

MAIN LINE FAITH

Building a beloved community through interfaith action

By DAVID ROBINSON

Eboo Patel, Ph.D., keynote speaker at the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Forum, will speak on building a “beloved community” in Philadelphia Tuesday, Feb. 12. Patel knows the topic from his role as executive director of the Chicago based Interfaith Youth Core.

His talk is a fund-raiser for the Interfaith Center of Philadelphia, an area nonprofit whose executive director is Abby Stamelman Hocky, a member of Beth Am Israel, who had previously served with the Jewish Community Relations Council for 23 years. Imam Muhammad Abdur-Razzaq Miller of the nearby Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Mosque is currently the chair of the board of directors.

“The Interfaith Center was founded in 2004 by religious leaders and lay community members,” she explained recently. “The founding Advisory Board consisted of Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Baha’is, Sikhs and Hindus.

“Philadelphia, the birthplace of religious liberty, is a wonderful place to foster ways of living out the dreams of the founding fathers.” Stamelman Hocky pointed out. “During the formative days of the Interfaith Center, we saw that while we live side by side, there is a yearning for deeper engagement and greater understanding about the diverse faith communities of our region. To make our religions more than just symbolic names and allegiances, the Interfaith Center set goals of education, dialogue, and service through collaboration.”

For the Interfaith Center’s first year, a series of community programs were held such as a training workshop — in collaboration with Philadelphia’s commission on human relations — focusing on conflict transformation. This workshop — led by a trainer used by the United Nations — brought together law enforcement, community relations and religious leaders.

Another interfaith program was with The Annenberg Center for Medical Education at Lankenau Hospital. “We were part of a forum and workshop on End of Life issues, with Lankenau providing the medical expertise and we brought in reli-

gious community perspectives,” Atamelman Hocky said.

Eboo Patel’s Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago gave the Philadelphia group an approach to youth service learning. The program is called Walking the Walk, directed by Marjorie Scharf, also of Beth Am Israel. “We began with 20 kids, and we now have 60,” Stamelman Hocky said. “They are recruited from various congregations in Philadelphia and the suburbs for a year-long program, meeting twice a month in small groups with mentors. The meetings have a service, dialogue and education component.”

The Suburban West group includes

The mission of the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia is to advance mutual trust, understanding and cooperation among faith communities in order to work together for the common good of the region.

youth from Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, Main Line Reform Temple, the Villanova Center for Islamic Education and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Mosque.

“This year, one of their service component sites is with the Lower Merion Conservancy’s environmental efforts,” Stamelman Hocky said. “The dialogue conversations are on shared religious values and distinctive aspects of our faiths, and there are meetings with faith leaders. The education curriculum covers the core teachings of the religions, conflict resolution and leadership skills.

“We are still learning what works from feedback of the students,” she added. “Though the program was set for one year, with a graduation, some students wanted to go further, so we opened student leader positions. We partner with the Arts & Spirituality Center to offer an artist in residence for each group, who guide the students in reflection during their mini-retreats.”

The Interfaith Center Web site also attracted an interested party. “The University of North Carolina has an Alternative Spring Break program, and they contacted us. Together, we came up with an intensive service week for their college students,”

Stamelman Hocky explained. The students come to Philadelphia and have a week of daytime activities encountering many faith communities, attending worship services and meeting with religious leaders. During the evening and overnight, they serve at Project Home’s Grace Café, which provides evening meals, activities and shelter at different churches. Some of the students also stay overnight with transitioning homeless families at a northwest Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network host congregation. They also speak with social workers and learn as they serve about the chronic and transitioning homeless.

“At the end of that exhausting week, the students have a reflection session where they write of the experience,” Stamelman Hocky said. “Last year, they wrote poetry, and some of it was very powerful, moving and good enough for publication. This spring Jewish Light Publishing will feature that poetry in a book called *Interactive Faith*, in the chapter on dialogue and the arts.”

Encountering Other Faiths — the adult learning and dialogue component of the Interfaith Center — is offered to congregations, covering the history of interfaith work, how interfaith activities deepen one’s own faith, and meetings with other nearby faiths. This program is run by Sr. Maria Hornung, MMS, author of *Encountering Other Faiths*.

“We are also coordinating the efforts of the newly established Religious Leaders Council of Greater Philadelphia,” Stamelman Hocky said. “These faith leaders have joined to build bridges, provide a moral voice and take action on critical issues of concern to the region.” Their first



Abby Stamelman Hocky, executive director of The Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia, and Imam Muhammad Abdur-Razzaq Miller of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Mosque, chair of the Interfaith board of directors.

action was the interfaith inaugural service for Mayor Nutter, where they also launched an initiative to address the issue of violence.

Another program for clergy, sponsored by the Interfaith Center is an annual interfaith women’s clergy retreat, this year attracting nearly 50 women religious leaders.

“In the future, we’re hoping to expand our Walking the Walk activities to include neighborhood and community organizations,” she said. “Sunday, April 20, the National Day of Interfaith Youth Service — organized by Eboo Patel’s Chicago group — our youth ambassadors from Walking the Walk will work with community groups in Cobbs Creek Park.”

The Web site for The Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia is www.interfaithcenterpa.org.

Eboo Patel is an internationally known author of *Acts of Faith*, and he has been seen as a guest on *CNN Sunday Morning*, National Public Radio and Public Broadcasting’s *Three Faiths, One God*.

Joining Patel will be the Main Line’s Unity Choir, featuring blended voices from Ardmore’s Zion Baptist Church, Wynnewood’s Main Line Reform Synagogue and Penn Valley’s Beth Am Israel.

The location for the Feb. 12 event is the Philadelphia Cathedral, on 38th Street, between Chestnut and Market streets. A reception will begin at 6 p.m., and Patel’s talk and the program will follow at 6:30 p.m. There is no charge, but an R.S.V.P. is requested at kas@interfaithcenterpa.org or 215-222-1012 if you plan to attend.