

Religious groups work together for community

By Rick Cousins | Posted: Saturday, September 22, 2007 12:00 am

If you've found yourself shaking your head over the dozens of religion-fueled conflicts boiling about the globe and wondered "Why can't they just get along?" then you may appreciate Galveston County Interfaith.

The umbrella organization which has brought Protestant Catholic Jewish and Muslim organizations together has begun to help local communities in a variety of practical areas.

Interfaith founder Joe Higgs saw an opportunity to use the collective faith community to create a practical benefit for students parents and the elderly. So far he's brought some 15 congregations representing a spectrum of beliefs and practices together working toward these common goals.

"We'd like many more congregations to take a look at joining us" he said. "Interfaith is an organization of institutions not individuals. We want to cross the many lines: race class and the causeway — all of which divide us."

Higgs said that when representatives of faith-based organizations began talking with each other common purposes were not hard to identify.

Anne Rubio grew up in a family of Methodists and Catholics who were not fully conversant with each other.

"In those days we kept pretty separate and I felt that there was a big piece of me missing" she said. "But when we got together it was like: 'Yes These are my people too and this is what I was supposed to be doing.'"

If a mixed religious group that works with industries school boards and grant proposals sounds a bit sedate you don't know the Rev. Lorraine Brown pastor of Faith United Methodist in Dickinson.

Rubio sets the scene. She and Brown were teaching underprivileged parents how to get the most from parent-teacher conferences by showing respect for the school and its staff as they also addressed the problems their children were facing each day. They began with a how-not-to role play skit.

Rubio playing a hot-headed mother confronted Brown who played the passive school teacher. As they began to demonstrate what they called "the parent-teacher conference from hell" Rubio raised the stakes by insisting that her fictional daughter who wanted to be a cheerleader should be cut some slack on her homework. Otherwise she might not make the cut for the cheering squad.

At that point Brown jumped up on her teacher's desk. Coming completely out of character she began shouting out a decade's old cheer to the assembled and presumably startled parents.

”Then she began to yell ‘Two bits four bits six bits a dollar all for the Gators stand up and holler’” Rubio recalled. ”The people were asking themselves if that was really Rev. Brown.”

But Rubio adds she really made the point clear.

There are other organizations running under the interfaith banner in Galveston County. Some specialize in providing food clothing and other physical needs. Galveston County Interfaith has taken a different focus aimed more at society change and leveraging support from state grants industry participation and government action.

The organization’s concerns include:

How well our children are learning;

How adults get the training and skills they need to find jobs that pay a living wage;

How we develop affordable housing;

How we assure access to affordable health care; and

How we support our elderly.

The closest model for Galveston County Interfaith is Houston’s Metropolitan Organization but Higgs and his group have also supported hurricane relief.

”These are areas that are tied into their faiths” said Maria Mercado who attends Galveston’s St. Patrick Church. ”It’s not just church work but being involved in the schools and community.”

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At a glance

WHAT: Galveston County Interfaith Meeting

WHEN: 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Sept. 29

WHERE: College of the Mainland Vocational Technical Building

PURPOSE: To discuss how life can be improved for families in Galveston County. Workshops and discussions will focus on improving public schools increasing access to job training and affordable health care developing affordable housing and supporting the elderly.

INFORMATION: 409-939-0045 or e-mail at GCInterfaith@aol.com