

# An interfaith talk with a Jubilee! leader



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

Over a year ago, we were driving across the country, state by state, across rivers, through mountain ranges and expansive open spaces.

Apart from the natural beauty, we looked for those “Welcome” signs at the borders of each state. Wherever we stopped to rest or to enjoy the beauty, people were our countrymen and women. We usually didn’t think, “This is a Montanan” or “That’s a Kansan.” We could both appreciate the differences and the similarities. Americans were Americans. People are people.

Carol and I were involved in interfaith work for many years. We were building networks of congregations and nonprofits across borders of belief, hanging out welcome signs for groups often excluded, like seculars and minority traditions.

Interreligious efforts have grown in popularity over the past century. Since the first World Parliament of Religions was convened in Chicago in 1893, interfaith cooperation has grown from just getting people in the room, to deeper dialogues and collaborative coalitions.

Today, multifaith organizations such as Interfaith Youth Core, North American Interfaith Network and United Religions Initiative sometimes include secular voices and leadership.

I asked Vicki Garlock, nurture coordinator and curriculum developer at Jubilee! Community Church and a facilitator of Asheville Interfaith, to respond to a few questions.

Asked how her faith tradition views nonbelievers, Vicki replied, “Jubilee! is a fully independent, ‘progressive-type’ Christian church” and “we have no idea” what members believe.

I find that quite refreshing. She told me that one of her kids is drawn to



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Chris Highland calls this photo, shot in Wyoming (squashed bugs and all), “The Open Road.”

Native American practices and another is an atheist. Young people in her congregation have many beliefs, from Sufi to evangelical. I asked her if the church has any interest in changing the minds of nonbelievers.

“Not at all. Since we do not profess any given creed at Jubilee!, it’s not clear what our conversion goals would be! ... We place a premium on people ... in the world at large.”

Regarding secular worldviews, she replied, “I suspect most ‘Jubilants,’ including the kids in our program, view those with secular worldviews as yet another important piece in the rich tapestry of human life on this planet.

“At Jubilee!, we try to move beyond simple tolerance of and co-existence with those who hold different views; we try to express and live into the idea of deep appreciation for what all sentient beings bring to our community and our world.”

That seems very open and welcoming.

Concerning the balance between naturalistic and supernatural beliefs, Vicki said, “Nature is an important piece of what we do at Jubilee! both with the adults and with the kids. Our themes change quarterly with the solstices/equinoxes; we sometimes celebrate neo-Pagan [holy days], like Brigid and Samhain; and we sometimes honor secular earth-based holidays, like Earth Day and World Water Day.

“We also have an Earth Team at Jubilee! that offers opportunities to commune with nature and/or to work toward sustainable living. All these things help connect us to the earth and remind us of our place in the web of living beings.”

Asked whether she thinks there is value in honest dialogue and cooperative action between people of faith and those without faith, she replied, “Jubi-

lee! is firmly committed to honest and compassionate dialogue with people of all faiths or no faith. We honor rituals from other faith traditions, we read from the sacred texts of other traditions, and we count people from a variety of belief systems not just as friends, but as parishioners.”

She added that their kids’ program offers “opportunities to explore topics from a no-faith perspective, including our themes of Peace, Awe & Wonder, Compassion, and Embracing the Darkness.”

They also “make a point to present the creation narratives given to us by science, including the Big Bang Theory and Evolution.” You don’t hear that too often from faith communities.

Beyond this, Vicki says that “because we are a church, what is experienced on Sunday mornings and what we offer to the kids is generally grounded in the faith-based traditions of the world [rather than a secular perspective],” which makes sense.

She said that “as questions arise” she’s happy to engage in conversation with nonbelievers.

I find it encouraging that a faith-centered community here in Asheville seems so open to listening rather than preaching. I have yet to visit Vicki’s church, but I’m guessing a person like me could feel included.

Gathering a wide collection of worldviews takes some risk. Bringing people of many faiths and no faiths together to build relationships, working and celebrating alongside each other, has challenges. But it seems worth it because — what’s the alternative? The same old fenced and defended religion.

We could use more journeys across the borders of faith, don’t you think?

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