawned on people frankly that it's not good for business it is not good for the image of the community. It's not good for just a general pathos of how we live here in the city and in the state as a whole. We want to change the image of what people see when they think of Indiana again of being a homogenous as you know kind of backwater, backwards way of living, and it really isn't. I mean I think people are very intelligent. They're very good hearted. They're very wonderful people, and I think if we can get rid of this distinction of not having a hate crimes legislation I think it will go a long way to letting people see that there is a lot of broad thought acceptance and movement in this state.

Rachel: And so for listeners who maybe tuning in and wanting to participate or help get this passed is there any way people can become involved and make it more well-known?

Anita: I think the beauty of democracy is to do what you're doing, right. You talk. You use your voice. You use the power of your vote and your voice to support legislators who support this kind of legislation. I think we do our best to contact those people and say the time is now to get this done, and I think it'll be a very good legislative session for us if we can get this passed. I think it will go a long way to again to showing that Indiana is far more than people think it is, and I think that's important.
Rachel: I agree and looking at interfaith and trying to get what y'all are getting at with this peaceful dialogue and trying to eradicate hate through that, I feel like the Center for interfaith Cooperation attracts those who want be a part of that dialogue, right, and perhaps those listening to a podcast will be tuning in because they have some sort of interest in the matter. Do you have any ideas, I know this is a really heavy question, on just how do you broaden the scope to reach those who may be stuck in their ways or think that their way is the way and don't want challenge that if that makes any sense?

Anita: Yeah I mean I think you know you have to try to use the opportunity you have to meet people first to connect with them just as human beings. You know recognize I can for myself as a mother, as a woman, as a sister, as a daughter. I have all these different identities right that spring for my feminism. I have different identities that spring from my religion. I have different identities that spring from my culture. I have different identities that spring from being born in New Jersey and being a Jersey girl. I have all of these different identities and yet we all share really important, common human values that just can't be taken away from us right. As the mothers, we are always going to worry about our children. As sisters, we're going to worry about our siblings. As wives, we’re going to want to care for our husbands. I mean I think we all share these values and to understand that that's where you start to connect with people and you start to realize that it doesn't matter what food you eat or how you dress or what your house of worship looks like. You are still a human being who has needs and desires that is the same as all of your brother and sister human beings, and I think if you connect in that way and then talk about what it was like to grow up in New Jersey, what was it like to grow up in a different family, what was it like to go to a different celebration of a different religious tradition. I think then people are more interested, but I think the most important thing is to connect as human beings.

Rachel: Build up that relationship for sure and that trust. Then you can tackle the harder stuff.

Anita: Exactly because you can't get to the tough stuff unless you can first see each other as human beings. I mean there is nothing inherently superior or inferior about any human being. We all have the same dignity and worth, and I think you if we can hold on to that understanding it would go along to healing a lot of the decisiveness that we hear. It's very easy to divide people if you just kind of fractionate, make them feel like they don't belong, but it doesn't lead anywhere. Hatred has been around for a long time, and doesn’t serve any good purpose. Nothing positive has come out of that. Nothing lasting has come out of that. I really think if you find those lasting changes that make true impact in people's lives, so if you approach things from that again shared value that all religion share of love. I think we may go a long way.
Rachel: Wow, thank you so much for being here. To end, is there one broad definition or how would you define interfaith?

Anita: That’s a really tough question. I think interfaith is really that understanding that there are shared common human values that are expressed by different groups in different ways with different practices but that are all in pursuit to finding our place in the universe with God, and I think that is probably the essence of interfaith.

Rachel: Great. Thank you so much for being here, Anita.
Reverend Brian Shivers interview

Rachel: Today we have Brian Shivers. Welcome Brian. If you wouldn't mind starting by just telling us a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the CIC

Brian: Sure. I have lived in Indianapolis for almost thirty years. I was born and raised in Marion, Indiana, which is a smaller city in Green County about sixty miles north of Indianapolis. I moved down here for a job at Second Presbyterian Church here in town. I started working with the CIC following my ordination in 2011. [I] really was drawn to it because of some important conversations that I thought they were having as an organization that was just starting out in 2012, I believe, and I wanted to be a part of these conversations. I felt like there was a lot of important work being done around what does it mean to live in a pluralistic society and how do we honor those voices, elevate those voices, make sure that voices other than just those of the dominant culture are listened to and heard and valued. I think that the biggest piece for me was education around other faiths and so all of that stuff drew me in. I'd also done some reading and some work with Eboo Patel (1:35) from Chicago who founded the Interfaith Youth Core there and was really drawn to his work. He self identifies as an American Muslim, though he's from India. His work has been transformative not just in the Chicago-land area but all around the country. He is an interfaith pioneer for sure and his work really pushed me into understanding that part of my own Christian faith has to be about interfaith awareness. I can't just live in my Christian bubble and I have to learn about other faiths. One of his lines that really impacted me at a conference I was at where he was the keynote speaker. There were a lot of young people around and a young man who is Muslim asked him, "Sir, are you asking me to not be a Muslim?" And Eboo said, "I'm actually asking you to do the exact opposite. I'm asking you to be the best Muslim you can be." Then he singled out a young woman who is Jewish in the audience and [he] said "and I'm asking her to be the best Jew she can be." Then he pointed at a Christian young person and said "and I'm asking him to be the best Christian he can be, because only in elevating the best of what it is that our faith traditions hold can we do this work together. We will begin to understand the value of one another's faith systems if we are working toward being the best of what our individual faiths are." That's what I really appreciate about the CIC. That it's not just honoring, not just getting to know one another on a personal level. It's actually celebrating the best of the faith traditions, pushing each individual back into their own faith system, to understand the best of it, too. I think the other thing that draws me is I work with young people a lot so people from the age of middle school through college and that's my primary programmatic responsibility in the church. What I've said often is young people live interfaith every day they live in a big city. So helping them not just ignore the faith questions, but to actually have those conversations with their friends, to deepen their own understanding of what it means to be a person of faith, and also to understand their own faith better. That's why, and once I got involved
really deeply in interfaith work my own faith has grown by my interactions with my friends from faith traditions that I don't think I would've ever had friends in.

Rachel: So you see your religion informing interfaith and the importance of this happening?

Brian: Yes. I do. I think that one of the misunderstandings from my perspective of the beginning of Christianity is that it was this really clean, very isolated, almost came out of nothing. I know roots in Judaism, but almost just magically appeared with the person of Jesus and we forget that it had a cultural context. We also forget that it had a deep, deep, Jewish roots Jesus was born, lived, died as a Jew. So in its own identity it is interfaith and there are these amazing stories sprinkled throughout especially the Gospels of these incredible interfaith interactions that happened that we kind of have sanitized because we want to see them only through the lens of "well this person then became a Christian" and never says that. So there are incredible interactions including right at the very beginning with the birth narrative of Jesus. The wise people that come to visit Jesus and Mary and Joseph, when Jesus probably was around two years old, it never says they become followers of Jesus. They are Zoroastrians. They probably come from Persia. So they go home as Persians or Zoroastrians who have met Jesus as an infant. So if we can stop being threatened by the existence of these other faiths and understand that there are some really cool stories within the text. One of my favorites is a God-fearing Roman. What does that mean? He comes to Jesus because he knows Jesus can heal and he asks Jesus to heal and Jesus does because of the man's faith, but it then never says that the man then became a follower of Jesus. It's just this healing that is in the middle of the text. So likely, he continued to do whatever it was he was doing that was God-fearing.

Rachel: I like that interpretation. It is really interesting.

Brian: It's interesting trying to read the text without these lenses that we bring. It's impossible to do but trying to at least acknowledge the lenses that we bring and say "okay, what actually are the words that are on the page" and let them speak for themselves. You start to see some that are amazing. The transformation I once thought happened, didn't actually happen in the text.

Rachel: Looking at some Christian exclusive claims where it's like "this is the way to get to Heaven or the afterlife," how do you reconcile that with the conversion in evangelical peace with interfaith?

Brian: My own personal faith roots, I would say I have a checkered religious past. I grew up until was I thirteen as an Assembly of God person. My grandfather was an Assembly of God pastor for sixty years and I was in the Assembly of God church until I was about thirteen. Then my family stopped going to church for a short time and then ended up going to Wesleyan Church, which is so far theologically removed from those roots in Pentecostalism and the charismatic
Pentecostalism. To then go to Wesleyan church, which is the holiness movement branch off of the Methodist Church. That's really where both of those have incredible importance to me and my own faith development and learning about what it meant to be a person of faith. I'm very careful as I talk about that because I honor those faith systems so deeply in my own faith expression. As I started getting older, I realized that certain things for me, just as a human, my own personhood, didn't fit anymore. When I went to college I started working at a Presbyterian church and I found a faith home. I really felt like this made sense to me with its emphasis on God as the primary actor, our call is a response to that activity. God is acting on our behalf always, even if we don't acknowledge it. It's all very theocentric, God being the primary mover. That all plays actually into this understanding that I've gained over the years of interfaith work and what does that statement that you used, Jesus is the way, actually mean? I think Richard Rohr (9:51), who's doing a lot of incredible work around this right now and helping people understand that there's an idea of Jesus as the person, but also what does it mean if when we declare Jesus as Christ. That's not his name, that's a title that's given to him. Christ as an idea that's bigger than just Jesus.

Rachel: I've heard something similar to that.

Brian: He calls it the Cosmic Christ. He's not the only one that talks about this, but what does it mean that God has always been acting for the salvation of humanity. That in the person of Jesus what we see is that story enfleshed, literally, in a way that had never been enfleshed before. Jesus didn't come just to save those who would give assent to Jesus' Christness, but Jesus came as an expression of God's desire to save all things, not just one individual human. That's a broader view of what it is that Jesus came to do; not just humanity, you think of all creation. God’s salvific act or God saving, that was a really deep theological word there. God saving all of all of all things, instead of just God saving Brian Shivers. My salvation is tied to yours and is also tied to the Earth and is also tied to people who live around the world. We are being saved together.

Rachel: So you could find Christ in other religions?

Brian: Sure enough. Actually one of my favorite interfaith stories is around that very thing. We had a CIC board retreat and I was seated at a table with Doctor Patel, a different Patel than the one I mentioned earlier. Doctor Patel is Hindu and said to me, "in my tradition we have a story about Jesus," then he said, "but I don't want to offend you." I said, "I want to hear." He ended up telling me this beautiful story about southwestern India, in a very small part of India. They have a tradition that after the story of the Gospels end, that Jesus didn't die, that Jesus moved with his family to southwestern India and was basically a shaman. They have temples in southwestern India; they have Jesus as an avatar. He's called Jesus Christos. So he's called Jesus the Christ. One of the beautiful things about that is it actually deepens my understanding of Jesus in a way that I'd never understood Jesus before. I'd never heard that story. I said, "Thanks. You've actually
helped me. You didn't offend me, you helped my faith develop even deeper." The understanding that anywhere there is mercy, anywhere there is justice, anywhere people are serving the poor, helping the needy, that text that Jesus reads from Isaiah in Luke chapter four where he stands up in the synagogue and says blind receive sight, good news is preached to the poor, seeker of the Lord's favor. Where that passage is enfleshed, I believe there's the Christ.

Rachel: What are some other stories like that magical story but maybe within your own faith journey and in the CIC that stand out to you?

Brian: Interfaith engagement stories like that?

Rachel: Or any faith-related stories.

Brian: Another one, and I would encourage anyone that lives in Indianapolis to do this, another one from the Hindu tradition. The Hindu temple that's on the eastside of Indianapolis is one of the most beautiful buildings that I've ever seen. It is one-of-a-kind. There is no temple like it in the world and the reason that it's so unique is because the people that live in Indianapolis, that practice Hinduism, are very diverse. They represent different regions of Hinduism; they couldn't just make a temple that represented one of those regions. They had to make a temple that represented all of the regions. Inside the temple there are small shrines. This is the only temple where you will see some of those shrines next to each other because in other parts of the world there's no need to have that kind of diversity. The thing that really moved me was the building of the temple was a religious activity. It wasn't just people building a building. They have artisans come. They aren't allowed to bring anything to the work site except for their tools. So anything that is used to build the building has to be local. They can't bring any of their forms that they use for different figures, you can't bring any of that with them. They have to make new ones because it's this activity of religious devotion. How that strikes me is it makes me think about my own religious devotion and do I have that same level of religious devotion? Can I say I think I ebb and flow? Sometimes I would say I have a pretty deep level of religious devotion but there are a lot of times where I absolutely do not. That is beautiful to me to have those kind interactions where you see how someone else expresses their faith in such a devoted way. They're not perfect but it's a beautiful act of devotion. That word has been, I think, reemphasized to me. I see when I go to a mosque and participate in prayer with some Muslim brothers and sisters. It's powerful to see that you know this is an activity that they do five times a day and that there's a physical part. It's just powerful and it's not it's not a conviction, necessarily, on my own faith. It's not convicting me of anything. It's actually driving me to discover what are the ways that I can also practice religious devotion. The other thing that I would say is I've never been to, either here or abroad (I've done both) and I'm sure there are places that they not want me there. But I've never been to a space where I felt unwelcomed. That is powerful to me. They don't ask me what I
believe, they don't ask me what in the world I'm doing there, you know ask me. They might ask me why showed up but it's not a "why are you here" in that accusatory way. It's in a "why have you come and how can we help you." It's just a powerful powerful witness and you think about some of the acts of violence that have been committed against some of our friends from other faith traditions and some of our friends from the Christian faith tradition. Let's not miss that. There been a lot of those, like Charlottesville. They have a they we have every right to question a white man showing up at one of the religious services and yet they don't. That is a an incredible and powerful witness to me of their own faith and the depth of their own faith. That they can move beyond what might be a preconceived idea of what I might be there to do. To actually just to invite me in to participate. It's powerful.

Rachel: How have you been able to incorporate interfaith and what you've learned into your own congregation?

Brian: That is a great question. I think the biggest thing, and I'll use the most recent example, with the tragedy that happened in New Zealand in Christchurch. I think that you can't miss the [irony]. It's almost like a double tragedy in some ways, but one of the things that we provided for especially the young people of the congregation was ways in which they could act to support their Muslim friends and the Muslim community in Indianapolis. So because of my interfaith work, I know people that are in these different mosques and different Muslim organizations. We were able to give out addresses and contact information for places that we knew that the students could go visit with their families, instead of organizing some big thing to "let's all go," which I think is a really powerful statement. I know that IHC and Beth El-Zedeck (19:32) recently joined one of the mosques in town for a prayer service, I think last Friday or Saturday. What we decided to do was "let's empower people to do that when they can, with their families" and we will do the other as well. But we wanna make sure that people know you can do this anytime, you don't need us to organize. We want you to experience your Muslim neighbors in a way that is really authentic and organic for you and your family. There's also a safety if you go in numbers. If we bring fifteen people with us, I can feel a little less of a risk than if I just go and show up and make myself vulnerable. Which is I think one of the very first steps of interfaith, being willing to step into that awkwardness. To be okay with that vulnerability and because, let's face it, coming from a Christian tradition, I went for myself. When are the times that I would feel vulnerable for being a Christian in the United States. There really aren't moments like that. It's a privilege. In order for me to understand better, I will never understand fully, but in order for me to understand better what it is like to be a person that is not in the majority but is in the minority, I need to be willing to take risks. I need to be willing to be uncomfortable. I need to be willing to step in it sometimes, say the wrong thing, and be corrected and not challenge or not get defensive because I've been corrected but to be able to apologize and learn. The next time I know not to say "x," because that is offensive and learn why it's offensive. And that's on me. That's not on my Muslim neighbor, that's not on my Jewish neighbor, that's not on anybody else. Just help me to figure that
out. I gotta figure that out. That's been the model we're trying to set for people is step into that comfortableness. Somebody says, "own your awkward," like step into that and be okay with that and be willing to go in with the sense of humility and learn something.

Rachel: I know I have been angry and frustrated and I know, being a Christian myself, I'm not directly affected as you have said. But the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh and this New Zealand massacre. Do you believe that these instances of going forward and putting yourself out there is the way forward to eradicate some of this is Islamophobia or anti-Semitism?

Brian: Yeah, and by the way I will say that my friends at the JCRC will say that acts of anti-Semitism are on the rise around the country. They hear about it around the world, but also here in the United States. To hear about them every day. My friend Lindsey Mintz says she gets e-mails nearly daily about an anti-Semitic act somewhere in the United States. This is not an abstract idea. This is happening to her friends, to her neighbors now. Yes, I do believe that education, getting close proximity is a really important thing. I think it's an undervalued word and idea in our culture. That the way that we begin to become people who understand others is by proximity, being close to one another. That doesn't just mean physical closeness, although that's really valuable, it means also an emotional closeness and an ability to suspend as much as we can. We all come with biases, I know that, but to suspend those long enough for me to hear. All of that is about proximity. Once we can value that as much as we value anything else; it is harder for me to hate you if I see you eye-to-eye. It is harder for me to also generalize you and to generalize "people like you." I hate that phrase. How can you begin to own "this is a human, I see your face." When someone says Muslim people, I have faces that appear in my head. Friends of mine, faces and names. I know their stories. I know the names of their children. I can no longer allow someone to cast hate at groups of people that have people I love, they're part of the community. I can't stand by any longer. Lindsey has this line that she uses. I've heard her say it probably five or six times where she says "be ready with your story." What she means is she's asking people like us, people from the dominant faith tradition. Or the dominant race, for me as a male of that dominant race in the United States, all of those things. All of those privileges. Be ready with your defense. So that when you hear an anti-Semitic phrase come out of someone's mouth or you see an act of anti-Semitism, you are ready to step in for your friends. She said, "Don't wait for me to do it because I have to do every day. I live this life. What I need you to do is be ready, to have your story ready. Because if we don't have it ready when that moment comes, we won't do anything." Our silence then becomes complicity. I think that is the motivating factor for me in interfaith work. I also believe it is deeply rooted in my faith tradition. If I just look at the person of Jesus, what did he do over and over again? In the stories that we have from the Gospels, we see him getting close to people. People that were marginalized peoples. As well as people who were hated peoples, that weren't necessarily marginalized. They were just a hated people group. They were tax collectors and things like that. He drew near them, not just in ideas but actually physically close to them. Drew close to them. Stories of him touching people, those are things
that we miss. Recently, I got a chance to hear Barbara Brown Taylor speak. One of the things that she talked about is that we have lost our language about body. Embodiment in our faith and that is such a powerful thing. If we can get back to that, I think we'd also begin to disarm some of this other stuff that's out there. Again if we're close, if I can see you eye-to-eye, that makes a lot of difference.

Rachel: Has there been any pushback within your congregation or maybe within the Christian community as a whole to this interfaith mentality? Or getting to know somebody that's totally different? I have experienced these extremes, that there are these like exclusive claims like "that's the other, we're following the way so we need to stay straight."

Brian: I haven't really experienced it in my own congregation but you do experience it. Especially online you experience it. That's one of the curses of our social media. I think it invites anybody and everybody to have an opinion on everything. Then when you add your voice in, you're inviting that as well. There have been people who pushed back. I do not have to give up my own understanding, my Christian faith. I don't have to give up my faith claims about who Jesus is, about what God is doing in the world. I don't have to get those things up in order to be working in interfaith. I think people misunderstand interfaith work. When they think that somehow you're being asked to give those things up. That actually is a disservice to true interfaith work. It becomes this wishy-washy, nothingness if we're not also willing to have the conversations about our differences. That's the beautiful thing again about the word proximity. In proximity I can't just stand at a distance and claim that you were wrong. I now have to enter into a dialogue and be able to understand where it is that I'm coming from. At the end of the day, when we have those conversations, neither of us is going to cast aspersions at the other one's faith if we're having these honest conversations. We're going to walk away from them still fully in our faith systems. There are people that push back on it. There are different understandings. I think one of our conversations in faith communities have to be around truth claims. You can have truth claims without denying the truth claims of someone else. One thing I can never have is your life experience. Even though we come from very similar faith traditions, we are at some point going to have a different truth claim. We can't have the same. It's impossible. I think if we just can realize that that's true in our everyday life, then the threat, the idea of threat, it becomes less. You're able then to enter into those conversations honestly, with some vulnerability, and with some humility. With the idea that I'm here to, not just defend my faith, which is been something that the Christian church has talked about a lot. How do you defend your faith? What if that wasn't the conversation anymore? Why do I have to defend my faith? I don't have to defend it. I can describe it and then I can listen to someone else's description of theirs. And I'm not threatened by that. I think we've got to get to a different place.
Rachel: I like that perspective a lot. I've been reading a lot of different theologians on interfaith. They just describe this relative absolute. That your absolute is absolute but it's relative to everybody else's.

Brian: I think it's in how you answer the question "how big is God?" Am I going to be arrogant enough in my belief system that I believe that I have the divine completely figured out. In my own faith, I find that to be a frightening concept to think that I will ever have the divine figured out. I hope that it's never true. I'm pretty confident it won't ever be true because the theology is one of those fields that the deeper you get in the more questions have. Which is a powerful thing. I love it. I think it reveals something about what it is that we're doing. There are more mysteries, it's like peeling an onion. Once you get in it's more complex than you ever thought it. I love that about it. The image I that often use is the difference between holding faith with a clenched fist or an open hand. If you hold your faith with a clenched fist, nothing gets in and nothing gets out. As I stand before you I look like I'm a threat. If I can hold my faith with an open hand, it's not that I'm not holding anything. I'm actually holding it so that I can receive and I can offer. It's much more generous and if I stand before you with an open hand there's an invitation. Even in our culture, it's a handshake. It's a welcome with an open hand. I think that image for me has really helped me understand that if I can loosen my grip on my faith, so that I don't choke the very life out of it. Not only did that allow me room to grow, but it also allows me to relax on other people truth claims.

Rachel: To summarize: interfaith to you in a succinct couple sentences, what does that mean?

Brian: Interfaith to me means seeing people for who they are and knowing that their experience is completely different than mine. Also understanding that the God in whom I have come to believe not only loves that, but is revealed in it.

Rachel: Thank you so much for being here, Brian.
Aarti Shah interview

Rachel: Today we have Aarti Shah with us.

Aarti: Thank you! Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

Rachel: Of course, so first I was just wondering what got you involved with interfaith and the CIC begin with.

Aarti: I think it was a conversation with Charlie and with Don, and once I heard what they're trying to do in Indianapolis and what their mission was, that got me intrigued and interested. I was also similarly going on on my spiritual journey and have been very involved with my community, the faith community and also teaching since 2011 kids between five and fifteen-years old, so when I heard Charlie and what they were trying to do, I became very interested.

Rachel: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you're involved with, I know you worked for Eli Lilly, so what that position looks like and then too just your faith journey how that plays into your work and your day-to-day life?

Aarti: Sure, so first and foremost I'll say my first title is I'm a mom. I have two lovely boys. They're twenty and twenty-two years old. At Lilly I've been here for twenty-five years. I just celebrated my twenty fifth anniversary a few days ago, and currently I lead technology at Lilly, so I’m part of Lilly’s senior management team and the chief information digital officer for the company.

Rachel: So what about your faith? Can you talk a little bit about how you became, I know you're a Jain, so what that means to you and how your faith journey started?

Aarti: Yeah so as you said, I follow Jainism, and my faith journey, I would say, started since childhood. My mom has had and continues to have a profound impact on me and who I am, but since childhood, she sowed the seeds of spirituality of dharma and what it is and the values of it, and I would say back then there would be rituals and we would go and follow and go into the temple. I would do all those things, and I enjoyed it. That was my relationship with my God and since childhood she taught me that I can have that own dialogue. I can talk to it, but I followed her. I did all of that stuff, and then when I immigrated to the United States, I realized how important it was for me, for my identity, but more importantly for me to just survive in a new country. Then as I've grown older and wiser, I think the key turning point for me was in 2011 when a living master entered my life. He is my guru, my spiritual master and gave me this beautiful opportunity to serve - We call it sewa. Sewa is to serve – by teaching. As I’ve started
teaching, I actually learned more about Jainism, and more importantly the why behind what we
do, so behind every activity that you do, every ritual that you do with whether you are ringing the
bells or you are doing something with rice or you are bobbing up and down or you are putting
the essence together, or you're lighting a candle. Everything has a meaning, and I just learned
what the why is behind all of that stuff, and it was so beautiful and then little did I know that the
questions that the students asked me actually were so innocent and so insightful. I learned so
much through that, but there is a full curriculum just like we have for kids going from
kindergarten to twelfth grade. There is a curriculum on Jainism for Jain school that takes the kids
through that. Through that you learn about all religions in the first phase, so I kind of take that
from all different religions that sacranimity is the key principle, and then there were stories,
mythology, different stories of saints, different stories of people, just the traditions, the different
studies and what its meaning is. It's been amazing. I don't think I that have the words to explain
that experience that I'm currently going through.

Rachel: So it sounds like interfaith is kind of woven into how you teach Jainism and everything
like that, so it's a fundamental part. Is there ever any conflict with understanding interfaith and
different relationships of other religions within your religion?

Aarti: Absolutely not. Actually you made me think about something else. I was a Jain, but I went
to a convent school so all the way from kindergarten to twelfth grade, I went to Mount Carmel
Convent High School. I would go for mass. I would go to the church. I have been exposed
thankfully through my upbringing to so many different religions. My close friends are from
different traditions, different faiths, denominations they’ve followed. In Jainism, one of the main
principles that you follow is that you are accepting of the different views and perspectives. It's
very important.

Rachel: Interesting. Cool. So with Jainism, I know you've hinted at some things like going to
temple and certain rituals that you do, but what are some fundamental principles of Jainism?

Aarti: Yeah so the fundamental principle of the Jainism… The main slogan is Ahimsa Paramo
Dharma meaning nonviolence is the supreme religion. Ahimsa Paramo Dharma nonviolence is
the supreme religion. There are five key principles, nonviolence being fundamental, right. This is
not nonviolence meaning I'm vegetarian and I don't want to kill anything, but it's truly not to hurt
anyone, any living being through your words, actions, or thoughts. It goes very, very deep, and
it’s very minute. Even if I thought negatively about someone or I’ve hurt someone, I seek for that
forgiveness. Nonviolence is one of the key tenants, and then it's truthfulness so honesty, non-
stealing non-attachment, so staying detached to the material world. And Anekantavada is
everything has two sides. There are two sides of the coin, so to truth that's why you have to be
open and willing hear all the different views and perspectives and not say that my way is the
right way. Actually, there are multiple facts to get to that end goal, and that's what I've liked at
the CIC. It has enriched my spiritual journey to be honest. I didn't know that there were so many different sects within Christianity or within Islam and just learning and hearing from those different things it has made me a better individual, I would absolutely say.

Rachel: Then looking too just at your role within Eli Lilly, being a big corporation business is it somewhat difficult to hold those values of nonviolence when it's such a competitive environment?

Aarti: Yeah actually I would say those faith principles has kept me so grounded and that has been my anchor all the way through as I've taken different higher level leadership positions and responsibilities at Lilly. It has not been a conflict for me. I believe in bringing my full authentic self to work, and if people were to ask, I am absolutely willing to share why I do certain things or what I believe in, but I will never going into the preaching part of it. Or not believe that what they do is right, but if any people are curious and likewise when somebody else practices certain things, it tells me that way. The other thing I would say for a company like Lilly and many other big corporations that are in Indianapolis in the state of Indiana. We are all working on making our company more diverse and inclusive. It's not just about diversity, but how do you make the workplace more inclusive, so people can bring their full self to work actually feel that are heard, and that they are respected. They are valued, and they are fulfilled because when an employee does that, think about the business is going to flourish, is going to thrive. The work that the CIC does in making Indianapolis a welcoming and inclusive city helps all the corporations to attract talent. We want the best of the best scientists and engineers and marketers and technologists to come to Lilly, and stay here, and that they can feel and practice what they believe in, and bring my full self to work.

Rachel: I feel like a lot of different organizations and work too, sometimes you have to leave part of your identity at the door when you walk in, so to have the two come together must be really great. And I can see it flourishing, too. It’s clear.

Aarti: Yeah it means that over the years you learn, and then once the environment makes it more inclusive you are much more open to sharing. I mean I wouldn't say I was like that day one, but over the years I've actually felt very comfortable, very welcome and hence more open to sharing.

Rachel: Yeah have there been any conversations with the CIC or interfaith groups in general that you've been able to learn from? Are there any notable aspects maybe in getting together and having those open dialogues?

Aarti: Yes the notable aspects include the yearly banquets that we do. It’s phenomenal. We recognize one of the leaders for their many years of service and that keep to the insights of how they have been practicing their faith, but more importantly giving to society and the difference
they have made. The festival of faiths. I love that. It just brings so many groups together, especially when we do the one drum circle, and everybody's there. The parade that we do… Just learning from that has been phenomenal. The living room dialogues that CIC has. Unfortunately I have not been able to go to many, but I know that it also gives the great opportunity for people to actually go into somebody's house and see how they live, and how they practice their faith, what are some of their traditions. And the hit always is the food. The piece that we have learned is that we rotate the place of the CIC board members at different houses of worship and I’ve been to several. You learn through that, too.

Rachel: Is there a place here in Indianapolis that you go to for Jains?

Aarti: Yeah, the Hindu temple which is on the east side. It's beautiful if you haven’t been there you should, but Indianapolis is very unique I would say it’s a unique temple in the United States. Where it has brought in all the different faiths within India. There is a shrine for all the different sub-religions, let me put it that way. So yes, we have a Jain shrine within the Hindu temple. We meet there once a month where we have the adult classes as well as classes for the children and then one Sunday of the month, I have the kids at my house, so we have the kids classes twice a month. Once at my house and once at the temple.

Rachel: It seems really relational, Jainism, too. So that’s really neat. This connecting with people.

Aarti: Yeah I mean I think it's all religion, right? That you are really respecting and bowing down to the God that you see in somebody. That soul whatever you call it. The consciousness, the spirit, the soul, right that you are bowing down and respecting that spirit in each and every living being.

Rachel: That’s very cool. And looking too at Indianapolis and just the States, in general, there's a lot of rhetoric of Christianity and these westernized religions, and I'm just curious in Indianapolis and in the States, do you feel included and are Eastern religions respected and noticed?

Aarti: My experience has been truly very positive. When I spent my five years in California and then now another twenty-five years in Indianapolis, twenty-five years before I came to Indy people said, “Where are you going? You don’t go to the Midwest. It's very conservative, especially being an immigrant, a minority, a female…” but to my surprise and to what people said I've not seen any issues or challenges. It goes both ways. It means that you have to accept that I’ve decided to come to a new country to study. This is my home. Then you have to be open to the culture and learning from this country and all the different things whether it's religion, it’s
cultural traditions and vice versa when people are curious and want to know what you do, and why you do. I am very comfortable with sharing so all in all even within the company. I'm blessed in that way, very very blessed that the experience has been nothing but positive.

Rachel: Great. That's great to hear and to just summarize everything and bring it all together why is interfaith work so important?

Aarti: Interfaith work is very, very important. I think I said a couple of things, but I think at the end of the day, it makes each and every one of us richer and a better human being when we understand each other, where we're coming from, what they follow, what they believe, and we understand that we first need to seek to understand before we are understood. It brings peace around the community and peace around the city, so with everything going on in the world, in United States, the work that the CIC does is such a huge joining force because we all want the same thing. Who doesn’t want this, right? Everybody wants to have a blissful existence and the CIC brings that together. The second piece I would say is it provides a platform and an organization that when something happens within society, we can all come together, talk about it and put our united view on that topic, so it's another way to get into unity. Conflict happens, but when that happens the CIC provides a very nice platform for us to say what our take is on that particular challenge or issue.

Rachel: Well, thank you.
Reverend Bruce Garrison interview

Rachel: Today we have Bruce. Welcome, Bruce!

Bruce: Thank you.

Rachel: And Bruce could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your occupation and how you got involved with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation.

Bruce: So I grew up on the west side of Indianapolis and was a Ben Davis High School grad. I have been involved in the Christian tradition my entire life. I spent twenty-one years in England and I did a lot of stuff in Asia, Africa, and Europe. I came back in 2007, and I am working in a church called the Dwelling Place. I do a lot of the outreach stuff, so I do a lot of work with immigrants and refugees. I do a lot of work with non-profits that are involved in all kinds of endeavors and got involved with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation about three years ago. I actually was invited by a man who was doing a lot of work in the Middle East primarily in Israel with Palestinian Christians to consider coming on to his board. That really wasn't a very good fit, but right at the very end of the conversation he said to me, “hey you seem to have a pretty good feel for international stuff. I'm with this thing called the Center for Interfaith Cooperation. Do you think you might be interested?” So literally in a three-minute conversation I ended up meeting Charlie Wiles. We ended up talking and here we are now - really heavily involved. It was a pretty interesting connection. The real reason didn't pan out but the CIC really did.

Rachel: So talking about your faith, in general. Can you describe your journey and how that started?

Bruce: So I'm a pastor's kid who was a pastor's kid who was a pastor’s kid. I have a set of books on my bookshelf that are my great-great-grandfather's commentaries. He was a Methodist circuit rider in Canada. So both my father's side and my mother's side, I have both pastoral backgrounds. I grew up in the Pentecostal church, the Assemblies of God on the west side of Indianapolis. I went to England in 1986, and I was there for twenty-one years. I published a magazine that drew from all traditions – Orthodox, Protestant, Catholic and from like the second century to the twentieth century. That probably more than anything informed my understanding of interfaith because you would find two authors who if they had lived in the exact same time would not be in the same room together because of their traditions yet they were saying the exact same thing, maybe from the twelfth century and the eighteenth or whatever. And then just being in so many different cultures. I was in a lot of different parts of Africa, and you start learning that nothing is done the same and various places within the Christian tradition and otherwise. We did
a lot of stuff with Muslims in the Philippines. We did water well projects. Throughout Africa you were constantly involved. My journey went from a pretty conservative, relatively narrow perspective to one that's gotten pretty wide. I found a lot of voice through travel honestly and interaction with people. The magazine I published was in about seventy countries in around sixteen languages so on a daily basis, I was hearing usually from four continents. All the time, the perspectives were really different. We had a Burmese edition in the magazine, so when the Burmese translator came and talked about his father who was a Christian but still had three wives and they had to walk three days into the mountains. You just started thinking okay this can look really different in so many different contexts. I guess that sort of started it, and then when I got into the CIC and in the interfaith thing you start engaging with the Muslims and the Hindus and the Buddhists. Nobody has got it all right, but nobody's got it all wrong either. There's always something to be learned from the interaction.

Rachel: Yeah, have those different experiences in different cultures caused you to question your identity more as a Christian or strengthened it?

Bruce: It’s strengthened it, I think, definitely, but it's made me question the cultural role imposition that occurs in any faith tradition. I think especially in America it's very hard for almost any faith but definitely Christianity because it's been the leader of the pack for so long here to not be heavily influenced by the culture. When I talk about Christianity, I'm mentally differentiating between what might be American politically driven Christianity right now and the teachings of the ways of Jesus, which are not necessarily distinct.

