

30-year-old ecumenical mission builds bridges to understanding

For three decades now, Christian churches in Strathcona County have been meeting to find common ground – exploring what unites them instead of what sets them apart.

In that spirit, ecumenical leaders invited their Hindu and Muslim counterparts this year to help bridge gaps. Among the top priorities: dispelling misconceptions about their faiths.

“The key is that we all have preconceived notions of what people believe ... but we’re seeking real relationships with real people and actually developing common history changes the way we think and the way we understand,” said Rev. Canon Scott Sharman, ecumenical officer for the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton and the featured speaker at this year’s Strathcona County Ecumenical Mission.

“So I’ve learned what the diversity of the church looks like in actual, real people rather than from the pages of a book or a theory. And I think that’s really essential.”



Rev. Canon Scott Sharman

Members of eight different Christian congregations have been meeting annually for the Ecumenical Mission, a four-day event held in different churches throughout the Sherwood Park area east of Edmonton. Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Parish was a founding member of the mission.

Sharman himself has attended for decades. Although there are differences among Christians, he said, "there's a tremendous amount of common ground, and what we do share provides a lot of opportunity to do quite a bit in common."

"We are not yet able to fully share in visible unity and communion across our differences, but we can pray together. We can learn together and be disciples of Jesus together and engage in service to the world together."

Beyond meeting once a year, the members of the Strathcona County Ecumenical Mission are involved in the community. They serve meals to the needy, sponsor refugees and work together on service projects – in spite of their differences.

"The word is 'full communion.' That doesn't mean uniformity. That doesn't mean syncretism or anything like that," Sharman said. "It's about bringing the gifts back into the inheritance of the one church of Christ and not being all exactly the same but being able to not allow our differences to cause strife and division and hatred and suspicion."

For the Muslim community, it's dispelling the distorted presentation of Muslims in media and news.

"Muslims are 1.6 billion people. We come in all shapes and sizes, colours, backgrounds, languages. And really it's this very diverse community," Imam Sadique Pathan, the outreach imam of the Al-Rashid Mosque in Edmonton, who recalls watching movies as child that assigned hate to his god, Allah.

"Ninety-five per cent of what we face, it's oh my God, the same issues. That is what we need to look at. That 95 per cent is the Muslim experience. It's the human experience. We are humans first and foremost."

For Hindu leader Nalina Kumar, the biggest misconception focuses on the multiple gods of her faith.

"People look at Hindus having so many forms of god. You go to a Hindu altar, it's got 50 different pictures of different gods, at least. But all of that leading to one," said Kumar, president of the Sathya Sai Baba Centre of Edmonton. "Unity is what the entire future is going to be about."

Faith leaders see a hindrance to that unity in the weaponization of religion.

The annual Statistics Canada summary of police-reported hate crime in Canada shows religion as a major driver of hate, violence and vandalism across the country. Religiously motivated attacks grew by 83 per cent in 2017, with attacks against Muslims and Jews leading the way. Hate crimes motivated by race rose 32 per cent and those motivated by sexual orientation increased 16 per cent.

Muslims, who are just 3.2 per cent of Canada's population, were the targets of 349 reported incidents in 2017, up from 139 in 2016. Canada's much smaller

Jewish community, just one per cent of Canadians, was hit with 360 incidents, a 63-per-cent increase over the 221 attacks in 2016.

There were 39 Catholic-related incidents, up from 29 the year before.

“Any time that Christianity gets co-opted for some kind of ideological purpose, it usually goes badly,” Sharman explained. “When the church gets too aligned with a particular culture or a particular political institution, it leads to distortions.”

Imam Pathan adds: “It’s a very, very unfortunate thing that exists within all faiths. Part of what we’re here for is to address that and to hopefully do our part to make sure that our faiths do not get hijacked. We want to make sure that, from our end, that doesn’t have a place to go.”

For the Christian church, Sharman said it’s important to build bridges between faiths.

“They’re not looking at us and saying ‘We want to talk to Catholics or Lutherans or Baptists’ or whoever. They want to talk to Christians,” Sharman said. “We need to take that as a challenge.”

Imam Pathan emphasized building relationships, with the ecumenical mission as a vital step.

“We want our barriers to be removed, not just as Muslims but as Canadians. It doesn’t mean that we are accepting every different faith system as the truth; rather, that we come to appreciate the differences we may have and acknowledge that the majority of the beauty that exists within each and every faith unites us.”