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## Promoting interfaith dialogue

*Retired minister reflects on final decade in ministry*

By J.R. DUREN

THE VILLAGES, Fla. — If America is the Melting Pot, New York City is where the country's first cauldron was crafted.

Unifying the mosaic of religious beliefs of the city's Wagner College, a liberal arts school on Staten Island, earned Village of Caroline resident Richard F. Michael special recognition upon his retirement as a minister in New York City.

Michael received Wagner College's Presidential Medal of Honor for his efforts to promote interfaith dialogue among students during his four-year tenure as the school's chaplain.

"It was just very exciting and a very humbling moment for me," he said. "I didn't even know about this award."

Wagner College President Richard Guarasci presented the award to Michael during the school's baccalaureate ceremony in May.

"The president literally stopped the service and invited me to come forward and explained that he wanted to say 'Thank you'," Michael said. "It was delightful for him to take the time to do that."

The ceremony served as a pinnacle at the zenith of his ministry in New York City — 10 years — and his 39-year career as a clergyman.

"I never thought I would be privileged to be a college campus pastor. I never thought I would end my career in New York City," he said.

Michael was taking a sabbatical in Lancaster County, Pa., when he received a call to Staten Island's Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in 2001.

He initially was astounded by the religious diversity of New York City, a far cry from the relatively traditional culture that typified Lancaster County.

"For me, this whole interfaith world, of living and working next to the mosque down the street or the Buddhist temple on the other side of town, this was all new ground for me," he said.

The frenetic pace of the city of more than eight million people served as a lively backdrop for interfaith ministry at Trinity Lutheran, he said.

"You are never sitting still in New York City," Michael said. "There's always something happening."

Michael sensed a peak in his own curiosity about interfaith matters in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy.

He desired to learn more about Islam, an inclination that eventually led him to serve as the president of the Staten Island Council of Churches and coordinator of Staten Island's annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Both forums promoted religious understanding and interfaith dialogue, he said.

Michael assumed the chaplaincy of Wagner College in 2007 in the wake of the unexpected passing of the school's previous chaplain, the Rev. Lyle Guttu.

Guttu also was Michael's friend and colleague.

"I don't ever think I did anything at Wagner without thinking of my friend," he said. "There was never a moment he wasn't a part of."

Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism all were represented in the student body, he said.

Michael felt it was his responsibility to ensure that students of all religious backgrounds could feel comfortable at the college's chapel.

Both his congregation and the college allowed him to move freely between both flocks.

"When I was needed at the college I was free to go there, and when I was needed in the parish the college let me go (there)," Michael said. "It was really the patience of the people that allowed me to do both. It was delightful."

By the end of his tenure as chaplain, he said, the school's chapel became a place where a Koran sat on one side of the room opposite a statue of the Hindu deity Ganesh.

"For me, it was a great thing to watch that happen," he said. "The people of faith worked together to understand each other."

He believes his efforts enriched the student body's interfaith understanding, he said.

"I think that it opened windows for some, and for many others those (windows) were already open," Michael said. "For some, it made clear that we live in a global community that needs critical thinkers and ongoing dialogue."

In addition to the honor bestowed by Wagner College, in June, Michael received an honorary Doctor of Divinity from Ignatius (Ind.) University.