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Midlands Voices: Many resources in Omaha bolster religious diversity

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An Oct. 10 essay by Travis Vauhgn, "Shifting religious climate evident in U.S.," raises several interesting points in regard to the demographic changes being experienced in many American cities. Omaha is not immune to these changes. Vauhgn states that there is "an ongoing struggle ... with how to navigate the country's shifting religious climate."

Omaha has found a way to handle this "struggle." A multitude of organizations in the area offer a variety of ways in which to respond to these changing times.

As our city becomes more religiously diverse, organizations such as Project Interfaith, the Center for Faith Studies and the Kripke Center for the Study of Religion and Society are leading the way toward a better understanding of this diversity. They are instrumental in attracting renowned religious scholars to our community to contribute their knowledge and expertise.

These organizations have sponsored programs and workshops for teachers, health care workers, the media and other segments of our society that enhance our knowledge, appreciation and understanding of those who follow a different spiritual path than our own.

Vauhgn states that some people "feel threatened by the increased religious diversity in this country." One of the most significant ways to alleviate this fear is through education.

A recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found Americans to be religiously illiterate. On a survey of 32 questions over a variety of religious topics, the average American respondent answered 16 questions correctly. Under any grading system, 50 percent is a failing grade.

Certainly, classes in the study of religion are available at our local colleges and universities, but we in the Omaha area are fortunate that some of our local high schools also offer classes in the comparative study of the world's major faiths. Bellevue Public Schools, Millard Public Schools and, for the first time starting with this school year, Omaha Central High School all offer such a course.

The world religion courses at Bellevue West and Omaha Central are dual-enrollment courses through the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Students who are dual-enrolled can earn college credit upon the successful completion of these classes.

All of these courses offer an academically neutral study of the sociological aspects of religion, as well as a scholarly base of factual information about the history, theology and practices of the world's major spiritual paths.

Critical thinking and meaningful dialogue among people from diverse religious traditions will play an instrumental role in how Omaha and the nation react to these cultural trends.

It is therefore imperative that our young people, our future, overcome this fear of the "other" through knowledge, positive social contact and interfaith dialogue with the various religious communities that are becoming more and more a vibrant part of the shifting religious climate of our city.

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