Rachel: I’ve had issues, and I'm talking about this in several classes, too, where I am looking at proselytism and evangelical work and seeing whether faith-based missions to go abroad and humanitarian efforts are actually helping in the name of religion or if they're hurting in that regard. Have you had any experience to speak to that?

Bruce: Oh yeah! There's a great book called When Helping Hurts. I don’t know if you have seen that, but it basically addresses this whole issue. With the best intention in the world, I think a lot of people can easily perpetuate their colonial mindset that “boy you're really lucky. Us western, white Christians have gotten here to help you in your particular situations.” We do a lot of stuff in the Nora area of Indianapolis. Washington Township is now the most diverse township in the state. One of the elementary schools we work in has over fifty nationalities and all the time...it's funny you bring up the proselytism thing because I'm being asked all the time – “are you doing this to make converts or are you doing this is just because you care?” And that's a legitimate question, and we always say there's no convert part of this. It's not like they have to listen to a thirty-minute sermon before we are going to get food or a coat or whatever, but again what's the way of Jesus and what’s become our cultural understanding of the way of Jesus is you take care of whoever's in front of you and that's what you do. Yeah, it's a really interesting dichotomy
because I was in a lot of situations where it was all about the convert you know the name on the dotted line and getting somebody to sign. I think a lot of what we're supposed to do is just create understanding, create relationships, develop awareness of where other people are coming from. I actually spoke to our church and the sermon was based on the fact that co-existing is actually a low bar. Jesus said co-existing really is not any big deal. We're supposed to love even our enemies and that raises the standard. And to love somebody means you have to understand them. This is where, I think, the work of the CIC comes into its forte, which is helping people to understand, giving people a platform where we can actually have those conversations, and just even begin to see what influences the other parts of the world. We're pretty sheltered here.

Rachel: Yeah, there’s definitely a bubble.

Bruce: Just a little…

Rachel: Yeah there's something that I've been interested in understanding, since working with Center for Interfaith Cooperation, which is how these monotheistic religions can come in and to them their way is the way that's part of the discipline of the religion, So how do you go into an interfaith setting without trying to convert if that’s part of your mission as a Christian?

Bruce: That's a really interesting question. Our church is a little bit different in that we draw from Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions just even within our own church, so we kind of take the best of whatever is coming along. Even just a couple weeks ago, I spoke on awareness and started with a quote from Rumi who is a Muslim, Sufi mystic, so we're okay with coming from other places. Now do we think that Christianity has got a lot going on for it? Absolutely. Are we followers of the way of Jesus? Yes. But I think that if you're actually pursuing the truth no matter where it comes from and what's actually been my most interesting part of this whole process with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation has been engaging with the Eastern religions that really are Western mindset. It has to take a pretty big step back and look at and go wow this is really big. Although even the Hindus would tell you that they're monotheistic, which is in the lot of nuances that really if you look at Islam they have got the 99 names of God. Christianity and Jewish tradition has a lot of different ways of describing God and the various names, so it's not that different, but the way the world is seeing just looks very different. Yeah, I think that you begin to grab that and then that allows you to begin to engage on a deeper level. Probably one of my absolute favorite things that I have ever gotten to do was right after the election. I was contacted by the Al Salam Foundation’s mosque. Our church does a lot with them. We do the thanksgiving breakfast for Horizon House for the homeless together every year. um-hum. So they contacted me and said would you come and speak at our potluck because our people are really afraid, and it's primarily homemade Indian food so any excuse and I'll go over to the potluck. The chance to go eat was great, but they wanted me to come into that room that night not as somebody who was trying to turn into a Muslim or anything but they wanted me to
be a Christian guy who was an American who is able to say to them that it's going to be okay. We’re still with you in this. To stand up and I mean the room was packed because it was right before Thanksgiving and to talk about irrational fear to a roomful of Muslims from Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. It was actually almost a little overwhelming just to have the opportunity but also the responsibility to try to help them and also myself to understand where they were coming from and to say together we're going to get through whatever it is we're going to have to get through over the next few years. There are situations like that they go beyond just, “oh I know that you have five pillars and that you pray five times a day.” Now, we're starting to understand each other. I'm starting to actually get what makes you tick and how you see the world, and you're starting to help impact the way I see the world. That’s a whole different thing. Now, you're moving way beyond well I know you guys have your main service on Friday, and we have ours on Sunday. Now we're actually starting to get into what motivates you and what drives you.

Rachel: That relationship is so important.

Bruce: Absolutely, and that starts actually shaping and forming you as people.

Rachel: Very cool and looking too because you alluded to the fact of violence in the name of your religion. How do you overcome that concept that people may be living out your religion in a whole different way that may not be how you condone that behavior? How do you overcome challenges like that?

Bruce: Wow…

Rachel: Or how did you address that situation?

Bruce: Yeah, so for us. There is violence in the name of Christianity and dabbling in various places, but probably for me right now the biggest issue is just how politically driven so much of the church in America is, and you compare that to Jesus or Paul or really anybody through the first three or four centuries of Christianity who absolutely would not go there. It’s just really difficult for me to see how we've… And that's what I'm saying, you have to kind of disengage the American cultural aspect of Christianity with the teachings of Jesus. That's a hard one because I almost feel like I have to come in the door. Well I don't feel like it, I do come in the door most times saying. We're not like that. That's not what it means to be a follower of Jesus because he himself would not go political. He would never get drawn into that world even though his message was subversive. It was subversive to those in power. I think that for us… Well I guess this is probably the easiest example, I've just unfollowed more people than I can even begin to tell you on Facebook because it has become such a platform for a political religion that really doesn't look a whole lot like what I'm pretty sure Christianity supposed to be.
Compassion, taking care of the needs of others, those who are marginalized: that I'm pretty sure is where you would find Jesus himself if he was here today. Definitely not in the political arena at all.

Rachel: Also, you have had so many experiences here in Indianapolis and abroad too, so can you think of any particular story of people that you encountered that really shaped you or made you think?

Bruce: I think I'm perpetually being made to think. Hopefully. One of the values that the CIC holds, we have six keywords and one of them is curiosity, and I think that if you hold on to a true curiosity, you are just continuously looking for more and it’s something that keeps making your world just a little bigger. One of the most interesting things…two examples come to mind really quickly. So our church this summer had somebody from the Hindu community, somebody from the Jewish community, and somebody from the Muslim community over three months. They all came and spoke and then we turned around and went and visited them, so a Hindu temple, a Jewish synagogue, and a mosque. We were at the Hindu temple touring with Anita Joshi who is on the CIC board, and one of the guys in our church was just watching the people come into the temple and they would pray or do their various things, and he said just feels like a spiritual gymnasium. He mentioned that to the pastor at our church who had started the church, and Shane went back and started thinking about that. What’s the difference between a spiritual gymnasium and a spiritual classroom which is what most churches tend to be where you just sit and listen. It actually transformed the way we now conduct services. It's a lot more practice based. We get people a lot of time to think about okay what is this going to look like for you this week. The funny thing is that all started with our visit to a Hindu temple, so there's always a lot to be learned from whomever is out there. Then, the pagan community just came on the board in the last year, and I have had some really fascinating conversations with three or four people - one involved with Wicca, one involved with Druids, one who is not really connected with anybody, but just to see their perspective of the world and how they have felt marginalized and persecuted over centuries. Really you start to realize that your preconceived ideas are almost always wrong. Our church talks a lot about relational laziness. What we mean by that is it's really easy to say “well she's Muslim, so she's going to be like that,” or “oh, he grew up Catholic, so we know what he's going to be like” without ever sitting down and talking to them. It’s lazy. It's a relational lazy attitude. It takes a little bit of work to get to know somebody, but there are one or two people on the board who I specifically, they're not from my faith tradition, but if I have a spiritual situation, without a doubt they would be one of the first people I would contact. I have that kind of regard for their spiritual awareness. Are we going to be exactly the same? No, but we actually are informing one another's perspectives by trading books back and forth or going, “hey you won't believe this,” and actually what you find is that traditions in a lot of ways, especially when you start getting into spirituality are not that different. The language starts becoming a lot the same. I think that's probably been my biggest discovery is just how you can be informed by
people who you're not going to convert and they're not going to convert, but you can truly help each other interact with the world, with your understanding of the divine, and with your spirituality. There is a lot of room for influencing and informing and helping each other to grow and then, that starts impacting, hopefully one of much wider scale as grassroots start to impact right across the board and help other people who would never go there start to say, “oh wait a minute. I'm starting to learn something here, and I start to realize…” I took a bunch of our people to the mosque just a few months ago after a lady had come and talk to us and they do their prayers and then we have the potluck and I went over to the people from our church, and I said, “Isn’t this interesting. What have we done here tonight? We've watched them pray and eat. What do we frequently do in our church? Pray and eat?” Humanity is not that different no matter where you are. It's just learning that and then beginning to allow that to inform the way you see the world and then respond to the world.

Rachel: True, yeah. What was your favorite experience abroad? Or your favorite country?

Bruce: My favorite country in Africa was Malawi because it was so undeveloped. It's a very poor country, so there are obviously some negatives to that, but the positive is you could be out in the bush and you could have no idea that you were even anywhere near the twentieth century. That was pretty cool. My favorite city is Prague, Czech Republic, without a doubt. It's just gorgeous and historically fascinating around every corner that you turn. Experiences, I think probably just the interaction with people no matter where you went. I was over there when the Iron Curtain fell, so probably my most memorable experience was when we went into Albania. It was so close to when the border had opened up that the road from Greece and Albania was still just gravel, and I was living in England at the time, and the British drive on the other side of the road, so the steering wheel is on the other side of the car. We were the first British car that they had ever seen, so our car was surrounded. People were just amazed. So just being able to interact with people who for almost forty years had no contact with the outside world at all was really fascinating. We engaged with them and found out what their world had been like and just hopefully sort of throw in some “well here's what it's like out there now.” It was bittersweet because it was really intense, but to be able to make those connections and start develop relationships with people who had not really had the opportunity was fascinating.

Rachel: Do you ever get a sense of feeling uncomfortable initially when you're meeting a different culture or somebody of a different country?

Bruce: I don't anymore. In fact, I absolutely thrive in the moment. I tell people that I'm somewhere in the mid-Atlantic because I was in England for twenty-one years, so two-thirds of my adult life. I can walk into a room, especially like at Al Salaam, for instance, they're mainly from India and Pakistan. A lot of them did post-graduate work in England, so I walk in the room, and we're immediately talking soccer. We're talking cricket. We're definitely talking food, and it
is very natural. Yeah of course like anybody when I was younger and the first few times I went to various places you're not sure what's going on, but now, what I find, and I think this is actually in the Quran, God has put all these various people out there for the diversity to show us the vastness of what the world is like, what the divine is like, and so instead of it being a place of nervousness I actually can't wait to meet new people. New cultures, like I say curiosity. New religious perspectives fascinate me. Of course that's what the whole CIC thing is about. How do we develop that? How do we create those platforms for people to engage in that without the fear? Because for most people and it's funny and I understand it, they're driven by fear. When something comes along, we're not sure what it is, so what do, we do we circle the wagons. When I finally have the opportunity to engage with people, I thrive on that just because of all the diversity and the nuances and it just shows you the vastness.

Rachel: What would urge a person to do if they were caught up in that mentality of being uncomfortable interacting with those around me and not going outside that bubble?

Bruce: The first step would be meet somebody. Yeah, I mean as simple as that. If can meet somebody even if it’s just over a cup of coffee or tea and just start asking any question that you have because I am almost a 100% sure the answers are going to completely defy what your expectations are. Most people, no matter where you're in the world, matter what your religious tradition, there are some simple foundational things that everybody pursues. They want the best for their kids. They want the best for their family. They want to make some kind of a positive contribution to society. That's one of the things that I spend a lot of my time doing is helping bring the Muslim community and various other communities into the nonprofit world because they're not really sure how to negotiate it because a lot of it's faith-based and especially in the Midwest and they're not sure how they're going to be received so I kind of play middle man. But my advice for anybody is to just start a conversation, meet someone and then do something with them, some kind of a project - service. If you serve beside somebody, so many barrier drop. It's pretty interesting.

Rachel: So to wrap up. To you Bruce, what is interfaith?

Bruce: For me interfaith is just taking the time to be curious, to be compassionate, to be understanding of other traditions that probably in a lot of ways look absolutely nothing like yours, at first, but then the further you go you actually begin to counter the depths of what those traditions are. There was a guy, he was a Spanish theologian, Raimon Panikkar, who talked about the difference between interfaith and intrafaith. Interfaith goes beyond finding out what night people have church or what times they have their services. It looks at how does this actually impact your life and how can your tradition actually impact my life. We joke about it because he used to say you always have to be cautious because you might end up being converted but his whole point was you make yourself vulnerable. You take the risk of allowing
somebody else's belief system to actually impact and possibly even shape you. That to me is interfaith and allowing that to make you a better person.

Rachel: Thank you for being here today.
Imam Mikal Saahir interview

Rachel: Today we have Imam Mikal Saahir with us. Welcome.

Imam: Thank you for having me.

Rachel: So first to start. I would love to understand you and your work and a little bit about yourself.

Saahir: Understand me. Well that’s good because maybe I can understand myself if you can tell me. My name is Michael Saahir. Many call me Mikal, which is an Arabic way of saying Michael. I was not born Saahir. I changed my name almost forty years ago. I had a different name, and we can get into that later. I am a retired firefighter. I served thirty-eight years for the city of Indianapolis. Next month, my wife and I will celebrate our thirty-ninth wedding anniversary. We have the whole family coming, children, grandchildren, and a couple great-grandchildren. They make us both great, and they make us both grand. I’m a lifelong resident of Indianapolis, Indiana, and a product of the school systems. (sinc) I am the imam at Nur-Allah Islamic Center. Nur means light in Arabic, so Nur-Allah is the “light of God.” I have been the imam there for twenty-seven years. (sic) The following January from June of 1991, I was chosen to be the imam. That’s how I can keep count. I do a lot of writing. I have written a couple of books. One is titled The Honorable Elijah Muhammad: The Man behind the Men. It is about 300+ pages. The other was a little small booklet called By Winter and Summer, which is a verse from the Quran. It is a family-oriented story.

Rachel: As the imam what role do you fulfil?

Saahir: The role of the imam, in my particular mosque, is similar to the leader of a church or a rabbi. In the pastoral capacity of serving the needs of the community. On Friday afternoon is our day of weekly service, worship. So I often lead the Friday prayer and Friday sermon. We also have a week-end school called Clara Muhammad week-end school. Sister Clara Muhammad was a pioneer in the community from back in making the Nation of Islam days. She was the wife of Elijah Muhammad, and the mother of Imam Warith Deen Muhammad. So those are our week-end schools, and there are also our full-time schools named after her in various cities, but here we have the week-end schools. So I am the director of the week-end school. I also write columns for the Indianapolis Recorder. Here is a column here that I wrote. The Recorder is about the third-oldest continuous African-American publication. I think it is 127-years old. Yeah we’ve been around for a while. I have been writing for them since 1992 as well. [sic]
Rachel: What are some of the topics that you feel passionate to address in some of your articles?

Saahir: Sure. There are so many misconceptions about Islam, so I never run out of topics. Whatever the issue may be or what’s most misunderstood, I try to address. [sic] The issue that’s most overworked in the media is terrorism, but also another one that is misunderstood is the role of women. I try to address these, but also it is often seasonal, meaning I cover whatever is prevalent in the American society. For example, if it’s Veteran’s Day, I’ll go interview a Muslim who’s a veteran. So whatever the season may be… There’s a dominant flow in the overarching society, and we must get a Muslim perspective on it. If it’s the Fourth of July, you know whatever is may be. If it’s Christmas, what does the Quran say the birth of Jesus? So that’s why we are doing it. The other way that I choose my topics, I say what is it that everyone talks about at home or in the barber shop, but when they come into the public, they are scared to say it. They want to be PC – politically correct. I said let me go after that one because everyone is talking about it, but when they come out in the public, they try to put on their best behavior, but I said, “Nope! We’re going to talk about this one today.” For example, I have a blog [sic]. My topic this Sunday is going to be “preserving the virginity, the sobriety, and the Islam of a Muslim youth on a college campus.” That’s a big talk. So someone says you should change the language, I say what change the reality. That’s not just for Muslims. That’s the issue for all people of faith. I know at Butler University that have the Center for Faith and Vocation because they recognize the seriousness of that. People may look at Butler as being a tame college compared to some others that I won’t name. So if Butler recognizes that this is a serious issue, we need to be a conference zone in which a student can bring their faith with them when they come from wherever they come. So that’s going to be my topic in a very similar but more direct way. You have to have a little spice in your topic. You know when people see virginity they are going to say sex, and then, they are going to read it.

Rachel: It is important to be upfront about it. I feel like you will get a lot more followers.

Saahir: It is what it is. We deal with all kinds of issues.

Rachel: How do you approach some of those difficult conversations?

Saahir: It’s is pretty much saying “what is the real problem?” Often at times we have euphemisms that we want to put out, but if you’re not careful the euphemisms become so common that you are endanger of telling a falsehood. Because you are dancing around the issues, and the problem continues to grow. A lot of times when people hear people address the problem head on, they say “yes, keep talking” and everyone else is putting a band aid on cancer. So I say “no, let’s get down to what is causing the cancer.” What are the contributing factors before the cancer becomes a big problem? What is contributing to this?
Rachel: What role do you see interfaith in that?

Saahir: Interfaith becomes secondary, but very important because when you speak to people of different religions, I don’t care what it is, they are facing the same problems like trying to attract youths to come to service, all the social issues. They are wrestling with them all from abortions to marijuana to the role of sex. They are wrestling with that. So interfaith is second only in the sense that by committing myself to interfaith am I able to realize that “oh, it’s not just us.” Sometimes someone from a different faith can give me an answer for what I need in my faith because of the exchange and you can be mutually supportive because we are all dealing with the same problems. We may have different books and traditions, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t hear a Buddhist or a Mormon or see a Hindu at the mosque, and vice versa.

Rachel: Has there been an appreciation from people within your community and outside in Indianapolis for interfaith dialogue? Do people seem on board with that idea or is it challenging to get people to recognize the value of interfaith?

Saahir: Well I and others who have been engaged with interfaith for a while, we work in tiers or levels. First level, second level, third level. And that’s true for me and anyone else who is an individual. After I get in a comfort zone as an individual, then I can really invite someone else into the interfaith conversation. So it’s in levels. It’s in tiers. It’s like graduating from first grade to second grade. In Islam, I’ll say it this way, and for Christians it should say the same thing, when you first become involved in interfaith, the diehards in our faiths say “what are you doing? You’re going to tell them about Muhammad aren’t you? I know you are going to set them straight because they are going to hell.” You’ve got those types in most every religion. So I say to myself when I go to an interfaith event and to these people with the questions “that you aren’t going with me yet. You are not ready.” But after they see me in it for a while, and I share with them that this is not about going to an interfaith event and bringing my Quran under my arm looking for someone to convert. I want to bring the Quran in my heart and see what I can get from the Quran in my heart that is in common with anyone else. Because the Quran tells us in very plain words. It says, “Come together on common terms.” That’s written in the Quran. So once you come together long enough on common terms, then you being to realize that first of all you hear it all over the country now, that we have more in common than I thought. But even that has levels of growth because as you become comfortable knowing you have more in common you are going to begin to say in the areas that seem to not be in common is that we were all saying the same thing differently. I use a different word. “Oh that’s what you mean when you say that! Oh, I’ve got that same idea.” Now the concession has brought you from one level to the next level. To where the first level, you work to build a friendship, the basis to build a friendship and friendships. That means trust. For example God. In Islam, there is no room for Father, Son, Holy Ghost. I’m not saying we are not doing that, but if I hear you talking about Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, I would say that you are really saying that they are all one, but you say it differently.
So the friendship and trust is built where I can have a real conversation with you without having to dance around the words wondering if I am going to hurt your feelings or you’re going to hurt my feeling, so you don’t say it or I don’t say it. Now we can just say it. Now you get to the next level, so you find more in common with what you thought was not in common. Then, you begin to work on projects together, not for the sake of this religion or that religion, but because you are human beings. It grows and grows and before you realize it, you and the other faiths around you have all grown in your respective faiths just by doing interfaith. In my faith they say it is like water. The Quran gives a very beautiful example. The Quran says, “Look at the crops, different shades, different colors, different growth, but one water.”

Rachel: That’s beautiful! That gives a great metaphor for different religions coming together.

Saahir: It is interfaith. If we can get the human being that God created, they may dip, they may sprinkle, they may bow, they may prostrate… Each time it is a human being that God created. We need to look at it through those lenses that God created you. This is kind of off topic, but it is not. This is why I don’t mind giving a panhandler a dollar or two downtown because that’s God’s creation. Although some others will say, that they are not going to give money so that they can buy whiskey or get high – “I know that they are getting high with it.” But I say that that is God’s creation. I lose a dollar in my glove box, so it’s no big deal. It is not going to hurt me to give them a dollar because that’s God’s creation. And that’s the same with interfaith. If we look at each mission, each purpose, each endeavor, we are serving God through His creation no matter faith, color, or status that they may be. That’s God creation, which takes a big social and religious maturity that a lot of people do not have. Interfaith can cause that to happen.

Rachel: How did you come to know the CIC and the people involved with it?

Saahir: I am one of the founding members. Myself, Judge Shaheed, Susan Judith Ray, and her husband Earl, Dr. Shaheed Athar, and others. They had a group just called the Interfaith Alliance for years, and by the time I had become involved, everyone had been president twice, and treasurer twice, but they kept it going. Lou Weiss was part of that initial group too. So the CIC came after a group called International Interfaith Initiative. We went over to Jordan and built a house with a Palestinian family on the Habitat for Humanity model. Then, after that group, we formed the CIC, the Center for Interfaith Cooperation. So it was a kind of transition along those lines. So to answer your question, how did I get involved with the CIC, my particular mosque, Nur-Allah Islamic Center, Imam W.D. Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad, became the leader in 1975. In 1976, he began to do interfaith with the rabbis in Washington D.C. and other synagogues in the Chicago area, and he told us back in 1976 to get involved with interfaith. Now, ironically, when we first began to do that other Muslims who came from overseas said “you can’t do that - that’s haram.” Haram means forbidden. “They are disbelievers and you can’t do that.” They held that position for a long time, but the imam said that we were going to do this.
Based off the model of Prophet Muhammad, he always gave to the people of different religions. Really many of the other Muslim communities did not consciously involved with interfaith holistically until 9/11, but we began in 1976 – 1977.

Rachel: If you could give us a brief history of your faith journey and what that has looked like over the years and how you became a Muslim within Islam and maybe some challenges that you faced over the years.

Saahir: Yeah, so for my childhood, I was born in the mid-fifties. You can put me in where I fit in with the changes of society because the sixties were turbulent. I was a small child going into high school during that time, and even the seventies were kind of rough for drastic society changes. I remember about freshman year of high school you had to keep your shirt tail in and you could not wear a beard. But by the time that I was a senior, shirt tails were out, beards were long, and we wore high pants. So in just three of four years, there was that change. So I’m in that turbulent sixties, and I don’t know what name they gave to the seventies… But I know that during that time from the African American side you got the ‘68 James Brown song, “Say it Loud, I am Black, and I’m Proud.” I remember clearly and distinctly, you can ask anyone my age, that before that song come out in ’68 we were Negros and don’t you dare call me black. Those were fighting words. “I am not black! You’re talking to me…” James Brown came out with that song in 1968, and it changed quick. But the Nation of Islam under Elijah Muhammad had been teaching that you were black since the 1930s. You are not a so-called Negro. You are not “of color.” You are not this, you are not that. You are a black man since God created the earth. 1930s, 40s, 50s, 60s, he taught that. We saw this in Malcolm X, Mohammed Ali...so that’s where I got the impetus for my book because of that connection between being proud of how God made you. In the late sixties, I am still in grade-school, but I remember watching on the news at night, Detroit burning, LA burning. I was looking at them kill John Kennedy. Then, they killed Medgar Evers. Then, they killed Malcolm X. Then, they killed Robert Kennedy and Dr. King, so for some who is 8, 9, 10, 11, 12-years old, that’s a lot of stuff going on. And I am going down to Alabama every summer, and I remember seeing signs “White Only.” I saw that as a teenager. Going downtown in the little town Athens, Alabama, where my father is from. We would go up in the balcony, my brother and cousin, and it would just be us in the balcony. We looked out over the balcony, and there are about five people down there, but we can’t go down there. I say all this because it is important to shape the environment as I saw it through my lens.

I was born and raised in the church, Church of Christ. Very good church, and I still have a lot of respect for it, right here in Indianapolis. But I am also seeing brothers on the corner, clean cut with good haircuts, and back then we had big afros. [sic] I always wore a bow tie. Always clean and sharp. It would catch your attention. One time I bought a newspaper, not too far from my neighborhood on the west side between 21st and Harding on 16th street. So I bought one of the newspapers. I figured that I would buy one, and I was walking down the street reading it, and I
was like “wow!” There was a picture of a Caucasian man and his wife. They were looking real sad and dejected in a row boat because their town had flooded, but the caption said word to the effect of, “As long as white people keep abusing black people, God is going to punish them.” It messed me up. I was probably in the seventies. I had never heard anything like that in my life, and my mind said “those white folks are going to get him for selling that paper.” They are not going to go for this. There he was again the next week and the next week. So I thought maybe what he is selling is true. So the voice of Islam from the African-American community from the 1930s to the 1970s, the dominant voice I should say for Islam, was Elijah Muhammad’s message, which is the Islamic message in its purity. It was a message designed to appeal to dissatisfied black folks. And guess what in the forties, fifties, and sixties, there was a lot of dissatisfied black folks and justifiably so. So that was my introduction to Islam. Elijah Muhammad passed in 1975. Then, his son became the leader, and though he was raised to help his father, he disagreed with his father on a black man being God and the white man being the Devil. But he still kept to Islam, but he would read from the Quran that the Quran did not support his father’s teachings. So in 1975, he became the leader of the Muslim community, and between 1975 and 1980, he began teaching from the Quran in mosques and nation-wide school systems. He said that we were going admit white people and that they could be members. We were going to put down the racial talk, and that’s how I came this way. Schools were just beginning to be integrated here in Indianapolis, so there were lots of challenges going on not just for African Americans, but also for Caucasian students because of the flower power, peace and love, ‘give me some blue tips, “give me some acid’, ‘I’m not going to bathe’, etc. Because they also saw the changes in society. I think it has been proposed that after the killing of John F. Kennedy, a lot of the perceived innocence of Americans was lost. We were raised on Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver, and The Beverly Hillbillies. Everyone was getting along well, and then all of sudden, you’ve got this [sic] group going on. It’s like a pimple, a big pimple, or a volcano, and it erupted.

Rachel: So would you say that your various identities inform your faith? Now that you’ve converted over to Islam has there been a source of peace?

Saahir: Yes, and this is a growing peace. If I may say, it grows in the ground and keeps me rooted, and it grows to the heavens to keep me aspirational because the way that I have been taught Islam from Elijah Muhammad is not faiths. It’s rational based faith so that there is a logic to my faith. There is an understanding that comes with the faith. It is not just faith that’s just “Oh, I feel good.” No, you’ve got to think good, too. It gives me a good root. Islam allows me to look back on my past and make sense of it. That’s very important. And just before I forget, Saahir was not my birth name. I chose that name in 1978-79. There was a name book, and they had that name in Arabic, and the meaning in English. So I didn’t go down the column for the Arabic. I went down the column for the meaning because first of all, I didn’t know a lot of Arabic. I got down to the Ss before I chose a fitting name, and the meaning said “alert, watchful, and not sleeping”. I said that’s me, and I looked to the left and Saahir was there. My name
before…my father named me Michael and gave me a middle name, which was a singular letter. The letter O. I said, “Daddy, why did you…” You see his name was Oliver, so I said, “Why didn’t you name me Michael Oliver?” He said that he didn’t want a junior, and I said that I wouldn’t have been a junior because I have the name Michael. Then, my last name at the time was Flannigan, so all through grade school, high school, I am Michael O. Flannigan. I didn’t know anything about leprechauns or St. Patty’s Day or growing a beard. I didn’t know anything Irish nothing. And I was a freshman in high school in JROTC, and we would wear uniforms for JROTC, and it must have been sometime in March around St. Patty’s Day. I was in line to get my food about to pay the cashier, a Caucasian lady, with Flannigan on my name tag, a green uniform, near St. Patty’s Day, and she said that’s mighty Irish of you. I looked at her “like what in the heck are you talking about?” Then, I walked away. I didn’t know what to say because I had no connection whatsoever.

Me: What age were you when you decided to change your name?

Saahir: Oh, it would have been 1978 because there was a big movement. See for Elijah Muhammad he gave his followers no last name. He gave them a letter X. That’s why you hear Malcolm X, and the reason why Elijah Muhammad gave his followers the last name X is because he said “you don’t know your family’s names. They were stolen from you by the slave master, and he gave you in place his last name.” And I found that to be true. I read the history on the name Flannigan, and there was a white guy named Simpson B. Flannigan who owned my great-grandparents. Elijah Muhammad said get rid of the slave master’s name. We aren’t slaves any more, and take this X until God comes and gives you a holy, righteous name. Malcolm X was the first Malcolm at the place because if there was another Malcolm, he would have been Malcolm 2X, and the next person Malcolm 3X. So the X was a placeholder until you got your holy name. So my name was Flannigan. What does that mean? At the time, we didn’t have Google. I got my car and went downtown to the library and went to the reference department and got the name book. I looked up Flannigan, and it means “the old man with red hair.” Then, I didn’t have the age that I have now, and I definitely did not have red hair. So I said that I have got the wrong name for sure. It’s kind of like flan in flannel shirt means read. Flan means red. So in 1977, I got the name book and saw Saahir and decided that’s the name that I want.

Rachel: That’s a really good story. It gives you a sense of empowerment, that’s for sure.

Saahir: And just for the record, if you go Google Saahir and the name McWilliams, Michael Saahir and Anne McWilliams, you’ll get a very interesting story [sic]. I’ll give you a snippet. I won’t leave you hanging like that. Oh, it’s a powerful interfaith story. In 2009, I am doing interfaith because I’ve been doing interfaith, that’s what I do. So a very liberal church, it’s a Christian church on 71st and Pennsylvania Street. I think it’s First Congregational. I had been there before as a Muslim to do the main sermon, so a very liberal church. So they invited me to
come in, and it was in March of '09. They said can you come earlier? We have an unchurched service in the morning for those you are new to the church or new to church, period. They come earlier, and it’s a very laid back discussion on the spiritual DNA. I said yeah, I can come, so me and my wife came early. There was a car pulling in with a lady in it who was walking across the lot to let us go on to the door, and we went on in to enjoy the am session about the spiritual DNA of Abraham. So coffee break, coffee, cookies. Well, at this church they all wore name tags, and the same lady that slowed down and let us in, I didn’t know her at the time, but we put it all together later on, and she had a nametag on that said Anne McWilliams. I didn’t realize that I said it aloud, but I said that I have a cousin named Anne McWilliams. She heard it, but I didn’t know that she heard me. I went on talking to the Reverend and everyone else, but she asked my wife what I meant by McWilliams, so I came back over, and she said “what were you saying about the name Anne McWilliams?” I said, “Well, oh yeah. I have a cousin named Anne McWilliams or had a cousin. She passed away, but she is not from here. She is from Alabama.” Then, she said, “Oh well, I am too.” I said, “yeah, but this is a small town, Athens, Alabama.”

Then, she said, “Yeah, I’m from Athens.” I told you every summer, I’ve been going to Alabama since I was a little baby, and she said, “I’m from Athens.” Then I said, “Oh, I didn’t mean Athens. My father is from Athens. My mother is from a little town called Elkmont.” According to the census, there are 400 people in this town. There are no two stray buildings, only flashing yellows and no red lights. Right now, as we speak, and she said, “Oh, my father is from Elkmont,” and said, “Well my great-grandfather got the name McWilliams because he was a slave, and he was owned by a James Lafayette McWilliams.” She said, “You mean Jim Fayet?” I said, “Yeah” She said, “That was my great-great-grandfather.” By that time, I felt a tingling go up my spine, and I looked at her and she had little, bitty goose bumps all over her arms. For the first time, her southern accent came out, and she said, “That’s amazing.” Then, we put the two and two together that her great-great-grandfather was the slave master of my great grandfather.

Rachel: How did that feel?

Saahir: Well, it was more of an issue for her than me because she knew there was something in the past, but her family didn’t want to talk about. She was very liberal because she is married to another woman. This church was liberal, allowing an African American Muslim to do the main sermon on Sunday. So she is in this liberal cloud, so to speak, bubble, and that I didn’t realize until a few weeks passed by that I had burst that bubble. Because I knew more about the history than she did, but she knew enough to tie it in. You see I had already talked to her great auntie in 1985. I went inside the house, which is the same house that the slave master lived in, and my great grandfather lived upstairs in the attic. And I interviewed her in 1985, so then, we began to talk. If you go Google Micheal Saahir and Anne McWilliams…We kept in contact, and she came to my family reunion in Alabama. It goes on because the topic of that Sunday was spiritual DNA and then this happens. And of the things that I mentioned that will really shock you, I am born in October of 1956, and she came in July 1957, so we laughed, and I said when I came out the
oven, you were going in. But take Islam, we spell God G-D, and so I wrote her something like that and she wrote back saying the same thing. I thought she was just being nice, and doing what I did, but this is how she always spells God. It gets more, I don’t want to say eerie… So we were talking one say, and we found out that her father was born October 29 and so is my father. Her mother was born in 1933, and so was my mother.

Rachel: It is good that that conversation started, and you said something. Who would have thought?

Saahir: Well, it goes back to interfaith. If I had said, “Interfaith? I’m not going to do that stuff. That’s them and I am over here.”

Rachel: So to wrap up everything, what does interfaith mean to you in a sentence or two?

Saahir: In a sentence or two… I said this in a semi-joking way, but I do have a serious part about it. I think interfaith is the new religion. Not that we will have a new house, but the way of looking at religion. I will use the Quran to support that. It says that “God will bring us all together, and He is going to make us all one.” It means the coming together in understanding and our respect, which is going to grow into love and appreciation for each other. That’s interfaith, interfaith, but sometimes I change that “i” into an “e”. Enterfaith. So I can see it as looking at the ground, the soil, to plant new seeds for a new way of looking at the human family.

Rachel: Thank you so much.
**Daniel Meyers interview**

Rachel: So today we have Daniel Meyers. Welcome Daniel.

Daniel: Happy to be here.

Rachel: Awesome. So if you can tell us a little about yourself and your interactions with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation that’d be great.

