

Ecumenical Institute fosters understanding

The Ecumenical Institute is not about Christians or Jews or Muslims or blacks or whites or Chaldeans. It's about individuals searching for ways to better understand each other, according to founder the Rev. James Lyons.

This year the Ecumenical Institute took charge of an Ambassadors of Goodwill program at five area high schools in Farmington, Birmingham, Livonia, Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield.

"It's a movement of people who care about other people, who agree to disagree and won't let the disagreements separate them,"

Lyons said, calling it a refreshing excursion from rigid extremism that, historically, has been so prevalent in society.

"People have been taught that, 'If you don't agree with me, I can't have anything to do with you,'" he said. "We expect people to come in as individuals, not representing any church or group, and we respect their individuality. If you recognize people's own dignity, amazing conversations take place."

To spark these conversations, the Southfield-based institute sponsors a series of programs,

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gatherings and dialogues, including trips to Israel for Christians and Jews to see how deeply the holy land affects each religion, tours of local churches and synagogues to explain the significance

of the buildings and ceremonies within them and classes and seminars taught by Lyons.

Through it about 50 students have been trained how to resolve conflicts peacefully and how to

break down racial and other walls to form better relations.

"The goal is for these kids to talk to and train other kids," Lyons said, adding that it has been an extremely successful program.

"We are the only people in their lives who really listen to them. Adults are so busy instructing that they forget to listen. We found they know very well what the problems are and what the solutions are. Our job is to knock down the walls that prevent them from solving them," he said.

Gary Faber, assistant superintendent for instruction for the West Bloomfield schools, works closely with Lyons on the project and said it has had excellent results.

Lyons, a Congregational minister for more than 32 years and a Holocaust scholar, said he gets tremendous satisfaction working with not only students, but also all the people he meets through the institute he created in 1982.

And that satisfaction makes sense, after all — as Lyons tells it — the institute seems to have

started with a little divine assistance.

A diabetic for more than 40 years, Lyons slipped into a diabetic coma in 1982 and came out of it craving change in his life. Calling it a "midlife awakening," he resigned the pastorate of his church, not knowing what he would do next.

Lyons was talking on the phone that week to Dick Lobenthal, director of the Michigan regional office of the Anti-Defamation League. Lobenthal asked him what he would do if he could do anything in the world.

"Off the top of my head, without really thinking about it, I said I wanted to start an institute that would get beyond the facade of goodwill to explore the things that really cause us pain," he said.

Within two weeks Lyons had a donated office in the basement of a Congregational church and secured a 3-year, \$35,000-per-year grant to get it started.

"Dick Lobenthal got a call from a lawyer who said he had \$100,000 to give away. . . . It is absolutely amazing how it happened," he said.

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