engaging difference
mission
We build learning communities where religious difference becomes a powerful force for good.

vision
To make Baltimore a model interreligious city.
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dear friends

In today’s world, conversations about religion are unavoidable. From culture and politics, to art and economics, the impact of religion is everywhere. Religion influences our daily lives in ways both big and small, requiring us all to have basic religious literacy and interreligious understanding to navigate our interconnected world.

Whether we personally believe, belong, or practice - or consider ourselves to not be religious at all — we have to find a way to speak with each other about the things that matter, and listen to diverse religious and ethical voices in our communities. We must continue engaging difference, celebrating our neighbors not only for what makes us similar, but also for what makes us distinctly unalike.

As Americans face the continued challenges of Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, the ICJS remains committed to confronting religious hatred and dispelling the stereotypes falsely used to caricature our neighbors. For over thirty years the ICJS has refused to give in to those who weaponize our differences. Through ICJS programs and fellowships we increase religious literacy and foster interreligious bonds in our communities. Together we can transform Baltimore into a model Interreligious City.

This past year, we had the privilege of teaching clergy, religious leaders, seminarians, rabbinical students, civic leaders, and activists, as well as friends in the community. We are inspired and humbled by everyone who joined us in the sacred tasks of listening and learning. We are grateful for who used their voices to take a stand against religious bigotry and intolerance. In this coming year we look forward to continuing our educational work with civic leaders, clergy, and the community, as well as piloting an innovative fellowship for high school teachers from Baltimore public, independent, and religious schools.

So are you ready to talk about religion with your family, friends, and colleagues? We are. Come join us.

With gratitude and with hope,

Heather Miller Rubens
Executive Director and Roman Catholic Scholar

Ken Karpay
Board President
mapping an interreligious city

our reach in 2018

- Imagining Justice in Baltimore (IJB) Fellows
- Entrepreneurs Lunchtime Series (ELS) Participant Workplaces
- Religion Teachers Network (RTN) Participating Schools
- Community Partners
- Religious Communities and Congregations
“I value the ability to dialogue on differences at ICJS. That’s one of the hardest things to do especially nowadays when a group will ostracize you or treat you like you don’t have a right to that opinion if you’re different than the group. A place where you can dialogue on difference, such as ICJS, builds strength.”

Khalil Ismail
The Secret Life of Muslims panelist & 2016 Imagining Justice in Baltimore Fellow

**BREAKING FAST:**

**Interfaith Iftar**
The ICJS hosted its first interfaith iftar (breaking of fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan) in partnership with the Muslim Community Cultural Center of Baltimore (MCCCB). The iftar brought together MCCCB congregants with ICJS learning community members including Imagining Justice in Baltimore Fellows, entrepreneurs, teachers, and clergy.

**PANEL:**

**Religious Communities Under Attack**
Anti-Semitic incidents are on the rise. Islamophobic assaults have reached 9/11-era levels. What can our religious communities do to bridge interreligious divides? What can you do? The ICJS and the Jewish Museum of Maryland hosted a community discussion with clergy and community leaders strategizing community efforts to curtail hate and vitriolic rhetoric.

**LECTURE:**

**American Anti-Semitism on the Rise: An Evening with Ira Forman**
Ira Forman, the former special envoy to combat Anti-Semitism at the State Department, gave a public lecture offering his reflections on the contemporary challenges of Anti-Semitism.

**COMEDY AND FILM:**

**The Secret Life of Muslims**
Comedian Negin Farsad kicked off the evening with a short comedy set and then welcomed Khalil Ismail, a Baltimore based Creative Director and artist, and Josh Seftel, director of The Secret Life of Muslims, to the stage to screen never before seen vignettes from the second season of The Secret Life of Muslims. Dr. Homayra Ziad, moderated a discussion between Farsad, Seftel, and Ismail.

building an interreligious city
one community event at a time
“I’m looked at as a black woman before I’m looked at as a Christian,” Jade said. “Who I am and what I stand for is because of my faith. But to others, I’m black first and then, if they take the time to get to know me, Christian.”

Jade Nicole Neverdon Merritt 2018 Imagining Justice in Baltimore Fellow

Sharing Faith
Jade Nicole Neverdon Merritt was trained as a microbiologist. She spent years as a clinical researcher. But when her mother passed away from colorectal cancer in 2016, Jade drew on her faith and quit her job.

“I asked myself, what’s the worst thing that could’ve happened to our family? Well, it just happened,” Jade said. “So I went full steam ahead to create an organization to support families like my own, to fill a void in healthcare services.”

