

Inspired By Our Foremothers in Seneca Falls, Women's Interfaith Institute Breaks New Ground

In Seneca Falls, a “mecca for women’s rights advocates,” the Women’s Interfaith Institute is breaking new ground.

By Allison Stokes, Ambassador, Parliament of the World’s Religions, March 2014



Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Dr. Melinda Grube) and Attorney Nadia Shahram meet in Seneca Falls to talk on International Women’s Day 2014 —across religious traditions, countries of origin, and centuries! Photo by Dave Duprey

It seemed like a good idea at the time. The church in Seneca Falls had a **For Sale** sign in front with a “Price Reduced” banner across it. The structure, built in 1871, stood next door to the Women’s Rights National Historical Park, which was established to commemorate the first women’s rights convention in 1848 and to preserve the Wesleyan Chapel where the gathering was held.

This church would be an ideal location for calling public attention to the pioneering leadership of women in the Interfaith Movement. So it was that leaders of the Women’s Interfaith Institute incorporated as a non-profit, educational organization in New York State in 2002 in order to raise funds for a deposit to purchase the late 19th Century Wesleyan Church.

An appeal letter went out to potential donors, and their response was heartening. Many agreed that the site would be perfect for an organization whose mission is “Women supporting women of diverse faiths in generating spiritual leadership, scholarship and service.”

Contributions large and small came in, and in 2003 we purchased the church. As far as we are aware, the Women’s Interfaith Institute’s home in Seneca Falls is the only structure in the U.S. dedicated to promoting women’s interfaith (or multi-faith) efforts.

Seneca Falls draws visitors from all over the country and the world; because it is a destination for persons passionate about women’s rights and human rights, it provides an ideal context

for the Institute's work of bridging boundaries— whether religious, racial, ethnic, cultural— that have traditionally divided people. We seek a more inclusive human identity.



The Women's Interfaith Institute in Seneca Falls, New York was a dream conjured by Parliament Ambassador Allison Stokes and made come true by a town famous for women's movement. Today it is the hub of programs trailblazing model relations across diverse religious women groups in the U.S., specifically building upon significant history of female leadership within the Interfaith movement chronicled by the Institute.

Photo: Madeline Hansen

During our ten plus years of programming, we have offered a variety of lectures, seminars, films, workshops, retreats, and celebrations as we endeavor to “bring peace to life.” Most recently we have been focused on learning about Islam and bringing Muslims and persons from other religious traditions together.

Programs breaking ground then and now

A grant from the New York Council for the Humanities made it possible for the Institute to break ground last spring (2013) in offering a “Muslim Journeys” reading and discussion group. We chose five books with stories about and by young Muslims: **How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?** (Moustafa Bayoumi), **Acts of Faith** (Eboo Patel), **Persepolis** (Marjane Satrapi), **Minaret** (Leila Aboulela), and **Broken Verses** (Kamila Shamsie).

Ten women gathered in six monthly sessions to share comments, questions, insights, reflections, personal stories, and (at the close of every meeting) refreshments. Because we came from different faith traditions, including Quaker, Baha'i, Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, and Roman Catholic, our sharing was rich, and our learning from one another profound. We especially valued the perspectives of Busaina and Musawar, a Muslim mother and daughter in our group, who are from Pakistan.

This year in March, Women's History month, the Institute joined with another non-profit in Seneca Falls, the Women's Institute for Leadership and Learning, to offer a unique dialogue. The event, featured Buffalo attorney Nadia Shahram, an author, activist, and Muslim women's rights advocate, in dialogue with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a convenor of the first women's rights movement. Stanton was portrayed by Dr. Melinda Grube, an historian and adjunct professor who has studied Stanton's works and life extensively, and uses her knowledge to bring Stanton seemingly to life. This remarkable discussion, entitled “Declaring Equality: Renewing a Legacy,” crossed religious traditions (Muslim and Christian), cultures (Iranian and American), and even centuries (19th – 21st).

Institute board member and former mayor of Seneca Falls, Diana Smith, observed that the remarkable conversation was between two legal minds though generations apart. Diana noted,

Both shared surprisingly similar stories of childhood experiences which served as inspiration to effect change, including the motivation to learn the law. Stanton was especially angered by the unjust treatment of women who came to her father for legal counsel, only to find that the law provided little protection or regard for women.

While Shahram's legal expertise helps women improve their lives through the judicial process, Stanton suggested that in the mid-nineteenth century, that would not be possible. She said her father likely pushed her to learn the law not to practice it, but rather to help her identify how to change it.

The Institute's upcoming program, to be held during Seneca Falls Convention Days on July 18th and 19th celebrates the first 1848 convention. Highlighting Muslim women's experiences, the Saturday events have been conceived and planned by attorney Shahram and some of her law students in Buffalo. The focus will be unveiling of "A Declaration of Equalities for Muslim Women" written on the model of the Stanton's original "Declaration of Sentiments." Nadia writes,

This document is a list of demands and sentiments that aspire to identify and amend laws which are discriminatory, oppressive, and prejudicial towards women in many Islamic countries. We are insisting on reformed legislation that is consistent with equitable human rights for women. Through these actions, we hope to contribute to the efforts of numerous individuals and organizations dedicated to the ongoing battle for progress and fair treatment of women throughout the world.

From the Ashes of a Fire, Interfaith Family in Seneca Hills Stands Tall

A number of the Institute's programs are being held at the National Park next door, whose hospitality we gratefully appreciate. This is because five years ago, in March 2009, there was a fire above the ceiling in our Great Hall (former church sanctuary), immediately after renovations were completed. Caused by old, live, electrical wiring, the damage to the roof and building wasn't so much fire damage, as water damage, necessarily caused by the fire fighters.

The challenge of recovering from this devastating event has sometimes been overwhelming. The donations of volunteer help, especially from Hobart and William Smith Colleges students, and of contributions to replace a roof that was only 5 years old, have been heartening. We are particularly grateful for a generous donation from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States. With this we were able to complete the roof repair in August, just as President Obama stopped by to visit the National Park. (Secret Service agents ordered roofers OFF the roof during the duration of the President's visit!)

When the challenges we face seem particularly tough, we recall Elizabeth Cady Stanton, her sister suffragists, and the obstacles they faced. Few lived to see the passage of the 19th Amendment, giving women the vote. As Stanton wrote, they were "sowing winter wheat," not necessarily expecting to see the fruits of their labors.



Allison Stokes

We in the Women's Interfaith Institute are inspired and encouraged by these pioneering foremothers, even as we feel that in similar, though different ways, we are breaking new ground ourselves.

Allison Stokes is Founding Director of the Women's Interfaith Institute. The organization was incorporated in the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts in 1993, and continues there. This article profiles the programs and founding ten years later of an affiliate, Women's Interfaith Institute, a sister group in the Finger Lakes Region of Upstate New York.