

# TOGETHER IN FAITH AND FRIENDSHIP

No. 11

OFFICE OF ECUMENICAL & INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS  
DIOCESE OF CHARLESTON

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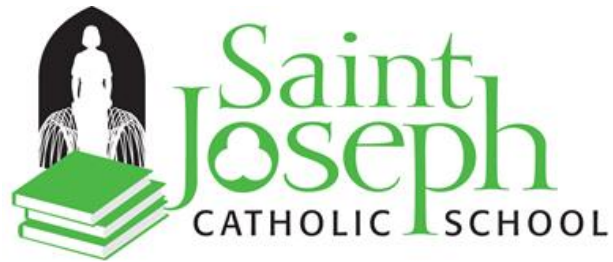


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## A MODEL FOR OUR CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

In his encyclical “*Ut Unum Sint*” (#25), St. John Paul II wrote: “Prayer, the community at prayer, enables us always to discover anew the evangelical truth of the words: “*You have one Father*” (Mt. 23:9). In that same encyclical, he urged local churches (dioceses) and their parishes to join in prayer and activities to help build understanding and cooperation among various Christian groups. He called ecumenism part of the Church’s “mission” (#101). St. John Paul, like St. Paul VI before him and Popes Benedict XVI and Francis after him, also made noteworthy efforts to welcome and dialogue with members of non-Christian faith traditions. One model for fulfilling what the popes of the past six decades have asked us to do is something which St. Joseph Catholic School in Columbia has been doing annually since 2006 or 2007. Once again, on January 26, 2024, the school hosted a morning of prayer with pastors and faith leaders of the schools’ students.



The morning included prayer, song, a special message, and hospitality for the school’s guests.



## ENGAGING YOUTH—They're everywhere!



**A victim of attempted murder takes a selfie with a youth group on hand for the Palmetto Journey of Hope.**



**The Bridge Builders quilt project is now on a journey to participating churches. It was crafted by youth.**

One of the main points Bishop Jacques Fabre-Jeune, CS, has made in our discussions about ecumenical and interfaith activities is his concern—one voiced among many denominations and religious groups-- about how to engage youth in religious belief and practice. We know that there has been a dramatic fall-off in that their attendance at formal worship. At the same time, this year in particular has seen youth showing up for special events and participating in special projects. They have been at marches for life for many years. Now we notice an uptick in their participation and leadership when it comes to interfaith relations, racial justice, and outreach. Youth from Spartanburg showed up for a death penalty awareness event. Young people from Bluffton-Hilton Head-Savannah faith communities put together a quilt depicting their hopes for the future. Youth were at the forefront of Interfaith Harmony Month in Charleston, Martin Luther King events in Bluffton, and collections and volunteer activities to help Lowcountry outreach centers—which are ecumenical and interfaith in terms of clients, volunteers, and donors. It certainly doesn't hurt when children and youth see their parents involved and ready to accompany them and cheer them on at these activities.



**Youth from many faith traditions read the proclamation for Interfaith Harmony Month in Charleston at City Hall, January 3, 2024**





Young musicians at City Hall, Charleston



A dance troupe honoring Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Bluffton



Talented youth at MLK day in Bluffton—at a celebration of faith and history, orchestrated by local churches, schools, families, and dance studios on January 15, 2024.



First graders at Saint Gregory the Great Catholic School were inspired to collect socks and shoes for needy adults and children—and tied it to a performance of the song “Footloose” this February.

## **SOME UNITY EVENTS AROUND THE DIOCESE**

Our recent Holy Fathers and our Bishops have made it clear that evangelization is a top priority for us. But, as mentioned on page 1 of this newsletter, we also have a mission to pray and work toward Christian unity. Every year for decades, Christian Unity Week has been celebrated from January 18-25. In South Carolina, it also overlaps with Interfaith Harmony Month. Both observances are marked by gatherings for prayer, hospitality, and special projects. All of these activities are designed to build mutual understanding and to unite people from various faith traditions in cooperative efforts for their civic communities. Here we highlight a few of the many observances which celebrated Christian Unity and Interfaith Harmony.