Daniel: Yeah so I’m Daniel Meyers. I’m the director of the Center for Faith and Vocation here at Butler University and so I work with students on faith communities that they're organizing around and also work on interfaith engagement on campus as part of our diversity and inclusion work along with some other things too. I came here in 2015. That was the start of my position here at Butler. I think it was that November so just a few months later that I was nominated to join the board of the CIC, so I just finished my first three-year term just a week ago when they had the board retreat a week ago and so I am starting second third three-year term and then that will be my time on the board I think It's been a lovely place to connect to and get a sense of the landscape of who's doing what on interfaith work in Indianapolis and wider. I've always felt it was incredibly generous for an organization to invite somebody so new to the community to be part of their leadership like that’s I think somewhat unusual. It's been a real benefit to me to come in to a new city and get a sense of all the important work and who the important leaders and players are around interfaith work. The CIC has been a perfect place for me to figure all that out.

Rachel: Cool and looking at your career, where you try and focus all your interest towards students, it sounds like religion is a big part of your life, in general, so what sparked this interest and exactly what does your faith identity consist of?

Daniel: Yeah so my family is not a religious family and not at least when I was growing up. My dad is Jewish and grew up Jewish in the 1950s in New Jersey, and his story is that he barmitzvahed, and then didn't continue in a real strong way with his Jewish religious identity but still always connected to Judaism as his identity, and then my mom is from Holland. She grew up in a pretty devout Dutch Protestant home, so I could have some connections to Calvinism after World War II and also, I think she found it in her teens to not be something she wanted to continue to be super connected to. Both my parents were kind of like hippies in the sixties. They were both from New Jersey, but they met in Israel on a kibbutz in like 1972. They had this long, interesting time where they were living on different continents but stayed connected by letters and eventually, they got married and had my sister and me. My sister is older. Obviously, religion was part of both their upbringing, but it wasn't something they really raised my sister
and I on in a really concrete way. We did celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah, and we did celebrate Easter and Passover. Those are the main religious holidays, and it was more cultural. We went to Passover Seders every year. We never went to church but we would eat chocolate for Easter, and then we did gifts around Hanukkah and candles and the tree and gifts around Christmas. I think in the high school maybe late middle school certainly early high school I started going to a church where most of my friends were going and just got connected and then found myself telling the story I just told you to some parents who were leading a reflection exercise on a retreat that I was on my sophomore year in high school. They asked what was my faith and I said what I my parents’ life is and somebody said okay that's your parents but who are you and that really prompted me to think more about what were my commitments. How did I see all this for myself? So over those weeks and months of sophomore year, I got really curious and interested in pursuing what a Christian life looks like and what it means to be you know a Christian person living and working in the world. I interrogated a lot of that and internalized a lot of that from this church in my hometown in Oregon and then became a youth group leader and got involved. I got baptized. When I graduated high school and went to college, the relationships around my faith were pretty, there was friction there, from my dad, especially, somebody who grew up feeling and experiencing anti-Semitism sometimes around Christian narratives and Christian voices, so it was a little bit uncomfortable I think. Also, the kind Christianity that I was internalizing high school was pretty clear about who gets in to the party and what that all looks like. When I went to college, I found out that there's like a million different ways to be a Christian and I didn't know that. So I started hearing words like Presbyterian and Methodist and Evangelical and all those kind of terms but I had no reference point for them. My first year of college was like a major exploration, and I started going to all these churches that I never knew about and learning more about them, and I got an internship to be a church intern through a program my school had and there was a list of churches within walking distance that you could work for that summer after my first year of college, so I just picked one based on what I read a little bit of blurb about it, and it was a church in the United Church of Christ, and at that time that church was a thriving community, lot of children, lot of young adults, all age ranges there. They had a two-pastor model. The second pastor was openly gay. They had put their flag in the sand on several political issues around economic justice, at that time the Iraq war, queer rights, the environment, etc. I was going there as an intern and learned, oh my goodness, there are so many ways of being a Christian that allow for different political viewpoints that may actually might align more with what I feel, but I didn't know that was something that you could ground in your faith in the way that these people were. It was hugely eye-opening. I ended up working there for three years all through college, and the senior pastor was very supportive, and she pushed me to pursue seminary and she nominated me within the UCC, which is how that works, nominated me to be a member of discernment, which she didn't do the community did, but they took a vote the last Sunday before leaving college. Then, I left college as a member of that church but also in discernment, which is a process that you do if you're considering seminary or ordination. That’s the quick story of my journey from not really a person of faith at all to understanding
Christianity and pursuing that as my calling towards God, but then interrogating heavily what does it look like for me, particularly coming from a family that is multifaith. My dad’s side being different from my mom's side and how they navigated that was to not do it, but I wanted to be able to do religion but also not perceive there to be or create conflict within my own family’s values and views and the very real fact of that all my grandparents had passed away and so I had two grandparents were telling me one thing about what that means, and I didn’t know how to navigate that. This whole college experience showed me that there's lots of other ways to think about how we interpret scripture, how we interpret justice, how we interpret multifaith…

Rachel: So as you progressed in your education, do you feel like you've gotten more answers or more questions through that process in regards to your own faith because I feel like in one sense you can discern more about what path you want follow, but as more and more literature and scholarship is presented to you or just experience, in general. You may realize that there are more questions even with your interactions with the interfaith community, too, there all these other faiths presented, so does that make you question or make you stronger in the beliefs that you hold?

Daniel: Yeah that’s a good question. So the next steps of my story, I went on and taught a little bit high school science for three years, and then went to seminary and thought I wanted to be a chaplain and I ended up connecting to higher-ed chaplaincy, and got ordained to be on a chaplain staff at Columbia University in New York and then from there came here to Butler, which I mention because one should think if you're ordained that you have some kind of commitments about what you believe, what your convictions are but I'll definitely say that a big part of my conviction is the lack of certainty. I'm pretty sure that I don't know it all. I'm pretty sure that no one does. That's kind of one of my main in roads in interfaith work. I think that's a huge open door for allowing us to be a lot more creative and open. If I can recognize that this thing that's divine that I do believe in and believe is acting in the world and believe has some ethics around how we should be and how we should set up society. If I believe that, then I should be curious about how to share that with others, but also how to learn how others are perceiving that divine thing. Ultimately if it's something infinite, and I’m finite, I’m not going to be able to grasp the whole 100% of it. So I think I probably have got some perception of one or two percent or less, right. Much, much less, but I also think every other person practicing faith has got a little bit of it too. If we all shared the little bits that we had, we'd actually get a larger picture of what is true at this thing. If we only cluster ourselves into groups of people who believe, act, and think in the same communities that we are, we’re kind of sharing the same parts or pixels of the image of God and that's good we should did that but I might get a whole new couple pixels by learning from somebody else within the Christian community as well as outside of it and so my uncertainty is the window or the road map to get it to interfaith interest.
Rachel: So part of the point is not to understand. I feel like being uncertain is the point, to an extent, right?

Daniel: Yeah, I mean faith is different than knowledge, right. We don't know, and I think there's a real worry when people operate from faith as though they know it to be true. I think that's a concern and hard avoid because all of us, I think do that sometimes, but I think a true faith, in some sense, is aware of its uncertainty and is operating in its best judgment despite that, but with a healthy amount of scrutiny and septicism and uncertainty and knowledge because it's not just running off and doing what you think is being called upon you without some kind of community connection or some kind of process because that can be dangerous too.

Rachel: So from this community with Center the for interfaith Cooperation maybe beyond and just all of your experiences, what have you learned about people who are different than you? Any maybe an interactions that may have stood out and made you think for a moment.

Daniel: Yeah, I think there's certain elements that many of the religious practices that are not part of my own story that I've found to be just marvelous and kind of inspiring. I wouldn't say it leads me to change my own practice but just an appreciation. Sometimes, there is a reason I may think about changing some things. So like as I'm learning more about people who practice the Muslim faith the image to me that all over the world five times a day there are millions of people facing towards a certain point to offer prayers. There is an image there that I think is just incredible, and there is a unity of practice there and a diligence and regularity that I think is just pretty amazing. One of the things that comes out of the protestant reformation is just this proliferation of other ways of doing it, which is really good, but it also creates a destabilization of unity, so there's so many variations and an independence that comes with parts of my own tradition. I know that there's all that diversity in nearly every global faith, but the notion of a unified effort of praying towards this holy place just as an image is amazing. I've also gotten to work a little bit with folks in an international organization that I'm part of, The National Association of College and University Chaplains, and we've had some executive meetings over last few years that happened to fall during Ramadan because they're in May or June, and our leaders or other board members who are who are Muslim you can just tell that they're living a different experience because of the food and the tiredness from fasting and so you know we are accommodating as a part of our organization. But I've just learned a lot by watching them, and they've shared too about how it strengthens and focuses but also is a big sacrifice and it's amazing. There's not a season where I am sacrificing my bodily energy like that for that long you know and it's pretty powerful and there’s a lot of people who do that every year. it's not a nominal amount. It's an enormous percentage of our world who takes a month and does not eat during daylight. That's remarkable. I remember a few years ago, when I was still in Connecticut, the local Sikh Gurdwara had a hospitality day which they do every so often all over the country, and I never been to a Sikh community before and so we went. You go in, and they give you a head scarf and some different
things that you may need and you sit down in this large open space and they went through a ceremony while explaining it in English because it was focused on outreach to folks who are not Sikh. Then there is an amazing meal. Anytime that you engage with someone from the Sikh tradition, you'll often hear about food and hospitality and giving food, and the gurdwara being a space where anybody can come. That was one of the first time that I learned, once again, about the enormous privilege I have as somebody who is a protestant Christian. My church doesn't need to hold an open house to educate the public on what it is like to be a protestant Christian. We might have an open house about certain theological views that we have that are unique or we might try to do outreach programs. Certainly, when you hear outreach in church, there's another kind of connotation with that which is that not only do we want to be hospitable and treat you well and be welcoming, we also hope you'll join the community. In the Sikh context, that was not part of it, right. It was not about becoming Sikh. It was about learning who they are and undermine myths and stereotypes, but also to live in to this practice of hospitality which I think Christian do as well, but the need for it is different. When you think about the privilege that comes with Christian identities as opposed to minority religious traditions so I just learned an enormous ethic of hospitality from that experience and also a reminder of what I don't have to worry about and what my communities don't need to do because they are already just understood and accepted.

Rachel: With that though, do you think that there are some challenges that you face as a Protestant Christian?

Daniel: Well, the United Church of Christ, my denomination, is a national organization that has made certain statements and positions and theological claims that are certainly located with a liberal politic and a sense of openness and lots of claims about social justice. Now, every local church in the UCC does not have to except what the national church says, so we don't have bishops who say we now believe this, so all of you better get on board. That's not a thing in our denomination, so it is democratic. Every local community votes on whether they ratify these statements or not, so in the early two thousands the UCC made a big move and committed to not only being open, welcoming, and affirming to gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgendered, queer communities but also that they could be ordained and also that weddings could happen. Lots of churches did not agree with that and decided that they didn't want to be in the UCC anymore or lots of members watched that their church was going to agree with that and decided they didn't want to be members and that happened all over the country. I'm part of that denomination and hold those theological commitments to be really important, but I think sometimes I have to be thoughtful about how I relate my version of Christianity within the work I do and within the goals of interfaith and intrafaith community building. I want to be mindful and respectful that that's not a position that I would even say the majority of Christians are holding. I have felt sometimes in certain contexts the Christian test. Are you a real Christian? Once I was working as a chaplain for the summer in a hospital, and I was trying to provide chaplaincy and comfort to a
family member who as dying, and they wanted to know whether I was a legitimate Christian and so I knew that I couldn't say certain things, but I also knew that I wanted to be a resource, and if I fed into certain perceptions, they would discount me and I would no longer be relevant, but I didn't want to be disingenuous. I didn’t want to say anything that wasn't true. I have experienced this from time to time where I have to be very thoughtful about the words I use, the language I use, as I think about conveying my Christian values, beliefs, and convictions and commitments and how I also acknowledge that that's not often the majority opinions about Christology, or how to interpret the Bible, or what it means to be a community and so forth. I'm working through things like that all the time. I know my own convictions, but sometimes that's not what's most important, particularly around community work and other times when it is important for me to speak and be true to myself, I have to be very thoughtful about the words I use. Then sometimes there is a time where you just have to say it and what you think. All of us are doing that all the time, and I think as long as we understand that what you believe is not necessarily what everyone believes and that you might not be right. I think you can always have a productive conversation.

Rachel: I think sometimes that difference can scare some people into not even have the conversation to begin with, so what would you to say to somebody that's comfortable in their identity and doesn't want to challenge that? What's the importance and exposing yourself to differences?

Daniel: You mean somebody who's settled into some version of their convictions, but doesn't want to be challenged?

Rachel: Yeah and is comfortable in their groups and meandering in their group and only interacting with people who they feel comfortable with and not challenging themselves by breaking out from that. It sounds like that's an important value to you.

Daniel: It certainly is but I also recognize like mission. What is my mission versus what somebody else's mission? I may have described or perceived a strong mission towards interfaith bridge building or being open to my own perceptions being broken down. I may even locate those missions into Christian doctrine and responding to scripture, but others may not have that same mission or call. They may perceive that their main role is to strengthen their own community, build their community, try to help others by bringing words of hope and affirmation and peace through Christian community. I think, speaking as a Christian in my case, that that's fair, but I think if somebody is doing that out of fear or out of not wanting to engage with those they don't understand or don't like. I think, yeah, there's an ethical imperative for us to try to break down barriers, but I don't think there's a universal mission that everybody necessarily needs to orient towards faith and others in the same kind of way. I think there is a universal negative that we should not be harming or operating from levels of hate or bigotry towards others. That I think is clear, but once you move past what we should probably not do, I think
there's a lot of ways to be an active participatory, engaged person of faith of all different times of faith that's productive and doesn't necessarily mean that everybody needs to be engaging with lots of other types of people.

Rachel: Great! Awesome. Well thank you so much for being here and answering these questions. One last plug for interfaith and your definition. What would you say is interfaith?

Daniel: Well by some work with students and colleagues here, we've defined interfaith programs using two words: education and networking. The slightly longer way to say that is learning about others and being able to meet with others. If there is a program where everybody is the same denomination or faith identity or secular identity, and they are watching a film about something different that may be interfaith content, but the event itself is not. Then, if there is a different event where there is a whole bunch of different people who believe a lot of different stuff and are simply eating together. That's a bad example because that could be awesome. But maybe, they're just watching TV together or something. That's maybe not an opportunity for learning and engagement. It's like a Venn diagram thing where there's an ability to learn about others and an ability to be in the presence of other, and if those two things are occurring… I say when I was living in New York on the subway you can have an interfaith experience like in that car you are not in a unified place where everybody agrees and believes the same thing, but does that make it an interfaith enrichment, engagement experience? The diversity is there. You don't have to work like that sometimes. It just is. The question is what are we doing with that diversity and are we building into something that helps improve understanding that's the learning piece. I think you need to have a group of people who are different than each other and some opportunity for them to engage with each other, and if those two things are happening, that's interfaith as an event or experience. That’s what the CIC is doing all the time. They’re trying to convene and create reasons why people would come together from different backgrounds and faith identities and secular identities, and then talk about something, create something, learn about something. Those are all the right touch points.

Rachel: Thank you so much for being here.
Ala’a Wafa interview

Rachel: Today we have Ala’a Wafa. Welcome! If you could start telling listeners just a little bit about yourself and maybe what you do outside your faith and in relation to your faith

Ala’a: Wonderful yes absolutely. Thank you for having me. So a little bit about myself. I was born in South Carolina, raised in southern Indiana and grew up in a household and in a community that really prioritized interfaith work. We were one of just a few Muslim families initially in Evansville, Indiana, and so with my family having come from overseas and seeing their children grow up in a community that did not have a lot of Muslims in the community we kind of stood out. They saw the importance of engaging with people of different faiths and backgrounds. Primarily because I think one thing that drove it was to make sure that their children felt welcomed in the community and were not misunderstood and so early on I spent time as a kid in churches and synagogues. I saw and we welcomed people of other faiths into the mosque, the masjid, is another name for that, and we were very conveniently located next to a church and so we would often share spaces. We would celebrate our Eid holiday in their big cafeteria because we didn't really have much space, and we would share parking lots on whether it was Friday our prayer day or Sunday their prayer day. You know we shared spaces. To me, that was just something I actually grew up with, and we moved to again when I was sixteen and finished high school in Wisconsin. I went to undergrad in Madison, Wisconsin, and interfaith work was carried out throughout that time period. My parents again did a lot of interfaith work in Wisconsin when we moved there. I was involved in the Muslim Student Association in undergrad and we did a lot of interfaith work there, and then I after undergrad I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do but I was kind of considering law school, so I got this great opportunity with a Muslim organization called the Muslim Public Service Network that was promoting Muslims getting involved in the greater community and public service. I accepted an internship with Senator Feingold from Wisconsin at the time. I had been interning for him in the state, so I got an internship in his D.C. office. So again people may think okay she's just working on the Hill but it was a very unique situation to me. Here is a Muslim female wearing the headscarf in the front office of someone who's a Jewish senator and I was the first, as far as the people on the Hill who'd been there for a couple decades could remember, I was the first Muslim female wearing the headscarf in the Senate. So people would come in and be a little surprised, like “oh, he's okay with you working for him?” or “you're okay working for him” and all of a sudden I would say, “absolutely why not?” and interestingly Senator Feingold, his sister is actually a rabbi, and my dad and her did a lot of interfaith work in Wisconsin and so again to me it was weaved throughout my life that interfaith work and then after that wonderful experience on the Hill, I decided that I wanted to go to law school. Senator Feingold is a lawyer by training and just did phenomenal work on the Hill and when I saw that, it really inspired me. Then, I went to law
school closer to home in Michigan and happened to follow upon my current job as an attorney so that’s my story of how I ended up back in Indiana.

Rachel: How did you tackle some of those encounters with people when they were unsure of why you were here or your role just solely based on your religion and how you are living that out?

Ala’a: Yeah I often take it with a smile. I smile back and I say you know it's really interesting and then I just explain this is how I came about where I am, and I feel very blessed that I feel like I have not faced a lot of hurdles. I know others like in high school I remember during 9/11 a lot of my friends faced a lot of issues like teasing and bullying and things like that and though I got comments here and there, it wasn't as significant as what other people face in other cities or other schools or whatnot. I did feel like I was somewhat protected in a bubble in the sense that I was just always surrounded by good people. They didn't necessarily know a lot about Muslims and may not have been aware of some of the nuances and differences and similarities between our different faiths and backgrounds but they were always very respectful and curious and willing to engage in great dialogue.

Rachel: That’s great. I feel like yeah as you said not a lot of people get that and so to be able to have that that’s great. I know you've done a lot of work looking at stereotypes among women specifically Muslim women and what have you learned through that experience or what can you share with the listener that may identify as the same?

Ala’a: Yeah what's interesting is that I have encountered different levels of a lack of awareness or I don't like to always use the word ignorance but ignorance as it comes to an understanding of the Muslim faith, and it could be a subtle comment. It could be just an action. Sometimes it's something more blatant, but I was always try to take the opportunity to educate people. I used to think that it may be tied to a level of education or exposure but people across all backgrounds, I’ve heard things. For example, a common misconception is that if I'm wearing the headscarf that I'm probably not from here, from America, right but I was born and raised here. I have people say, “oh I'm trying figure out your accent,” and it's like “well maybe I don't have one because I was born and raised here. Do you mean my southern accent? I don't really have one” Surprisingly, I probably should have one because I grew up in the south. Yeah, so number one this surprise that I was born here and an assumption that if you're wearing a headscarf you're not from here and an assumption that if you're wearing a headscarf you are oppressed or you are uneducated and you were forced to wear it, but not only was I not forced to wear it. Even my mother who grew up in the Middle East had to really work to convince her family that it was okay to wear it. She actually went against the tide to actually wear it, and I think there's a lot of misconceptions. Yes, there are absolutely some people who may be forced by family members to wear it, but as for my experiences in the communities that I've been in that's really not the norm,
and it's something between us and God and a decision that we make on a personal level. It's actually an empowering decision, not something that takes away our independence or anything like that. Other common misconceptions, I mentioned being uneducated and so when they find out that I'm an attorney they are very surprised, or when I do a lot of public speaking and so you'll hear the comment “oh you're really well spoken.” Yeah and just like a surprise when they're saying that. So again this interesting assumption that if I am Muslim or if I wear a headscarf, I'm not going to be educated. I'm not going to be well-spoken, and I'm not going to be strong-willed or a leader or any of those things that anyone can be as long as they strive to be.

Rachel: Right, that’s powerful, and something that I feel like a lot of us need to hear, too. And with your role in politics and seeing kind of that side of things, how do you see the intersection between Islam and the current American political system if you will? Do you see a lot of things that come in conflict with that or inform it or challenge it?

Ala’a: So if you mean specifically like the democratic system in general or our political system, there's a lot of misconceptions about the Muslim faith, and then what’s known as Sharia law and this fear or this messaging from a couple years now been pretty strong. It’s died down more recently but this concept that Muslims follow Sharia law which means that they're not going to follow the Constitution and that they're trying to replace the Constitution with Sharia law, which is all complete nonsense, and people who better understand the faith know that as Muslims one of our obligations is to follow the law of the land as long as it does not conflict with our beliefs, which it doesn't and in fact, our Constitution protects our right to practice our faith, so there's really no conflict. It saddens me that there's just this machine of misinformation that’s constantly being pushed out, and then also reinforced by some political leaders and so I don't know if that's necessarily what you meant by that, but that's one piece, but then of course now is also the other piece, which is the current political climate, which is also very disheartening because through the election period, and then all the way to now, you see the rhetoric that's driving misinformation, that's driving and building off of the fear of individuals. Initially it was commentary, but it only lasts for so long until it actually manifests in action, so we saw that in New Zealand. We saw the criminal in New Zealand referencing rhetoric that he heard in the United States. There were attacks in Canada. There are attacks here. I think there was a mosque in California just recently, and literally like the day after the New Zealand attacks there were multiple attacks in the UK of people at their places of worship. There's a lot of fear now by Muslims because they're just so severely misunderstood and for those who are very visibly Muslim in a matter of an instant you could face a physical attack but at the same time, I've seen and been really inspired and touched by the resilience and the strength of many Muslims who are saying, “we are not going to let these criminals try to shake us or to make us afraid and try to take away our rights and our ability to practice our faith.”
Rachel: How do we overcome some of these hate crimes? How can we minimize that Islamophobia so that you can feel free to worship whatever you want to worship regardless of your faith?

Ala’ a: That’s the million dollar question because you know one of the biggest challenges is that often times you have events, you have discussions but you're sometimes preaching to the choir in the sense that the people that are coming are open-minded people that maybe know something but they want to learn more, but it's not the people who are literally afraid of you or literally think that you're going to kill them or that you're out to wipe out anyone who's not Muslim or things like that and so that's where the challenge is: how you do get those folks in the same room? I don't necessarily know the answer to that but I firmly believe that it's about human interaction and so, sure you may host an event and people don't come that are maybe all the way on the other side of the aisle there, but in the workplace, for example, everyone is coming together to work, in the grocery store, and public places you're constantly interacting so the importance of smiling, of engaging and getting to know people and even communicating to the people who are willing to come to those events who then may be connected to other people. It's really powerful. I remember I spoke at a church in south-central Indiana and the woman was just staring at me. She was in the front row and she was just staring at me the whole and time I was like well she must really dislike Muslims I don't know what's going on and then after the end of the panel - it was an interfaith panel - she came up to me and she said you know I'm sorry you probably saw me staring, but I've just never seen a Muslim in real life before, and it was literally the first time she's ever engaged with someone and it changed her. She talked about how she was really afraid before and then her perception completely changed within that one hour because she just hadn't seen someone. All she knew was what she’d seen on TV. That was really powerful and then that's an example of face to face interaction and the power of that, but then there's also instances where I was speaking at Franklin University, and it was a class a couple years ago of college students and again my mom and I were actually going to speak about Islam and it was a religions course of some sort and that day they were talking about Islam and so we went to give some basics and then it was a big Q&A type of session and a couple years later I went to an event at the Christian Theological Seminary and there was talk about Islam and a girl came up. She kept looking at me. She kept looking over from a different aisle and I was wondering if I know her. I was trying to connect the dots, and then she came up to me after and she said I'm not sure if you know, but I was in that class when you spoke a couple of years ago and today this is my dad. She brought him over to introduce him, and she said this is my dad, and he was really anti-Muslim everything and really hated Muslims. She talked about how they would get into arguments all the time, and she was referencing that course and that lecture to help him understand that his perception was incorrect and that Muslims are good people generally speaking. Then, he spoke up, and he said, “I can't believe how wrong I was,” and he came to that lecture to learn more. He was just really such a sweet guy, and you could tell that he was affected by everything that he'd experienced and learned from his daughter. That was like a couple years
probably process she said between her and her dad. I think it’s a domino effect, and I just think it’s so important to have that human to human interaction because as much as you tell someone something they're not going to believe you unless they see it. Sometimes you're lucky and it’s one conversation, but sometimes it's really just getting to know someone on the human level to understand that you have the same fears, that you have the same goals, that you really care about your children growing up in a safe environment, getting a good education, being well fed, and protected. All these things, and having a future, that you're all very similar. I think that is really just in the end what is going to change things and will combat the rhetoric that's out there. The other thing is holding the people who are making those false statements accountable. Recently, on one of the news stations there was a woman who questioned Representative Omar’s Americanness, I don't know what the right term was, I can't remember exactly, but you know questioned whether or not she would follow the Constitution because she wears a headscarf, so again questioning her Americanness based on her clothing, which is actually quite un-American in and of itself. So holding people accountable. She ended up being pulled off the show versus in the past I think a lot of Muslims didn't know the avenue to voice that discontent and now as the young professionals are becoming professionals and getting engaged, they are better able to better understand how to push back and hold people accountable.

Rachel: Yeah and I think the CIC does at least try to start those conversations, and they do start with those people who are interested you know hopefully like you're saying has that ripple effect, eventually. How did you get to know the CIC?

Ala’a: That’s a good question. I think that I initially met the executive director Charlie at a friend’s house in Columbus via my family, and then it was a couple of years later that I ran into him at a memorial service for the American Muslim who was killed by ISIS from here in Indy. I forgot the gentleman’s name, but people from all faiths got together for the service downtown and I think he approached me at that point said “you know we met before. I know that this is something that you care about. Would you be interested in joining the CIC board?” so I learned more and decided that was something that I wanted to do.

Rachel: That’s so exciting! How has having those different faith perspectives influenced your perspectives within your own faith and maybe just outwardly as a person?

Ala’a: Yeah the board is amazing. I don't think I've interacted with a group with that many different faiths and backgrounds, and I think that's what's such a beautiful thing about the board. It is so diverse. There are nearly forty people; most of them are of different faiths and backgrounds. Even within the Muslim faith you have multiple denominations, so even within the Muslim faith there is diversity, and I think number one it lets you appreciate the commonality amongst all those different faiths as fellow human beings and also as people of faith and then people often say that these types of engagements often reinforce your own faith because you
learn about another’s faith and maybe you're not sure about that particular aspect in your own faith so then you go research your own faith and you learn more about it and then it may reinforce what you believe. So just in general it makes you a better person, I think. Just being able to interact with people from all over.

Rachel: Definitely, does Islam encourage interfaith interactions like the faith, itself. Coming from a Christian perspective, there are some exclusive claims within Christianity that this is the way and the only way, like the Great Commission and everything. How do you distinguish staying true to your own faith, but also completely celebrating the diversity of other faiths and allowing other people to celebrate their truths? Is there that dichotomy in Islam as well?

Ala’a: Yes, absolutely in the sense that Islam respects people of all faiths and in particular, our holy book, the Quran, talks about Christians and Jews as people of the book or family of the book, Ahl al-Kitab so it's actually recognizing and valuing people of other faiths and if we look back at the prophetic traditions of our prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) you see how he interacted with people of all different faiths. He protected people and respected of all different faiths and engaged with them whether it was in community meetings or otherwise and so from the beginning of time of our faith, we have the most perfect example of the importance of that type of dialogue and interaction and mutual respect. I see that is the perfect example and a tradition to follow.

Rachel: So being a part of the CIC's living out of your faith, and there's no difference there. That's very powerful, and coming up near on the end I want to first learn if you learned anything about other faiths and how those interactions have been. Has there been any standout stories from people on the board that you can think of?

Ala’a: Let me think. I would say growing up I think I was primarily only exposed to the two primary categories of Christianity. We were always aware of just Christianity and then, Catholicism, so seeing a board that has so many different denominations within the Christian faith, learning about the Mormon faith, learning about all these different denominations and I still have so much more to learn. If anything, what I think I've really gathered through my experiences thus far is that I still have so much more to learn. I am thankful for the opportunity to get to know folks of those different faiths, and I think that one of the things that we have talked about as a board is trying to increase opportunities to go deep within those differences to learn about it. We have the living room spaces where you go and you go to someone's living room of a faith and learn about it. I think if anything I've taken that from my experience that there's just so much more to learn. We had a recent event, and someone from the Muslim faith, they realized that they forgot to take something into account that may relate to another faith and so they go, “oh no I totally forgot that I should have gotten XYZ type of food, right because I need to make sure I take into account the faith-based traditions that tie into those different
religions and denominations,” and so it's a constant learning I think is what I’m taking from this and what I try to apply and always just try to be cognizant of we’re all coming from some commonalities, some different beliefs, but again we're like one big family.

Rachel: That’s true. We’re all human, right? And to end here, Ala’a, what does interfaith mean to you? What is your definition?

Ala’a: To me interfaith means, you're coming together and bringing with you your faith traditions, your beliefs, your values, and coming together as fellow human beings for the betterment of your community and for the betterment of the world and it's realizing that there's a lot of negative forces out there that are trying to divide people and identify differences and for me the purpose of interfaith work is to counter that and to really show the power of unity, power of love and coming together as human beings.

Rachel: Thank you so much for being here.
Don Knebel interview

Rachel: Today we have Don Knebel. Welcome, Don.

Don: Thanks, Rachel. It’s good to be here.

Rachel: First, to start, I would love to share your history with the CIC and what that has looked like.

Don: Well, my history actually with interfaith starts before the CIC which I think is an important part of the story. I grew up Methodist in a small town in Indiana. I had very little contact with people of other faiths. Then I joined the Zionsville Presbyterian Church. In 2006, the church took a group to Israel, which was my first time in the Middle East. I got to know something about Jewish history, and in February of 2007, my wife and I went to Egypt where our tour guide was Muslim. I began talking to her about her tradition, and she said you know Don if I'd been born in the United States I would probably be a Christian, and if you'd been born in Egypt, you probably would have been a Muslim. I said that's probably right. From there we became more interested in religious tradition, so we went to India in 2009. We went to Turkey in 2009, and when I came back people asked me to do talks and presentations about what I was learning and I began focusing those presentations on the differences and similarities in religions. That fact came to the attention of some people at Purdue where I was an engineering graduate in the sixties and they said that a Purdue electrical engineering alumnus, Marwan al-Muasher, who is the first Jordanian ambassador to Israel, was coming back to Indiana and wanted to know if I would host a presentation that he was going to make and I said sure that's right among the things I'm interested in. My law firm at the time was Barnes & Thornburg. I sponsored an event at Barnes & Thornburg and brought in people of the community to talk about Israel and Palestine and Jordan and among the people in the audience was Charlie Wiles who heard this presentation and after the event, I took a group to the Columbia Club, and we talked about interfaith and Jan Gehlhausen was in that meeting. Charlie was in the meeting, and sometime after that probably in the spring of 2011, Charlie came to me and said, “Don, I have this idea for the Center for Interfaith Cooperation. You seem like you have an interest in that.” And he knew from that that I've been involved in a lot of community activities including the United Way board and he said, “why don't you help me start this organization,” so I said sure and that's what happened.

Rachel: Nice! Were there some challenges to starting that or was it…

Don: Well we had no idea what we were doing. We had no money. The CIC had no money. They had a corporate registration for the state of Indiana and did not yet have a tax-exempt status. Charlie had been involved in some interfaith activities but had never really been involved
in starting an organization of this magnitude and so we talked about sort of what the board structure would look like and we decide we wanted a lot of board members so that we could have a lot of representations of different faiths. We settled on forty board members, and I sat down and drafted a set of bylaws that would define this organization, and we went to the National Bank of Indianapolis where I had an account, and we got a $20,000 line of credit and that's how we got started.

Rachel: Amazing. Has there been a lot of great feedback from the community and just interest…

Don: Well, I think the fact that so many people have been willing to join our board and I mean we've had approximately forty people as board members and we have term limit, so we've had more and more people coming onto the board. We are always asked to go out into the community and talk about interfaith. Our board members are on speaking circuits. I was as a part of this about two years ago asked to go to South Bend and be a speaker at their National Day of Prayer which I talked about interfaith. Other people are getting opportunities to do that, so yeah it has been a pretty popular undertaking. We went from having a budget $20,000 line of credit to we are up to a 4, 5, or $600,000 line of credit. It’s really pretty amazing.

Rachel: Look at y’all! That’s amazing! Now, what is your faith journey specifically? I know you talked a lot about traveling and stuff, but was there something before that that made you interested in just pursuing faith as a concept?

Don: Well I just said Rachel. I grew up Methodist in a very small town in Indiana where you either went to the Methodist Church or you went to the Catholic Church and so my parents were Protestants and so we went to the to the Methodist Church. I went off to college and had very little religious experience in college. Then, I came back and had very little connection to a church until my daughter was able to understand and I thought we have to give her some religious tradition, so we started going to Zionsville Presbyterian Church. But I had always been interested in religious history and biblical history. I've always thought of myself if I came back in a different life that I would be an archaeologist and so I was reading something called a biblical archaeological review and got a pretty good sense of biblical history so that's when I went to Israel and actually saw some of those sites. began to get a better sense of the common traditions of all religions and that sense really developed more completely when I went to Egypt in the spring of 2007 and saw how many of the religious traditions of Christians and Muslims really derive ultimately from views that the Egyptians had two, three, four thousand years ago. So it was that idea that I've sort of carried forward and I speak now an awful lot about religious traditions and religious origins. I'm actually working right now on the series of presentations that I’ll give in the spring at the Second Presbyterian Church on the history of Satan, history of hell, history of heaven, and the history of final judgment. Many of which tie back to other traditions so that's been my interest.
Rachel: How have you seen your profession in law and your interest in faith inform each other?

Don: Well they certainly inform the ability to quickly do research that other people I think wouldn't have the skills to do. If you are a lawyer, you have to read an awful lot of materials quickly and summarize them into something that is coherent and you don't have to read the entire book you quickly learn or read the entire case. You can quickly use indices and keywords and things like that so that's one of the things it has done. The other thing that I think the law profession creates in you is a sense of trying to find the history of things, trying to find out where things come from, what was the origin of some traditions of heaven and hell and Satan and so I think it's that curiosity that sort of informs what I've been doing.

