

Thanks for the gratitude

November 22, 2016

By the Rev. Thomas C. Willadsen
Pastor
First Presbyterian Church
Oshkosh, Wisconsin

Nearly 250 people came to the seventh annual Interfaith Festival of Gratitude Monday, Nov. 21. The Grand Opera House was filled with people of a wide variety of faith traditions.

This year festival attendees were challenged to work on infrastructure, specifically the infrastructure of their hearts. In a society whose deep divisions were exposed by the recent election, all people need to build bridges of openness and understanding. Friends, neighbors and strangers gathered at the Grand on a chilly evening to hear, see and experience the great diversity of religious belief and practice in Oshkosh.

Fourteen different faith communities were represented on stage. More than 100 people sang, danced, prayed and shared something about their faith. Smiling, laughing and clapping were encouraged and in great supply.

The festival was a great success this year, and many different people and organizations contributed to the joy that echoed through the Grand.

Thanks was extended to the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, who hosted a potluck before the festival. Authentic Pakistani food, tuna noodle hotdish, challah and brownies were just some of the goodies that filled festival goers. Perhaps it was appropriate that no one brought devilled eggs!

Thanks was extended to the City of Oshkosh and its citizens for making the Grand Oshkosh's living room for the evening.

Thanks was extended to the Grand's staff and volunteers who kept everything running smoothly.

Thanks was extended to these sponsors of the festival: Oshkosh Rotary Club, Oshkosh Southwest Rotary Club, First Presbyterian Church, Wisconsin Satsang Society Inc. Eckankar, Congregation B'Nai Israel, Baha'i Community of Oshkosh. Church Lady, Judy Russell, who writes the weekly faith news column for the Northwestern was also thanked for her support and promotion of the festival.

Two groups making their first appearance at the festival were especially dynamic. The Ambassadors of Christ African Fellowship choir sang and danced to "I Am Content with Jesus," filling the auditorium with syncopated shouts of joy. The fellowship is less than a year old and Pastor Shadrach Muhima took obvious pride in his congregation. Singers have recently settled in the Fox Valley from Burundi, the Congo and Uganda. They worship at First United Methodist Church in Oshkosh each Sunday afternoon.

The North High School Youth for Asian American Culture Dance Group danced to two Hmong melodies. Mary Yang, their leader, helped those in attendance understand Hmong culture. The music, movement and smiles on the faces of the dancers expressed better than words could how gratitude feels.

The free will offering raised well over \$600 to support the mission of the hub. Hub program director Karen Befus showed a brief video about this new community-wide collaboration to help individuals and families become more stable. The hub coordinates the work of nonprofits, government agencies, businesses, churches and volunteers to help committed people tackle the obstacles that keep them from financial self-sufficiency.

The festival concluded with the singing of "Let There Be Peace on Earth." The daughter of that song's composers, Jan Tache, sent this message to Oshkosh: "I am very happy that you are including 'Let There Be Peace on Earth' in your annual Interfaith Festival of Gratitude. It is the kind of program that brings people together — something that is sorely needed — and is the reason why the song was written in the first place by my parents. I wish that there were more festivals like the one you have created in Oshkosh."

More than 250 people gathered on a chilly November evening to begin the necessary work of building bridges of understanding and openness by singing "Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

Thank you, Oshkosh bridge builders!