

ORANGE COUNTY EDITION

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Bridges of Understanding

Orange County has been making substantial efforts to promote understanding locally in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11. None of this comes as a surprise. It's a tribute to the important groundwork done in the county long before.

In Irvine on Monday night, the National Conference for Community and Justice, the city and Concordia University will sponsor a forum designed to help residents get to know more about one another. A Muslim principal, a representative of the Lutheran university that is hosting the event and a representative of the area's Chinese cultural and educational community will offer their perspectives on diversity.

Last week, the Islamic Educational Center of Orange County held a forum to help non-Muslims come to a better understanding of Islam and its place in American life.

A few days earlier, the Orange County Human Relations Commission invited representatives from dozens of civil rights advocacy groups to discuss tolerance. They heard from a young man whose recent beating outside an Anaheim karaoke bar is being investigated as a possible hate crime, one of a number targeting Arabs or Muslims since Sept. 11.

Orange County is privileged to have organizations that have been at this work for some time. The commission, for example, has labored for three decades to address problems of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination. When the attacks occurred, the commission

was ready with a curriculum to dispatch to county schools that could be used to explain the violence. Immediately after the attacks, Executive Director Rusty Kennedy held a news conference with Jewish and Muslim leaders to try to establish a tone of harmony.

The local chapter of the National Conference for Community and Justice long has been involved in efforts to foster better understanding between people of different religions and cultures, and it has sponsored such special events as the popular tour of local houses of worship.

On the Orange County Commentary page today, interfaith activist Kay Lindahl writes about the special meaning of this year's Religious Diversity Faire at UC Irvine. This event, set for Saturday, is in its eighth year and has been a crown jewel of the county's efforts to build understanding at the deepest level, of core religious values and beliefs.

Others in the county also have been involved in various dialogues between faith groups over a period of time. For example, Cal State Fullerton's Department of Comparative Religion long has been a leader in the scholarly pursuit of religious diversity and has a faculty experienced in interfaith dialogue.

This is a county that, whatever its problems, has understood the value of building understanding as a kind of preventive measure. The work to build bridges in ordinary times has served as a strong foundation for coping with the stress of extraordinary times.

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