

Scholar builds ecumenical bridges

BY RENA FULKA
SPECIAL WRITER

When the Rev. Dr. James R. Lyons resigned as a full-time minister 13 years ago, he only knew that he needed freedom to discover how to continue his work. Less than 12 hours later, he was asked in conversation what he would do if he could do anything he wanted with his life.

Without hesitation, Lyons responded, "I would start an institute that would go beyond the facade of good will and build solid relationships between Christians and Jews."

A mere two weeks later, with the help of Richard Lobenthal, Lyons found himself at the helm of The Ecumenical Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies with board members representing Catholic, Jewish and Protestant faiths. And within a month of its founding, the Southfield-based institute received national media attention after Lyons returned from his travels in Israel and Lebanon during a time of upheaval in 1982.

Although he was surprised by the publicity, Lyons has grown used to expect the unexpected.

"Whenever I thought I was going through a door, suddenly I'm off on a shoot somewhere," he explains of his life in the ministry.

Today, The Ecumenical Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies provides an environment for academic study and individual involvement through educational outreach programs, a resource library and media center, publications, dialogue groups and

study tours.

With Lyons as executive director, the not-for-profit organization works to improve relationships between Christians and Jews, but avoids all activities aimed at conversion.

"It's an immensely well-run and enlightened Institute," said Rabbi Arnold Shluterberg of Congregation Shir Tikvah in Troy. Shluterberg has been involved with the Institute since moving to suburban Detroit seven years ago. It was at an Institute-sponsored program similar to those he now hosts that Shluterberg first became acquainted with Lyons.

"He's a gifted scholar and a gifted teacher. He had an immense understanding of the sensitivities of Christians and the sensitivities of Jews and he knows what it historically and presently means to be a Jew or a Christian," said Shluterberg.

"He's a perfect bridge-builder because he knows and respects each of the groups shares information back and forth. There are too many walls and barriers in our society, and when someone like Lyons can bring understanding, I think that's noble work. It brings out the best in people."

A church-goer all his life, Lyons initially considered becoming a doctor or a psychologist, but pursued the ministry because it combined all his interests.

"The ministry has everything," insists the Detroit native. "What an exciting world."

Little did he know how well his studies would prepare him for his mid-life awakening with The Ecumenical Institute.

As a student at Wayne State University, Lyons studied the Bible, Jewish and Christian tradition, the gospels and more than a

half-dozen languages while earning a bachelor's degree in speech and a master's degree in near-Eastern language and literature. It was during this time that he found himself caught up with the horrendous activities of the Holocaust. His many questions led to further study, which he continues to expand even today.

"I'm a firm believer in being intellectually accurate," explained Lyons. "But you must also have the emotional drive to understand the issues... and the obligation to do something about it."

Lyons first became involved in ecumenical work while serving as director of the Office of Religious Affairs at Wayne State University. He continued his education in Bible studies at the University of Michigan, and served as a full-time minister for 12 years.

He and his wife, Christine, have four grown children: Sheri, Shelli, Charles and David, and three grandchildren.

During most of his 13 years with The Ecumenical Institute, Lyons has maintained a yearly schedule of 200 lectures at schools, universities, churches and synagogues across the country and in different parts of the world. Although he has recently slowed his pace, his work is just as important.

"We're trying to get people to move beyond the facade of good will. What we want to do is get people to really engage," he explained. "We deal with the tough questions, the painful questions, as honestly as we can. My job is not to pick sides. My job is to help people understand the question."

The Ecumenical Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies is at 19900 W. Nine Mile. Founding

board members include Lyons, Lobenthal, who currently serves as director of the Anti-Defamation League, Michigan Region, Dr. William Quirk of the Metropolitan United Methodist Church in Detroit, and the Most Rev. Alan J. Brunett, Bishop of Helena, Mont., who served St. Aidan Roman Catholic Church in Livonia and Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak before his recent appointment out of state. Lobenthal and Brunett also serve The Ecumenical Institute as past president of the board of trustees.

With the dove as its symbol, The Ecumenical Institute has worked for peace through a host of volunteers working to promote good will.

The Rev. Dr. Allan Eickelman, senior minister of the Congregational Church of Birmingham, recently attended a Model Passover Seder held at Temple Beth El with a group of 20 youth and parents from his church.

Sponsored by The Ecumenical Institute, the annual event not only kept his group intrigued, but also encouraged participation.

"I think they're performing a worthwhile service for the community in enhancing the research and dialogue between faith groups. Their work is significant because it focuses and shapes the culture and the cultural attitudes in positive ways," said Eickelman.

"With as much division as we have in society, with as many hate groups and prejudices... to have an institute building on commonality is very, very significant."

"And it's very important to look at the differences as well. The differences are worth celebrating and they lead to a greater understanding among people."

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RELIGION CALENDAR

Items for the religion calendar should be submitted no later than noon Friday for the next Thursday's issue.

BIRMINGHAM TEMPLE

The Birmingham Temple will have a "Celebration of Israel" at 8 p.m. Friday, May 19. Rabbi Sherwin Wine will discuss "The Radical Right: Rise of American Fascism." Antisemitism will be the theme. For more information call 477-1410. The temple is at 28611 W. 12 Mile Road, Farmington Hills.