Jade founded Mikey’s Miracle Foundation, a non-profit that provides services for patients and their families during their fight against cancer. Jade was determined to provide the desperately needed services missing in the healthcare system such as meal preparation, nutrition advice, cleaning services, and pastoral counseling.

Through participating in the ICJS Entrepreneurs Lunchtime Series and serving as an Imagining Justice in Baltimore Fellow, Jade quickly realized that the health system needs interfaith leaders.

“Before serving as an Imagining Justice in Baltimore Fellow, I always looked at having cancer, faith, and healing through the lens of having a Christian patient or family,” Jade said. “But now I’m cognizant that not everyone shares my beliefs. We have to build interfaith relationships so we can better serve our patients and at the very least refer them to receive the pastoral care they need.”

For Jade, interfaith is nothing new. Her mother was a devout Christian and her father is Muslim. But when she’s out in Baltimore, it’s not her faith that defines her most days.

“The fellowship taught me to take my own view out of how I understand others,” Jade said. “You look at people through the lens of how you perceive life. And until you consciously stop doing so, you expect people to think that same way. I’ve learned to be more open to having these conversations about race, justice, and faith.”

These are lessons Jade plans to take with her as she builds Mikey’s Miracle Foundation.

“Mikey’s Miracle Foundation is my true purpose; it feels divinely orchestrated. And I’m always looking at how to improve my organization in terms of my faith,” Jade said. “But now, I’ve expanded my lens. I’m looking at how to improve my organization in terms of the faiths and needs of those we serve.”
building an interreligious city with clergy & religious leaders

EMERGING RELIGIOUS LEADERS (ERL) IS HOSTED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE WASHINGTON THEOLOGICAL CONSORTIUM. ERL IS AN ANNUAL, WEEK-LONG IMMERSION PROGRAM THAT BRINGS TOGETHER RABBINICAL AND CHRISTIAN SEMINARIANS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY FOR INTERRELIGIOUS STUDY AND DIALOGUE—AN OPPORTUNITY THAT IS MISSING AT MANY SEMINARIES. IN 2018, ERL WELCOMED TWENTY-FOUR SEMINARIANS FROM CALIFORNIA, NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, VIRGINIA, AND WASHINGTON, D.C.

Why did you decide to go to seminary?
The decision was a process that I had been thinking about for years. Before deciding, I had been working in social justice circles in both Jewish and non-Jewish settings. That’s when I realized that I was the most fulfilled when I was mobilizing [the Jewish] community, and I decided rabbinical school was the best path for me to do so.

What made you interested in interfaith?
I was raised in Minneapolis. I lived in the city, and most of the Jews in the area lived in the suburbs. So when I wasn’t in my Jewish school or in synagogue, most of my community wasn’t Jewish. But from a young age, it was very apparent to me that the world is filled with people of all different faiths. And I realized that if I’m serious about making the world a better place, I have to do so alongside people of other faiths as well. And while I learn so much about other faiths when I study with other religions, I also learn a lot about my own faith in the process.

Why did you participate in the Emerging Religious Leaders program?
On a personal level, I feel like my knowledge of Christianity is not to the level I want it to be, and Emerging Religious Leaders was an opportunity to expand my knowledge. As a future rabbi, I believe it’s my responsibility to know the role that faith plays in my congregants’ communities. And for almost all congregants, their communities include Christians and Christian influences. Emerging Religious Leaders was also a great fit because the best interfaith learning comes from relationships and conversations. Emerging Religious Leaders had both the text based learning and the conversational or relational learning.

What was your biggest takeaway from the Emerging Religious Leaders program?
I feel like everyone at Emerging Religious Leaders genuinely wants to learn from each other. It’s really beautiful to be in a space where the goal isn’t to be right, but rather to learn from each other. We spent five days together learning and talking. It’s not realistic for people to come to a completely new understanding around a text or difficult idea after just one conversation. There needs to be spaciousness and time for real learning, and Emerging Religious Leaders proved the impact of time and conversation.

Sarah Brammer-Shlay
A rabbinical student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Philadelphia and a participant in the 2018 Emerging Religious Leaders Program.
“You aren’t just looking for a common thread of kindness, but you always need to know the faiths so that you can be profoundly and deeply respectful of them and the people who follow them.”

Jen Hobbins | longtime ICJS mini-course participant and donor

In Pursuit of Peace

During the turbulence of the 1960s, Jen Hobbins was searching for a spiritual home. She comes from a long line of Presbyterian pastors, and her mother was a devout Catholic. She joined the Religious Society of Friends in her pursuit for world peace.