In Bluffton, Sisters of Saints Cyril and Methodius, their lay Associates, and members of Bridge Builders of Hilton Head cooperated in the display of the youth quilt project shown on page 2 and to share in the annual Prayer for Christian Unity promoted by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Friars of the Atonement, and the World Council of Churches, on Sunday, January 14. In Charleston, Father Aristotle Damaskos opened the doors of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church for Prayer for Christian Unity which drew Catholic, Orthodox, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalian, and Lutheran clergy and parishioners. Dena Fokas Moses, a member of Father Ari's parish and president of the Charleston Interreligious Council, was instrumental in arranging the event, held the evening of January 23.

On Saturday, January 27, the Interfaith Partners of Aiken held their annual Tour of Faiths. Bill Collins of St. Mary, Help of Christians Church, has long been the leader of the group, which meets monthly and plans events for Thanksgiving, Interfaith Harmony Month, and other occasions throughout the year. This year Catholic, Episcopalian, United Methodist, Latter Day Saints, and Unitarian Universalist Churches joined the local Jewish synagogue and Islamic masjid (mosque) in Aiken to welcome guests. In Sumter, Father Gio Nunez hosted Christian and Jewish communities on Sunday, January 28, at St. Anne Hall. They came together for prayer, reflection on short talks offered by faith leaders, song, and social time.

On Ash Wednesday, February 14, 2024, Rev. Dr. Fred Clarke of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) hosted a small, invitational prayer service with scripture, readings from a book on grief, African American spirituals, and preaching at his church on Orange Grove Road in Charleston. This was organized in cooperation with the South Carolina Christian Action Council (page 10).



**SSCM Sisters and Associates join Bridge Builders for Christian Unity Prayer and celebration of youth quilt project.**





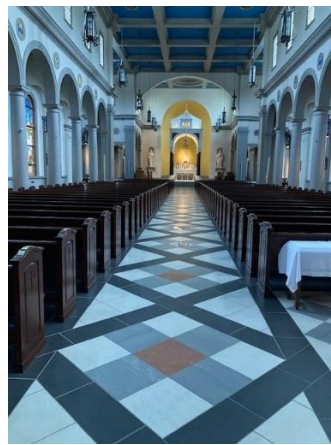
Parishioners and clergy from various churches gather at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church January 23 and at St. Anne Hall in Sumter on January 28 for Christian Unity and Interfaith Harmony celebrations.





The Sumter event made front-page news the next day. Fr. Gio and Fr. Rani expect more to come!

Then, below, see some highlights from the Tour of Faiths in Aiken, beginning with St. Mary, Help of Christians.



In a chapel at the Methodist church and inside the main church with the cross suspended over the sanctuary



An Episcopalian gentleman dressed according to the time of their founding, greeted us; inside, we met the pastor, heard a brief history and a selection played on their pipe organ.



## JEWISH AND ISLAMIC RELATIONS

Anyone who watches the news is aware of the Mideast conflicts that continue and threaten to escalate. Among the Interfaith Partners of South Carolina, the Interfaith Partners of Aiken, and the Charleston Interreligious Council there are Jewish, Christian, and Muslim board members. All of these groups have sponsored, and are continuing to sponsor, dialogues, worship space visits, food fests, and so on. The Interfaith Partners of Aiken had their regular open houses at a synagogue and a masjid. A unique event was held at Bon Secours St. Francis Hospital, Charleston. On January 25, the hospital hosted a conversation on “Allyship,” attended by many of us from many faiths. The presenters were Jewish and Islamic professional women who have collaborated on a number of projects. They shared elements of their faith traditions, emphasized action on behalf of the common good, and also traced commonalities among their traditions—and, indeed, of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Scenes on the first line below are from the synagogue in Aiken



Above: Christian families and couples visit the Aiken masjid. The couple on the right (from Bluffton) include the wife, whose family has Catholic and Muslim members. Below: the presentation on Allyship at Bon Secours..