Rachel: Yeah definitely. Have you ever found that it is hard to live out your faith on a day-to-day basis through your profession?

Don: When I many, many, many years ago told a probably ninety-year-old aunt that I was going to go to law school, she thought that I had just committed the gravest possible sin because she couldn't imagine that there were ethical lawyers out there that really could maintain consistency with their faith tradition and that just turns out not to be true. There are many lawyers of all different faiths who are perfectly able to practice their faith within their tradition. They just have to do it in the way that's consistent with their ethics and morals, which I think I've always done. I've tried to - not sure that I've always been successful.

Rachel: There you go. And I've always been curious in looking at Christianity as a faith and in some nature, it can be exclusive in just the language and perspective on this is the way that you get to heaven by following this Savior, so how do you understand that and reconcile that with your work in interfaith?

Don: Well I have a talk Rachel that I give called what truth can set us free and the conclusion is that we can have multiple truths. Let me just give you an example of that. If you say to a Buddhist that following Jesus is the only way to get to heaven, their response will be well I don't have any sense of heaven to begin with so why would that be important to me? Or if you were to say to somebody a Muslim, for example, that Jesus can be your Savior, the answer is I don't need a Savior, all I have to do is lead moral a life so all of those things can be equally true to the people who have those beliefs. They just simply don't have to be true to everybody. It's impossible to explain to a Buddhist how Jesus is the key to heaven when your belief system has no heaven in it or hell in it. So you have to sort of make sure that these truths are in your own tradition because if you tried to take them to other cultures they won't make any sense to those people so if you have a belief in a heaven and hell or a heaven and not hell or any kind of belief in an afterlife, then the idea of Jesus being the only way to that afterlife may make sense to you,
but it doesn't make sense to somebody who doesn't have an afterlife in their future. So that's how I try to reconcile this Rachel, which is I that have this idea that you can have multiple truths. In fact, I use an example the fact that we still today with our incredible science still don't know how to describe light. We sometimes describe it as a wave, and sometimes describe it as a particle. They are inconsistent with each other. Einstein says they are both true. Well if we don't have the ability to determine what light really is, I don't think we have the ability as human beings to determine what the ultimate truth is. We just have to get comfortable with the fact that our version is good for us. That's my view of the world.

Rachel: So through conversations maybe in your travels or with the CIC has anything stood out or any great stories come of it?

Don: Well I think the thing that was most remarkable as I think back about it is just a long discussion I had with a tour guide in Egypt who is a Muslim woman, a very articulate practicing Muslim woman, who was also a WOMAN and saw herself as a woman and we talked about religion and we talked about Moses and we talked about Islam and we talked about Christianity and that's when she said to me, Don if you'd been born in Egypt you'd be a Muslim today and I said if you were born in the United States, you would be a Christian today. We had that exchange and that's true. And so well if I'd been more in Egypt, I would've been speaking Arabic. If she'd been born in the United States, she would've been speaking English and so it sort of came to me that our religions are something that we're born into just like we're born into our language and so we don't typically pick our religions. The religions pick us by where we're born and so nobody ever says well is Arabic true or is English true? It's just what we have. It’s just what we're born into and so we can make the best of that history and environment, but we can't go out and say that someone else's religion can't be true because we were born into ours and they were born into theirs.

Rachel: Does that shake your faith at all realizing that it is all circumstance?

Don: Well, I don't think it shakes my faith. It shakes my confidence that I can say to anyone else from a different tradition that mine is the only version of truth is or that they can say that to me. I can certainly say within the tradition I was born into that I'm trying to make the best of that. I go to church. I do the things that Christians do. I expect them to go to the mosque or go to their temples to do the things that Muslims and Hindus do. I don't have any more, in my opinion, an ability to say that what they're believing is wrong than I have the ability to say that their language is wrong. They are simply different ways of looking at the world. And by the way that doesn't say anything about my faith because my faith is sort of who I am. It comes up with me and where I was born and where I was raised. It would make no sense to me to say that I can become a Hindu or I can become Buddhist or I could become Muslim. It just wouldn't fit. It just wouldn't fit who I am.
Rachel: Yeah there have been claims from certain theologians from what I read that it is a language. It's synonymous to that so conversion is very hard.

Don: It is a language, and I think people sometimes have this view that well if I am exposed to Islam - I know people are unwilling to pick up a Quran - because if I'm exposed to Islam, it will somehow rub off on me or it will challenge my faith. Well learning a second language doesn't mean you lose the first one. It doesn’t make you less articulate in your first language. It's just a second language, and it will always be your second language and so you can learn as much as you want about other religions, and it doesn't shake your faith, and the truth of what you believe any more than you going to someone else and saying I would like to tell you about my religion will typically shake their belief of what they believe. Conversions, real serious conversions, not based on force, not based on fear, are very difficult. It is difficult to say to somebody that I'm going to change your language, so when you think you'll no longer think in your original language. It’s very, very difficult.

Rachel: I can imagine. Yeah. And too looking at interfaith as a concept, where do you see it fitting into the current world, maybe here in the United States, and the importance of interfaith?

Don: Well surely in the United States and probably all around the world, we are more and more seeing that religion is being used to divide people, being used to provide a basis for hating people. I think this is clear in Islam where the Sunnis and the Shias are fighting each other because of their beliefs, but it's certainly true in the United States where we have a rise in anti-Semitism. We have a sense now perhaps that some Christians, the fundamentalists, are different or perhaps should be feared compared to the more progressive Christians, so religions are being used to divide us and that's unfortunate because we all have within our beliefs things that could unite us, but we don't use them that way. So I think it's probably part of human nature that we look for reasons to fear people of other beliefs, but it's an unfortunate part of human nature so part of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation's goal is to make sure that people understand that they can have different beliefs and still be friends with people. I mean one of the most extraordinary things that we've learned is we have brought together the board members with different faiths is that once the board members see each other as human beings with the same concerns that they do they begin to look beyond those faith differences.

Rachel: So with the Center for Interfaith cooperation, it attracts people interested in interfaith, right? So how can we try and expand this interest to allow those that may be comfortable being surrounded by people who are similar to them, more comfortable and willing to go out [and interact with people who are different from themselves]?
Don: well I think the CIC is at a point where we're beginning to think about how we can expand these ideas beyond simply our board members. We can take this out to the hospital chaplains, for example. Hospital chaplains today are seeing people whose faiths they do not understand and that they have to comfort them when they are dying. But it’s hard to comfort somebody when they're dying, who is not a Christian. You cannot say well you are going to get to go see Jesus because this person doesn't believe that. So you've got to be able to talk the language of the person’s faith. The CIC is now trying to think how can we do that. How can we take this idea to seminaries? As people learn Christianity in the seminary, we can say okay you're going to have to, from time to time, deal with people of other traditions. To answer your question, how can you learn that Jesus is the only source of salvation and how can you communicate to a person for whom salvation is a meaningless concept? So I think CIC is beginning to try to think about how we can expand this thought beyond our board members into people who have a faith tradition, whether it's the one we have not. That's a challenge. It's going take money. It’s going to take resources, and it’s going to take people, but that's the goal.

Rachel: Yeah that is hard. So with your time on the board, have there been any great interactions with people of different faiths that come to mind?

Don: Oh my goodness! I mean every time I have met somebody new on the board from a different tradition… I have become really good friends with Anita Joshi who is obviously a Hindu. I have had interactions with K.P. Singh who is a Sikh and so when I went to India on one of my trips, I actually sought out the Sikh Golden Temple and when we reached India because I knew his tradition and got a better sense of that. I've gotten to be really good friends of Ruth Ellen Homer who is a Mormon and learned a lot about her faith tradition. In fact, I was invited by her to come to the to the opening before they consecrated the temple, and she had me interview with some reporters from Chicago about my experience, so it's just been a wonderful experience interacting with people with different beliefs and trying to understand that their beliefs do not define them anymore than their language defines them.

Rachel: Nice and with your travels, what is one of the best places you have been?

Don: You know, I have been to forty-five or so countries. I write a weekly column on travel. I have written about forty of those. I write every week. For me the most interesting place was probably Egypt, where they have religious art going back to 2500 BC, and you can see how so many of the traditions of all the religions, the idea of a final judgment, the idea of a soul, all can go back to those early Egyptian beliefs. They looked at multiple gods, but they all had the sense of perhaps they are all manifestations of the same one God that we believe so for me, that's the most fascinating. I mean I've been to a lot of fascinating places. I've been to Syria in 2010. To places that no longer exist because they were destroyed in the Civil War. I learned something
about the connection between Syria and early Christian history, but I think for me the most fascinating place to go, especially the context of interfaith, was Egypt.

Rachel: To summarize, so interfaith to you, in a succinct two or three sentences, what does it mean?

Don: To me, it means that we're not defined by our traditions. Our traditions have defined us based on where we were born, and we cannot assume people of different faiths are any less devout than we are, any less committed to faith than we are, any less good moral people than we are. I think the thought that people cannot be moral unless they believe a particular faith that if we didn't have the Ten Commandments we would be murderers. I think that's just a false premise. I think we've used our religions to help us articulate our values. I think we have used our religious to help us articulate our values, but I don't think our basic human values come from a religion. I think they come from our humanity.

Rachel: Well thank you so much for being here today.
Dr. Vimal Patel interview

Rachel: Today we have Vimal Patel. Welcome!

Vimal: Thank you!

Rachel: How are you?

Vimal: I am good! And you?

Rachel: I’m great! I'm happy to have you here, and I would love to start by just hearing some about yourself, introducing yourself to the listeners and how you got involved with the CIC.

Vimal: Wonderful! So I been living in this country for nearly fifty-four years, and I came as a student at the University of California. I did my graduate work and got a PhD in biochemistry. Then, I did a four-year fellowship in neuropathology at the IU School of Medicine. Then I spent about thirty-five years teaching there in the department of pathology as a professor and had an interest from the beginning when I came to this country in the relationship between the different countries and different faith traditions. I was asked to give a talk in high school when I came in 1965, January of 1965, about Hindus or Hinduism as many people know it. I said yes because I am Hindu, so I should be able to give a talk even though I did not quite know what to talk about because it was never a subject that we learned in our high school or primary schools. It was simply a lifestyle rather than a particular belief system driving the lifestyle. The belief system or you could say the understanding rather than belief because in India belief is not so important. It is what do you understand about your human life and from the very beginning as a student in the primary school I learned a couple things that has always remained in my psyche and in my living style. The most important thing that I have retained from my kindergarten on is the four sentences that I have learned. I always begin talking about it if somebody asks what is Hinduism. Then the four sentences that I learned, the lifestyle has evolved in India. We call ourselves a spiritual culture rather than a material culture, so the first thing that I've learned as a student is...your mother is your first teacher, and it is through the upbringing not only after you’re born, but during the pregnancy that you imbibe the culture of inclusivity, and viewing all life as sacred...The term mother and the father comes from a Sanskrit term. Matru and pitu. Pitu means father, and padre for example, is derived from the Sanskrit terminology. So the second tier of learning that you have is from your father. The third place is given to a professor or teacher or a primary teacher. So your character is holistic, and another thing that may be in second grade I must have learned, I don't exactly remember, but there is a Sanskrit term...that’s a derivation from the Vedic knowledge bases that the entire cosmos is one family. Or you could bring it down to “we’re one family,” so it is not so important for a Hindu to have a contractual relationship, but to have a relationally driven relationship. Unlike what you see in the world.
Everything is contractually or legally led in our country now being divided. interest[BRH] I'm like what you're seeing often the best and you can get the word. So that is the spiritual idea in Indian terminology. So how do I relate to you? So the first five to seven years before you go to school your family is your character building unit. We used to have a joint family; now it's getting a little less and less since I come from a very small village we still have it to some degree even though we are equally impacted by the Internet culture that we have where isolation has become a big issue. Because we want to be self-internalizing, self-serving and self-centered and what have you. So my background which is at least fifty-four-year-olds. So I have retained that quality, and as I mentioned earlier that as a retired professor, I have tried to adapt a Vedic lifestyle which is designed to achieve a call of humanity or human being in four stages. The first stage as I have described as a student and is a learning stage and a building-character stage, not so much as a trade or skill for gaining a job, but learning what it is to be a human being. Therefore, in our culture, elders are respected like anything because what you are is not just you per se, but what you inherit seven generations before you. So your forefathers have given you this body, this structure, and your structure will cross me to seven more generations. So you have a relationship not only now, but also in the past and in the future. So this is the way the human society is built. There came a lot of distortions like two thousand years ago. The Hindu society went about quite a bit of change. We had pretty much integrated our spiritual understanding of what human life is and the material understanding of what our life needs. In other words, they had integrated the material aspect with the human aspect as well as the connection aspect. They were, in fact you should look at the economy of the country, from after Jesus Christ was born, so from 100 A.D. plus a century to about 1850 or before the British came to India as colonizers. Two basic things happened. The colonization, which was an exploitation of a resourceful country, developed a system to create castes or servants, so to speak. They enslaved the country by destroying its education system. When the British came to India, there were more than 500,000 institutions of higher ed. India was the first country to have universities more than 5,000 years ago. And it is the first country to have centralized cities with the parallel streets and with the water taken away from development. The West invented the toilet, but it has been known long before the Roman culture. All the other cultures disappeared incidentally. Only Hindu culture is the longest surviving, continuously living culture. It has gone through lots of adversities. There was an Islamic invasion of the country which destroyed lots of things. One of the biggest damage that was done to the culture was Nalanda University which was more than a mile long, but bigger than what you see here. There was a nine-story library, and at that point in human history, I’m talking about 200,000 plus years ago, it was one of the biggest collections of manuscripts. It took almost a month to burn that library because they could not find the Quran or Islamic literature. It's not that I'm blaming. Any conquering institution or conquering people will destroy the native culture to bring their own culture, but fortunately the Islamic invasion… There had invasions beforehand, also because India was a very rich country from 100 A.D. to about 1800 before the British came. About 25% of the world’s GDP was from India, and about 34% was from China. Between them, they had almost 60% of the world’s GDP. For 1700 years, India
was number one for almost 1600 years. It was a vibrant economy with extraordinarily honest people. In fact, when the British wanted to rule the country they had to devise many ways to undermine and destroy the education system. We won't go into that, but essentially that has impacted the current state of India’s education system and in fact the entire education system that we have today in every part of the world, just not in India or not here or not in Europe is driven by industrialization to create a cog in the machine to produce GDP. Therefore, the humanity has been completely neglected. Our relationship is completely neglected. Our personal development or seeing holistically how the whole world is connected is completely neglected. And we become so selfish in our actions that we don’t care if we walk all over you. That is changing slowly, but for the last couple hundred years when the British entered the total GDP of India was about 18%. When they left in 1947, it was less than 1.7%. They have exploited all the resources. They built railways and often they will say that they didn't build railways to help people. They exploited resources. It is just like you see corporations. So this whole corporate mentality came because both religious understanding of the world as well as the scientific understanding of the world. This survival of the fittest that Darwin proposed created the basic reason for colonization by Europeans. We are a product of the colonized people really speaking. There were some 30 million Native Americans that were basically massacred. Let's be honest because unless we become honest we cannot change the way that we look at things. Having said all this “why did I get interested in interfaith?” Because I come from “what do you do on a personal level?” What your belief system is is not important. How you behave with me is very important. What is my relation to you is more important. We have this freedom of choice, in fact we have a concept, which we call [different language], your own God because we understand, I'm using this understand very deliberately, it's not a belief. I understand I exist because you exist. Without that relationship, I have no way of... [sic]. We are completely and totally dependent on each other not just as a human being but all lives. If there are no plants, we have no existence. If there are no other animals, we have no existence. Life can only be sustained by another life, whether it is a plant-based life, or all the sea creatures, or the birds, all the animals. We have to. It’s this interdependence. For becoming human being, there are two specific characteristics. You have a mind. You have free will, essentially speaking. We are supposed to have it. But this too distinguishes us. We have a free will, and we have intellect. We can comprehend, we can observe, and we can deduct. We can doubt, so all of these factors that humans possess have the ability to choose, so choosing how to live has been the Hindu focus of life. We have four stages as I was saying. The student life where you learn skills and relational aspects of living, that you are part of the whole, not independent of anything else. Second, there are four goals of life. One that you are still learning. The second goal is to enjoy life because when you are young like your age, you need to explore what it is. It's a lifestyle that’s grasped our family lifestyle where you enjoy the pleasures of life. You raise children and pass on what you have inherited from your forefathers to your future generations. The third lifestyle is often after we have enjoyed life, produced children and educated them, then you take a kind of contemplative lifestyle, which is after you retire. Normally, we divide life in about hundred years, so the first 25 years, you study,
you develop skills. All the necessary elements that you need to live in a given environment, a given space and time. Third, you contemplate. Now you turn your attention from your family oriented activity or self-serving activity to the common good...you live a conflict free life. Conflict-free in the sense that your attention is not self-serving or family serving or just community serving, but you give back in the community that you have lived, and refocus your attention to serving others, and the remaining that you do, which may be up to eighty years old. I'm seventy-nine years old, so up to eighty or so you educate people like yourself who are really starting out life. By intuitive experience in the last phase of your life you have exhausted many of the conflicts that you had because service helps you to get your rid of your self-ego. There’s a science behind it, but we don't have time. Only if you ask a question will we do it. The last stage is total contemplation of “who am I? What is it that makes me who I am? What is the truth behind it?” The search of truth starts from the very beginning of the [unintelligible].The remaining focus on the education aspect and not indulging in the pleasure aspect as in the first 25 years. In the second 25 years you enjoy. You do whatever you have to accomplish in life and then, contemplation and then finally withdrawing from activity to reflect on simply “what does it take to liberate me from the duality of life?” All the good, bad, indifferent, likes, dislikes, all those things, right? So that is in short how Hindus have developed a lifestyle, so the entire life is geared towards finding the truth of life, okay, and the truth that they have found is that we are interconnected. When I relate to you, my daughter, for example, or my sister. I call you my sister, my daughter, then conflict disappears. It’s a relationship driven society. Not that it is like that. There has been a lot of distortion in the United States within the last 200 years, but it is now beginning to revert back because it has recognized that life driven simply for economic gain is totally out of sync with who we are as human beings.

Rachel: I like that. I think a lot of us can use that sort of mentality and re-shifting of our focus.

Vimal: The minute that I see you just as a woman and as an object, it will create a different set of thinking in my mind. But the minute I saw you as just like my daughter, or sister, or mother. Whatever the age relationship or my friend for that matter. Then, my whole psyche is totally different. I'm not looking at you as an object of enjoyment, but I'm looking at you, my relation, my sister, my daughter, etc. This is how we do it in interfaith. This has been my base. This has happened over a lot of time, over the past 54 years, but my triggering point was that I was asked to talk in high school where students were like that. And the two things that I thought is unless we start to appreciate the woman’s role in development, we will never become a good society.

Rachel: I like that. I can applaud that!

Vimal: No it is a fact. Without the womb, there is no creation. God cannot create without the womb. So without the femininity, the womb meaning femininity, both the consciousness principle and the energy principle must interact in order to create the new thing. So now given
that background to interfaith dialogue to understand different expressions of the same infinity we call God. God is the name given by us. Do you remember the story of the elephant and four blind men?

Rachel: No, you should explain it.

Vimal: There are four blind man walking along and an elephant came. They wanted to find out what is this sound *dum, dum, dum*? They're blind but they can hear. Then, somebody touching the leg says that it is a post. Somebody touching the feet says something else dependent on their experience. An ear, since it came from India, was thought to be a tool that separates grain from the husk. So they begin to describe what they see. Religions of the world is the expression of that infinity in their own way. Therefore, you see, we have a history. Any forced occupation that occurred throughout the world they took shelter in India. The first thing that happened when the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The country that gave them shelter was India. We have the oldest synagogue in the world. It is not in Israel or anywhere else, but it is in India to this day. We have the oldest church also in India when St. Thomas came to India. See what I'm trying to say. We have the oldest mosque in India. While the Prophet Muhammad was living, we had the mosque in India. We support freedom of expression because we know that we are the same. We are children of the same infinite consciousness. We prefer not to use “God” because “God” creates in this culture some form of connotation, so I try to use the scientific terms because I am a trained scientist. This has been the history of India. When Jews were persecuted, this was the only country in the world where Jews have never been persecuted. Jews were not allowed to own land, and we continued to discriminate against Jews even today in this country and it has all come from the dogmatic way of looking at things. I don't want to criticize anybody, but insufficient understanding of the cosmic realm or the cosmic reality creates this conflict. If I editorialize a little, see all religions have four basic pillars. One is called metaphysics, so how they perceive or speculate on how the universe may have come about. Second, the story they create to bring that perception to the common masses because common masses cannot understand. Third, the institutions that they create like churches, temples, and synagogues and the institution of the rabbi, priest, minister, or what have you. Then, fourth is the social conduct derived from these three pillars and your behavior. These are the four basic tenants of all religion. Now, there are two basic themes without going into any specific religion and because we are an interfaith organization. So there are two streams. One is the Abrahamic tradition and the other is the dharmic tradition that rose in India and is not a history-centric tradition, but it is an eternal tradition. It’s all Sanatana dharma. Sanatana means eternal wisdom. It is not a belief. You discover it for yourself, so we have a concept of [unintelligible], your own god. So I can consider you a god. That is why mother is the first God because without Mother you have no existence. Father comes second because without the father, even with modern science you can replicate yourself, but man cannot replicate himself. He needs the [sic] from the woman to produce a similar organism. You know genetically made organisms. You can do that nowadays,
but even then, they have not been able to do anything about the content of being. You can take away the genetic material, and you can use the material that you want, but you cannot do it without that egg. So the feminine energy and the consciousness principle is something that holds this whole material world intact. It is called consciousness. This is what the dharmic tradition says. In the Abrahamic tradition that has been called God, but now we have to expand that literal translation from either the Bible or Quran that God created the world. In fact, I would go up to the extent to say, no, we created God in the image of human beings. See the infinite cannot be comprehended. The infinity cannot be comprehended because the infinite is beyond comprehension and beyond reason. We can only experience it indirectly. Then, your mind is completely devoid of any distracting thoughts. No thoughts, and this is a called the contemplating state. That's the state that I described after the end of the third pillar. After serving the society, you contemplate on that and it is an intuitive experience. How do I express intuitive experience? Suppose I ask you “have you eaten mango?” and you said “no, I haven’t eaten mango.” I can describe that mango looks like this. It tastes so good like honey.

Rachel: It’s like describing a color.

Vimal: Right. Do you get it? No. Hell no. You can, but instead, here you taste it. So you experience it, and you never forget it. That is [unintelligible] in Sanskrit, which means adapt individual experience to indoubt. You cannot describe it to anybody else. That is what has happened to our prophets whether it’s Jesus or Prophet Muhammad or many other extraordinary personalities who experience this truth within themselves and that's what Jesus Christ says. The Kingdom of Heaven is within you or he says my Father and I are one. What is that idea of father? That consciousness principle pervades all of creation. Creation is not without the presence of consciousness: only because you are conscious of yourself can you say that you exist. That you exist is proof that God exists in you. God is a principle, and now I project all the benevolent qualities of anything that I can imagine - how good you are, what kindness, all these good qualities like love, care. There is no opposite to that, no opposite to love. It is not hate. These are relative terms that we are using, but love has no agenda. What is spirituality? When I have no selfish motive of anything, suppose I study you without any purpose to know what it is that you are I can do it through this contemplation. I don't have to study your skin color or this or that but I just study from your particular then to general. What sustains your body? This consciousness principle that makes you aware of who you are. That principle pervades an entire cosmos. Even in this table. Even in this microphone, so what is your body made up of if I were to ask you?

Rachel: What is my body made of? Well, I would probably go scientific and discuss cells and how those have come together to form organs.
Vimal: Yes, but behind that, the five basic principles that really are there. That are all the chemicals that you can think are based on it. Then, if 72% of your body is water, then this digestive capacity, you've taken in bread this morning that you ate and now it became Rachel. That is the fire principle, the transforming principle. Then you have the air quality. Without the air quality in the system, your system is not sustainable. Your lung cannot breathe if the cavities are not separated. So air, fire, water, earth, and space. If you do not have this space, you cannot exist. So this behind all of the material thing in our own body, [sic], now you can further look at what this [sic] and ultimately both sides in religion have tried to understand what is this cosmos, what is this world, how do I fit in this world, what have they discovered thus far? Without that world, you have no [sic] This emphasis on individualism is to a degree necessary but when that is the only goal then we become terribly selfish, and we isolate ourselves. Simply looking at the phone all the time or doing something else, and we can see much suicidal tendencies in our young people because they're frustrated. They cannot relate to anything. Therefore interfaith means that truth lies everywhere. It is what trust you have embodied which will reflect how you behave and relate to the world. Each religion has either the leg or the trunk or the ears or the body, and they think that is the whole thing and that is where the conflict arises.

Rachel: Valid. Wow you have done my interview for me. You have been so informative. Thank you so much.

Vimal: No you can ask many questions. I didn’t know exactly what you wanted.

Rachel: No, I loved being able to hear all that you had to say. It’s so philosophical, and I think that a lot of people could use that shift in perspective to look at each other relationally rather than, like you are saying, capitalistically or materially.

Vimal: Okay. So there are two important issues that we should not forget that material things are necessary. You must make sure that your survival needs are met. The whole idea is because we have the mind and the ability to discriminate or to decide what path I should take. After certain needs are satisfied, suppose you have a hundred pairs of garments in your closet, then you can question – Do I really need a hundred pairs? Gandhi said, for example, there is no shortage of anything in the world as far as needs go. But as for greed, there is a shortage. And the capitalist society, which is only 300 years old. You are familiar with Max Weber, the guy who developed capitalism. Karl Marx developed communism, right? Then, through this interactive aspect, we developed socialism, so in this country, we hated communism. No system is good or bad, only its operation, but the metaphysics of creation is that the root of all of our problems is when I separate God from all the creation and I assume that this world is for my enjoyment, exploitation begins. When I don’t relate to you as part of me, then I see you as an object of enjoyment. This is what we see with all the priests and the all the so-called religious leaders who get into all the nonsense, exploiting children, exploiting women. It’s for their enjoyment because it's based on
this wrong principle of the separation of God from the rest of it. When I see godliness in you, the
divine. The only thing that Hinduism insists is that you are a divine being, potentially. Not
already, but potentially. You have the ability of freewill and contemplating and learning about
who you are and become a Messiah unto yourself. If this knowledge base exists from our womb
as it were, then I from the very beginning I would begin to see others as myself. So I will
eliminate the otherness principle, which is where all the conflict originates. This is why I was
attracted to not only share these thoughts that I learned as a child and my experience as an adult
both in terms as I am a scientist and have done a lot of work in integrating medicine where health
is at the center of what we call interfaith. If you're not healthy physically, I don't mean just
physical health because all the athlete role models that we see are misbehaved even though they
are physically healthy. But mentally, the mind is what separates us. All the animal systems are
driven by the genetics of it. They don’t violate that. We violate everything, and the first violence
that we commit is in our food habits. If you want to become nonviolent, and cultivate this
lifestyle of nonviolence. It must with our physiology. It starts with ourselves. What kind of food
I eat. Every choice that you make will make you who you are. The thought that exists in animal
systems, the simplest creative thing that our lives depend on is plant based. No one in the scale of
evolutionary process. That food is the most appropriate for you. The first choice that I would
have is a plant-based food. Secondly is a seafood because if you look, life arose in the water and
that is the way that we look at it. We are absolutely with science. We don’t have any conflict
with science, unlike the Abrahamic traditions. So most science in dharmic tradition shows that
you are the center of everything. If you don’t exist, the cosmos does not exist. Just think about
that. You cannot say that you exist. I have to say that you exist; therefore, I exist because it takes
two to make this statement. This consciousness principle, this energy principle, and the [sic]
principle. We have feminine energy, the matter principle, and the male energy. I am not saying
male, female, so please hear me. The consciousness principle we call “he,” but it is not he or she.
It is the consciousness principle that for matter of understanding we use he and she because
without she there is no he, and probably without he there is no she. They have to be together.
Hinduism is where women are respected so that’s why I started with the notion that you are my
daughter because I am 79. You are what?

Rachel: 22.

Vimal: Right, my daughter is 46 or 47, I think, so see this is what I am saying that as an interfaith
dialogue proceeds further, we must begin to understand what it means to be a human being. Now
you can ask me questions, and I will just answer in one sentence.

Rachel: Unfortunately, we are here at our time.
Chris Melton interview
Rachel: Today, we have Chris Melton joining us. I would love to start but just hearing a little bit about yourself and what you're involved with inside your faith, but also outside in the Indianapolis community.

Chris: Well I'm a member of Second Presbyterian Church, and I have worn a lot of hats there as a volunteer, just as a congregational member. I'm currently on session as an Elder. I'm a returning elder, so that's where I spend a lot of my volunteer hours. I'm also engaged in a ministry at St. Luke’s Methodist Church just around the corner, and it is a healing ministry that I got called into about nine years ago.

Rachel: Can you talk a little bit about that?

Chris: Yes, it's a ministry that was developed an Episcopalian woman, priest, and she felt that when she was doing a service of wholeness and communion and anointing that people wanted more, and she wanted to get give more, but she had no idea what that was going to look like, but over time and in conjunction with a woman medical doctor they tossed around the idea of doing a type of healing that involved prayer, presence, and light touch. They also consulted with a lot of people that have hands-on experience with people, chiropractors, people that do massage, so over time they developed this protocol called the pilgrimage healing ministry and St. Luke's is being the national training center for that. I'm a trained healer and I’m trained to certify and train others.

Rachel: Interesting - that's such a cool part of ministry that I've never heard about before.

Chris: Well neither had I.

Rachel: Nice - and St. Luke’s has board members here at the CIC too, so that’s a really great partnership. How did you hear about the CIC?

Chris: I first heard about it after returning from Israel, Palestine, and Jordan on a trip that we did with Second Presbyterian Church, and when I came back, I was so taken by my experiences there that I just felt that I wanted to connect on a deeper level with people that were not like me that were more like people like that I met over there. At that time, there was a small group of people, Dr. Kent Millard and Dr. Louis Galloway from my church, a few other people, and Charlie Wiles, and I was invited to go to a meeting where they were all discussing the possibility of an interfaith trip with all three faiths represented, so that's how I met Charlie, and how I heard about CIC.
Rachel: How has it been since being a part of this interfaith group? Have you been able to have some of those conversations like you had over in Israel and Palestine?

Chris: Well I am a brand-new board member, and I have come to the orientation meeting with the other new folks. I was out of town for the big board meetings so other than attending the banquet this past Sunday night, which was phenomenal, where I did get to meet some people, but sort of superficially because it was a big banquet event. I'm just dipping my toes in the water and starting my journey.

Rachel: Absolutely. That’s exciting though you will get to have a lot of those cool conversations. I'm sure.

Chris: I’m looking forward to it.

Rachel: Can you speak a little bit about your experience in Israel and Palestine? What you learned there and maybe some of the conversations you had with people.

Chris: What I loved the most was when the trip was devised. Dr. Galloway and his wife were the leaders and they said they didn't want to just go see the old stones as they called. We wanted to have that experience of all of the holy sites and the things that have been there for such a long time, but we also had as a component of our trip the opportunity to meet people of the three major faiths and discuss things on both a faith level, a political level, a sociological level. It was quite extraordinary, and we had the chance to interact with people and really ask questions and go deeper into that experience and I was just captivated by everyone I met. We didn't always agree on things, but as human beings, I felt drawn to them, and I would have loved to spend more time with them.

Rachel: Yeah I feel like there is a lot of pain in that area, so to be able to go and experience that and see how faith works along and inside that must've been really powerful.

Chris: It really was quite extraordinary and there were so many moments. At the end of each day before dinner, our group would gather. There was about thirty-five of us that went on the trip, and we would gather for a time of reflection and do some debriefing about the day we had and what we'd seen and what had touched us and what had moved us and the question was always asked “where did you see God today?” and it's impossible not to see Him over there, regardless of who you're with, who you're speaking with, what situations you are in…

Rachel: Can you talk a little bit about your faith journey? Were you Christian when you grew up and how that evolved over the years?
Chris: I grew up in an extended family of very faithful people who really didn't just talk about faith, they lived it. I learned more by their example, probably. I grew up in the Methodist faith, and I lived on a farm, so a lot of what I knew about God I learned from a very early age from just being in nature and seeing those wonderful marvels. I loved being outdoors. I was the oldest of five, so I was always with my dad outside. If we weren't working, I was just out. I had my favorite places. I was contemplative. I liked my solitude, and I liked to ponder and think about things, but I think that was my beginning working into an understanding of who God is. I saw at a very young age dying and birthing because we had a dairy heard and I saw the miracle of putting a seed in the ground bigger than your fingernail and producing an 8-foot stalk of corn with three ears on it, each with hundreds of kernels that had that capability of replicating themselves. Periods of drought, it would rain and we would all rejoice and say thank you God. It was just a part of my life's journey. It wasn't separate from the way that I grew up.

Rachel: Interesting, and how did that evolve over the years? Was it a continuous faith? Were there ever any challenges that you encountered?

Chris: Well, I went to college and got married and moved away from my family and so I wasn't probably as faithful looking back I think.

Rachel: I feel like we always have those times in experiencing college.

Chris: I think my faith was still there, but I wasn't as actively engaged in the rituals of my faith, so when I had my first child, my husband and I looked, and we decided that we needed to find a church and make that a priority for us and for our children, so that got me engaged again.

Rachel: I know me personally I identify as a Christian as well and so I commonly combat misconceptions of people who have been harmed by Christianity, and how they've turned away from the faith due to that and so part of what I'm trying to do and as I pursue my faith in Christianity is to try and correct some of those wrongs and show that Christianity is so much more than some of these harms, like it isn’t even that at all. So have you ever come across that?

Chris: Oh yes, it's really one of the things that bothers me the most, and I think one of the reasons why I'm here. I talked to Charlie about this. I said saying you're Christian these days doesn't really explain entirely who you are because there are so many different ways people call themselves Christians and their behavior doesn't always seem very Christ-like to me. I just kind of say that I am attempting to follow Christ. I'm an imperfect follower, but I believe that that is the road that we’re called to follow and the values that we’re called to manifest in the world. But yes it's a word that’s fraught with so many different meanings but emotions that are invoked in people because not everybody has the same experience of either being a Christian or knowing
people who call themselves Christian. Then you expand that across other faiths in the world. No faith is just one size fits all I don't think. We have lots of room for misunderstanding.

Rachel: Yeah that's a valid point. I feel like often when I say what I am, there’s a follow up of “but this is how I follow because your experiences are valid and I want to be able to help and correct and all of this stuff…”

Chris: You almost need a disclaimer.

Rachel: Exactly, Have you seen that Christianity encourages interfaith work in your experience?