Working for world peace sounds lofty. But with Jen on the job, you might just believe it’s attainable.

“I read a book by the Dalai Lama that said if you want world peace, which is a central focus for me and was for my late husband too, you need to study all of the world’s religions. You aren’t just looking for a common thread of kindness, but you always need to know the faiths so that you can be profoundly and deeply respectful of them and the people who follow them,” Jen said.

Jen is a lifelong teacher, and she has the warmth and understanding eyes that all the best teachers have. But she’s happy for the role reversal when she comes to ICJS. She has attended almost every ICJS mini-course and lecture since first being introduced to the ICJS in the early 2000s.

“The courses and conversations [at the ICJS] are so incredible because of a commitment to very serious study,” Jen said. “Because the scholars begin from a profound understanding of the subject matter and because they’ve studied the materials for so long, so hard, and so well, they can focus their energy on making it enticing and accessible. The scholars make the texts that would normally seem the most off putting, come to life.”

Building an Inter-religious City: One Student at a Time

FROM RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN LITERATURE TO HOW FAITH INFORMS SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK, MINI-COURSES DELVE INTO A VARIETY OF PROVOCATIVE TOPICS AND PROVIDE ADULT LEARNERS THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO A DEEP DIVE INTO ONE SUBJECT OVER A SERIES OF CLASS MEETINGS. THIS PAST YEAR, ICJS HOSTED OVER 100 STUDENTS THROUGH THREE COURSES:

• FROM AVOCADO TOAST TO MATZO BALL SOUP: MAKING SENSE OF JUDAISM IN AMERICA TODAY
• STORIES OF FLANNERY O’CONNOR AND PHILIP ROTH: JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION
• TERRIFYING WOMEN: TEXTS THAT MAKE US SHUDDER
THE ICJS EMERGED OUT OF THE CONVICTION THAT RELIGIOUS IGNORANCE, FEAR, AND HOSTILITY COULD BE DISARMED THROUGH SUSTAINED INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING AMONG LEADERS IN OUR CITY. IN ADDITION TO OUR CONTINUED WORK WITH LOCAL CLERGY AND SCHOLARS, THE ICJS EXPANDED ITS NOTION OF LEADERSHIP TO INCLUDE ACTIVISTS, ENTREPRENEURS, TEACHERS, AND BUSINESS PROFESSIONALS. THESE LEARNING COMMUNITIES ARE THE FOUNDATION OF AN INTERRELIGIOUS CITY.

Entrepreneurs Lunchtime Series (ELS)
ELS brings Baltimore-based entrepreneurial leaders together to discuss the role that religion and ethics can play in building healthy communities.

Religion Teachers Network (RTN)
RTN connects and supports religion and cultural-studies high school teachers through professional-development seminars, networking, and sharing of resources and classroom experiences. RTN is an emerging network of teachers dedicated to this vision of 21st-century citizenship.

Teaching Fellowship
After years of successful RTN workshops, ICJS reaffirmed its commitment to high school teachers by announcing the launch of the Teaching Fellowship. The Teaching Fellowship Planning Committee met fall 2017 through spring 2018 to plan a Fellowship for Baltimore high school teachers from public, private, and parochial schools. The first Teaching Fellows cohort will meet in fall 2018.

Scripture Forum
Scripture Forum brings together clergy and ICJS scholars for the study of classical and contemporary texts on topics both central to our religious traditions and relevant to modern society. The ICJS contends that one rabbi, minister, priest, or imam will impact at least 1,000 individuals over the course of his or her career.

“IT IS CRUCIAL THAT THE NEXT GENERATION OF BALTIMORE’S CITIZENS LEARN ABOUT HOW THEIR PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD DIFFER AND HOW THEY CAN LEVERAGE THOSE VARYING VIEWS TO CREATE SOMETHING GREATER THAN THEMSELVES, TOGETHER. I LOOK FORWARD TO THE LEARNING, COOPERATION, AND UNDERSTANDING THAT TEACHERS WILL DEVELOP FOR THEMSELVES AND IMPART TO OTHERS, ESPECIALLY THEIR STUDENTS, AS A RESULT OF THE TEACHING FELLOWSHIP.”

Monica Whippo
Social Studies Coordinator for Baltimore City Public Schools and ICJS Teaching Fellowship planning committee member
Tariq Najee-ullah

Tariq Najee-ullah is a 2018 Imagining Justice in Baltimore fellow and assistant imam at the Muslim Community Cultural Center of Baltimore. Najee-ullah also works full time as a patent agent and is the founder of the interfaith education organization DC Musliman. Najee-ullah completed a graduate certificate in Muslim-Christian studies from the Washington Theological Consortium, received a degree in Arabic, Islamic Sciences, and Islamic Jurisprudence from the Abu Nour Institute in Syria, and graduated with an M.A. in Islam and Muslim-Christian relations from Georgetown University in spring 2018.

