Children of Abraham embodies open-mindedness, inclusivity in 15th year

Children of Abraham hosted an event at Temple Beth El in October to celebrate Sukkot, a weeklong Jewish holiday. It drew 200 people to the temple.

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Alan Garfield, John Eby, Adib Kassas, Bonnie Sue Lewis and John Waldmeir talked openly, laughed and kept posing questions to one another. Kassas, a Muslim man, looked intently at Garfield, a Jewish man, and asked, "Really, you guys do that?" "When he said that, two things happened. Number one, I knew he was getting an education. And two, I could feel he was deepening his own faith in talking to me about my faith," Garfield said. Eby asked the two if they would be interested in expanding the conversations into something bigger.

In 2010, they launched a series of monthly faith-based conversations on a wide range of topics. "The vision that we established is that we want to create a conversation that helps to educate people about other ways of seeing, that helps to build relationships," Eby said. The organization grew quickly. Seventy people showed up to the first meeting. Before COVID-19 plunged the world into a pandemic, they were averaging more than 100 people at each meeting. Their attendance numbers dropped off after the pandemic.

Now in its 15th year of programming, the organization is seeing strong participation at its events. During its October event, 200 people attended Temple Beth El, 475 W. Locust St., to celebrate Sukkot, a weeklong Jewish holiday. "Our temple has 17 people," Garfield said. "We had over 200 people of all religions, and no religion, and they all came."

A board of academics from colleges and faith-based organizations in Dubuque run the organization and decide on its series lineup. The name "Children of Abraham" comes from the umbrella of the Abrahamic religions, which encompasses Christianity, Islam and Judaism, all stemming from ancient religious figure Abraham. They host monthly events from fall to spring at various locations across the city. All the meetings are free and open to the public. "In the absence of direct conversation and direct (relationship building), people rely on rumors and innuendos and sweeping generalizations," Garfield said.

The organization is focused on open-mindedness, encouraging anyone to attend its events regardless of their religious affiliation and relationship to faith. "The central tool in our tool kit is generous listening," Eby said. "Listening with curiosity, with sympathy and empathy, assuming the best of the other and being open and interested in learning more".

While a major goal of the organization is to build peace, Kassas believes struggle and instigation are important for growth. Peace can sometimes lead to laziness, he said. "When you get close to your guy who you are in a relationship with, or lady, you start instigating each other," Kassas said. "That's a way of keeping the love real". The organization hosts conversations on hot topic issues, but it is not centered around debates and crowning winners and losers. Their goal is growth on personal and communal levels. "The most valuable aspects of our conversations often come out in points of disagreement," Eby said. "That's certainly one of the ways in which I have learned and grown the most personally".

Kassas, a Muslim immigrant from Syria, holds a weekly study of the Quran, which started 16 years ago. He knows the value in learning about other religions. "Last week, I went for my first time to the Hanukkah celebration with Alan," Kassas said. "I've never realized what it means until I shared with them, until I went there in their sacred place and shared their feeling and their joy and their hope and their fear and praying to God".

In the last few years, Children of Abraham began extending panel invites to people outside the Abrahamic religions, including Hindus and atheists, Garfield said. The group is trying to be inclusive in its programming to bring new ideas to the conversation. It also stays up on current issues and brings those to the discussion table. The organization's topics for the 2025-2026 series include immigration, masculinity, superstition and the metaverse. "We want to be a conduit for the creation of relationships across cultural, religious, generational and gender divides," Eby said.