Chris: Oh I believe it does. I believe that when you understand that a loving God created all of us. We are all his children and no one is really to be excluded from our faith. Jesus modelled that so well. He extended inclusive hospitality to all he encountered, especially those people that were always on the margins, those people that were considered to be outcasts, or looked down upon, not worth, and so that model of inclusiveness I think calls us to be that way in the world.

Rachel: Definitely I have been trying to wrestle with staying true in your faith and seeing as though Christianity has this Great Commission mindset that this is the Way, so there's an exclusivism inherent in the faith, but I want to remain true to my faith while encouraging interfaith, so how do you reconcile this idea of conversion with interfaith and trying to allow others to also worship their own faiths and celebrate their own truths? Is there a medium between those? How do you see that working?

Chris: I believe in respecting other people, and if they have another name for God, another way of worshiping the divine, I don't think we're supposed to be judgmental or reach out and radically try to convert somebody to our way of thinking. We're doing a class at Second Presbyterian on Wednesday nights. It deals with the spirit of hospitality within our faith, and it's been really helpful for me because what we are called to do is to be hospitable in this world with those we meet, and so many times we lay out an agenda or we have terms within which we're only willing to operate. I'm a learner. I’m learning this as I go along. I have my core beliefs that we are all created in the divine image. We are all part of this human family. We celebrate diversity in so many areas of our life. We love diversity when it comes. We look at nature, and even simple things like the color of flowers, the more the better. In almost every area except in our humanity, and then all of a sudden, we start segregating ourselves, pulling ourselves back, and looking at the other, grouping ourselves and saying “we believe this and they don't,” so therefore we become judgmental. I think we should cherish the diversity. It doesn't mean we have to assimilate each other’s beliefs. We can build relationships and appreciate each other in spite of all that.
Rachel: Yeah, I like that a lot. I think that's how it should be too. Often things as you said are misconstrued and you get those segregated parts of identity and you solely see somebody for what they appear to you, rather than sitting down and getting to know them through dialogue, which I think is a core mission of the CIC in trying to promote that peaceful dialogue. What do you see as some of the issues that interfaith may be able to help solve? Is there any parts of the world or any conflict that you see rising where interfaith can really be a valid solution?

Chris: Well I really hope it will help solve some of our political discord because I think it has to start somewhere, a healing and a different way of interacting with each other and the interfaith component is the best place to start because although we come from different faiths and different backgrounds when you really look at a faith, we share so many of the same core values and tenants. The golden rule is almost universal. It may use different words, but the meaning is the same, so I think we have an opportunity through this group to impact other parts of the world, and I don't have the answers for that, but I just feel that it has to start someplace and this is a great place to start, and once we learn how to navigate through that… I was thinking this morning as I was coming here, and I don't know why but these words came to me. I think we're here to facilitate, to foster, and to forge. Well to foster relationships with other faiths and people unlike us and to facilitate fostering that for other people and hopefully through that we can forge relationships and alliances and new ways of understanding each other. It all starts with me finding out for myself how to do that too.

Rachel: Yeah, absolutely I think something that I've talked to Charlie about and other board members is that the CIC definitely attracts people who are interested in interfaith dialogue, right? So how do you take this notion and apply it to people on the margins who may see somebody of a different religion as a threat or something because they probably wouldn't be attracted to the CIC? So how do we take your mission and apply it broadly, so to speak?

Chris: And therein lies the problem. That's why I'm here. I'm here to help to help in some small way any way I can. I can add to the conversation or help part of the solution. I don't really know what that's going to look like yet because I am so new, but I just feel convinced that this is the place. The foundational work will be done here. Really what we learn here, it's not just a matter of sitting here and learning how to do this, we have to embody it when we go out and interact with other people, so I think if it becomes a part of we are, there will be a ripple effect.

Rachel: Yeah that's the hope. I like that idea, and the fact that you're so open to learning first. I think that's a big deal because we come in with our own lens and our ideas and ways that things are supposed to go, so to be able to come to an organization like this where everybody is open to learning is a good place to start. So to summarize, for you Chris what is interfaith to you if you could give it a broad definition from your experience outside and various travels and maybe with your little experience that you have had here at the CIC. What does interfaith mean?
Chris: I'd like it to mean interaction with each other. I don't know how often that occurs but I think it should occur just that interfaith, interaction, providing opportunities. I think that's one reason why I really wanted to be on the program committee because I feel like this is what they're going to wrestle with. How do we provide opportunities and situations and training for these interactions to occur in healthy ways, in ways that grow us in spirit and humanity and make us agents as we out go in the world. I don't know how that's going to look. It's a process. I'm sure they've been at this for a few years and it's probably a process that we will never fully master. There will always be work to be done because you will always have new people coming into the system. It's probably our life’s work.

Rachel: Thank you so much for being here.
Canon Bruce Gray interview

Rachel: Today we have Canon Bruce Gray. Welcome. It's great to have you. If you don't mind talking first a little bit about yourself to get our listeners acquainted with you, that'd be awesome.

Bruce: Sure, I'm an Episcopal priest and I've been a priest for over thirty years, basically all my adult life. I grew up in California. I had my seminary training in the Chicago area and fell in love with the Midwest but have ended up spending about half my ministry time in California and about half in Indiana, particularly in the Indianapolis area. Right, now I serve the Holy Family Episcopal Church in Fishers.

Rachel: How is that distinction between California to Indiana?

Bruce: It's interesting because there's an old saying that whatever is happening in the rest of the country started on the West coast and so I found when I moved here about ten years ago that sure enough about a year later - maybe two years later - what we've been experiencing in Los Angeles culturally, politically, economically, etc. came to Indiana and so now that head start is no good. Yeah, I have to call my kids out there and see what's going on, but in many ways it is culturally quite different to be in Indiana from the urban areas of California, but my wife and I love it. It's a great place to be. The goal of having community interfaith and otherwise is pretty strong here. It's not something that you have to convince someone that that's what we should be doing. Instead, it's more “well, of course that makes perfect sense.” Whereas particularly where I was in Los Angeles, we had a lot of people in the what they say as the entertainment industry and so there's a whole lot of self-promotion and a dog eat dog competitiveness even within faith bodies and so it was a much bigger challenge to have cooperation on a community level on all sorts of different projects, interfaith projects, various community activities, things like that. You had to convince people that they would get more out of working together than just doing their own thing.

Rachel: What got you interested in interfaith coming from California to here? Was that an interest that you had?

Bruce: Oh yeah, I've been involved in interfaith activities literally since I was a kid. Growing up in California, my parents were both thoroughly convinced of the need to be involved in our communities and to reach across boundaries. I was born in 1960, and my parents were part of the civil rights movement to a certain degree as amateurs and volunteers and so we'd spend time going to all sorts of different cultural, political, and religious events. My parents wanted to make sure we were exposed to all sorts of different types of folks. So once I became an adult, it felt very natural to continue to form those kinds of bonds wherever I lived. Everywhere that I have
lived I've been involved with a local interfaith group. That's the first thing I Google, so back then it was sort of make some phone calls and see who knew what to figure out what the interfaith network is and I really enjoyed spending time both in California and here developing all sorts of strategies to improve our communities and build tighter bonds through the interfaith networks.

Rachel: What is your faith journey like? Maybe in regards to your specific faith, but also these interfaith acquaintances that you have made along the way?

Bruce: Well, I grew up an Episcopalian, which for Episcopalians is very rare. Most Episcopalians come to the Episcopal Church either from no faith background or perhaps another Christian background or other body of faith. They come to the Episcopal Church as adults, so I'm a rarity. In fact, we did a little who-are-you game in our congregation at Holy Family and I was one of three people in the congregation who grew up Episcopalian out of a couple hundred that were participating in this, so I'm a rarity in that way. [As a result] my faith journey really had to therefore be about what was going to be mine versus what had been handed to me, so that involved mainly as a teenager looking at what other faiths were about, and I knew I was a spiritual person. I wanted to see and see for myself what the different faith traditions were out there and see which felt truest to me and like the best fit. It helped that we were living in a university community. My father worked for University of California and so I had friends from at least a dozen different faith backgrounds and my parents had absolutely no hesitation about us doing this kind of exploration as we were growing up, so I got to experience what it was like for a Jewish family, for various Eastern religions, for atheists, for all sorts of different brands of Christianity.

Rachel: Is this through dialogue or through actual experience?

Bruce: Actually spending the night at their house. I mean, they were my friends, so it would be hanging out, and what was most interesting was a household that I was good friends with a boy my age, and they were devout atheists and yet were perhaps now they would be more comfortable calling themselves Pagan because what was crucial to them and their faith journey was getting out into nature frequently, and I really enjoyed going camping with them. My dad's joke was that he got enough camping during World War II, so that was not somethings that we were going to do. Again, my parents were great about me exploring life and so we would go out to the desert of southern California, and as we sat around the campfire, the adults, as atheists, would talk about the wonder of everything that we were seeing and would have all us kids there, and there were a lot of kids, three or four families camping, walk out into the darkness and look up at the stars and see the constellations and the Milky Way and if it is the right time of night to see satellites going by, which is really hard to see usually. The wonder that they expressed was one of those huge lessons to me that people won't necessarily use God language when talking about the wonder of life and what a Christian, for instance, may say the wonder of creation. For
them, it was really the wonder of science. They were professional scientists, and I learned a lot from them about wonder. In some ways, their vocabulary then started to become limited compared to what I'd be able to express today, but it was sufficient. I really appreciate how vulnerable they were willing to be about what was important to them. That was one of those things that was formational for me, particularly before becoming a professional, so to speak, in religion of taking seriously the spiritual walks of everyone. That even someone who says that they don't have a spiritual walk, and I wouldn't force the title on it, but from my perspective, it probably is spiritual even if it's not part of any organized religion or perhaps has no concept or belief in God it all.

Rachel: So how have you taken that to get to where you are now?

Bruce: Well that was when I was in elementary school and that helped me to really develop a keen sense of listening. Basically, if I'd shut up, I could learn an awful lot from other people. So in some ways what I've sought out in the forty-five years or so since then, are the quiet times, the campfire times with people and to be able to listen to their stories and their perspectives and their experiences and their perceptions and that has greatly enriched my spiritual journey and the ways in which I can express and perceive God in the world around me. Probably one of the most interesting things to me is the growing movement across various cultural barriers, even in our society, about practicing mindfulness. Give credit where credit is due that for the most part it started within Buddhism, but within the Episcopal Church, it was something that, by the time I became an adult, was a very popular movement of prayer form and fast forward to today, corporations are teaching it and public schools are teaching it to their children, to the students, and in some ways it strikes me as the great interfaith movement of our generation, and if I hadn't been listening through all those years, I don't think I would've been able to appreciate now as I see it popping up almost all over the place as something that is worth paying attention to and be able to see the pattern of its growth and - again using my vocabulary - certainly see God moving through that. It’s giving us tools in a time in our society, a time in our history which is so full of stress and fear and attachment from what's going on around us, that mindfulness practice helps us get re-centered within ourselves, if we're religious with the divine, but regardless of what's happening here and now, which is one of the huge challenges. Keep our feet on the ground as we're looking at what's on our social media feeds that may be taking place around the world, and there's a goodness to know what's happening around the world, but it can get us lost in our everyday.

Rachel: Absolutely, I can speak to that with just college and all of my current responsibilities, just life in general. Definitely, we had Tony Wiederhold here recently, and he's working with Eli Lilly to incorporate mindfulness into their practice as a business and corporation, which is super neat. So yeah, I can see that for sure. How did you get to know the CIC? How did you get involved here in Indianapolis?
Bruce: Grace Burton-Edwards was an Episcopal priest in Indianapolis. She's now serving somewhere in the south, but she was at Trinity Episcopal Church, and she was on the original board, so I heard she was involved with interfaith stuff. I hadn’t even heard the name “CIC” yet, so I bought her coffee and said, “tell me what's going on with that.” So she started to brief me and then to my embarrassment I realized that they were in the same building I was working in - “oh that's where they are” - and then shortly after that was when Grace received the call to move to a new parish and so when the CIC needed a new board member and was hoping to have someone who is Episcopalian I was very willing to step in as her replacement.

Rachel: That’s funny that you were in the same building. What have you learned since being on the board? Have there been some connections that are memorable and stories that you have encountered?

Bruce: What’s fascinating to me is how the diversity of faith expressions in the Indianapolis area that are so firmly rooted now of the new temples that have been built just since I've moved here ten years ago and the wonderful religious festivals. I'm not going to name any communities because I don't want to slight any because I have not been able to go to all that we're invited to, but the fantastic openness across the board that faith groups have with inviting people from various backgrounds to come enjoy and be inspired by their holy days, by their architecture, by their studies, worship, and of course social justice activities that we do together. Everywhere that I'd been involved with interfaith work, the social justice, the helping the poor and that sort of thing, had been the easy work to do together and so what's impressive with me in Indianapolis is that the CIC community has taken much further steps than that so that we really are able to pray together using all sorts of different forms and formats and not watering down what anyone believes, but instead being open to praying in the form that someone else does every week or every day and I may never have experienced before. We don't try to figure out what's the lowest common denominator, but rather have a respect for each other and each other's spiritual practices that I think is enriching to everyone involved.

Rachel: When you have these encounters doesn't it challenge your own beliefs or does it strengthen them?

Bruce: Oh always for me always strengthens. Something that I didn't say is that in college I almost had a second major in cultural anthropology. That background gets wonderfully tickled through interfaith experiences by saying “okay this is how this group is expressing what's important to them. Here are the values that they're sharing. Those symbols that are important.” So it's always enriching and just piques my curiosity to learn more.
Rachel: Can you speak a little too about being Episcopalian and what that looks like as a denomination of Christianity?

Bruce: Of course. We are one of the more liberal branches of Christianity in the United States. Our roots are in the Church of England and so our current claim to fame is that our head bishop, our presiding bishop, spoke at the royal wedding last summer and got all sorts of social media attention that way. He's a great guy even without the social media attention, but consequently our roots are back in the fourteen hundreds in the Roman Catholic tradition but since we've had hundreds of years, we continue to have a strong symbolic and sacramental life, so we use similar terminology as Roman Catholics and Orthodox churches do, but we have a particular American bent on it where we have women clergy priests and bishops and deacons, and we have gay, lesbian, and transgender clergy as well as in lay leadership of course. We have tended to be particularly in the last about seventy years pretty progressive on the political fronts as well, which is symbolized in who we have in leadership. There is a real intentionality about having diversity in leadership. We're doing a lot of work over the last ten to twenty years on racism because we are aware that we're a diverse denomination that historically has had to deal with racism and often just tried to be polite about it rather than make substantial institutional changes. We do wonderful symbolic things like electing African-Americans to leadership. Our bishops are elected, so we have a number of African-American bishops and all, but then when it comes down to a congregational level are we really open to having a wide variety of cultures and races in the pews. That's a tougher question and in a very Episcopal sort of way we do lots of studies on that and discussions and we are doing our best to grow in that. We have also been very involved for really since our inception in the United States at the time of the American revolution in social justice and economic types of ministries, so we started places like the Julian Center and Damian Center in Indianapolis and quite a few other great organizations. Since we are the incubator, to use current language, and then spin them off to be freestanding non-profits, so they have a better time fundraising. But that's typical in any part of the United States where the Episcopal Church is there. There's almost always some kind of non-profit if not multiple ones that the Episcopal Church was key in forming. At my last community, our congregation helped start a homeless program that included all facets of what we call “recovery from homelessness,” so it had housing and emergency services, but it also had psychological, medical, and job training all the other pieces. For our congregation, it was a no-brainer, like “that's what Episcopalians do” and so we were able to start something that began in a parish all into a multimillion dollar freestanding charity and then say that “we are going to continue to support you but fly little chicken,” and it's laying lots of wonderful eggs now. That's very typical for the Episcopal Church. We're not so huge on dogma. We really believe that the historic Nicene is a sufficient creedal statement, so we don't have any kind of confession of faith like a lot of Protestant churches do, and we don't have a library full of dogma like the Roman Catholic Church does. We really leave it on the shoulders of each person, layperson, clergyperson to decide for themselves what they believe and how they're going to live their lives. We give lots of guidance, and we have a minimum of
believing in God and the Holy Spirit, believing in Jesus Christ, treating others well, but after that it turns into quite a diversity of thought, which makes it fascinating to be a part of an Episcopal denomination. There's always good discussions going on how we should respond to the life around us and make the world a better place.

Rachel: Yeah it sounds like you're really getting your hands dirty. You're really getting to know the community. You're going out there and showing your faith rather than just talking about it.

Bruce: Yeah, we tend to have a lot of academics in our congregations, but we want to apply what we're thinking about. Test it, and build on it.

Rachel: Have there been some challenges or misconceptions that you had to overcome in regards to being a progressive Christian?

Bruce: Oh all the time. First “well, yes, we are Christian even though we progressive.” I remember when some years ago within the Episcopal Church, our first openly gay bishop was elected, and I had a number of colleagues from more conservative Christian churches in the community I was serving in at the time come up to me very sorrowful and say, “I'm sorry this is the last time that I'll ever be able to talk to you because your denomination has crossed the line, and if I even talked to you that will compromise my beliefs and the beliefs of my congregation.” In the instances like that of course it's hard in terms of personal relationships, but it's also hard in terms of not even being able to agree that we're following the same God. Episcopalians will sometimes be accused of not believing in the Bible even though we take the Bible very seriously and spend lots of time on biblical scholarship, but we don't take it literally. We take it within the context of the cultures that produced it and believe that God works through all that but that doesn't mean that it was ever frozen at a certain moment and can't be changed. Some fellow Christians have misconceptions about us not believing in the Bible, not believing in God, not believing in the fundamentals of the faith is what I've been told, and we like to think that we do, but express it in a different way. Many things people at any given day and age think are the absolute essentials to agree on, we think with our historical perspective, not so much that keep shifting through time and certainly there are hot button issues at any given time, but if we can agree that we should love our neighbor as ourselves and love God with our entire being, then we can work together on all sorts of projects rather than worrying about is my fork on the proper side of the plate.

Rachel: True. Yeah definitely and looking at interfaith specifically do you find that your faith encourages interfaith work?
Bruce: Oh yes yeah. The Episcopal Church has been one of the leaders in interfaith efforts probably for centuries, but when the interfaith movement in the United States really took off after World War II, the Episcopal Church was really in the forefront of leadership for that.

Rachel: Neat. I am currently in a religious pluralism class where we look at interfaith from a Christian perspective, and there's various ways that you encounter religious pluralism. You can be exclusive in your mindset within the Christian faith and say this is “the way, and the only way,” but of course there's a spectrum to that and I'm trying to wrestle with how do you stay true in your Christian faith but also celebrate the diversity of other faiths as well, and it sounds like they can go hand in hand and should in my opinion.

Bruce: The basic thought that we keep in mind is God created us all, and we are not responsible as individuals or as a denomination for loving anyone more than God loves them because that's not possible. So out of that construct it's much easier to say “okay this is your worst been gone in a way that's very different from what I do, but it's easy to see that you really are loving the world around you with a great deal of sincerity and effort.” So I think we're all on the same track at that point, and I don't have to step in and say “well unless you confess Jesus Christ as your savior, you’re going to hell.” Yeah it's just not something we believe in how God works and so that takes a lot of pressure off us as Episcopalians and gives us a lot of room to be involved with the interfaith efforts and relationships and studies and things like that.

Rachel: Why do you think interfaith is so important?

Bruce: Well I think God has purposely created the different faiths of the world, and I'm not going to say all faiths because white supremacy I think technically is a faith, but I don't think God created that. However, with that little caveat, I think God did this kind of creative work on purpose and part of it is to help us grow in our own sense of wonder about the diversity of God’s creation including within the human race and the cultures and religions of the human race. I think we learn more about God by learning how others see and experience God.

Rachel: To end and conclude here, what is your definition of interfaith?

Bruce: Interfaith is the seeking to appreciate in the other the presence and experience and expression of God. Actually I’ll step back to the Divine or that which is beyond us. Some people do not except the term God, and I want to respect that.

Rachel: Thank you so much for being here.
Maria Pimental-Gannon interview

Rachel: Today we have Maria Pimental-Gannon. I am really excited to hear your stories. If you wouldn't mind starting with just telling us a little bit about yourself and what you're involved with inside your faith and outside your faith.

Maria: Thank you for inviting me to be interviewed. A little bit about myself… I'm originally from Mexico: Mexico City. I've been in the U.S. for a long time. In Indianapolis, I've been here for thirty-seven years. I do want to show that I have two daughters. I have one daughter here who is an attorney here in Indianapolis and one daughter who is a personal trainer who lives in Arizona. My calendar looks different every single day. The only constant I have in my life is change, and I'm a teacher. I'm a trainer. I'm an interpreter. That's what I do mostly, but I do that part-time. I'm self-employed, so everything that I do, I do on my own since I'm self-employed. I have my LLC, which is called NISE, the acronym NISE and it stands for Necessary Ingredients for a Simple Existence. Under that I do my interpretation, my training, and more recently my book. I am a newly published author, and I do it under NISE as well. I'm pretty involved but mostly with all of that I mostly do ministry work, so I do a lot of volunteer work in the community and in my church.

Rachel: What is your book about?

Maria: My book is called *Necessary Ingredients for a Simple Existence: the Transformation*. The book is not about me, but it is about transformation and I share how I experienced transformation in my life. It’s a really neat book. I’m a very faith-filled person, so anything I do is around faith. I love God. I love the Lord, and everything I do shows that I love the Lord, so the book is about helping people see that there are no coincidences in life - only God-incidences. It’s all about how it’s all around us. Some people call it coincidences and some people say, “wow, I had a far out experience.” It’s great and it's true but you know there are no coincidences - only God-incidences. I know that it's a good book not because I wrote it, certainly not because I wrote it. It was actually written over a weekend and that's how I know it wasn't me. It was divinely inspired and I know that the work that came out is the work that God wanted to have come out. I am in the process of finishing the next book and a little short books that will be coming out, the good Lord willing. What I see myself as a conduit. I see myself connecting people and things. One of the things that I train is the area of multicultural education. I get called often to consult on a group, a school, an organization about multicultural living, specifically with the Hispanic and Latino community. I love to build bridges between the Hispanic, Latino community and the community that is from Indianapolis or from the U.S. It is very neat. I thoroughly enjoy what I
do. We were talking earlier before we started recording, and we talked about the mission trip that I was blessed to be a part of with the COIN organization going to Delhi, Texas.

Rachel: How was that?

Maria: Rachel, it was phenomenal, but I need to qualify what I mean by phenomenal. It wasn't a pleasure trip. It was not a vacation. It was a very hard week. We worked long days - usually about twelve hours - but two or three days we ended up working about fifteen hours. It was phenomenal in that it was powerful. It was very impactful on all our lives. I went there thinking that we were going to go there to help people and to make a difference in their lives, which I believe we were able to do, but I think I left there realizing – no, they were blessings in my life. They changed my life. I am the one who came back changed. There are so many things that we take for granted - freedom and daily things that we take for granted - and these women and their children just wanted to have a chance to apply for asylum. We went to help them prepare for their credible fear interview.

Rachel: Ok, so that was your day-to-day work down there. You were interacting with people.

Maria: Interacting with them, helping them because they all have a story to share, and that story is one that the average person might have a difficult time hearing. There's a lot of violence. There's a lot of fear. There are a lot of threats and that's why they're coming because they fear for their life if they stay in their home country, so that’s why they're asking for asylum. The only thing is that they don’t necessarily know how to tell the story. So we listen to their story and then we help them so that they would be ready for the interview because the law for asylum is very strict and very specific. We try and help them truly see how that story would fit within those laws and rules.

Rachel: Was there an encounter that you can remember specifically that was really impactful? If you can't share that’s totally ok too for privacy issues.

Maria: I just wouldn't share any name or anything, but I have one in particular. I mean all of them tugged at your heart. One, in particular, was a person not from your typical countries that we have been helping, like Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, but from Brazil. I met with her several times, several different times because I knew she had a story, but she was just unable to convey it or communicate it, and I think that meeting together made a big difference in her life and in being able to finally say, “yes, this is what happened and this is why I fear for my life and this is why I can't go back.” So helping her to be able to put that into… I heard from her recently and she made it and she is with her American host family so that I was very excited about. Most of the other ones we didn't get to find out what their outcome was: whether it was a positive outcome, which meant they were allowed to come in and continue their asylum process, or a
negative outcome, which meant that they would either have to appeal or possibly be sent back to the country, which would be a travesty.

Rachel: What can we do here in Indianapolis to help some of the people at the border or to get the news out of the situation of some of these individuals?

Maria: It's interesting that you're asking that especially right now with what's going on with the latest news with the government, which is not very… I was meeting with a gentleman from Honduras earlier today, and we were just talking back “close the border?” What would that do with us here? If we close the border, they're not the only ones who are going to be impacted. We're going to be impacted because so many things come from Mexico. Things that are imported and things that people don't have to think about until we start having to pay these astronomical prices for things that we are used to getting at reasonable prices. It’s just going to the picture so much, and we're not headed towards easy-going. The road may get worse before it gets better.

Rachel: But hearing stories like this and staying up with the news can maybe lead us towards some sort of action to ensure that we're taking care of these individuals. Fingers crossed.

Maria: We certainly hope so. I mean there are things to do. You could contact your legislators. You can let them know and it's good to do it with having facts, knowing what's going on, so reading. A lot of what we can do is reading, being informed, being educated, and then taking a stand, taking the position.

Rachel: I would love to hear how you got involved with the CIC. How did that start?

Maria: I think that I first need to share with you that I talked about my church. I worship at Saint Monica Church. It's a Roman Catholic Church, and I consider myself a BACC. Someone asked me, “Well what is a BACC?” It’s a “Born Again Catholic Christian.” I know that it's all about having a relationship with Jesus Christ, and actually we would have to get into religion and Catholicism to fully understand. We do have that opportunity through the sacraments and we receive baptism first and then the second is confirmation. In confirmation, we have the opportunity to reconfirm our faith to invite Jesus into our heart. We commit to practicing to following Jesus on our own, whereas, as a child, it was our parents and godparents who made that commitment for us. Now, we have the opportunity to say “yes, I want to follow Jesus; yes, I want to invite Jesus into my heart,” but I'm very intentional. Yes, Lord, I invited you into my heart and yes, you are my Lord and Savior, and yes, you're my priority and I just want to be in your creation.” So I consider myself a BACC. That having been said when I was first invited, I have been part of the CIC since pretty much the beginning and when I was first invited, I was at that time president of the Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis and they had been invited to
sit at the table, etc. They weren’t real sure whether they wanted to do that, or whether they could or whether they should do that. I was just intrigued by what the CIC was doing, and I told them, “I'm not going to do it representing the Church Federation, but if you're open to just a community member, I would be happy. I would be honored. I can do that of my own interest.” They said, “Yes, that would be great,” so that's how that started and that journey has been an amazing journey. I have made so many friends, and I have learned so much. There are so many good people.

Rachel: What are some of the things that you learned? Or some of the people that you have met?

Maria: What we try to do is have our meeting at different locations, different places of worship, different multicultural or ethnic places. So I had never been to a mosque before, and since being with CIC I have, and I've been to a number of different temples. I've been to Jewish synagogues. I've been to other Christian places of worship, some of those denominational, some of them nondenominational. I've learned a lot about interfaith and about other faiths, and I have sincerely enjoyed the opportunities that we have had to celebrate our diversity, such as with the banquet that we just had to celebrate our diversity and embrace it and realize that it is a gift. It's not an excuse and it's not a condition but rather a gift that we have. I feel so blessed that here in Indianapolis that my experience and the CIC’s experience is that we want to embrace it and go forward and make it better and make Indianapolis a very inviting city.

Rachel: As I've said before, the diversity here is amazing and I think the board does a really good job of representing all that diversity here in Indianapolis, so that's awesome.

Maria: I think you're absolutely right. I sit on the board at the immigrant welcome center, and they work very closely there. A lot of what they do is similar to the immigrant welcome center. We work with people of different cultures. Probably many of the people we work with, not all of them, but many of them are people who are needing some kind of service. With the board, it's people who are providing service and can help others, whether of the same culture, the same faith, or those who want to know more about the culture, faith, etc. I am honored to be serving in both organizations.

Rachel: Yeah and you have talked a lot about this multicultural perspective. Can you speak a little to how your background has played into your faith, and what your faith journey has looked from the beginning to now? I know that's a big question.

Maria: I guess when I first came here, I did not know what multiculturalism was or what it meant. That had never come up. We just happened to be from Mexico, and we came to Chicago, and I never thought, even growing up and after becoming a young adult I never stopped to think. At that time, it was probably more ethnicity that played a role in my life. There was affirmative
action. There were numbers to need and keep, so I often was one of those numbers that was needed to show that there was minority representation. It was an interesting position to be in because the people from Mexico who are more recently arrived than I was didn't really consider me Mexican because I had been here for a few years, and I spoke English well, and they said, "You're not Mexican. You're American." So I didn't fit in there. They said, "You're American," so I would go with the American friends, and they'd say, "You're nice, but you're not really American. You're a minority." So I would go with the minority groups, mostly African-American, and, "Well you're not really minority," so it was kind of like not fitting in anywhere, which is kind of sad, so when this came up with the multicultural education, and then it was more than just black and white, that the diversity was in faiths, that the diversity was in culture, was in the language, all these other things. I became very interested in the international arena, in the international world, and then I wanted to meet people from all different countries, and I would try to learn the words from their country and try to learn how they cooked, try to taste their food and share my food. Ever since then, I have just been working with the international arena.

Rachel: I'm an international studies student at Butler and I absolutely love looking at different cultures and interacting because I think that's so important. You gain so much perspective on your place in the world, and how you can interact with people who are different than you.

Maria: For me, since faith is so strong for me, I just sit back and look at what God has done and then I say, Okay I can see why in Genesis it says He rested on the seventh day and He saw how good everything was and He was pleased and I see all around and see such diversity and shades of color, in heights and sizes and in clothing, in so many things that I just say, "What a wonderful world."

Rachel: Did you grow up in the Catholic faith when you were little?

Maria: Yes I was born and raised in the Catholic Church, with the Catholic faith; however, we were of the pre-Vatican age before the Second Vatican Council, so we grew up with what's called the Baltimore Catechism, which is very different than what it is now in many ways. Of course the Catholic Church and the teachings are still the same, but with the Second Vatican Council a lot of changes came about. Changes that I'm so glad came about because I believe that those changes are more uniting and unifying of people. I like to look at who unites, us not what divides us, so we have the Word of God in common. At that time before the Second Vatican Council, Catholics were not encouraged and in some cases were not allowed to read the Bible, which is unfortunate, but it was felt that those who were trained in theology… They didn't want you to get confused. Someone who was trained would explain it to you, and I thank God that my mom was born before her time because she didn't know. She raised us with the Bible, so we were raised with scripture and knowing the Bible and following the Bible, so when the Second
Vatican Council came about, I was just elated. We've always had bibles at home. At one time, I considered leaving the Catholic Church, but the Lord got a hold of me and said, “I put you there because they're going to use you there.” I'm so on fire with my faith. I won't push it, but I will share with anyone what it means to me to be a Born Again Catholic Christian, and for me, it's all about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. You can't have a personal relationship with someone if you don't know them, so you have to get to know them. I teach a three-hour class every week. It's a twelve-week three-hour class, and I tell them, “Remember when you started dating your husband or your wife and how did you feel? Do you remember back when you just had met and then you couldn't wait to see each other the next time? Then your hand might have accidentally touched the other and you felt that electricity going up your arm and you were giggling? You were like oh! You were so excited and what did you want to do? You wanted to spend time with that person.” I just want to share how wonderful it is when you start spending time with God or with the Word. For me and my Christian faith that's what it is with God and the Word. But it could be in any faith. I respect my other friends and in other faiths, the Muslims and the Quran, the Jewish faith, everyone. The important thing is to just fall in love, for me it’s a higher power or whatever you would want to call it. Fall in love with it. Get to know it, and embrace it. Let it help you become the best person you can become, to become the best version of yourself, to fully be the person that you were created to be. I think that's what life is about and I'm having fun working towards that.

Rachel: So you see that interfaith and Catholicism work hand-in-hand, so they encourage each other?

Maria: Absolutely yes. We've always had a priest who has also served on the board, and we have a priest who's in charge of the ecumenical part of the church, and he's on the board as well, so yes, there's no doubt in my mind that they go hand in hand, and we have to work together. We’re all God’s people, whether we choose follow Him through this church or that church or whatever. God didn't create denominations. Men did, so we are all, you know, created in God's image.

Rachel: If you could just summarize in a sentence or two as we close, what does interfaith mean to you? What is your definition of it?

Maria: That's a million-dollar question. Whenever we have situations, they are “what does interfaith mean to you?” I'm not going to define interfaith because interfaith means different things to different people, and yes, there is a definition for interfaith, but what it means to me is acknowledging and respecting and loving others who may not have a God view as I do. Whose view of God may vary, but acknowledging that they too were created by God. If Jesus were here, he's not stopping from meeting with someone because they are from a different faith, so I want to do what I think Jesus would do or what I think that Jesus wants me to do, and that's to love all unconditionally, to love all as He tells us. The two greatest commandments are “love the Lord
your God with all your heart, mind, and soul and your might.” The second one is, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Who is my neighbor? So I say everyone's my neighbor so to the degree that I can do what I am expected to do as a Christian then I'm going to live my life and that's what I'm trying to do: to live my life being an example of that, modeling that.

Rachel: Well, thank you so much.
Muzaffar Ahmad Interview

Rachel: Hi everyone, and welcome to another podcast episode in which we are able to learn more about our board members as part of the Center for Interfaith Cooperation. And today we have Muzaffar Imad with us. Thank you so much for being here.

Muzaffar: You're welcome. Thank you for having me, Rachel.

Rachel: Yeah, it's a pleasure and too, just to get us started. I would love to learn a little bit about how you got involved with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation and what that experience has meant for you.

Muzaffar: Yeah, so I am an immigrant to the U.S. I was born in Pakistan and came to the U.S. in ’98. And my background is that I was born in a religious minority in Pakistan which is persecuted because of their faith. So I grew up seeing religious persecution and I grew up living in an environment with, just because I'm part of that faith group, I don't have the same rights as the rest of the population. So, that's where I grew up. And I've seen a lot of discrimination, I've seen violence against our community. So, that's the background that I came with to the U.S. I came to the U.S. in '98 and been living in, in and around Indianapolis since 2000. And, uh, so the community that I'm part of it's called Ahmadiyya Muslim community, so it’s one of the sects within the bigger Islamic faith. It’s a subgroup within the Sunni sect of Islam. So, this community in general, because of being good, because of being part of a persecuted sect, we are very aware of the benefits and the need for reaching out across different religious backgrounds. So, our community in general have this tendency of reaching out to people from different faith groups and we believe that we all share a very more common beliefs and traditions than we are different. It's really the lack of understanding of the other that causes the problem and the hatred and the violence and all that entails. So, if we can just educate people that “Hey, look, this is what I believe. This is what you believe. We may look different, we may pray differently, you may not believe it all, but under the hood it's the same moral values. Do to the others what you want done to yourself.” So, that's what I grew up with. And when I came to the U.S. again our community, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, we reach out and do a lot of interfaith activities. So, that's the background I came with, and then I'd ran into Charlie and Dawn and a few other people, and I realized it is an organization that's already doing this. So, I just got involved and been working on that for a few years now.

