

LANE STUMLER

I grew up on a farm in Starlight, Indiana, fourth generation of German immigrants, and attended Catholic schools, elementary through high school. After receiving my degree in Education, I taught school for a couple of years before joining the U.S. Air Force. I am a veteran of the Vietnam era receiving my honorable discharge in December 1972. After my discharge, I used the G.I. Bill to back to school, this time studying Architecture. Living in Philadelphia from 1975 to 1979 was an education in itself. Our nation's 200th anniversary celebration took place mostly in Philadelphia in 1976. After graduation from Temple University in 1979, I moved back home to Louisville/Southern Indiana and practiced architecture until my retirement in 2014.

I discovered *The Salaam Network (TSN)* in May 2017 at a presentation at St. Andrew United Church of Christ. This interfaith panel was on "Inheriting Abraham: One Ancestral Family: Three Faiths: An exploration of the legacy of Abrahamic tradition in Judaism, Christianity and Islam." *TSN* promotes understanding of the true teachings of the three Abrahamic religions whose basic tenets are Love and Compassion. From its presentations I have also learned about pervasive myths and misunderstandings, religion versus culture and mis-taught history.

Due to *TSN's* programs, commonalities and accord between the three great monotheistic religions are now so apparent to me. I find it astounding that this is not common knowledge. It seems that our modern society only looks for differences to turn into divisions. Since 2017, I have attended every *TSN* presentation that I could. I have been especially impressed by the presentations on women's rights and LGBTQ issues.

I was greatly inspired by the education I was receiving from *TSN's* presentations, and most impressed by the presenters' depth of knowledge and the wide range of topics they covered. I am very appreciative of the opportunity to be educated in subjects which I am so intensely desirous to learn.

I would like to say a few words about what *TSN's* presentations have meant to me in a personal context. I am a gay man. Religion has always been a very important part of my life, but from early childhood my religion did not seem to fit me or rather, I did not fit. I had a strong faith in God but was told that I may not be loved by God as I am. I tried desperately to change, and prayed for God to change me into what He intended me to be. Now, decades later, I realize that I was simply not taught correctly. Also, as a child I could not understand racism and the apparent oppression of women that seemed common in the religious culture into which I was born. Fortunately, in my early life I simply did not allow the negative attitudes around me to shape my own thinking.

From *TSN's* presentations I have learned that serving those who are disadvantaged or marginalized in our community is of utmost importance in the three Abrahamic traditions. I have dedicated much of my time to being engaged in volunteer activities focusing on helping marginalized groups. Since my retirement, I have had more time to

devote to these activities which include working at my church soup kitchen, free community health fair, and housing repairs for those in need in our neighborhoods and poverty-stricken Appalachia. Currently, I am involved heavily with the Homeless Coalition of Southern Indiana. Giving of my time to help others has been more fulfilling than any other activity of my life, and I feel that it brings me closer to God.

The founder of *TSN*, Riffat Hassan, is one of the bravest women I have ever met. She has survived a long life of the struggle of being a Muslim feminist. I use the word “survived,” recognizing the dangers she must have encountered taking on the important work of challenging the misconceptions of religion that have pervaded centuries of patriarchal culture in which Islam developed.

Armed with knowledge I feel that I am now better prepared, enabled to speak with confidence against prejudice and bigotry which are the result primarily of ignorance.

TSN comes on the scene at a time in which its healing message is so greatly needed. Our nation is in a troubled period replete with division and misunderstanding which leads to discrimination, bigotry, and sadly - in some cases - to violence.

TSN is a network of peacemakers. By its very nature it is diverse and inclusive. *TSN* has the courage to tackle current issues that cripple our society. My life is much richer now as a result of taking advantage of these wonderful opportunities offered by *TSN*.

If only this type of educational programs existed nationwide. My hope is that *TSN* will grow in recognition and reach a broader audience, and hopefully, one day grow into the nationwide movement that our country so seriously needs to help with the healing of our nation and the spreading of peace and understanding amongst our citizens.