Why did you decide to become an imam?

I went mostly to public school, and my parents were concerned about my religious education. So, they hired a Muslim tutor who challenged me to know my religion. She asked me questions that I didn’t know the answer to. She would always point me to the Quran to find the answers. She gave me the strength to know that my religion makes sense and has answers. When my imam established an opportunity for students to study abroad, I went to Syria to study for three years after college and learned Arabic. When I was there, community members and U.S. mosques supported my education. I wanted to give back to the community that helped me attend the program, so I volunteered at the Masjid Muhammad in D.C. when I returned. As I got more and more involved, there was always more to do and more responsibility. I became assistant imam and then interim imam. And now I’m working at the Muslim Community Cultural Center in Baltimore.

How did you become involved with interfaith work?

My mother, father, uncle and aunt are Muslim. Another aunt is a Buddhist, and another aunt is a devout Christian. My dad’s mother was a self-proclaimed Baptist missionary. I have an uncle who is a member of a full gospel ministry. And my grandfather was a reverend. Discussing politics and religion became common place and has never riled me up. So when I started interfaith work and people were getting really upset in the conversation, I was confused at first. But I have a knack for it, and keeping calm. There’s a necessity for human interaction and relationships in this space that is dominated by stereotypes and othering.

Why do you dedicate so much of your work as an imam to interfaith?

I enjoy interfaith events because, for many people, it’s the first time they’ve been to a mosque or masjid. I know people who live next to a mosque and never visited. For some people, just walking in is a great first step.

It’s also the first time people might have a conscious dialogue with a Muslim. Your doctor or bank teller might very well be Muslim, but you don’t know it. At an interfaith event, you’re conscious that you’re speaking with a Muslim. The majority of the Muslim Cultural Community Center members are African American. A lot of people think Muslims are foreign or not part of American culture. There’s also a stereotype that all African American Muslims are members of the Nation of Islam. But that’s not the case. There’s a community of Muslims in Baltimore that goes back almost 70 years. Events like the interfaith iftar raises awareness of a community that people may not otherwise know about.

What do you value about ICJS’ interfaith work?

I deeply appreciate that the ICJS scholars respect scripture and what faith can do to the individual and society. Often in interfaith, programs are just for a photo opportunity without a genuine attempt at connecting with other human beings. But the relationships ICJS builds are genuine, and ICJS has a genuine desire to make a positive contribution to the city and community. ICJS holds a different expectation of faith leaders in society, one that goes beyond a photo opportunity. ICJS engages the multiple layers of government, culture, faith, and the business community, to galvanize the different parts of our society. Anything ICJS does, I make time to be a part of it because I see it as something worthwhile and beneficial.
Talking about religion is often considered taboo in the workplace. Why does Brown Advisory value diversity and inclusion events around interfaith dialogue?

JACOB: Over the last few years, society has become more fractured, partisan, and vitriolic. In the most classic sense, a CEO and Board work for the shareholders. But the prevailing notion at Brown Advisory is that we need to have a civil society where people understand and appreciate differences to maximize the type of community we can become. Our firm is learning to have difficult, open conversations. The ICJS has something they can teach everyone about how to have difficult conversations in a meaningful, goal-oriented way.

CLINTON: We didn’t want to manage our diversity and inclusion initiatives through a human resources lens typical of corporate America. We respect that it is both an individual and collective journey. For me, because I’m a lifelong Baltimorean, I wanted to make this a model and focal point for what is becoming a national conversation. We wanted to show people that dialogue and interfaith understanding is not only possible, but alive and well in Baltimore.

Does Baltimore’s corporate sector have a responsibility to improving interfaith relations?

CLINTON: Interfaith dialogue is inclusive by its very nature. And inclusivity is a benefit to the individual and to the workplace. From a business standpoint, it’s about doing well by doing good.

What excites you about the emerging partnerships across the nonprofit and for-profit sectors?

JACOB: Most American cities are so full of diversity and potential but have very acute issues such as poor health and poverty. You need a combination of government and the corporate and nonprofit sectors working together to make a difference. Your companies need to be good corporate citizens to help the non-profits, and it’s much more effective working together than working separately.

WORKSHOP

In December 2017, ICJS scholars led a lunch and learn workshop for Brown Advisory employees.