Rachel: Yeah, super cool. Have you seen the effects of the CIC? Have there been any moments that you've been able to learn from? Or also you've just been able to see communities coming together? I know you're heavily involved with the Festival of Faiths and maybe seeing how that brings the Indianapolis community together. Can you speak to that at all?
Muzaffar: Yeah, yeah! I have learned a lot. I mean, I have learned - I've met people from so many different faith groups. And some of those faith groups are not mainstream. So, for example, pagan community. I mean, I've never even imagined that I cou- I would be talking to somebody from pagan group because I didn't really know anybody.

Rachel: Yeah.

Muzaffar: So, I've met with several people from several different communities and just enjoy being with them. Sharing our faith, sharing of traditions, how we raise our kids, what values are important to us. I've learned a lot and met so many different people, and this Festival of Faiths is an annual festival that we've been organizing in Indianapolis for five years now. And it brings hundreds of people out on a Sunday, and we just have a good time, talk to each other, and I just enjoy being a part of this group and continue to promote the idea that, “Hey, get out of your bubble. Get out of your silos. Talk to others,” and you realize that you have more in common than different. So that concept of hatred or being - doubting what is this group up to? I mean what, they’re doing something bad or they’re up to something that is not acceptable to us in America. Once that barrier is broken, people realize that we are a lot more in common than we have different.

Rachel: And looking to it just your faith journey. So, how did that look growing up? And how have you continued to strengthen your faith over time?

Muzaffar: Yeah, so my faith journey has been a journey, as you use the term, and as we grow, we learn new things. Some of us change our faith positions or concepts or traditions, others don't. I guess everybody behaves differently. So, my journey has been that I grew up in a very homogenous environment. So everybody around me was part of the Muslim faith. My family and most of my friends are also part of the same Ahmadiyya Muslim community, so we - I grew up with very little diversity of religious talk growing up. But when I came to the U.S., I met people from so many different faiths: Christianity of course, to Judaism, Hindus, Sikhs, and others besides these. And I just loved learning about people, so I have become more aware that my faith is important to me. But I'm also aware that everybody's faith is important to them. So, the way I look at it is that they're different highways going to the same destination. So, I'm following my path, other people are following their path, and as long as we are getting closer to recognizing God, whoever that entity is, at the same time making this world a better place for everybody who lives here. I think we will reach the same destination. Yeah, so it's a journey and I'm blessed to be part of this diverse community that it is giving me this perspective.

Rachel: That’s awesome!

Muzaffar: And get me- allow me to meet people like you it’s just-
Rachel: I love interfaith. I think it’s so fascinating to learn about all the different connections and how people go about their different lifestyles. And how we can work together to make that a harmonious environment, so that people can work and live the way they want to.

Muzaffar: Yeah, and I've also met people who are - who don't consider themselves religious. So, they don't really go to a church or mosque, but they consider themselves spiritual, and they want to do good in their society. So, what I've done is working with some of my friends, since I live in Fishers. So, I've started a group, in Fishers. We don't call it an interfaith group; we call it a multi-faith group.

Rachel: Okay.

Muzaffar: So, we're not really all pastors or imams or rabbis. We're just normal people from different backgrounds and we call this group a multifaith group for compassion. So, we're all getting together on the single concept, if you need to be compassionate, and we need to do good. Coming together so people can see that people from different races, religions, and ethnic backgrounds, they can do things together.

Rachel: Right.

Muzaffar: Yeah, so we launched that group in Fishers a few months ago. But if we’re planning to expand it, participate in festivals and just tell people ‘hey, look we are a bunch of different communities working together’, so that's my vision for- that we will have these kind of groups in all different cities. Like satellite groups, to do what that CIC is doing, and CIC could be that hub that allow us all to collaborate. Maybe then the festival in a few years will be thousands of people instead of hundreds of people.

Rachel: Yeah, yeah, I like that. I think there's a common misconception that there's not a whole lot of diversity in Indianapolis. But when I interned with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation, like I was blown away.

Muzaffar: I know.

Rachel: Like it exists - there's so much diversity. And the fact that, like, these festivals can really highlight that I think is so important, and so to expand that reach as much as possible.

Muzaffar: I mean, in the last few festivals there were like seventy to eighty different churches and religious communities who set up their stalls. So within Indianapolis knowing that there seventy different types of faiths. It's pretty amazing.
Rachel: So, looking at your history in Pakistan and now, would you say that being persecuted under that, was that hard for you to hold your faith true and like stick to that? Or did that challenge you in any way, or probably just probably made you more firm in that faith too?

Muzaffar: Yeah so being persecuted, I think made me stick to my faith more strongly than otherwise. I mean my own brother in Pakistan who is a professor at a university. He had a PhD in physics. He was murdered, and we never found out who killed him. But the only reason you can think of is that he was part of this religious community and he was the only member of this community who was a professor at the university. And there's this group of people in Pakistan who are just … people like Taliban, ISIS, these kind of people who live there who just cannot tolerate diversity and who cannot tolerate you telling them that our faith is slightly different than yours. So, after that incident, I was aware. I became aware that I can't just sit back and cruise along and just do day-to-day activities, so after a few years of that I came to the U.S. and I realized that people who … the person who killed my brother probably never even heard of the word “interfaith.” He, if he was sitting here, or in the CIC boardroom, looking at all these different people talking about their different faiths and still working together, sharing meals together, going to festivals together, he or she would probably think otherwise, and probably regret doing what he did. So, again it's that lack of opportunity and when we started this group in Fishers I was talking to the mayor of Fishers and I was saying, “Well if the mayor of the city of Pakistan launched a similar interfaith group and this guy who killed my brother saw that ‘hey the mayor of the city is promoting this’, he would've changed his mind, or at least he would've thought twice about killing somebody just because they belong to a different faith.” Really, is that - so it's just that lack of opportunity, the lack of knowledge, or lack of exposure that I'm trying to end. That’s why I keep going back to interfaith organizations: CIC, there's several other organizations that I'm part of who are focused towards bringing people together from different backgrounds. So that's my passion, that's one thing I love doing and Indy is a great place, and CIC is a great platform.

Rachel: Well, thank you for all your work, that’s amazing and looking at some of the margins. So, like we see a lot of hateful jargon, as well as just, like, persecution here in the United States as well. And a lot of this rhetoric that involves that the CIC is putting out is really great, but it attracts people who are interested in interfaith. right? And so how do we get to those margins and trying to get people who may not understand interfaith or want to interact with people who are different than them? How do we help them and encourage them to do so?

Muzaffar: Very good question. That's the million dollar question. You can get the masses, the silent majority, as we call them, to get involved in these activities, to know about these activities, that is really the objective that I have. And I that's why I started this other initiative in Fishers. It's good to have CIC, but there's so many people to reach out to, and as many channels as we
can develop would be helpful. So, my thought is that the large religious institutes that exist in central Indiana: mega-churches, large churches, large mosques, large synagogues. Where hundreds and even thousands of people go every Sunday or every Friday and every Saturday. If we can attract their pastors and their religious leaders to be part of these groups, and then talk about these groups in their weekend sermons and tell people that this community exists, and maybe at one point even invite people from different faiths to come and speak for five minutes, or come to the church on a Wednesday night and just have a meet and greet allowing people to ask questions. So, I feel like that's where the next step needs to be where we engage with a lot of institutions, a lot of churches. Church just keeps coming to my mind because in Indiana, that's the predominant religion, so my desire is to engage the masses. Instead of just having five hundred people know about CIC, I want that to be fifty thousand or a hundred thousand. And the way I see doing it is to have the satellite grassroots organization that are formed by people living within that community. And there are people that it's just a matter of finding them, encouraging them, and giving them a model like ‘hey this is how they're doing it in Fishers. Why can't I do it?’ In Zionsville, or Noblesville or in Greenwood. And then I know, I'm aware of other similar initiatives that are happening within the greater Indianapolis area.

Rachel: How have you found the experience being in America being any different from Pakistan?

Muzaffar: Oh it's night and day. U.S. being a land of immigrants is there so much diversity, diversity is valued. Laws are to a very big extent pretty nonreligious, what's the word I'm thinking of...

Rachel: Atheist?

Muzaffar: No no no secular! Secular law. It doesn't matter what religion you're part of, the law is the same. So, it's a great opportunity. I feel I'm more free to practice my faith here than in Pakistan. And it’s not just Pakistan, I feel probably ninety percent of the world, the immigrants who come here, about ninety percent of them will say they are more free to practice their faith here than in their home country because the U.S. was formed on the idea of freedom, and liberty, and justice for all, so I love being here. Of course I miss home. But I’ve been here for about twenty years now so this is now my second home. I am, though, worried about recent political direction of the country. It seems like lot of tribalism is coming back into the mainstream. Us versus Them and doubting the other, refugees are bad and immigrants from a certain country are bringing drugs in, and this and that. And so I'm worried that this country is at a place where we should be taking the next step forward instead of stopping or taking a step back. But I'm very hopeful and optimistic that our government system has checks and balances built into it, so we'll get out of it and we'll continue to move in a positive direction.
Rachel: And just great organizations like the CIC. Hopefully, taking that step and pushing it in a new direction, I can see that. Something that I've been experiencing in different regards through internships and other things like that is I've seen how sometimes the church and state, that separation is kind of blurred to an extent to where some of the rhetoric in the government, it can be Christianized in focus. And in that realm, do you ever feel that that might be isolating in some regard or that that should be a more black and white divide?

Muzaffar: You know I am passionate about this. I grew in up in Pakistan, where the line between religion and state is very weak, if there is any at all. And at times there was no line. It was all the same and people believed in it, people were proud of it. And it's again, it's our natural tribal way of thinking. So, it's a very, very dangerous thing to have and I would be very vocal about anybody who thinks it's a good idea to Christianize America, or to Muslimize America or to Jewishize America or any religion. The state should not see what your color is, what your religion is. Everyone should be treated the same, so it's worrying when people feel like America is a Christian country so our law should be Christian laws. Of course there is, the majority of the country, is Christian so they will be some reflection of that in the government. But it should be consciously stopped, and it should be made sure that religion and state should be kept separate.

Rachel: Yeah, I've just seen a lot of that in debates and things like that and just wondered how others might feel about that.

Muzaffar: It's hard to realize that, when you're in the middle, in with the majority, then it makes sense to you. That “of course everybody here is Christian that so why not?” But what you don't realize is that there are other people living in the society as well. And when it is flipped in a different country, so for example, in a Muslim country when Christians don't get the rights, then you realize, ‘oh no, it's not a good thing’. But everybody thinks, ‘Oh, we are good. We will never do that.’ When you're in the majority you're fine, but you don't realize is that from the standpoint - from point of view of a minority, you see all the negatives. But when you're sitting with a majority, everything looks good to you. It’s that point of view that is important.

Rachel: And engaging those and minorities and majorities in a common conversation I think can really help alleviate that, which is great. So, looking at just maybe some common misconceptions in regards to Islam, do you come across any of those in your day-to-day that you might want a listener to understand?

Muzaffar: Yeah I've spoken at several churches and universities, and other areas about libraries, about Islam, along with several other co-speakers including Christians, professors, and other folks. And I have been asked several questions about Islam. One of the main questions is about Sharia. What is Sharia Law? Is Sharia Law gonna take over the US? So, what I tell people is, the Sharia Law is a word that is being used to scare people off. People think of Sharia Law and they
think of, oh in Saudi Arabia they don't let women drive, or are violent against thieves or if they
catch somebody stealing they cut their hands, things like that. What I tell people is that Sharia
Law is a set of guidance that's available in Quran, the holy the book of Islam. And it's, there are
some suggested rules. If this happens, this is how you deal with it. For example, divorce. How to
divorce a couple. There are rules and regulations mentioned in there. And that's a guidance for
Muslims. But the Quran also says that there's no compulsion in religion. So those are guidelines.
If you wanna follow them, if you wanna be, if you feel that that's how they apply, if those
guidances apply in a certain situation, then you follow them. But there's no compulsion, so
nobody can tell you that, ‘hey because Quran says that divorce should happen this way, that's the
only way divorce law should work in the U.S.’ Quranic principle is that whatever majority
decides, or the consensus, that should be the rule of law, that should be the law of the land. Of
course it cannot be against human rights and it cannot be unjust. It has to be just but you cannot
force Islamic law on anybody. So that's one conception, and again there is no one book of Sharia
Law. So if you go to three different Muslim countries, they will all say we have Sharia Law in
effect, and they will have different rules and different regulations because the interpretation of
scripture could be different. I mean scripture is not to be taken literally. Scripture can be, it's
more of a literature than a book of science. So even Muslims interpret different teachings
differently and implement them differently. So, nobody should be scared of Sharia Law because
it's Muslims wanting to implement Sharia Law. What people should be afraid of is people who
are extremists, whether they're Muslims or Christians or Jews there are nut jobs in every religion.
So don't be afraid of Islam; be afraid of extremists. So that's one misconception I hear a lot
about. Why do women cover, why do Muslim women cover their heads? The answer to that is
that Islam says that women should dress modestly. What's the definition of modesty? It changes
from place to place, from time to time, from your age, from whatever you’re up to. So, the main
guidance is to dress modestly. But again, there is no compulsion. If a woman says, ‘I don't want
to dress modestly’, fine! It's your choice. It’s your body, you do whatever you want with it. So
those are some questions and there are many other questions I'm asked but one thing I want to
tell people who don't know many Muslims, the best way to know what Islam is, is not to watch
YouTube videos, or to read books online. It’s to talk to a Muslim, one-on-one, and learn what
they think, what they feel. What they're trying to accomplish in life, and you’ll realize it's not
that different.

Rachel: I’ve realized in a lot of different situations, people have these questions and have great
intentions of wanting to get to know others. And then it's just crossing that barrier and really
trying to get out there and pushing themselves out there that kinda limits them.

Muzaffar: Then there about seven to ten mosques around Indianapolis. So, if you want to know
anything about Islam walk, in to any one of them. I can guarantee you they’re perfectly safe to
go into. Nobody will be suspicious of you; they will all welcome you. They would love to
explain what Islam means to them, and that's really the best way. We have colleagues and
students and there are, there is diversity almost everywhere - it's just a matter of finding them. Take them out for lunch and have a conversation! Another thing - people think that all Muslims around the world believe the same. They eat the same, they look the same, they speak the same language, they're all from the Middle East. And I tell people the majority of the Muslims don't live in the Middle East. The biggest Muslim country is Indonesia.

Rachel: Interesting, I didn’t know that.

Muzaffar: Exactly, you didn't know that. There are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan. India is predominantly a Hindu country but Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim country, but because of the size of the countries, more Muslims are in India than in Pakistan. And Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, there's a very few because the population is not that big, so very few Muslims live in the Middle East. More of them live in Southeast Asia, and in the U.S. about one percent of the population is Muslim. And there are immigrant Muslims, African-Americans were converted into Islam several decades ago. So, there's a lot of diversity with Islam. Now there are hundreds of sects just like there are hundreds of sects within Christianity. You'll find hundreds of sects within Islam who believe in the same common principles but differ on lot of interpretations and practicing.

Rachel: And looking too, from my perspective. So I'm a Christian and looking at how there can be this exclusive nature to it, and just inherent body of it, and saying that ‘this is the way you have to believe: Jesus Christ died for your sins and then you'll get to heaven’. There's ‘this is the sole way’ and I can assume that in Islam there's some interpretations that could also be exclusive in that nature.

Muzaffar: Absolutely.

Rachel: So, how do you reconcile that with interfaith, and getting to know other faiths and being okay with people practicing other religions? How do you work with that?

Muzaffar: So the Ahmadiyya of the Muslim community believes that the Islamic teaching is that anybody who believes in doing good deeds has nothing to fear whether they're Christians or Jews or other religious people, as long as they believe in their faith. Okay and do good deeds. Those are really the two pillars. So I don't believe that you have to be a Muslim to be forgiven, or to reach to God, or to be forgiven I guess, is the word, to reach the promised land. And that's what I believe in, and I'm lucky to be part of this group who believes in this religious harmony and there's… nobody has the monopoly on salvation. I have known several Christian friends who believe the same way, they say well we don't think that Jesus literally is the way, He is one way. And there are certain passages good prophet Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, said similar statements and made similar statements. That if you want to be saved, go through me. That’s for
the people who were around him at that point. It doesn't mean it's a universal statement for the times to come. It was for the people he was around because he was the prophet of God. He knew what God wants; he was among the people, so he made those statements. All I believe all the religious leaders, prophets, throughout history have made that statement. And some people take the scriptures literally, instead of metaphorically, and out of context. Similarly, there are some verses in the Quran that people take out of context and apply them universally for all time and use them to justify their agenda. I mean people, like Taliban and ISIS, focus a few verses from the Quran and say ‘hey look it says go kill Christians and Jews’. If the Quran says go kill Christians and Jews, well you fight. And they forget that the few verses before and the few verses after them, if you read them, you realize the Quran is talking about the war time when Muslims were being attacked by Christians and Jews. So, it was talking about defending them against that attack. It was not talking about a universal principle for all Muslims to kill Jews and Christians. That’s really what exists in all religions. I mean Christians were a part of Crusades killing Muslims, killing each other for years, for decades. I don't think Jesus ever would've, Jesus would probably be really upset if he saw his followers killing in the name of religion. So, all religions have those extreme manipulations. In a statement I heard somebody say that your God is a reflection of you. So, if you're good, God would be good. If you're bad, God would not be a pleasant sight to see.

Rachel: I see, interesting! That’s an interesting way to look at it, for sure. So, to summarize everything in a few sentences or so while you can, what does interfaith mean to you?

Muzaffar: Interfaith means to me that we all should step out of our silos. Our religious silos, our ethnic silos, and build bridges between people who look different than us, who believe differently, who dress differently, who speak differently. And try to build that bond, try to break the barriers, and you’ll realize that the people on the other side have a lot more in common than different.

Rachel: Awesome, well thank you so much for being here Muzaffar.
Betty Brandt interview
Rachel: Today we have Betty Brandt with us. Welcome, Betty.

Betty: Thank you.

Rachel: It's great to have you here. And I would love to start with having you tell us a little bit about yourself, how you became involved with the CIC, anything of that sort would be great.

Betty: Well, I'm the Director of the Spiritual Life Center at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, which is a relatively large Methodist Church on the northside of Indianapolis. And we started having interfaith programs about 2008. So I had been involved in creating those programs and then I was invited to get on the board of CIC about five years ago. So I jumped at that opportunity because I already had some major interest in interfaith work in the city.

Rachel: Was it pretty welcome by your congregation – this interfaith focus?

Betty: It is a huge congregation – almost seven thousand people – so to say, “is it welcome by the congregation?” is too broad because everything operates in segments of the congregation that are interested in various things. So yes, there was a segment of the congregation that was interested in interfaith and would turn out for programing. I would not say it was with the whole seven thousand people, that’s for sure.

Rachel: Yeah, and I'm hoping later in the podcast too to unwrap how we can play interfaith in some of these specific religious circles and how we can unwrap understanding its roles in regards to the exclusive language that I've experienced in Christianity. We’ll try to figure out how you can pursue your religion wholeheartedly and also interact with others of different faiths. So maybe at some point… But I would love to start too with understanding your faith journey and where you started and some really impactful moments that happened along the way.

Betty: Okay well, I'm not embarrassed to say that I'm seventy-five years old, so I have a long tradition. And I joke that I was carried from the hospital into a church service because my family was very churched and had been churched for generations. The church that I was carried into was a little Baptist church in North Wales, Pennsylvania, which is a suburb of Philadelphia, where my grandmother had sort of been running the show for a long time. It was a typical Baptist church, but my mother did not have much denominational allegiance. So every time we moved, she would just find the church that she liked the best. So then I've also been Presbyterian and now I'm Methodist. And I must admit that I think I followed in my mother’s footsteps. I don't have a lot of denominational loyalty either, even though I work at a Methodist Church and I'm on staff there. I've had a lot of other experiences along the way. I've also traveled a great deal. I've been very, very fortunate to be able to travel. So I've had experiences of being in
Muslim countries and being in Israel, which is a Jewish country. So that has enriched my experience along the way to be able to get up and hear the call to prayer in the morning and have that everyday-ness of a religion instead of reading it in a book. It makes a big difference.

Rachel: Absolutely, getting those experiences and building relationships. Have you found there to be a lot of differences between the denominations within the Christian faith or more similarities or differences? What does that look like?

Betty: Well, I think there are… I can't remember… 7,200 number of denominations, so I can't speak to all of that. All the denominations that I've been a part of have been pretty progressive, liberal versions of those congregations. The Presbyterian church that I predominantly grew up in was a social action church in a Chicago suburb. So it was a very liberal kind of approach to the Christian tradition, which I would say is still where I am today, in a very progressive church. But there are very conservative Christian churches that are very different. The theology is different; the rituals are different; everything is different; and it's still all Protestant Christianity. There's a lot of diversity. I think there's a lot of diversity within all the faith traditions. I think there's very, very conservative Jewish traditions and there’s very liberal Jewish traditions.

Rachel: I know recently within the Methodist Church there's been a lot go down in regards to welcoming people of the LGBTQ community. Can you speak to that at all with St. Luke's and how that's being more inclusive?

Betty: St. Luke’s has been inclusive for decades, for a very, very long time. We have been welcoming of LGBT. Probably thirty years ago we wouldn't have called it “LGBT,” but we were very welcoming. So, we still are. The clergy at St. Luke's are very forthright about “Everybody's welcome.” And I think we live that out and I think the people who are part of the congregation know that. They feel affirmed. They feel like they are welcome in that congregation. I would say that's not true of all Methodist congregations, but certainly it's true of St. Luke’s.

Rachel: Absolutely. I myself am Methodist, too, so there's been a lot of questions surrounding that whole issue, and I know there’s still a lot to come.

Betty: There's a lot. There's a lot of uncertainty.

Rachel: Exactly. But to continue to be inclusive I think is so important, and it's a lot of what interfaith is, too. Seeing all these different conversations come together in a peaceful way I think is what the CIC stands for. Can you speak to some of the conversations or what you've learned since your time on the board with the CIC?
Betty: Yeah, because CIC offers so many opportunities for programs and personal relationships and learning about other faiths, building relationships with other people, working together, it becomes apparent pretty quickly that we are more alike than we are different. We may have theological differences, but there are the core principles of almost all the traditions about taking care of the poor and serving others and being compassionate, and leaning into those kinds of values – universal values – is what strengthens all of us. So I don't think I've ever been at a board meeting or any other function where we've gotten into an argument about some theological issue because that doesn't appear to be very fruitful. So I would say that the core values of all the religions bring us together and help us work together to make a better city, better world, and the richness of learning about the other traditions. Barbara Brown Taylor, who was just in town a couple weeks ago – she's a Christian writer – just wrote a book about envy because every time she studies another religious tradition she thinks, “ooh, I could do that. I would love to be a part of that.” And then that then strengthens her own religion, her own values, because she sees the beauty of any valuing of all the traditions.

Rachel: I like that a lot. Do you think that your interactions with people of different faiths has strengthened your own as well? Or do sometimes you leave some conversations questioning why you do things the way you do in comparison?

Betty: Well, I would say that learning about other faith traditions certainly gives me a lot of respect for the diversity that we have, not only in the United States but all around the world, and that each person feels strongly about his or her own tradition for good reason. You know, I was born in Covington, Kentucky. I was born not too far from where we live right now. If I had been born in India, I would undoubtedly be a Hindu. But because I was born in Kentucky into a Baptist family, I wound up being Christian. I don’t think that that would've happened if I'd been born someplace else. And I think I could have been as good a Hindu as I am a Christian because that would've been my tradition and that would’ve been my path to the divine. I have respect for that, for other traditions and for their valuing of their own faith.

Rachel: Definitely. And in case listeners don't know really what the Christian perspective is on faith or how you live that faith out day-to-day, could you give some perspective as to what the Christian faith is and what that means to you? I know that's a loaded question.

Betty: Wow! Well, it is and it isn’t because it’s “love God, love your neighbor.” I think it distills down to that. I think of it as kind of the infinity sign where part of it is the personal relationship with the divine and the contemplation and spiritual disciplines and all those, but then that forces you out into service to the community and service to your fellow men and women and children, everybody. But then that forces you back in to study and to contemplation which then fills you up which then back out you go into the world and then you come back in to get restored again
and then out you go. So I think of it as a never-ending stream of both loving God and loving neighbor.

Rachel: That's cool. I like that. That was really succinct. You’re right. And as I mentioned before, something that I've wrestled with and I've mentioned in some other podcasts as well is this question of exclusivity in regards to Christianity, saying that this is the way, the Great Commission, and that you want to convert others to your religion because you believe it's right and it's the ultimate truth. How do you reconcile that belief with interfaith work and ensuring that you're truly getting to know these people and valuing that their faith is distinct and should remain distinct?

Betty: Well right of the bat, I do not believe… I think you probably already figured that out since I said, “if I thought I'd been born in India, I’d be a Hindu.” I do not believe that there is only one path to the divine. So since I believe that there are multiple paths and that they all have value, there is no conflict for me. I can see how if I believed in a different way, there would be a conflict. And I don't know how people sort that out – who really believe that everybody else is going to hell but them. I cannot believe in a loving God who operates like that. I think that says more about what somebody's version of God is than who God really is.

Rachel: Yeah, you’re kind of imposing your own image, and it's kind of this unknown… being.

Betty: Right, but to imagine that God has a narrow view of who God loves appears to me to be off the mark.

Rachel: Yeah, I agree with that. Looking at your travels, have there been any stand-out moments where you've been able to interact with different cultures that you’ve thoroughly enjoyed?

Betty: Yes. I was in Morocco a couple of years ago, and we had the opportunity to have a tour guide who was born in Morocco. He's now an American citizen. He married an American. But he had great roots and understanding of Morocco and was able to arrange for us to be in the presence of lots of really sacred, holy people – opportunities that the average tourist wouldn't get just wandering around on an IU tour or some other kind of more secular tour. So we had very intimate moments with them, with small groups and religious people. Sometimes we didn't have the language. There was a language barrier, but there was no emotional barrier. There was that knowing that these were holy moments, that these sincere people were in fact calling forth the divine. And I can summon up the images of that and the feelings of that just talking about it again. It was a group of twelve of us, so it was a very intimate kind of group. And we had a lot of really powerful moments in mosques and homes and on the roof of a home and just all over in Morocco. It was very powerful.
Rachel: Was that your favorite country that you visited?

Betty: I liked it a lot. The other country I really like is Holland. I like the Netherlands a lot.

Rachel: What did you do there? Was that also faith related?

Betty: No, that was more just an opportunity to be there. We were there when the tulips were blooming so we had the opportunity to go to Keukenhof which is the queen's garden but now it's a big showcase for bulbs. I went to the tulip parade which was just kind of like the Rose Bowl Parade and did all kinds of things that are just really unusual, different from what you can get in United States.

Rachel: I think travel is so important. You're able to really gain perspective on where you live in the world and your position in the world and that kind of thing.

Betty: Rick Steves – there was an article about Rick Steves in the New York Times Magazine just this last Sunday, and he is a big fan of America. He just thinks America's wonderful. But he also thinks that Americans need to get out of their box and fall in love with the rest of the world. And of course that's what his life is – helping people fall in love with the rest of the world. And I agree with him. I think if we've got the money and the ability to travel… it just changes your life to know that people around the world are just like you.

Rachel: Just say that there's a person, somebody who is super comfortable living in their bubble and doesn't want to go far outside that. How would you encourage that person to take a leap and encounter the things that you've learned through your experiences, going outside your own personal bubble?

Betty: Well, I'll say to take a little step. The Center for Interfaith Cooperation has a big Festival of Faiths downtown in the fall. Go to that. Go to the booth where the Sikhs are tying turbans. Go talk to the Hindus. Go to the different booths and just talk to the people. You don't even have to leave town because they're all right here. Go to Bloomington to the Tibetan… it's not a monastery… to the Tibetan Center down there. There are places right here in Central Indiana where you can learn about other traditions. It’s not going to cost you any money. It might take five or six hours of your time. But you know, everybody wastes that much time anyway. So, you don't have to go to Jerusalem. You don't have to go to Morocco. I mean it’s great if you can, but take a first step and just meet these people and talk to them and learn a little bit. One step will lead to another. Be curious.

Rachel: I feel like initially when I came to Indianapolis, I had no idea of all the diversity that exists. There's so much diversity.
Betty: There’s an enormous amount.

Rachel: Looking at the CIC and all the different people that it's able to represent is insane to me.

Betty: And we have some gorgeous structures: the Greek Orthodox church; there's a new Coptic church in Carmel. There’re just some beautiful, beautiful church structures architecturally that call to people whatever their tradition is. The beauty of these places call, and they're right here for us to enjoy.

Rachel: And too just to summarize where you’re at with interfaith, I would love to hear what is interfaith to you? What do you see it as?

Betty: Well, I really see it as the future of the world because if we're going to exist… if we can solve the environmental problem… if we're going to get exist and get along, we have to learn about other people and accept their traditions and their values. And so without that, we will be in a continuous state of war, trying to prove that we're the best, that we're the only, or that we are somehow the chosen ones. And so learning about others is our way into the future as far as I'm concerned. And my granddaughters go to Orchard Park School in Carmel, and that's like a little UN. When I go there for their music performances, there are Hindus and Asians and Hispanics and African Americans and Africans, and it’s just a little UN at their school. So they're growing up in that kind of environment. So they'll expect that that's who their friends will be, that's who they'll know. They'll expect that diversity, rather than my growing up which was very WASPish. Very, very different.

Rachel: Yeah, you’re continuously interacting with people who are different than you nowadays as people and the world becomes more and more globalized. It's important to gain these skills to be able to interact and peacefully interact. Definitely. Well, thank you so much for being here.
Father Rick Ginther interview
Rachel: Today, we have Father Rick Ginther. Welcome, Fr. Rick.

Fr. Rick: Thank you.

Rachel: It's great to have you here. Can you start by telling us just a little bit about yourself?

Fr. Rick: I was born and raised here in Indianapolis on the Eastside near the state fairgrounds. I've been a member of the Roman Catholic Church since I was a little boy, actually an infant, and brought up to be a strong believer. And I've got a lot of education to help keep that going strongly. And I've always had an interest in how people pray in the various religions, and an interest in how they approach God. When I was younger, I heard people say that our Protestant brothers and sisters weren't going to heaven because they left the true church. And that was hard for me, because I couldn't understand that these were good people, and how would that possibly be? Then, I even began to explore, in my own mind and reading, what about other people? People who aren't Christian? And that's what has led me to seek a greater understanding of their faith journeys, whether it's how they pray, how they think, how they see the world, how they wish to be embraced by God, however they express their belief in God. So it's been a fascinating journey.

Rachel: I bet. And is that how you got involved with the CIC? You saw their mission and were interested?

Fr. Rick: Well, I did see their mission, but I saw it through the eyes of Glenn Tebbe, a former board member. Glenn is the head of the Indiana Catholic Conference. He works for the five dioceses, Catholic dioceses in the State of Indiana, and he has been involved in ecumenical and interreligious work since the first ecumenical commission of the archdiocese of Indianapolis. So, he's been around a long time, and he invited me to encounter this. In 2012, then Auxiliary Bishop Coyne asked me to begin working as the ecumenical-interreligious officer. That's a technical term that means I am working on behalf of the Diocese and the Archbishop, and to take this work up. Very quickly, Glenn introduced me to the Festival of Faiths, and so we've been a part of the Festival of Faiths as the Archdiocese and the Office of Ecumenism and interreligious concerns since the very inception. So that's how I began to get more in touch with the work of the CIC. Now, in a past life, when I was the Director of Liturgy for the Archdiocese and the Rector of the Cathedral, I had the opportunity to help begin a Thanksgiving interreligious prayer service at the Cathedral. And we had Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. praying in thanksgiving, and we all witnessed how they prayed. And that was - since we're not able to pray together, which, when we come together interreligiously, it's our understanding of
God and how we pray is different, but we can witness each other pray. That was a powerful experience over a number of years at the Cathedral.

Rachel: Have you found across all different religions that there is a form of prayer that exists in all of them?

Fr. Rick: There is verbal prayer, yes. There is sung prayer, yes. The naming of God is very different. Some of the religions have multiple gods. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all have one God. And there are always forms of art to express our belief in God, from the very simplest to the more ornate. Some of us have images, statues, but what I've found is that we all have a longing to pray to something that's larger than ourselves. It's a transcendent reality. However we name it, we still have this longing. It's buried deep inside of us; it's just a part of who we are, that longing for something greater than ourselves.

Rachel: I like it, yeah. Looking at something so simple, I guess, as prayer and looking at it across different faiths, I think, is really interesting, because you can see it from a larger perspective, there are so many differences. But when you bring it to one thing and really look at that specifically, that's a powerful moment. And two, with the Thanksgiving, that must have been super neat to have so much diversity in one room.

Fr. Rick: The great diversity in prayer forms, and the fact that we were all praying in Thanksgiving, the Tuesday night before Thanksgiving was celebrated in the United States. So there was this connection with the secular and the religious at the time, and the majority of the people that came to be with each other to pray that night were going to celebrate, in some way, shape or form, Thanksgiving in America.

Rachel: So you did have that similarity.

Fr. Rick: Right. That's part of who we are as a nation, and thanksgiving is one of the prayer forms that cuts across all religions, giving God thanks and praise.

Rachel: And it sounds like, within the Catholic Church, you have these positions that are solely meant to be ecumenical as you say, or focused in an interreligious dialogue. So, it sounds like the Catholic Church encourages interfaith dialogue.

Fr. Rick: It does very much. The Second Vatican Council, between 1962 and 1965, there was a specific document, Nostra Aetate, that talked about interreligious, or interfaith, dialogue. There's another one that was written for ecumenical dialogue and work. And it's a thread that runs through many of the sixteen documents of that council. And so it encourages us to clearly listen, learn, share, find that which is good, holy, wholesome in all religions, and let others see that in
ours, and where do we connect, especially as human beings. First and foremost, as human beings, creatures of the Lord, [sic] in God, and how do we appreciate that? And then, what can we do together, especially in interreligious. What can we do together to better the situation of humankind?

Rachel: Yeah, definitely. What are some issues that you find where interfaith could be a great solution or looking at interfaith and peaceful dialogue is so needed? Does that make sense?