NORTH FARMINGTON COMMUNITY CHURCH

The church plans at family fair at 4:30 p.m. Sunday, May 21, for all ages. Events include: games for adults and children at 4:30 p.m.; a picnic at 5:30 p.m. (bring something for grill, a dish to pass and lawn chairs); a puppet show at 6:30 p.m., with "His Handwork," a puppet team from Southfield Christian School. The church is on the north side of 13 Mile Road, between Orchard Lake Road and Farmington Road. The church also plans at celebration of music, at 4:30 p.m. Sunday, June 4. The event will bring together the adult choir, children's choir, men's group and various instrumentalists and solo performers. Lemonade will be served on the lawn afterward.

OAKLAND HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

Oakland Hills Community Church meets in the chapel of William Tyndale College, 35700 W. 12 Mile Road, one block west of Drake. Sunday worship begins at 11. Nursery care is provided. Sunday school for ages 3 to adult is at 10 a.m. A series on the family runs through June 25. Call 478-5001.

UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN

Guest minister the Rev. Charlotte Cowtan will speak Sunday, May 21, at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Farmington, 25301 Haletted Road, Farmington Hills. Sunday services and Sunday school are at 10 a.m. Call (810) 478-7272.

CHURCH OF GOD

Farmington Hills Church of God, 25717 Power Road (between 10 and 11 Mile roads), Farmington Hills. Sunday school is at 10 a.m.; worship service is at 11 a.m. Nursery care is available. Call (810) 477-9144 for more information. Sunday services are at 8:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. For information call (810) 477-9144.

CHARISMATIC PRAYER

A charismatic prayer group meets at 6 p.m. Sundays in Patio Classroom 1 on the ground floor of the University Center at Madonna University, Schoolcraft and Levan roads, Livonia. For more information, call Shawn at (313) 464-9057 or Julie at (313) 464-4566.

A group also meets at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays for scripture and singing at St. Elizabeth Church, 15089 Newburgh, Livonia. The group meets in the church meeting room. (Use rear entrance 2.) Call Sandy at (313) 462-2243.

PINE HILL CONGREGATIONAL

Pine Hill Congregational Church, 4160 Middlebelt, West Bloomfield, has Sunday worship services at 10:30 a.m. Nursery care and Sunday school are provided during the service. For information, call (810) 626-2737.

TEMPLE ISRAEL

Temple Israel, 5725 Walnut Lake Road, will have services 7:30 a.m.

weekdays, 10:30 a.m. Saturdays, (Rabbi's Tish at 9:30 a.m.), 9 a.m. Sundays and 8 p.m. Fridays.

M. Robert Syme, rabbi, Harold S. Loss, rabbi, Paul M. Yedwab, rabbi, Joshua Bennett, rabbi, and Harold Orbach, cantor.

Friday evening Syme will deliver the sermon; Saturday morning, Yedwab will deliver the sermon.

WEST BLOOMFIELD BIBLE

West Bloomfield Bible Church, 4900 Orchard Lake Road, West Bloomfield. Church: (810) 631-3467, Parsonage: (810) 738-5260. Sunday school, 10 a.m.; worship service, 11 a.m. Sunday (evening, 6 p.m.); Wednesday prayer meeting, 7 p.m.

HOLY SPIRIT LUTHERAN

Holy Spirit Lutheran Church, 4800 Orchard Lake Road, has services at 5 p.m. Saturday and 8:30 and 10:45 a.m. Sunday; nursery provided at second service. Sunday school for toddlers through adults at 9:30 a.m.

CONGREGATION SHARIEV

Zevek B'nai Israel Center Congregation Shariev Zevek B'nai Israel, 4200 Walnut Lake Road, will have services 9 a.m. Saturday and Sunday, and 7:15 a.m. weekdays. For more information, call (810) 681-5353.

CHURCH OF OUR SAVIOUR

Church of Our Saviour, Presbyterian (USA), 6655 Middlebelt, conducts 10 a.m. Sunday services. Church school classes for infants through high school and crib care are available during worship. For more information, call (313) 626-7006. Facilities are barrier-free. Weekday preschool program and child care are open to the community. Call (810) 655-6186 for more information.

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CONGREGATION B'NAI MOSHE

Congregation B'nai Moshe is at 6800 Drake in West Bloomfield. (810) 788-0600.

Services are 6 p.m. Friday; 9 a.m. and 7:15 p.m. Saturday; 8:30 a.m. Sunday; and 7 a.m. daily.

Elliot Pachter, rabbi; Louis Klein, hazzan; Shalom Ralph, sexton emeritus; Abram Rabinowitz, Torah reader; Joel Ungar will chant the Haftorah. Shabbat Mincha at 6:30 p.m., followed by Se'udah Shelishit, and Rabbi's Mishna class. Ma'ariv and Havdalah. Kiddush will follow Shabbat services.

TEMPLE SHIR SHALOM

Temple Shir Shalom is at 5642 Maple, West Bloomfield. Friday service at 8 p.m. Saturday service 9:30 a.m. Tish: 11 a.m. Shabbat services. For more information, call the temple office at (810) 737-8700.

FIRST ASSEMBLY OF GOD

The First Assembly of God Church of West Bloomfield is meeting in the facilities of Temple Kol Ami, 6885 Walnut Lake Road, and normally meets at 10 a.m. Sundays and 7 p.m. Wednesdays. (810) 624-6824.

JEWISH SERVICES

Jewish services with the Birmingham/Bloomfield Hills Synagogue-Chabad at 10 a.m. Saturday mornings at the Masonic Temple. (810) 544-8639.

Farmington area religious institutions should submit calendar items to the Farmington Observer, 33411 Grand River, Farmington 48335.

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