

Interfaith Conference Strengthens Bonds

By Larry Maloney

On the very day that a gunman killed 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, a group of Metrowest residents gathered at Holliston's Temple Beth Torah for an event dedicated to promoting understanding and cooperation among people of diverse religious faiths.

Entitled "Listening and Loving: Honoring Our Diversity as Multifaith Neighbors," the two-day event, held at the temple on Oct. 27 and Our Lady of Fatima Shrine on Oct. 28, was the first such gathering sponsored by the Metrowest Interfaith Dialogue Project, launched in 2017 by Holliston clergy.

Consisting of presentations, discussions and information on social justice programs, the conference drew more than 50 participants each day in what organizers hope will be a continuing series of events that will draw people from a mix of religious faiths, as well as those with no religious affiliation.

United in grief. Even before conference participants could begin the planned agenda, Rabbi Steven Edelman-Blank of Temple Beth Torah led prayers for the Pittsburgh victims and recalled the valuable mentoring he received years ago at the Tree of Life synagogue. "I would not be a rabbi today, were it not for my experience there," he said.

Rabbi Edelman-Blank noted that anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. rose nearly 60 percent in 2017, the largest single-year increase ever recorded by the Anti-Defamation League. The FBI has designated the Pittsburgh shooting –the worst assault on Jews in U.S. history--as a hate crime. "We mourn the victims, and we worry about our country," said the rabbi.

Another of the conference's organizers, Rev. Carl Chudy of Holliston's Fatima Shrine, said: "We can all bring comfort and consolation to our Jewish neighbors. Interfaith dialogue is more important now than ever before. People of faith can be part of the leaven of peace so sorely needed in the world today."

In the spirit of openness that prevailed over the two-day meeting, Rabbi Edelman-Blank gave participants a taste of "Judaism 101." Besides answering questions about Jewish rituals, he opened the ark doors in the synagogue sanctuary to reveal the temple's Torah scrolls, which contain the Hebrew scriptures. It was the kind of "open house" presentation that many participants said they would welcome in future interfaith events.

Ice-breaking exercise. The Oct. 27 temple gathering also brought attendees together in a fast-paced activity described as "speed faithing" by the Rev. Mark Peterson, pastor of Holliston's Christ the King Lutheran Church. The minister arranged people in two concentric circles, with the inner circle moving every few minutes, as people of different faiths shared their thoughts on a variety of questions: How have your core values changed? How has faith guided your life? What image comes to mind when you hear the word "God"? Who is your neighbor?

Said one participant: "I was surprised at how similar my views were to people with entirely different faith backgrounds."

Speaking to social justice concerns voiced by many attendees, day one of the conference ended with people joining together to stuff shopping bags with birthday-party supplies and gifts, to be distributed to children in homeless shelters by the nonprofit Birthday Wishes program. The organization provided such parties to more than 5200 children in 2017. “Through Birthday Wishes, every birthday child in a Massachusetts shelter got a party,” said Rabbi Jennifer Rudin of Holliston. Joining the rabbi in planning the activity was the Rev. Bonnie Steinroeder, senior minister at Holliston’s First Congregational Church (UCC), which donated funds for the birthday supplies.

Evolution in thinking. In contrast to the “us versus them” mentality that once pervaded the religious landscape, a panel of religious leaders began day two of “Loving & Listening” with their views on why the interfaith conversation is important in today’s world.

Hussam Syed from the Islamic Society of Framingham stressed that the Koran urges Muslims to know and honor all people, not just those of their own faith. “Our problems, goals, aspirations and many of our beliefs are the same,” observed Syed. “When we get to know each other, we can move beyond mere respect and can be more efficient in reaching out to others, especially the poor and needy.”

To discover new “creative sparks of God,” Rabbi Rudin noted that people of faith need to have the knowledge and courage to encounter those who are not like themselves. “Knowledge is power. The shooter in Pittsburgh was powerless because he did not have the tools needed to encounter others.”

Tracing his own journey from Minnesota where he grew up in a hotbed of Lutheranism, Rev. Peterson cited the influence of an ecumenical environment in his seminary training, as well as his study of Hebrew. “God’s grace helps us to break down barriers and allows us to live more proactively, learning new things and being more compassionate.”