## COOPERATION ON BEHALF OF CIVIC CAUSES

In the interreligious realm in South Carolina, there are events that are focused on building relationships and sharing faith traditions and also activities that bring people together for the sake of the common good. Our diocesan involvement with South Carolinians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (SCADP) is one of the latter. Since the last newsletter (early October), we have sponsored the Palmetto Journey of Hope. This activity brings people who have themselves been incarcerated, people who have been affected by capital crimes, and family members of both offenders and victims. One of the highlights of this year's Journey of Hope was held in Spartanburg in the later fall. The man who gave testimony was formerly on death row for a youthful crime. After a major conversion experience, he became a counselor and advisor to other prisoners, helping to resolve conflicts, and ultimately was freed. He is now a happily married minister. One of the highlights of his testimony, which was repeated around the state, was the presence of young people. Other SCADP events of the later fall and early winter have included online meetings concerning restorative justice and legislative testimony. A late October 2023 discussion was led by Sister Helen Prejean, famous for "Dead Man Walking."



Above: A former convict-turned-minister advocates for alternatives to the death penalty and for prison reform.  
Below: A sample of the online attendees at a presentation for SCADP by Sister Helen Prejean.





## FROM CRIMINAL JUSTICE TO FAIR LENDING . . .

Another action event began on the second day of the 2024 South Carolina legislative session when a number of us affiliated with the South Carolina Fair Lending Alliance attended a news conference at which Senator Tom Davis (Catholic) unveiled proposed legislation to impose controls on lending practices which accelerate interest rates and victimize unsuspecting people. Payday loans, title loans, and installment loans currently can rise to over 300% interest, and, of course, many poor people (including people who seek help from our outreach centers), as well as many ordinary citizens, find themselves trapped. This cause has been embraced by a number of faith-based organizations, and groups such as the Council of Catholic Women have been raising awareness.



Senator Tom Davis presents a new bill affecting title, payday, and installment loans—with the support of the South Carolina Fair Lending Alliance. Below: the first committee hearing on the bill was well attended.



## CHRISTIAN UNITY AND INTERFAITH HARMONY: A NOTE

In presentations to our diocesan employees in Charleston and the Presbyteral Council in Columbia and then in conversation at the Priests' Convocation at Myrtle Beach (all since the last issue of this newsletter), it has become clear that there are events and ecumenical and interreligious activities going on in many quarters. Many of them, however, get little notice because they aren't widely reported. Some parishes have interfaith prayer services at Thanksgiving, others have ministerial groups that gather regularly, others have special ecumenical gatherings during Lent. Some of them are publicized in local areas; some like the one below are intentionally small and local. Whatever they might be, please notify our office if there is something in the offing—especially if they can be held at times that work for our Bishop and the Vicars General!

**It was late-breaking news, small, and spirited—an initial ecumenical event for First Christian Church in West Ashley. Readings were exactly the same as those we use at our Catholic Ash Wednesday liturgy. We listened, read, sang, prayed.**



## UPCOMING EVENTS—WORTH ATTENDING OR TUNING TO

### **March 15, 2024 at 7 PM      Lenten Ecumenical Service**

Trinity United Methodist Church, Conway—in collaboration with St. James Catholic Church, local denominations, our office, and others

### **May 19, 2024 at 3 PM      Ecumenical Pentecost Service**

Grace Reformed Episcopal Church, Moncks Corner—in collaboration with Mepkin Abbey, local denominations, our office, and others

### **Ongoing programs offered online and in person by**

Atlantic Institute South Carolina

Interfaith Partners of South Carolina (IPSC)

Charleston Interreligious Council (CIC)

South Carolina Christian Action Council (SCCAC)

Interfaith Partners of Aiken

South Carolina Fair Lending Alliance

South Carolinians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (SCADP)

Also see online programs offered by: Atlantic Institute, Focolare and New City Press, Rumi Forum



## OUR MEMBERSHIPS

**CADEIO—Catholic Association of Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers (USCCB)**

**IPSC—Interfaith Partners of South Carolina (Board membership)**

**SCCAC—South Carolina Christian Action Council (Board membership)**

**SCADP—South Carolinians for Alternatives to the Death Penalty (Board Membership)**

## OUR ACTIVE AFFILIATIONS

**Atlantic Institute, Greenville, SC**

**Bridge Builders (Hilton Head-Bluffton-Savannah)**

**Catholics for the Common Good (based at Saint Gregory the Great, Bluffton)**

**Charleston Interreligious Council**

**Interfaith Partners of Aiken**

**South Carolina Fair Lending Alliance**

**Water Mission (international reach, based in North Charleston, with ecumenical partners in the Lowcountry)**



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