

NORTHFIELD



RECORDER STAFF/MATT BURKHART

The Rev. Ted Thornton and The Rev. Julie Olmsted in the sanctuary of the Northfield Trinitarian Congregational Church.

‘Become a part of the Northfield Interfaith Alliance’

By REV. JULIE OLMSTED and REV. TED THORNTON

Religion may be waning in the West, but in most of the world it's a very big deal, and it's growing.

The Hindu Kumbh Mela rites, held at regular intervals in various parts of India, routinely break the Guinness Book of World Records in attendance for a single event: In 2013, 120 million people gathered in Allahabad over a two-month period and over 30 million arrived on a single day, Feb. 10. A million and a half people attend the Muslim Hajj each year, the pilgrimage to Mecca, which begins this year in late August. Many more would come to fulfill this sacred duty if the Saudi government lifted the caps it began imposing in recent years for reasons of safety, health and security.

In response to the global reality of religion and in the face of rising religious intolerance, the two of us last fall began discussions that led us to create the Northfield Interfaith Alliance, whose aim is to

promote greater knowledge, understanding, tolerance and respect for religions other than one's own.

The inaugural project is a course on the religions of the world, which will begin this September and run through May 2018. The course will survey and compare the many ways human beings have been religious throughout history.

We will study and reflect upon the following major religious traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We'll also look at primal indigenous religious traditions including the Australian aboriginal "dream-time" and the Mother Goddess.

Participants will be invited to deepen and enrich their own spiritual lives through connections they make with the material. We will supplement the main text with readings from primary sources, slides and video materials.

Learning about different religious traditions can lead individuals back home to one's original faith, with new per-

spective, no longer a "hand-me-down" faith but one with vitality, depth and personal meaning. It can also provide appreciation of the common threads that make the tapestry of all paths to God.

The case has been made throughout the generations for a "Supreme Being," a phrase for God that declines adherence to a particular faith. This leaves much open to interpretation. One interpretation might be that, were all followers of any faith to practice their faith with diligence and a sincere heart, Supreme Being would be a reality — the Supreme Being of human beings. The being of humans would create a world of harmony and peace, the primary aim of the heart of religion itself.

Most if not all of the world's religions have much in common when it comes to Supreme Being: The Golden Rule, Truthful speech, Forgiveness, Generosity, Faithfulness and Charity, to name a few.

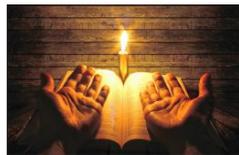
There are, of course, many differences as well. Studying the world's faith traditions is not an attempt to make a "religious stew." We are not all the same and should not minimize that fact. Just like different

languages, there are distinct sounds, emphases and accents. There are strikingly different customs, meanings and paradigms. But underneath all that is the wonder of transcendent love and humanity's desire to feel it, embody it and extend it. This is Supreme Being.

Our assertion is that by learning about and celebrating the differences, Supreme Being is realized — a happy irony that requires only an open mind and willing spirit.

Future plans of the Alliance include a follow-up course for 2018-19 on practicing ministry, non-ordained as well as ordained, in a world where rapid global communication networks are bringing members of various religious traditions into closer touch with one another, for better and for worse.

Join us! Here's where to go for more information: we're on the website of the Trinitarian Congregational Church in Northfield: <http://www.tcc-northfield.org/home.html>. At the top, click on "Ministries" and scroll down to find a link to the home page of the Alliance. You can also reach us through the church business office at 413-498-5839.



FAITH MATTERS

CALLING ALL FAITH LEADERS: Share your perspective in this weekly series. For guidelines, email religion@recorder.com or call 413-772-0261, ext. 265.