Fr. Rick: That's a tough one. I believe, on social justice issues, we can come together for the common needs of humanity of respect, of valuing each other, of housing, healthcare, family, caring for those who are poor and helping them to rise through that, caring for the environment, of all of nature and creation, religious freedom, that we all have the freedom to worship and to believe as we will, and that that freedom carries through in so many levels. The only lack of freedom is if what we are doing becomes destructive, and that's not necessarily who we are supposed to be. Oh, yeah. There are so many things. I have been involved with Habitat for Humanity, and with my parish here. And with a parish I was pastor of in Terre Haute. There, in Terre Haute, it was an apostles' build. It was Christian churches coming together to build. Here, it's been the interfaith build. And we're going to continue to be involved in that as a parish. And I know that it's wonderful because that meant that we had Mormons and Muslims and Jews and Christians and Jains, and you name it. There were people working on these three houses this past year. That's just one small way. In certain parts of the city we have, here in Indianapolis, we have churches or mosques and/or synagogues that can work together to deal with justice issues, but especially food, food insecurity.

Rachel: Yeah, that's a huge issue in Indianapolis.

Fr. Rick: It is. I live on the Eastside, and we're the most food insecure side of the city, and we're involved in that. But when it comes to interreligious work in that area, it's a little more difficult because it's finding each other. You have these smaller communities that want to, but do they have the capacity to? And then you've got these larger communities, and we're still learning how to find each other, which is fine.

Rachel: That's so neat that you can come together over service, and then, you-- that propels a really great interreligious dialogue beyond what you're doing physically.

Fr. Rick: It allows us to begin to be curious in a safe way, once we see that we're able to work together on an issue that we believe is basic goodness for humanity, the common good. Then, by rubbing up against each other, we begin to build a relationship. As we build the relationship, then we can possibly begin to talk about how the world treats our religion or how we treat the world as a religion. It's a slow process of building those trust relationships so that you can enjoy each
other. And then listen attentively, and ultimately, to grow stronger in your own belief, your own religion, your own faith.

Rachel: That's something I've always wondered, and [what] I've asked a lot of different people from the board is: do you become stronger or do you leave some of them questioning your own beliefs? But it sounds like it informs yours.

Fr. Rick: It informs and challenges and asks you to look a little deeper. Maybe I have looked at something as deeply as another one of my brothers or sisters in a different religion has, so I would step back and go, "Maybe I oughta look at this a little deeper." And I'm in kind of that, with conversations with a couple of the rabbis. They have made me think deeper. And then to make connections with how they're speaking and how our own documents on social justice and commitment to the common good, how do they speak of it, and where we can connect. So that just starts to make it deeper and deeper. And the more you can interrelate like that, the more it becomes just a part of your personal fabric.

Rachel: Could you speak a little to your personal fabric, maybe your personal faith journey, and how you became Catholic, how you've stayed Catholic and what that's meant to you?

Fr. Rick: Sure. I was born into a Catholic family. My mother was raised Catholic. My father became Catholic sometime before I was born. I'm number five out of seven. There were twelve years between my oldest sister being born and my being born, and then there are two more after me. I was immersed in Catholicism from the very beginning. I was born on August 25. I was baptized on September 11, 1950. Do the math. I was marinated in it. It just became a part of who I was. I had the opportunity through seminary high school, college and theology to encounter other Christians and even go to synagogue and to begin to see, okay, there's another way. We are Judeo-Christians. That means I need to have an appreciation for Judaism because the Old Testament, or Hebrew Testament, however you wish to name it, is powerful but you have to kind of have an appreciation for Judaism and not just read it as a Christian.

Rachel: Yeah, true. That's a valid point.

Fr. Rick: That was part of my faith journey. My faith journey was also to look at a lot of questions just about Catholicism over the years. And then to not be afraid to ask the questions or run away from questions, but to say 'Okay, where did this come from? How does it tie together? How does it uphold what's in the Christian Testament? How does it relate? What part of history does it come from? Which of my ancestors in faith arrived at this? And how does it all tie together in this fabric we call 'Catholicism'?' So, I have found that to be a fascinating journey over the years. And it's always new, because there's always something I don't know. Always. Which I enjoy. I'm not afraid to say 'I don't know.' At one point in my life I taught middle school.
Rachel: How was that?

Fr. Rick: Well, I loved it. I was teaching in a Catholic school, and letting students ask their questions and struggle with the answers and then not letting them make me the question answerer. 'Well, go take a look at that book over there. I bet you're gonna find your answer if you really ask yourself and look at it.' So, I was teaching in a Catholic school to mostly Catholic students at that time, but still on this quest for understanding, to be open to thinking something through. I've been blessed that way. And I came from a family that encouraged me to study.

Rachel: I think education is so important.

Fr. Rick: Right. Well, when you have four older sisters who are all pretty smart, you really gotta struggle to try to stay ahead.

Rachel: What does your day-to-day life look like with the church?

Fr. Rick: As a Catholic pastor, priest?

Rachel: Yeah.

Fr. Rick: Well, early rising. I tend to get up early. That's for first breakfast, because there's always a second breakfast. Time for prayer, time for reading, time to do a few personal things that need to be taken care of. I have to balance my own checkbook and that kind of thing. Get ready for whatever the day's gonna be. I have days that begin with 8:15 [AM] Mass and days that begin with appointments, and Mass is later in the day. So there's this adjusting. I do some writing. I try to stay ahead of what the parish needs, visit with people. I have appointments with folks, try to think beyond 'Where are we right now?' But, 'Where are we going to be in three to five years, and how are we building towards that?' Again, more time for prayer. I try to eat well, healthily, that is. I exercise three times or more a week. I like to read. I usually have a spiritual book going, a novel going, and sometimes a history book going.

Rachel: Wow. That's amazing.

Fr. Rick: Yeah, well that doesn't mean they get done very quickly, but they're all there. And then, encountering people where they're at, whether it's a grade school student at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, one of the faculty, one of the staff, a parishioner who comes in, a stranger who stops me on the grounds. On Wednesdays, I spend most of my day at the Catholic center working on ecumenical or interreligious topics or projects or I'm writing. I write a column every month for the Criterion.
Rachel: Wow. You're so busy. That's a lot going on.

Fr. Rick: Yeah I have a lot going on, but I've been doing that for a long, long time, and it works for me.

Rachel: And through your journey, you said you've had these questions. How have you been able to reconcile looking at the question of there are people outside the Catholic Church who may or may not be seen as well in God's eyes "for some religious doctrine says this"? In my own Protestant faith, we also have those exclusive claims of 'this is the way and you have to follow my way to get to God,' right? How do you reconcile some of those, being strong in your own tradition, with also wanting to encourage other faiths to practice their own particular faiths and celebrate their truths just as much as you can celebrate your own truth?

Fr. Rick: Well, that can be a real tricky one, a slippery slope if you're not careful. Knowing what my church teaches, first and foremost, I have to know that. And I have to know where it came from. There is an old saying that goes back centuries: 'There's no salvation outside the church.' But the question has become, in the last seventy-five years, what do I mean by 'church' and how are others related to this church that is a gift of Jesus Christ to humanity and is supposed to be carrying on the Gospel? How do you relate that to all these others, and how-- that's where those documents I mentioned earlier, the Second Vatican Council, they talk about what is good and true in other religions. We can't ignore that. We can't deny it. There are goods and truths in other religions. And how does it relate to what we believe, and that's where we start. And to encourage people to embrace their religion as close to themselves as possible just as I hope I am doing that with myself, by then learning from them how they have come to what they've come to, and appreciate that. And then, at the same time, when they learn from me, that's part of how I say 'Okay, this is how we believe and this is what we believe, and this is where it came from and how it's rooted in scripture' and the importance of that for us. Well, that's a form of proclaiming the Gospel, is just sharing what I know. Just sharing it. Here it is. If you have questions, ask your questions, and I'll do the best I can to help you arrive at an answer that you can, at least, go 'Okay, I think I've got it.'

Rachel: That's not force or anything. That's just you talking, sharing, and them doing the same.

Fr. Rick: The church has formal, theological dialogues with other religions, and definitely, with other Christians. And this is where the theologians actually get together and actually sit and talk. These are the ones who are trained at a level-- I'm a pastor, first and foremost. I don't have the academic acumen, nor the intellectual acumen to do that kind of dialogue work. What I can do is the everyday and the work with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation. I can help with this. So, that's part of how I approach it, going back to your original question. You teach me, I teach you,
we appreciate each other. We come to some kind of understanding of each other and sometimes go 'We're never going to agree on this one. Okay. But that doesn't mean we can't work together.'

Rachel: Yeah, definitely. So to kind of summarize everything, what does 'interfaith' mean to you?

Fr. Rick: 'Interfaith' means the ability of people of different faiths to appreciate each other, to find ways to work together for the common good, to reveal to each other the wonder of common longing, and to, all of us together, leave the world a better place.

Rachel: I like that a lot. Thank you so much for being here, Fr. Rick.
Dr. Pierre Atlas interview

Rachel: Today we have Dr. Pierre Atlas with us. So first Dr. Pierre can you elaborate a little bit on how you got involved with the CIC and your interest in that organization?

Pierre: OK well my first connection was with Charlie Wiles personally and we met back when and I can tell you exactly when it was: August 2002, as the United States looks like it was about to go into a war with Iraq, and there was a panel that was put together as the United States looks like it was about to go into a war with Iraq together and there was a panel that was put together to basically talk about the war That was pending. The war hadn’t even started yet. And he and I were both panelists that was pending. The war hadn’t even started yet hours. And he and I were both panelists and that was the first time I had ever met him. We became pretty good friends. We both had served in the Army. We both were pretty opposed to the United States invading and Iraq. And since then we’ve been friends, and since he has started working on interfaith things he sort of brought me on board. I’ve been on the board of the CIC since it was established. And it’s been really an enjoyable experience.

Rachel: And what has interfaith meant to you? Why is it such a value you hold?

Pierre: So I am a comparative political scientist by training and so I look at different countries and cultures and different cultures so I always have a natural interest in that I’m Jewish. I’m Jewish, I studied Arabic when I was in the Army so I’ve always had an interest in Middle East politics and all of that. My mother was born and raised in Cairo, Egypt, as a Jew and came to the United States. And that kind of gave me a different perspective also in terms of different experiences and her experience of growing up in a predominantly Muslim country with the stories that she told me. I’ve always been interested in that. I’ve always liked meeting people of different faiths. I find it very interesting to learn how different people make sense of the world based on a different faith positions and non-faith traditions too. So it’s always something that interest me personally, people of different faiths. I find it very interesting to learn how different people make sense of the world based on different faith positions and non-faith traditions too. So it’s always something that interests me personally and professionally as an academic.

Rachel: Looking at dialogue you’ve had with different faiths, has there been anything that has stood out as something you’ve learned and really questioned your own position in your own faith?

Pierre: I wouldn’t necessarily say questioning my own faith. In fact I think and I teach a course at Marian University called Introduction to Peace Studies and one of the things we look at is interfaith dialogue and interfaith discussions and one of the arguments made and one of the
assertions made by people who engage in interfaith is you really need to come at being fairly knowledgeable and comfortable in your own faith in order to engage with people in others. And what I find interesting is that as you talk to people with different faiths and traditions is just how much we all have in common as humans. Most human beings have the same desires: they want their family to be well, they want to achieve things, they want happiness, they want a sense of justice and tranquility, and it really doesn’t matter what the religion is. I mean all faith traditions have respect for the environment, treat others as you would like to be treated yourself, and basically you can find that golden rule in every faith tradition there is, the monotheistic traditions to Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Native Americans religions. You name it, you can find it in all of that that also care for creation and the environment. They are common threads across humanity and different faiths sort of just give a particular take on that. The more I engage and meet with people of different faiths the more I learn that we actually have a lot in common than we have that separates us.

Rachel: So looking at your Jewish tradition can you speak a little about your faith journey and what that looks like growing up and now?

Pierre: Mine was kind of interesting because my parents were very different: both Jewish but my mother grew up in a very secular sort of Jewish cultural home, but they didn’t do a lot of religious traditions. My father was born in Mississippi and grew up in Louisiana from an Orthodox Jewish family of Southern Jews. They were much more traditional. My parents didn’t stay married for a very long. I grew up being sort of in between those two. And that also probably gave me more of an interest in interfaith too because I got the sense of how even in Judaism there is such an incredible diversity and nobody really speaks for all of Judaism. There’s no central authority: everything from Reform to Reconstruction, there is Conservative to Orthodox to Ultra-Orthodox. There’s so much variety there. So my personal journey really was kind of more identity. Where I really came into my own sense of Jewishness and when I found a strong identity was when I was actually in the Army. There’s so much variety there. So my personal journey really was kind of more identity. Where I really came into my own sense of Jewishness was when I found a strong identity it was when I was actually in the Army. When I first went into the Army, religious identity wasn’t that important to me; but as I saw people around me practicing their religious faiths I sort of became more aware of my own. That’s something I learned later on as an academic from studying political science and sociology and anthropology -- all identity is based on contrast. You become more aware of your own identities and qualities when it becomes contrasted with others. It was really in a situation of being with people of other faiths that I became more aware and appreciative of my own. That’s my journey. I will say I do not consider myself a religious Jew, but I am very proud to be Jewish.

Rachel: Have there been any influential figures throughout your life that have helped you along the way too in that faith journey?
Pierre: Yes, I would say family, friends, as I grew older having children. My kids both went to the Hasten Hebrew Academy of Indianapolis from pre-kindergarten to eighth grade graduation and that really gave all of us a greater appreciation of our Jewish identity. I would also say that people have influenced me in my interest of interfaith from a Jewish perspective. For example I mentioned my Father is from the South. His brother, my uncle, Theodore Atlas, was a 7th-generation Rabbi, and he had a pulpit in Montgomery Alabama, from the 1940s to the 1950s. He knew Martin Luther King Jr. and Sr. His synagogue was down the street from the Dexter [Avenue] Baptist Church from the 1940s to the 1950s. He knew Martin Luther King Jr. and Sr. He got involved with the Montgomery bus boycott. He knew King. He got asked to speak in the Dexter Methodist Baptist church a couple of times. He met with King’s congregation, When there was a time that Martin Luther wanted to learn Hebrew in order to read the Bible in its original language, he asked my uncle to teach him; my uncle taught him how to read Hebrew. Back then in the segregated south in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1950, 1955 or so it was pretty bad - pretty racist and also very anti-Semitic. I talk to my uncle a lot about this. He told me a lot of interesting stories; he actually had to sneak Martin Luther Junior in the back door of the synagogue so he wouldn’t be seen bringing him in. That would’ve been really bad for his synagogue if some of the Southern whites had seen King going into a synagogue, so he wouldn’t be seen bringing him in because that would’ve been really bad for his synagogue if some of the Southern whites had seen King going into a synagogue. My uncle was not a politically liberal person; he came at this and the reason he took a stand on the bus boycott was out of a sentiment of a Jewish understanding of social justice. He never said it was a political thing, he just said that it was the right thing to do. Of course he thought segregation was bad. He spoke out against it. He actually had to leave his synagogue over it. I guess that sense of doing the right thing, that sense of social justice - that’s a really important thing to me in terms of my Jewish identity. And then I would also add that being at Marian University, which is a Franciscan Catholic university which stresses social justice as well, the more I thought about Catholicism and Catholic social thought the more I see the commonality between the two. Like I said it sort of reinforces my own identity while greatly appreciating any others. And that’s sort of where with my uncle and hearing his stories that I will greatly appreciate any others. And that’s sort of where with my uncle and hearing his stories that I sort of interviewed him once for a column I wrote. Getting the sense of not only what he did but why he did it had an impact on me.

Rachel: Sounds like faith has empowered your interest in politics in this active way of going about your faith in some regard.

Pierre: I guess you could say that. I’m going to be honest though I don’t think of myself as a faith person. I think I’m fairly secular. But my Jewish identity - it’s cultural as well as religious. I am a member of my synagogue and I’ve served on the Board of Directors. I serve on the Jewish community relations council board and things like that. And being Jewish, it’s maybe a little bit
different. It’s a religion; it’s a faith tradition; it’s also an ethnicity. And so, it's sorta kinda all wrapped together. You can identify yourself as being very strongly Jewish without necessarily following all of the requirements of the faith. A lot of Jews don't keep kosher but they still identify very strongly as Jewish. And that's just part of it. It's a little bit different than other faiths. You can be Irish and Catholic and Protestant but you're still ethnically Irish. If you're Jewish you're Jewish. Once you get into the different streams of Judaism, more conservative, more traditional, more reformed or liberal things like that. We have a lot of diversity within it.

Rachel: Very interesting. So with your intellect and having a passion for academia, have you seen that you can reconcile, to some regard, intellectually, religion? I think as a student that's something that I struggle with a lot. I have a lot of questions in regards to faith and understanding how there can be maybe an infinite being or something of some sort with our understanding here on Earth

Pierre: And all the bad things that are happening?

Rachel: Of course. Is that a hard thing to reconcile? Have you been able to do that?

Pierre: That’s an age-old question that everyone has struggled with. All religions have struggled theologically. One of the things that, I come at it as a political scientist, I stress what the religions have in common as far as social justice and the things that I suggested earlier. Every religious tradition has things that you can pull out of it to justify heinous acts against other. You can find it in every scripture, or almost every one. Certainly the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam. You can find passages stressing people getting along and respecting each other and you can find other passages that can justify very violent things. I think what becomes difficult is to see religion, whether it is their religion, or somebody else's religion, being used to justify bad acts. That happens a lot. That's the struggle. You have positive and negative things and I guess one of the things is what road do you want to walk down yourself? There will always be people, even in your own faith tradition, whatever that is, that see things differently than you. That will operationalize the language and the liturgy and scripture of your faith in ways that you don't agree with. Perhaps do bad things or things you don't agree with yourself. That's the struggle that goes on in every faith. That translates to other things that aren't religion. You may consider yourself and Dem or Republican and you won't agree with everything the party does but you still have that identity. Some people get so upset that they leave their faith and they go someplace else. They go searching for something. That's certainly an option. Or they may remain in their faith and come to terms with those contraindications, or try to change it to the extent that they can.

Rachel: Have you at all heard in Indianapolis, or across the years of your life experience, any marginalization because of your faith or has your community?
Pierre: I have to say, personally, I was born in Texas, grew up in California, did my undergraduate at the University of Toronto, then I moved to Arizona, then New Jersey, then here. Personally, I've never, I've been fortunate, I've never experienced any act of anti-Semitism directed at me personally. However, last summer my synagogue congregation started to feel, in Carmel, was vandalized with a person painting a swastika and other symbols on the outbuilding of our synagogue. That hit us all really hard. It was sort of like, if it can happen here it can happen anywhere. Also, then, we had the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh where the person went in with the intention of saying, "I want to kill Jews." But it's important to know that when he did that he wanted to kill Jews in that synagogue because those Jews were doing things to bring in refugees into the US that were not Jewish. It's also important to note that the day or two after our synagogue was vandalized in Carmel, we had this massive interfaith rally in the synagogue, in which the CIC had a major role in helping to organize that as well as the Jewish community. And there were two people that vandalized the synagogue; we had over 1200 people either in our synagogue or waiting outside to get in. We had members of the Jewish community, Christian, Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist, not Buddhist, Hindu, all speaking, all denouncing this. The response was so much stronger than the act of the anti-Semitism. That's really, when I think of what happened at our synagogue, I think of the response and how positive it was. That was the Indy and Carmel and Central Indiana interfaith community coming together and those of no faith, and saying that we are not going to stand for this. What we have in common is more important than anything that might divide us. I think that's really important to see as we see more acts of anti-Semitism coming up, and Islamophobia and other kinds of hatred, there will always be people out there, you can't necessarily stop that. What's important is how you respond to it.

Rachel: What do you see that response being?

Pierre: Well I think part of it is actually to say we're not going to, what we have in common, to gather around, to have people of different traditions stand around. I think when any community is marginalized, whether it’s based on their faith or their sexual identify or their nationality or their place of origin or whatever, it's important that people of other identity groups come together and say, "We're human" or "we're American" or whatever it is, just to say that we aren't going to stand for this. I think the best way to respond to that is to marginalize the people who are attacking them. Make it to the point where those people aren't seen as legitimate in society. That's the important thing. Sometimes it might be through law. Hate crime legislation, things like that. But laws don't change people's attitudes. People's behavior over time does. I think it's really important just not to be quiet and not to be silent. That's one of the missions of the CIC. One of the things that I really enjoy about being, I've been proud to be on the board, when any faith community has been attacked in Indianapolis, whether it’s been my synagogue or the Islamic Society of North America with graffiti, or the Hindu temple, we come together not just in terms
of rallies, we issue statements, we say we are against this, we represent the majority of people in this community and we aren't going to stand for it.

Rachel: There's been a lot of talk recently about the hate crimes legislation in general and looking at how we can bridge that divide here in Indianapolis. How would you say for somebody who wants to see this as a legitimate and focused on, how would you say they can go about this?

Pierre: I cannot speak for CIC, but I can speak for the Jewish community relations council and JCRC has been playing a major role for years along with other faith groups and other groups in town and the state trying to get hate crimes laws passed. Indiana is only one of five states in the country that doesn't have a hate crimes law. Even Mississippi has a hate crimes law. It's been controversial because some of the people who are opposed are actually opposed to it from faith based grounds or at least their interpretations of faith. They don't want certain people to be identified as potential target of hate, particularly the LGBTQ community. That's pretty much what it comes down to. And JCRC and other groups that are in favor of hate crimes legislation are saying that if you are attacked because of your identity and that's the reason you are attacked, it needs to be included. So we're trying to push it, unfortunately, and fortunately, the attack on my synagogue, the graffiti, the anti-Semitic graffiti, may have been a turning point, because a lot of the people who weren't there yet were pushed. It also brought hate to the forefront in ways that it maybe had not been before. So there are more Republicans that are supporting it. Governor Holcomb says he wants it to be one of his top issues on his agenda, getting it passed. It's going through, literally as we are speaking, the state house - different versions of the bill are going through committee. If you want to see it passed it's really important that you contact your state representative, you state senator, join groups that are for it. There are lots of faith groups in Indianapolis and Indiana that are very much strongly supporting the hate crimes legislation. And I would add one thing, from a political science perspective, some people think this will stifle free speech; this is not true. The way hate crime works, the crime has to be a crime on the books. It's an enhanced penalty because you are trying to intimidate an entire community. A hate crime is basically a form of terrorism. Because the act of terrorism is you aren't attacking a person, you're trying to terrorize an entire community and intimidate them. That's what a hate crime does. It already has to be a crime on the books. It's not a thought crime; you can think whatever you want. You can say whatever you want. But if you are committing a crime, something that's already on the books as felony, and it can be proven that one of your motivations was to intimidate the broader group, because of that it's an additional penalty, which also might be a deterrent. We always hope that laws will deter a crime. They don't always but we always hope they do.

Rachel: You said the manifestation of the thought too. Trying to kill it at the source too is important.
Pierre: It is, yeah. But we don't criminalize thought. Hate crimes will not criminalize thought, it will further criminalize acts that are already criminal.

Rachel: But marginalizing the community.

Pierre: Yes, absolutely yes. And frankly, if you are protected by hate crimes law, then that can also signal to some people that gee, maybe, you're on the wrong side of history.

Rachel: I'm fascinated by your comparative approach to different politics both here in the States and abroad and looking at how religion plays a role in that and different religions around the world and how certain communities are marginalized because of their faith. How do you think religious tolerance and religious freedom is important in promoting around the globe?

Pierre: Well it's very important. We are fortunate, very fortunate that we live in a country where there is freedom of religion, where there is a tradition....there's always been a tradition of prejudice in the U.S., but there's been a strong tradition of religious tolerance. That is not the case in a lot of other countries. Especially in the non-democratic world. There are places where it is illegal to convert out of your faith. Some Muslim countries are like that. There are places that religious minorities are persecuted or they are denied rights formally in law. As well as in the culture. Getting people around the world to respect religious diversity or any other type of identity diversity it difficult. You're talking about culture. Culture takes a long time to change. You can change law tomorrow; that's not going to change the culture. And one of the things, and this is the idea of not just tolerance, but acceptance of people that are different than you is really important and frankly that's important to the survival of a democracy. There are secular reasons for this beyond just faith. But, in a country like the U.S., we certainly could try to encourage tolerance and lack of nondiscrimination. Look at Myanmar and what the government is doing against Rohingya, which is an ethnic Muslim minority that has basically been targeted with genocide and some of those heinous crimes we haven't seen in fifty years. That obviously needs to mean people need to take a stand on that there's a lot of things people can do through non-government organizations and that type of stuff. But here at home, with the rise in hate crimes in the U.S., and it's frankly risen quite a bit in the last two years according to the FBI crime stats. Against Jews, Muslims, LGBTQ, African Americans; all different types of groups. There seems to be a greater acceptance among some people that has come out of the woodwork and express hatred that has been considered more marginal in the past. That needs to be addressed. That's something we need to work on here at home. That actually can tear apart the fabric of our society. What I would say in the long answer to your question--different societies have different ways of dealing with or not dealing with diversity. Some especially non-democratic societies just repress. Not only can we not allow that to happen here, we have to sort of go in the opposite direction to make sure that various groups feel comfortable to practice their faiths and their identity without being attacked, without being marginalized. That's actually part of the American
The original English settlers came to the Colonies because they wanted to escape religious persecution. That's something that's in our DNA and we need to keep it that way.

Rachel: What is our responsibility as Americans and how can we address some of these issues abroad in regards to religious freedom without be perceived as coming in as the "White Savior" if you will and seen as the this is the universal truth and we are going to impose our culture?

Pierre: That is great question. That's a question I posed to my own students. Because this is a, the answer, we don't have time for this, one of the big question is what are universal human rights? To what extent are all humans entitled to certain basic rights that regardless of what country you live in or regardless of what faith or regardless of what political system? That's been something that has been discussed or debated in the world for a long time. In fact, I just had students today reading the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948. It is a very profound document. You will not find all those rights enforced anywhere, including the U.S. But I suggest everybody listening to this to go to the U.N. website or anywhere else, look at the UDHR and look at the preamble. The preamble is a very passionate, powerful statement about what we as humans have in common in terms of basic rights. If you believe that as a human, you are a rights-bearing creature, there are certain fundamental rights that all human beings have, then there is a sort of obligation to argue for that and to do what you can. One of the things is that over time, we've been trying around the world to get all peoples of all cultures of all faiths to come together and recognize that humans are rights-bearing creatures and not everybody recognizes that. And then, the devil is in the details. What are the rights? Does it include rights to property, right to life in the sense of not having your life taken out without due process? Does it include a right to marry who you choose? There are some societies where…does it include gender equality? All human beings should have the same basic rights. Does that mean that all girls have the right to education? We certainly believe so but there are some places where that is not the case. It's a struggle, it's a worldwide struggle. There are organizations that are devoted entirely to doing that and there are faith traditions that are committed to doing it. I can speak from personal experience from what I know. Both the Jewish community and the Catholic community are very much pushing forward in favor of these kinda of things. Catholic social thought, Catholic relief services, the international humanitarian NGO of the Catholic bishops. Very much saying we believe in the dignity of every individual regardless of where you're born, regardless of your status, your class, your caste, your gender, your ethnicity, your religion. These are fundamental things. If we truly are God's creatures, made in the image of God. However you define what that God is then that means that we are all entitled to certain things. That is a very controversial statement and not everybody believes that. If you do believe it, then you start talking about, ok, what are those rights? That's an ongoing conversation. It's never going to be settled. The rights will be sort of expanded but there are sometimes only recognizing the breach. That's part of human progress is moving in the direction of international humanitarian law, international rights
and all that. As long as to the extent that more and more peoples and more and more countries accept this basic premise, then it’s going to be less like it's being imposed by the West. The understanding of the idea that a human is a rights-bearing creature, that concept really comes out of Western civilization. That's where it originated. That doesn't mean it's a Western concept. It just means that it started there, it’s spread and more and more people around the world have come to accept it. I don't think you can do it by force. We shouldn't be invading countries and overthrowing their governments to install people that recognize rights, which is problematic in itself. I wouldn't worry so much about people saying, Oh this is a western concept, it is actually a human concept. One of the things that indicated that is the UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) is the most translated document in the UN. It's been translated into over 300 languages. There are people in countries where those rights are being suppressed where they pull out that document and say, "Hey, I have rights, this says that I have a right to human dignity." If you look at somebody like Malala Yousafzai who basically took on the Taliban in Pakistan, she was citing the UDHR, she was saying, this says that I have certain rights. She was not saying this is a Western concept that is being imposed on me by the U.S. and Europe, she said that this is a human thing. That's where the UDHR is something worth looking at. It has its problems, but it underlines, especially the preamble, it underlines the basic understanding that we all, as human beings on this planet, have certain fundamental things in common.

Rachel: Thank you for that perspective for sure. Just to wrap up everything, when you look at the value of interfaith, can you say it in a succinct sentence or two as to why we should be utilizing interfaith dialogue?

Pierre: I think that the more you get to know people outside of your own community, the richer you are as a person. I think that also, the more you interact with others, the richer our society becomes, and the safer our society becomes too. I think interfaith dialogue and interfaith interaction is a win-win for everybody.

Rachel: Thank you so much for being here Dr. Atlas.
Reverend Anastassia Zinke interview

Rachel: Today, we have Reverend Anastassia Zinke. Welcome!

Zinke: Thank you so glad to be here.

Rachel: Yes, good to have you, and I would love to start by just hearing a little bit about yourself and what got you involved with the Center for Interfaith Cooperation.

Zinke: Sure. I grew up in New York city and in my life, I hope to share more about this with you, but I grew up in a household that I would describe as very secular and when I was going through late elementary school, middle school, high school, I went on an interfaith religious pilgrimage with my mother and in the context of New York City which is a very interfaith community. Then when I moved to Indianapolis to serve All Souls Unitarian Church, I was really interested in community partnerships in interfaith spaces, so I googled “interfaith Indianapolis” and found this amazing Center for interfaith Cooperation and noticed that there was not an Unitarian Universalist on the board and I thought as a minority faith, we could and as a community that historically has been very committed to interfaith spaces that both I and they could be valued by that partnership.

Rachel: What is your role within the church?

Zinke: I am the senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church, and we have a wonderful ministerial team but when I first started I was the sole minister for five years.

Rachel: Wow that's amazing. How has that been?

Zinke: It’s been really great. It’s exciting because I was the first woman called as a minister of that congregation in its first hundred and ten years. So that was a kind of historic event and All Souls has a very strong reputation within our association. It might have been one of the first if not the first liberal religious home for people who are seeking that orientation in Indianapolis, and it was a congregation that contributed a lot to the development of the great community or the great society, so we are on lots of non-profit boards or civic groups, and the ministers here really participated and had a voice on a lot of important issues over the decades from racism to the Vietnam War to abortion, so there's a lot of topics that we were engaged in and All Souls was typically a congregation that my predecessors came to culminate their career, and I came to start my ministerial career. It was just a really great honor for me to serve this congregation and to try to help make Unitarian Universalist part of the multifaceted voices of faith in this city again.
Rachel: Yeah definitely, and can you talk a little bit about your faith journey. You alluded to it with your mom in New York city, but how was that looked over the years?

Zinke: I think my faith journey started with my grandparents because both of my parents were raised in interfaith households. My father, his fundamentalist, highly conservative Baptist father married his Catholic mother, and they were very devout people who cared so much about the congregations that they were part of, and they were also deeply in love. They met when they were thirteen and seventeen, and they were together for almost seventy years. The one thing they couldn't reconcile was their faith, so they just agreed never to discuss it which meant that my father wasn't really raised in either church and so he would identify as an agnostic, a theist, but with an undefined understanding of the divine, and then my mother, her Jewish father married her Catholic mother and both of them were disowned by their families. My grandmother was disowned from her Catholic family for marrying a Jew for the rest of her life, and then, the Jewish side was upset temporarily until they had kids. Anyway, my mother was baptized, confirmed, and bar-mitzvahed, and my grandmother started to go to All Souls Unitarian Church in New York city as a place where both she and her husband could worship, but also where her interfaith marriage would be respected, and she loved that congregation, so she would actually drive from New Jersey to New York City every Sunday to go to church and when my parents were raising kids together, I can't remember ever celebrating a religious holiday. I cannot remember ever any language of reverence. There was no discussion of God and so I had I'd say a very blank canvas. When my parents separated, my mother naturally leaned on her mother and we began to go with her to All Souls Unitarian Church in New York city, and when I was there, I experienced what I call three promises of Unitarian Universalism. One of the things that would happen is the year that I was there, which was fourth grade, I reflect back, and it was clearly a world religions year, so we studied about the life of Siddhartha Buddha. We learned the Hebrew alphabet and played dreidel. We studied mindfulness of Buddhist meditation. I was in a Christmas pageant and so it was a whole gamut of things. In fact, probably my favorite memory was in one basement classroom I got the play the role of Moses parting the red sea and I threw down a pencil and felt extremely powerful in that moment. So that was a really powerful grounding experience for me. Also, there was a woman who ran the children's programming named Amy Church, who was the wife of the minister there, and there were several hundred kids in the church program, and we would be called out of the sanctuary to go to our children's programming and we'd go through this little door and up and down the stairs depending on where we are headed and as I would go through, she would smile and greet me by name, which was just really powerful because I was relatively new. There were so many kids, but I felt really seen. So that was very valuable to me, and then the other thing that happened was my mom and I were economically really poor and struggling then, but one thing that we would do after church was we would go to the supermarket, and we would buy like a cart load of noodles and pasta sauce and meatballs and mushrooms and bread, and we would take it back to the church the next day because my mom and I would prepare the meal that the church would serve to homeless
people. We’d serve the meal, and I would carry around the bread basket and I was also aware that that was probably like the best meal that we would eat all week, but it had the sense that my family was a family who served and we served with our church family. So that church had a conflict and my mom and I ended up leaving, but I remembered back to that time and as adult I thought of how any Amy Church welcomed me and I said a church is a place, our Unitarian Universalism, promises to be a place where you can come and know others and be known and that sense of witnessing and intimacy with others felt like the best promise that one human being could make to another human being. Then, the second thing was with that soup kitchen, it made me recognize that I was part of a people who served others, and I really cared about social justice and being compassionate and so I was looking for church that modelled that commitment. Then the third thing that I recognized that was really valuable to me was after a lot of searching that I did afterwards I really wanted to be part of a community where you didn't have to ascribe to a certain set of faith beliefs in order to belong. The world religion model taught me that even though I had a sense of what I believe today. It would be unlikely that in ten or twelve or fifteen years I would believe exactly the same thing, and I wanted to be able to continue to belong to a faith community as hopefully my faith theology continued to evolve, and I wanted that sense of continuity and belonging and so those are the three promises that really called me back to Unitarian Universalism, but I didn't know that at the time and so after my mother and I left. The next place that we went was a Xen-Do Temple, and I found that space to be incredibly sacred and also very mysterious because while I felt moved in that space and curious in that space. I also realized that I had no cultural orientation or practical training about how to be religious in a Xen-Do community at that time, so we moved on. The next place we went was an ethical-culture society and that was very enlightening and I remember that I was the only non-adult sitting in this group of like five other people in these padded, but slightly unattractive office chairs, and we went around and we were introducing ourselves, and the facilitator looked to me and said “do you believe in God?” and even though I know for most ethical culture societies now the answer yes would be the wrong answer. When I said I did, and I felt uncomfortable that I guess I'd assumed that I was supposed to answer yes, and I'd also say their coffee hour did not match All Souls coffee hour in any way, shape, or form, and then I ended up going to a mostly Jewish high school, and I lived in predominantly Jewish neighbourhood, so I ended up going to schul and Torah study and I dated a man in high school or a boy in high school for a couple of years who wanted to be a rabbi, so I celebrated the Jewish high holidays a lot, and I felt very welcomed but also it was clear that I myself hadn't particularly been raised in the Jewish faith even though I had some of that heritage and so it was hard for me to claim I think a theistic Jewish identity, and I felt like particularly in comparison to my rabbi want to be boyfriend that that was a particular sticking point, so I also in high school I took a couple of world religions classes and got really into Taoism and Buddhism and I that non-theistic, mindful-ethical stance of faith and I was really into that. while all this Jewishness is going on around me, and then my mom actually was dating a Muslim man and going to mosque on Friday nights, and he wanted to marry her, and I just thought this is all kinds of interesting. That’s why as a young adult when I had very powerful
moments of mystical revelation, and I then strongly identified myself as someone who was faithful and had a personal relationship with God, I thought where have I experienced a place that I felt like aligned with who I am and where I want to be and how I want to live in this world that I think will welcome me and the answer to that when I looked back was Unitarian universalism grounded in those three promises.