ATTENDANCE: 80.
The phrase “a life in quotation” (zitathaftes Leben) comes from the work of the celebrated German novelist Thomas Mann. In honor of Sigmund Freud’s eightieth birthday, Mann penned the essay “Freud and the Future,” in which he coined this phrase to explain how we establish continuity with the past while renewing it in the present. In part, this book explores how Mann’s concept operates within Jewish tradition.

The book, then, addresses two salient questions in modern Jewish thought. The first: What are the problems that befall a theological language that is interested only in preserving tradition? The second: What are the problems that befall a secular language that is interested only in destroying tradition?

In answering these questions, Sax looks to the applications of quotation in modern Jewish thought. In so doing, Sax draws out the dialectic between Jewish theological and secular views of language in order to establish a contemporary, sustainable form of Jewish identity rooted in tradition.

The research conducted in this book contributes to the broader questions regarding interreligious dialogue. Our intellectual and religious commitment to difference requires us to fully engage our own traditions in ways that simultaneously consider what makes us different and what makes us the same. In so doing, we slowly realize that our own identity occupies numerous spaces simultaneously. It is always partial, never singular or complete. This book explores these spaces philosophically through theories of language and translation. How quotations function in these theories, Sax argues, is critical to understanding how language, thought, and identity converge into our complicated religious selves.
dear friends

My forty year friendship with Charlie Obrecht started with one seemingly simple, shared idea: not only does religion still matter, but it is the stuff that binds us. Religion, as many of you know, is an expression of our ultimate concerns. Despite the growing disenchantment with organized religion, there is still no escape from the gravitational pull of it.

There is no doubt in my mind that the role of the ICJS is more urgent and more important than at any time in our thirty-year history. The ICJS provides the setting where people can learn in the midst of heated arguments and disagreements. For me this work is as foundational as it gets, and I am grateful, beyond all measure, to the ICJS community for providing me with the opportunity to work in a place where my great gladness has met the world’s great need. This is what the Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner calls a vocation.

In closing, I want you to know that I have not been sleeping well, and it is in large measure your fault. As I struggle to find my way into a restful slumber, I call to mind all the people who have blessed me. I see your faces and all the people who have made their mark on me. So many faces. I am awash with the images of individuals who make up a multitude. And I realize how indebted I am to all of you and all of them. I carry you and so many others deep in my bones. I can’t go anywhere without you. And you can be sure that I will carry you into my retirement.

With gratitude,

Rev. Dr. Chris Leighton
Founding Executive Director and Protestant Scholar

Leighton retired from ICJS on June 30, 2018.

The staff and Trustees thank him for his passion and unwavering dedication to making Baltimore a model interreligious city.
expanding our legacy
A Major Gifts Initiative 2014-2018

WITH GRATITUDE AND SINCERITY, THANK YOU TO OUR DONORS, TRUSTEES, AND ICJS FRIENDS AND PARTNERS WHO SUPPORTED THE EXPANDING OUR LEGACY CAMPAIGN. THIS EFFORT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE VISION AND PASSION OF THE ICJS FOUNDER, CHARLIE OBRECHT, AND THE DEDICATION OF THE PLANNING COMMITTEE. YOUR GENEROSITY AND PARTNERSHIP ENABLES ICJS TO FULLY INVEST IN INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING, EXPAND OUR EDUCATION AND OUTREACH, AND FULLY INCORPORATE ISLAM.

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“WHETHER ONE IS A RELIGIOUS PERSON OR NOT, RELIGION AFFECTS EVERYONE IN OUR COMMUNITY. IF APPROACHED PROPERLY, RELIGION CAN BE A SOURCE OF STRENGTH IN PEOPLE’S LIVES. IF NOT, IT CAN BECOME A SOURCE OF HARM AND PREJUDICE. FOR PEOPLE WHO REALLY CARE ABOUT EMBRACING DIVERSITY AND AFFIRMING OUR COMMITMENT TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, I CAN THINK OF NO OTHER ORGANIZATION DOING THE KIND OF WORK BEING DONE AT THE INSTITUTE. ICJS TRULY DESERVES OUR SUPPORT.”

Arnie Richman
Expanding Our Legacy Donor
the sacred act of gratitude

WE ARE GRATEFUL FOR YOUR CONTINUED PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT AND GENEROSITY. TOGETHER WE BUILD LEARNING COMMUNITIES WHERE RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE BECOMES A POWERFUL FORCE FOR GOOD. THE DONOR ROLL RECOGNIZES GIFTS FROM JULY 1, 2017 THROUGH JUNE 30, 2018.

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