

Religious effort opens doors through building houses

A rabbi, an imam and a minister walk onto a construction site in the Middle East . . .

Sounds like the beginning of a joke, doesn't it? But it is actually the middle of a story of an Indianapolis interfaith collaboration that is a model for building peace through service.

The rabbi is Lew Weiss, a chaplain at Clarian Health; the imam, Michael Saahir of Nur-Allah Islamic Center; and the minister, David Berry of Second Presbyterian Church. They are part of the International Interfaith Initiative, a coalition that puts its shared values into action through the House of Abraham project. Honoring the patriarch of the Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions, House of Abraham works with Habitat for Humanity to build houses for the poor.

For three years, the group has raised homes together in Indianapolis while building on an admirable record of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Different Indianapolis faith organizations have conducted prayer services and public dialogues side by side for decades, as well as collaborating in interventions for homeless families and a new anti-hunger initiative that is helping feed the hungry in Indiana and in Kenya.

Whether motivated by the Sermon on the Mount, the Hebrew concept of tikkun olam -- "repairing the world" -- or Zakat, the charitable pillar of Islam, the adherents of the different traditions find common ground in the mandate to serve the less fortunate. "Religion provides a lot of opportunities that government and politics don't," said Charlie Wiles, director of the Interfaith Initiative and founder of the Peace Learning Center.

Last summer, International Interfaith Initiative headed to Amman, Jordan, with each member bearing a suitcase filled with donated medicines much needed in the Iraqi refugee communities they would be visiting. They helped build a House of Abraham for a Jordanian family and met with refugees from the Iraq war.

More than a million Iraqis have fled to neighboring countries like Jordan and Syria, where many of the refugees struggle for food, medicine and housing. According to Refugees International, some Iraqis who have tried to return home have found neighborhoods divided among sectarian lines and their homes occupied or destroyed.

These suffering and largely ignored Iraqis may represent a simmering cauldron of resentment toward the U.S., Wiles said. "What a recruitment tool for al-Qaida we are providing," he said. "We are playing into the hands of those who fuel hatred for the U.S. unless we give them some hope for a secure future."

For a few of those refugees, hope came last summer in the guise of multifaith Hoosiers working with Jordanians to hammer out a future for a poor family. The International Interfaith Initiative plans a trip to build a home for a family in Israel soon, too.

"This is a golden opportunity to build up the stature of Americans in this region at the same time we are helping address the critical problems of disenfranchised, displaced people," Wiles said. "It shows the best example of who we are and what we can be."

Amen -- and *Âmîn* -- to that.