Rev. Steinroeder, raised by a Jewish father and an Episcopalian mother, “was subject to interfaith influences from the beginning.” She pointed to lessons from biblical parables like the Good Samaritan. “Neighbors are not just people like ourselves, but anyone we find in a ditch.”

Father Chudy, whose ministry includes many years as a missionary in Africa and the Philippines, noted the progress made in the Catholic Church over the last 60 years in being more open to dialogue with other faiths, as well as with secular humanists and atheists. “Our secular society promotes a level playing field and equal opportunity,” said the priest, “but the spate of hate crimes in recent years shows that our secular institutions are failing us. Survival of our nation depends on religious and non-religious people working together.”

Interfaith concepts. Following the panel discussion, attendees themselves tackled the issue of why interfaith efforts are important and gave their vision of future interfaith cooperation. Asked to present their ideas visually, each table of attendees prepared drawings depicting their concepts. Among the themes presented:

- The need for openness, acceptance, and joint cooperation, as denoted by symbols like gates, bridges and links.

- An age-old symbol of division --a Tower of Babel drawing—shown alongside reminders of the common experiences and emotions that all people share.
- A call for ongoing education, communication, and peacekeeping, shown visually in a drawing with people holding hands around a globe.

A common conclusion among the table discussions: We need to find more ways to bring separate communities together, while still preserving their distinct practices, traditions and beliefs.

Faith in action. The discussions also emphasized the importance of interfaith programs that address social problems, such as hunger, homelessness and addiction. Men from the Islamic Society of Framingham described their efforts to get young people involved in distributing food and school supplies to the needy. “Humanity comes first,” said Mohammed Asif. “We need to put aside our differences and get our youngsters involved at an early age in community outreach.”

Women from Catholic, Protestant and Jewish congregations also described their joint volunteer work for Family Promise. In that national program, whose Metrowest office is in Natick, churches and synagogues provide homeless families with week-long shelter, food and children’s activities. In Holliston, Christ the King Lutheran serves as the host church, but volunteers from several area congregations set up the makeshift bedrooms, supply meals and provides games and books for kids.

“Family Promise lets us give something back to the world,” said Reva Tankle of Temple Beth Torah, which has worked with Christ the King Lutheran for 10 years. “We even get our children involved in games and other play activities with families we’re hosting.”

Finally, Saghii Saadi, an Iranian immigrant of the Baha’i Faith, talked about her new organization, Holliston Diverse, whose aim is to establish connections between community leaders and residents. Among other things, she wants to start a “community conversation” in which people from diverse background have a platform to tell their personal stories.

The challenges ahead. The conference clearly attracted participants who by and large are open to interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Some attendees questioned whether or not interfaith activities are seen as a significant priority in the area’s congregations.

“In times of crisis, interfaith tends to take on more importance,” said Rabbi Rudin. “Our job as clergy is to maintain our focus even when things are going well.”

Rev. Peterson added that while his Lutheran congregation is generally open to interfaith ventures, “it still takes some work to get people out of their comfort zone.”

Others observed that many congregations are caught up in more pressing matters, such as declining membership that has caused financial problems and prompted closings and consolidations. Data from Middlesex County shows that the number of residents who say they are affiliated with a religious denomination declined by 24% from 2000 to 2010, while those with no religious faith increased by 137% in the same period.

Building the momentum. Even so, “Loving and Listening” participants clearly viewed the conference as a springboard for more interfaith dialogue. “I loved the warmth and friendship that I felt all around me,” said Verna Hobson of the First Congregational Church. “We are all God’s children, and we have much in common. If there should be further meetings of this sort, I would certainly plan to attend.”

Before ending the conference with prayers from Jewish, Muslim and Christian traditions, attendees suggested ideas for future interfaith activities. These included: joint prayer gatherings, such as the interfaith Thanksgiving service scheduled for November 18 at the First Congregational Church. Among other ideas: joint social justice programs, book clubs, youth volunteer days, open houses, and workshops on addiction and other concerns.

Some also stressed the need for more outreach to attract more people in their congregations to interfaith issues and programs. Said one attendee: “We need to go beyond just preaching to the choir.”

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