Rachel: That’s amazing. You had an interfaith life. Have you kept that up here in Indianapolis? In Know that we have the CIC to plug into, but have there been other ways that you've been plugged into the interfaith community?

Zinke: Yeah I would say I really adore the CIC in part because they are the community here. The people with whom I feel like I'm most belong. Not only are they interfaith, but they come from diverse nationalities and ethnic backgrounds and cultural orientations. They are comfortable in understanding themselves and how to communicate their orientation to others and hold an openness and curiosity about others and that ability to have a particular identity within a connective community is what makes me feel like I really belong. In addition, I have really been active in Faith in Indiana which is an interfaith organizing group around justice issues here in the state. They're the people who I probably have done the most work with and the other place where I have developed long-standing relationships with people beyond Unitarian universalism.

Rachel: What are some justice issues that you find important regarding your faith and others, maybe, that you're fighting for?

Zinke: Unitarian universalists have a legacy of working on a certain set of justice issues. Perhaps the first one we got involved with was advocating for religious tolerance and religious inclusion. The very first encyclopaedia of world religions that was published in the United States was written by a Unitarian woman, and we have worked to invite interfaith speakers from abroad. In the early years when I there weren't very many people from India bringing Hinduism indirectly or things like that so we have kind of helped create those spaces and I think the CIC is my opportunity not just to do that work for myself but also to honor my legacy as a Unitarian universalist. The next thing that we became involved in was abolitionism, so a disproportionate number of Unitarian universalists were abolitionists or showed up at Soma or participated primarily as white people in trying to bring around racial equity. That has been really important, and today I kind of do that work. I'm particularly trying to change our patterns around mass incarceration and really I’d say that we need another abolitionist movement, so I honor that. When Unitarian universalist women were part of that first abolitionist movement prior to the Civil War, what they heard was if women are taking political stances in the streets that they would be physically threatened and that began to lead to the first wave of feminism of recognizing that women's voices were unwelcomed and that women's rights was actually a really important thing to advocate for. Susan B Anthony was a Unitarian woman, and many other
feminists were either Unitarians or universalists, so Unitarian universalism was active in advocating for women's rights in the twentieth century and particularly for reproductive choice and justice, so I continue that today by partnering with Planned Parenthood of Indianapolis and Kentucky and just advocating for women to have experiences that have a greater safety and where they can be fully valued and I would say equal pay as well. Then the fourth one that we've been historically part of is environmentalism. This last fall in particular I was really spiritually devastated and politically concerned about the reports coming from the UN and other bodies about how dire the threat of climate crisis is and so I continue to do that work and try to help do my small part in my community do their small part to help save our planet and life on it.

Rachel: Have you found that the religious voice advocating for these concerns is taken seriously and invoking change? Have you seen that over the years?

Zinke: What I would say is that in my experience most religious communities are culture takers, so all the issues that exist in society are also perpetuated within our institutions, and when we're at our best, houses of faith move from culture takers to culture makers and bring our values grounded in our faith traditions out to shape the world. From Gandhi to Martin Luther King Jr. to Doris Day, you could see great examples of people of faith exemplifying that culture maker, so I try to remind people in my congregation what it means to be a culture maker both aligned with our values, but also with an ethical responsibility towards others. I like to live by what I call the platinum rule, and the platinum rule is you don't treat people how you want to be treated which is the golden rule. You treat other people how they want to be treated which requires you to understand how they would be honored and what they're seeking, so it's a little bit more work, but as we go out to bring our culture to the greater world, we also have to understand how that might be received by others and consider that as well.

Rachel: I like that revision. I think that's a really important for sure. One of the reasons why I've been called to more pursue my faith is with all these big questions regarding it and my role specifically as a woman, so when you brought that up that was really fascinating because I consider myself a feminist and a Christian, but some people see that at odds with one another because of some things that they interpret within scripture, so how have you been able to reconcile that in your role right now as one of the first females within your own congregation, but also within your studies of the Christian faith?

Zinke: I am blessed with the fact that the very first woman ordained in America was a Universalist minister, and Unitarians were not that far behind, so there have been women clergy in my faith traditions for over a hundred and fifty years and that is not to deny the fact that power and oppression haven't also shaped my faith and opportunities for women within my faith. What's interesting actually is there's what is loosely called the Iowa sisterhood and when the frontier was expanding to the Midwest many particularly Unitarian ministers at that time the
male ministers were trained at Harvard and served very historic New England pulpits or major pulpits in New York City or Baltimore or DC, and the idea of going out to the hinterlands was not appealing to them and so in the late eighteen hundreds many of our congregations were either founded or led by women ministers who emphasize that religious communities are like a family and that the home was a really valuable place of faith making and modelled faith communities on kind of concepts of home and family. When those pulpits did particularly well, sometimes they were replaced by male ministers, and when religious life went through a process of masculization in the early part of the twentieth century that legacy of female ministers vanished and then re-emerged, again much earlier than our Christian protestant counterparts, but there weren't that many female ministers in the fifties or sixties or seventies in our faith either. That said that the majority of Unitarian Universalist ministers today are women, but again still not in our largest pulpits. Probably what I would say is denominationally, now that I'm reflecting on it, I probably have to be a better minister than some of my male clergy counterparts, many of whom are very wonderful, but I don't have an equal access to opportunity and sometimes still face examples of patriarchy just in the course of doing things. Here in Indianapolis it's interesting how there's just a very subtle resistance to putting Reverend before my name here. I sometimes go to interfaith gatherings, for instance, the police and sheriffs here in town. wanted to engage with clergy members to help change the dynamic around community policing here in Indianapolis which I really appreciated their outreach and how they called us to that work, and it was just really interesting because there were very few female clergy members in that room and almost everyone assumed that I must be a spouse of someone else, and they had a lot of trouble processing that I could be a minister as a woman and so I think that I encounter things like that here in Indianapolis pretty regularly. I would say there has been wonderful scholarship to pull out the historic presence of women, particularly in the early Jesus followers and very powerful prophetic women theologians, activists, community leaders, denominational founders in the Christian tradition, so I'm not going to pretend that I'm the best voice for that, but if you don't know what that voice is, then you have not looked very hard because that scholarship is there and is actually really quite amazing.

Rachel: That's good to hear because that is a constant struggle that I sometimes face, too.

Zinke: I mean it's just interesting how rarely were invited to consider that. Last year I preached a sermon where I talked a little bit about Saint Teresa of Avila. I really got curious about her because when I was in Rome one day, I saw the Ecstasy of Saint Theresa which is in this beautiful little Catholic chapel, and it's one of the most beautiful art pieces that I've ever seen, and I was reflecting on that I thought well “who was Saint Theresa?” and “what is this moment of ecstasy?” And of my goodness is she amazing. She was able to found orders for women where there were women at the head of her group, and they didn't have to be overseen by a male authority even in the Catholic Church. She was a highly impressive theologian. She wrote music. She did all this work. She's just extremely exciting and powerful and mostly what we know
about her is that she's like fainting from this religious mystical moment. So I just think again it
really doesn't take very much to uncover that history we just have to be curious. The other thing
is that I went to the Parliament of World Religions in Toronto this past November, and there's a
project day I forget the exact numbers, but they realize that in religious spaces in particular
women are significantly underrepresented in Wikipedia and so they're having a project to add a
thousand pages of powerful and interesting historic and contemporary religious women to
Wikipedia, and there's a process by which you can volunteer to research and write a page and so
if you know someone that you're like “yeah this woman deserves a page on Wikipedia!” I
suggest you got to look into this project, and we should all do it because it would be so great to
have four or five thousand such pages.

Rachel: It sounds like an important undertaking for sure. We need that representation! As we
come up on the end here just to conclude I would love to hear your definition of interfaith and
why you find it so important.

Zinke: So what I think about interfaith is the ability to know one's faith. To be curious and
exploratory about other faiths with the goal of being able to articulate that faith to a third party in
a way that the party whose faith you're describing would also say you described my faith
accurately, respectfully, and well. It's about gaining that interfaith literacy or competency, and
then it's also about taking those discoveries that you have encountered and bringing that back to
yourself and saying “how does this ask me to question explore, deepen, rearticulate my faith. I
really think about it as an interactive, a live process of mutuality.

Rachel: Thank you so much for being here!
Yanev Shmukler interview
Rachel: Today we have Yanev Shmukler. I'd love to just start by having you tell us a little bit about yourself and what got you interested in the Center for Interfaith Cooperation.

Yanev: Sure, well my name is Yanev. I am a lawyer here in Indianapolis. I just graduated from law school last year. I went to IUPUI for both undergrad and law school, majored in Spanish. I've been really interested in interfaith work, since I was a kid. When I was in high school, I founded a club called the Coexist Club, which was just people from different backgrounds talking about their religions, and when I was in college, I was the president for the Jewish Student Organization, and in that role, I did some interfaith events, especially with the Muslim Student Organization, so we hosted a couple of these panels with rabbis and imams and one time with a Father from an Orthodox Church. I got involved in the CIC through my involvement in the Jewish community. It was something that was recommended to me and to reach out to Charlie at the CIC and talk to him and get involved.

Rachel: Is it fairly recently that you joined the board? Am I correct in that?

Yanev: Yes, it's my first year.

Rachel: Well that's super exciting, and I would love to learn more about just your faith journey and how that's been and how you even got interested in interfaith because often that's new and exciting and a lot of people don't have interfaith on their radar.

Yanev: Right, well I was born in Israel, and we moved to the US when I was ten, and also my family is originally from the Soviet Union, so very complicated family history. So I guess going back to my parents and my grandparents, they lived under the Soviet regime which strongly discouraged and sometimes banned religion, so they lost a lot of their family's traditions and practices. It's been kind of a challenge for my family to get it back. For me growing up, I grew up in a very secular household. We still celebrated the holidays and were proud of our identity, but we didn't really know how to do certain things. For example, sometimes when we have a holiday that we host at our house, my parents would ask me what to do because I learn more of the traditions, so that's been a challenge. Since moving to the U.S., this Pakistani family moved next door, and I'm pretty sure they were the first Muslims that I met, and I became really good with friends with the kid that was my age, and we're still really good friends. I think learning about his background and his beliefs really made me passionate about making sure everyone gets exposed to that because I don't know maybe if I wasn't exposed to that I wouldn't care as much about talking to people from other backgrounds.
Rachel: Definitely. How have some of those interactions helped form your own personal beliefs? Have they challenged them? Have they strengthened them?

Yanev: I'm a big believer in challenging and questioning all of your beliefs. I think the more you talk to people who have different beliefs, the stronger your own faith becomes, so I think it's really important, and I tell everyone that you want to be challenged.

Rachel: Definitely. Have there been any really influential people along the way? You mentioned your neighbor. Have there been any others that have really impacted you?

Yanev: I would say my wife. Up until a few years ago, I was still pretty secular. I wasn't really involved in the synagogues or anything, but my wife really pushed to start going to synagogue, learning more, and so she's really helped me discover another aspect of my identity that I wasn’t familiar with before.

Rachel: Yeah that's neat, so what does it look like for you now as a Jew here in Indianapolis. Are there everyday practices that you do in regards to your faith or do you still have the secular component attached or what does it look like?

Yanev: Overall my life still is fairly secular. I do go once in a while maybe once a month or so to services, and I’m on the board with the synagogue. In that sense, I'm involved in the community sense. Other than that we celebrate the holiday. Other than that there's not much.

Rachel: Cool. Are there any misconceptions that you come across in regards to Judaism that you may want a listener to better understand?

Yanev: It's more of a misconception about I guess Jewishness or the Jewish people. A lot of people think that it’s just a religion, but really it's a lot more than that. It’s a group of people, a civilization in a sense, a tradition. You can be Jewish and not believe in anything, anything in Judaism or anything at all so that's a big misconception. A lot of really famous Jews like Albert Einstein were agnostic or atheists so that's something that’s a big misconception.

Rachel: Interesting. Yeah I feel like before I started learning more about the Center for Interfaith Cooperation and really interacting with differences. That was a huge misconception that I had. Definitely. Have there been any memorable moments? I know that you just joined the board, but in interacting with different cultures what have you learned in different faiths, but what have you learned during that journey? Maybe even going back to your college years too.

Yanev: One of the memorable moments as a CIC board member was actually last week. It was the Interfaith Youth Forum. You heard about it?
Rachel: I did hear about it. Can you explain it? What it was a little bit?

Yanev: It's a group of high school and college students who were interested in interfaith work, and they committed to go to different sacred spaces in the community and learn from leaders in those communities and to really tackle challenging questions about faith. I was extremely impressed last week when I heard them speak. Sixteen, seventeen year olds, eighteen year olds talking about really complex issues of violence and religion and things like that. It was really impressive. They knew way more than even the average CIC board member. More than me. so that's cool.

Rachel: How can we attract more people to these conversations because I'm sure you realized on your college campus maybe I know I experience it here at Butler that the people who want to become involved and interact with different faith communities are probably going to do it or look and be interested, but how do you get those that don't really look at faith or want to get out of their comfort zones and have those hard conversations? How do you get them involved?

Yanev: I think sometimes it's hard if it doesn't really affect your life to care what other committees are doing, so I think it's important to explain how it could affect their lives and why it's important to understand what other people believe and especially like a lot of the misinformation that’s spread around, a lot about Islam and Judaism on the Internet and media. I think it's really important because that kind of misinformation can lead to violence and can lead to bad policies. To show how that can have an effect would be the way to do that, I think.

Rachel: Have you seen that your faith really incorporates interfaith and encourages it?

Yanev: I would say so. Respecting other faiths is really important.

Rachel: Good because I know that's something. I'm in a class right now that looks at religious pluralism and Christianity, and how those two play together and of course there are some claims in Christianity that looks at a way to live out a truth and that you need to spread that truth beyond and so how do you stand firm in your own faith, but also celebrate the differences and encourage interfaith at the same time?

Yanev: So in the Jewish tradition spreading Judaism is not really part of it. I wouldn’t say that it’s discouraged, but it's definitely not a principle of Judaism. Actually, there's this thing that if you want to become Jewish, not every rabbi does this, but you have to knock three times. You have to ask once, and then you’ll be rejected after the second time to show that you really want to become Jewish, which is different from maybe Islam or Christianity where you just have to say or show that you believe it, maybe go through a baptism or something and that’s it. So it is a
little more complicated, Judaism. Yeah so I think that really helps with the interfaith aspect of it because people are not worried that we are only talking to them to convert them. So I think that makes it easier to have those conversations.

Rachel: Yeah that’s a big struggle in Christianity for sure is trying to find that balance. That's great that you can stand firm in your particular faith and also celebrate interfaith, as well. I was wondering and if you feel comfortable with us or not totally let me know, but if you could speak at all to Israel and Palestine and how you have engaged in that conflict and what you have felt as a result of that?

Yanev: Sure, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict actually has played a huge role in my life and a huge role in my interfaith work. Growing up in Israel, especially in the late nineties and early two thousands, was a really difficult time there. There was a lot of violence, and the city where I grew up was almost completely Jewish, so I didn’t, from what I can remember, I didn't have any interactions as a kid with non-Jews in Israel, so that really made me aware later in life and reflecting back on that made me understand how people can be stuck in their bubbles. The only understanding I had of non-Jews was from what I saw on TV, what I read in books, but then coming here you know I had a multicultural friend group and neighborhood and it really opened my eyes to how important it is to know people from different backgrounds. Even now, even in college, and after college the Israeli-Palestinian conflict still affects my work. A lot of what I do is to try to increase dialogue between Muslims and Jews and Palestinians and Israelis about the issue and part of that is also in interfaith. I think interfaith dialogue can play a huge role in improving the way we talk about the conflict and bringing people together. It's not going to solve the conflict, but it'll make things better. So yeah.

Rachel: I've heard from several different perspectives that it’s a claimed to be a religious conflicts, but a lot of other factors are of course involved, so it’s not really.

Yanev: I don't personally see it as a religious conflict almost at all. There is some aspect of a religious issue there with the Old City of Jerusalem, but that's about it. Other than that which is an important issue, but other than that issue pretty much the rest of the conflict is not about religion at all. It's about a bunch of different things including identity, competing claims on land, other things as well.

Rachel: I think that's a common misconception for sure. What has the interfaith landscape looked like here in Indianapolis? Have you found that you're still able to find definitely people within your own community but a wide variety of others, as well?

Yanev: Yeah for sure. I think it's really good here in central Indiana. Aside from the CIC, I am also involved in the Fisher’s Multifaith Community for Compassion. Even in Fishers we have an
interfaith as well or multifaith organization. There's a debate about interfaith and persons of multifaith.

Rachel: What is that?

Yanev: So from what I understand some people interpret interfaith as a way to spread their faith, which I personally don't see that way. But that was a concern for the organization, so they decided multifaith as a way of celebrating that there are a multitude of faiths is better. I personally don't see it, but I understand that people have issues with the term interfaith.

Rachel: Interesting. I never understood that connotation.

Yanev: I probably didn't explain it well.

Rachel: Yeah because I know that a lot of board members of course celebrate that diversity, too, so that nuance is really interesting.

Yanev: I think it's really impressive in Indianapolis that so many different religious groups come together to work on shared goals and to learn from each other. We can always do better, but I think it's really good.

Rachel: Yeah, through these conversations do you see more differences between each other or more similarities? What do those conversations look like?

Yanev: Definitely more similarities, but I think differences are a good thing. It's not that we should shy away from our differences or only focus on similarities but talk about our differences and celebrate the differences I've noticed a lot of similarities about our traditions, and it's interesting especially in the Abrahamic how similar they are. There are a few major differences, but a huge portion of it is almost exactly the same, but then we argue over these important but small differences, so it's interesting.

Rachel: Yeah, have you had some travels throughout your life besides I know that you came from Israel, but have there been other opportunities that you have had to get out of this Midwest bubble.

Yanev: So two years ago, I believe, Philadelphia's not that far, but I went on an interfaith service trip through IUPUI, so the participants were from all different backgrounds, Christian, Muslim, nonreligious, but it was a really cool experience because we got to hear from different faith leaders, and we at the same time got to do community service that was faith based, so we went to this church in downtown Philadelphia where we didn’t just serve meals to people experiencing
homelessness. We sat with them and talked to them. So that was a really impactful experience. The place where we stayed was a basement of a church, which was interesting. We got to visit a really cool synagogue. I think it was really old from the revolutionary days.

Rachel: Well I'd love to just wrap everything up and hear in a succinct maybe two or three sentences what does interfaith mean to you?

Yanev: So interfaith means being open to learning from other people, from other backgrounds, to being open to celebrating our differences and working together, figuring what our shared goals are, while still celebrating our differences and focusing on what can bring us together and how we can make our community better by working together.

Rachel: Well thank you so much for being here.
**Uzma Kazmi Interview**

Rachel: Hello everyone, and welcome back to the podcast where we are interviewing the Center for Interfaith Cooperation Board Members. Today we have Uzma Kazmi, welcome.

Uzma: Thank you I am excited to be here.

Rachel: It's so good to have you, and first I would love to just learn a little about yourself and how you have gotten involved with the CIC.

Uzma: Absolutely, so I actually moved to Indianapolis about three and a half years ago from Cleveland, Ohio and my family spent about nineteen years in Cleveland, Ohio and originally we had immigrated from Canada. So we ended up in Indianapolis and I was hungry and thirsty for to get involved in the community and be an active member of the community and I saw somehow, somewhere and email came to me in which I was invited to an Interfaith Iftar. This would be when we break fast in the month of Ramadan in the Muslim tradition and this was an Iftar that was held at the Interfaith Center where CIC is headquartered and located. there would representation from all of these different faiths and everyone would have the opportunity to break fast together in the month of Ramadan. So I said to my husband what a wonderful opportunity for us to go to and maybe meet some new people and little did I know that was to start of my CIC journey. I went to this Iftar and the table I was seated at there was a wonderful lady by the name of Wasema Ali and she was on the board and her and her husband were sharing this story of how they were relocating to California and because he is a physician and he was going to be doing his residency there and that her board position was opening up on CIC and she had heard about my name and was so excited to meet me as I was to meet her and she said you would really love to be on this board Uzma. I said just this event and this gathering and these people I just feel like I am getting so much energy from everybody. She said let me introduce you to Charlie Wiles and that was it, you know I met with Charlie, I met with Jed, I met with a few other members of the board. We set up a date and exchanged our contact information and set up a date for us to meet for a cup of coffee and to get to know each other better and the rest is history. I feel in love with the organization when I got to know more about them and their reach and their history and the objective is just so human and it just gives me so much energy. So you know I got involved in the board and I now serve as the treasurer on the board, which you know is a great honor for me, and I have to say in my short time serving on the board I have made so many wonderful friends and continued to expand my knowledge of interfaith.

Rachel: I love the community that surrounds the organization, it is so obvious. If you could tell me all about your faith journey and where you are coming from and maybe some really informative moments that happened along the way.
Uzma: So I am a Muslim and I followed the Muslim tradition. As I mentioned, I was born and raised in Canada and my parents both immigrated from India to Canada and so we were part of a pretty tight-knit South Asian community when I was growing up in Canada. So faith was introduced to me at a very early age, going to the mosque, having friends that follow the same tradition, but it was important to my parents for me to get a complete religious outlook. So I attended Catholic school all of my life which was wonderful for me to give me a different perspective and I had many friends growing up that were from the Hindu tradition, from the Jewish tradition, that were from the Buddhist tradition, and we all got to know each other's faith and our faith's traditions really well. So Canada, as many people know, is really a very multicultural and a melting pot of different cultures and different faith traditions and so I remember as I was a young child there was this event that would be hosted in Alberta, which is where I grew up and it was called Heritage Days. Heritage Days was an event we would always look forward to as young children. It was three full days of displaying your culture and your faith tradition and your food and your clothing and your traditions, just over three days in a very public park and so I grew up in that type of an environment where faith tradition and culture and everything that goes along with it was really celebrated. So when I met my husband and he had the opportunity to do some research work in the United States we immigrated to Cleveland. My perspective really shifted you know, because we had moved here in 1997 and we got to know several Muslim families, we got familiar with the local mosque that was in the area. We made some friends that way and because my husband was teaching and doing research at Case Western Reserve we got to know a lot of different people from different cultures and different religious traditions, it was fantastic and then 911 happened and our world really changed. I remember our eldest son was in elementary school and he came home very scared and very afraid and said I can not let anyone in my class know that I am Muslim and I am very afraid of them finding out that I am Muslim. So I went to his school and spent a little bit of time there, but there was just such an extreme reaction almost to Muslims in general, even though at the time several leaders, several national leaders, and our president at the time, George Bush, stood up and went to a mosque and really tried to set the message straight. There was still a lot of anxiety especially for women who wear the traditional head covering. There was a lot of backlash and reaction to them and I certainly saw that in the students that went to Case Western because we were so closely affiliated to the school. So you know we at the same time had applied for our Green Card application and our Green Card was denied, which was a big shock to us because we immigrated from Canada. We thought, oh this is a sure shot deal, this should be easy for us to get, but I don't know if it was part of the 911 timing and backlash of that. Anyhow, we continued to decide to stay on in the United States. We hired an attorney and reapplied for a Green Card and several months later we received an acceptance letter that we were immigrating officially to the United States. My journey as a Muslim as always been to spread the word of peace in Islam, but really for it to be a perspective that everybody can latch onto. The one thing as a Muslim that I have noticed that I always feel we have working against us is in many ways the media. So the media has not been a very fair partner to us and it has been a very bias approach of the media
many times and you can still see that. I feel like it has gotten a lot better, but after 911 I felt like I almost had to explain myself to everybody, just because I wanted to follow my religion. A religion that promotes peace, not all of these other things it was being associated with and it was unfair, it was scary, and it also made me question a lot about being a Muslim in America and becoming a new American. There were just so many things in our lives that the paths were crossing at the same time and it really caused us to reflect and more and more I felt like my mission and my goal is to be a Muslim in America. I remember my husband and I sitting down and having the conversation of considering the environment that we're facing here post 911, is this where we want to continue to stay? Do we continue to raise our family in Cleveland in American, becoming American citizens? What does that mean for us or do we go back to Canada now? I remember that the two of us decided that we were going to stay, we were going to continue our Green Card application, we were going to become American citizens and we were going to be role models of Muslims in America of peace-loving good neighbors who interacted outside and inside of our culture and our religious traditions and our communities and really promoted an interfaith dialogue and helped with an understanding of promoting the peace. So that became our goal and we stayed on and I am so glad we did. Since then I feel like for every step we take there are people who reach with their outstretched hand and say I want to learn more and understand more and I have so much respect for your faith traditions as I do for theirs and we continue to learn from each other and that circle of friends grows and grows and grows. So I really tired through my employer and to promote diversity and inclusion and one piece of diversity is your faith tradition, it's not just about culture or your gender, it's also about your faith tradition. You know all of our employers ask us to bring our entire selves to work and if faith is a big part of your life then it is showing up in your job each and every day and it is showing up in the values and the mission of your organization that you work for so I have continued with that. Fast forward now to being in Indianapolis and being a part of the finance community I am very proud to say that we are starting an employee business resource group in the company I work for, PNC bank and it is an interfaith employee resource group and we are in the process of starting it and it is very exciting for a corporation to take that brave step, that courageous move to say, yes we recognize that sometimes faith can be a sensitive issue, but at the same time we ask our employees to bring their selves to work and this is a part of who we are. So we are seeing many companies in Indianapolis following suite, companies like Salesforce, they have Faithforce, which is their employee business resource group and I know that we have been in conversation with several other major organizations in Indianapolis who are interested in starting this and I give all the credit to CIC because they start that dynamic conversation of setting the table with people of so many different traditions to come together, find the common goal of peace, go back out to their communities and spread the word that way. Rachel: That is amazing. I feel like you are in the right place to be able to represent and then invoke some change because change needs to happen ultimately. Have you found that since 911 you have felt more at peace being here in the United States?
Uzma: Yes, definitely. I think the religious understanding in America is really developing. It has been a journey, it really truly has. There has been a lot of misconceptions, but I believe that America on the whole, the fabric that this country was built on was immigrants and acceptance and diversity. I think people really are latching onto the belief that together we are stronger and together we can accomplish so much more and love can overcome hate. If there's a more appropriate example, I can't think of a more appropriate example, I mean to say then what has happened in New Zealand and the outpouring of love that we have seen here even in Indianapolis. So the day that the news came out about the New Zealand massacre that Friday morning I went to work so disturbed and with such a heavy heart over what had happened and that same night there was a gathering organized at our local mosque in Indianapolis for everyone to come together and pray and it was an interfaith gathering. Many leaders from various religious communities were invited so when we got there was no parking available so my husband was dropping me at the door because I was carrying a big tray of food in and I saw that there were all these people standing outside the door with posters and I thought to myself, protesters? Are you kidding me? On a day like this, there are protesters? Well it is what it is I thought to myself and I walked out with my tray and as I was approaching there was just a big group of people saying Salaam-Alaikum, which means "peace be with you," and it is the traditional greeting in Islam. I said Wa-Alaikum-as-Salaam and as I started to read their posters it was there of extending their love and their embrace during a time of pain and hurt. One of the people must have seen a confused look on my face and she spoke up on behalf of the group and said, "we are all here to protect you and your family while you pray." Rachel that just gave me, even when I repeat that story it gives me goosebumps, but it speaks to the outpouring of love and generosity and kindness that is there in the world and often hate gets the attention because it is so sensational and is that shining bright light that everyone wants to look at, but there is so much love and there is such an outpouring of love and we saw that in the vigil and we saw that in the outpouring for Mustafa Ayoubi, who was the Indianapolis young man who was shot over the hate crime. I pray as a community, not just as a Muslim, but as an entire Indianapolis and Indiana community, that we can pass the Bias Crimes Bill. That is so important for us to come together and say everybody is created equal and everybody bleeds red, we need to think about each other.

Rachel: Valid point, and I have been trying to figure out with looking at the CIC's mission, it's worthy of being exuded of everybody and to be welcomed by everybody, but it definitely attracts a certain person who is willing to interact amongst faiths right? So there is still another part to that where people are not engaging and there are hate crimes such as the New Zealand massacre. So how can we take the mission of the CIC and expand it so that it reaches and can eradicate some of this Islamophobia and hate in general?

Uzma: So the antidote for hate I believe is not just love, but education. When we become, you know what is unfamiliar to us can be very scary and when I feel people are in their bubbles that limited knowledge and groupthink is what festers and grows and it becomes the popular belief
system. That is what we have to breakdown. That really, truly is the antidote for all of this is we have to step outside of our comfort zones. I had an epiphany a couple of years ago, I had a dinner party at my home. I had a moment as a host when I was kind of scanning the crowd in my home looking at all the guests and I said boy everybody looks almost like me. That is a problem and that is what needs to change, so we as a family became very deliberate about inviting and extending our hand to people who were outside of our comfort zone or what was familiar to us and I feel like that is the greatest message that CIC spreads, is that education and building a platform or a table that everybody gets a seat at and it creates that environment where we can have that interfaith dialogue, learn to respect each other and understand each other and that's where it all begins.

Rachel: I know you have been really involved with the CIC and looking towards it's longevity and trying to plan to make sure that it reaches more and more people as much as it can. Can you speak to some of its improvements but also some of your interactions with people on the board and some things you have learned?

Uzma: Absolutely, I would say one of the most exciting endeavors that we are getting ready to begin at TIC is the cohort model and this is a series of dialogue that will begin and again promoting interfaith conversation, but on a multifaceted level. So this is not a conversation that is one and done. You can not just have an interfaith dialogue and say okay now I am going to go back to my life and I am going to go back to my bubble. This needs to be a series of conversations and that is exactly what we are looking at beginning. This series of conversations we have actually tested it out in a couple of areas and it has worked really well, the response has been great, is that interfaith dialogue to help bridge the understanding and really explore outside of our comfort zone and each of us has a comfort zone and stepping outside of it can be a little bit uncomfortable. In doing it in a series of conversations makes it a lot easier for everyone. The board is an outstanding board it is a fantastic representation of the Indianapolis community. CIC just celebrated its Interfaith Ambassador of the Year Award dinner in which a mom, Sahir was honored. There was something very eloquently stated at that dinner and I believe it was Judge Shaheed who made the statement and it is something that really stayed with me, and he said, "where in America are you going to find a room full of people as diverse as this group today? Where are you going to find in this country, in this city, in this state a group a room full of community and religious leaders where everybody just wants to celebrate humanity?" That is the objective of CIC. It was such a wonderful event and a heartfelt moment I think for everybody in the audience

Rachel: I don't think I realized before becoming involved with the CIC just how much diversity exists in Indianapolis because you often see what is around you and you do surround yourself with people who are common to you, which needs to be a deliberate action to get away from that.
Uzma: You're right, and I have had the privilege of living in several different cities and Indianapolis's non-profit community and faith-based community is very strong. Unfortunately, we get a little bit of a bad rep with some of the things that happen, but it is a community that is very diverse and CIC really helps to bring that to the surface.

Rachel: Have you found with your faith that this diversity and interaction with those of different faiths is encouraged or is it at sometimes seen as something that you should not interact with because I know coming from my Christian perspective there are several debates around this topic. Because I know sometimes you want to perceive your faith as "The Way," and convert others to that faith right? At what point do you try to balance that so you are pursuing your faith wholeheartedly, but you are also encouraged to interact with others?

Uzma: That is an excellent point and you know that should not be the goal, is to convert people or attract people to your particular faith. Bridging understanding about your faith is one of my goals, absolutely, but I feel that if I do good deeds and I treat every human being with the respect that he or she deserves and with elevated humanity more than any one faith tradition, people will realize that and see the goodness. To that I always say that there are some that really try to pursue, I want to make this about my religion, or make this about a commercial for what I do. That is not the goal at all. Really the goal is to bridge understanding and to say that if I model myself as a good person and people learn from that, that humanity, then that is really what faith is all about. The objective of faith is for us to have and control our moral compass and for our North Star to be treating people equally, treating humanity with dignity and making sure that everybody gets their fair share and is treated with kindness and empathy so whether you pray with your face towards Mecca or whether you face any other direction or whether you pray in Arabic or English or your hands clasped or your hands opened it doesn't matter we are praying to one God and I think that is one of the beautiful things that CIC really allows everybody to see and it becomes so transparent. It is not about any one faith it is about the discipline of faith itself. It is about the strength of faith and what it brings to people's lives and it is bigger than any one religion is.

Rachel: I like that refocus, so you see that pursuing Islam is pursuing interfaith and in a way, they both work hand in hand.
Uzma: Exactly

Rachel: So to conclude, interfaith in general, if you could summarize it in a couple of sentences, what does it mean to you?

Uzma: I will say a quote from the Quoran, which is something that holds so much meaning to me and when I think of interfaith I think of this quote. It is that "mankind we have created you into tribes and nations, so get to know one another," and to me, that is a beautiful and profound
statement that says get out of your comfort zone and learn from each other. There is so much, life is so short and there are so many experiences out there to be had and I become a better person when I get to know you and you become a better person when you get to know me and we all bring so much to each other. There is so much out there to be discovered so to me interfaith is my learning journey, my continuing education of learning about other people's belief systems and learning about just the greatness of humanity overall.

Rachel: Thank you so much for being here and it was a pleasure hearing your thoughts.
Works Cited


