

Is harmony better than unity?



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

While serving as a chaplain with the “unhoused community,” we organized the first interfaith prayer service in our county north of San Francisco that welcomed the homeless community, which made sense since it was held in the St. Vincent dePaul free dining room, a hub for houseless folks.

As we were lining up speakers and musicians, I called a local church pastor to ask if he would like to join us and offer a prayer. He told me he would need to talk with his staff and get back to me.

A few days later he called to say “we prayed about it and decided we could not in good conscience pray with people of other faiths.” I was disappointed but thanked him for considering and hung up the phone. I shook my head and let it go.

The evening of the gathering we had a good crowd attending. There were representatives from many traditions and a nice mix of neighbors with and without homes. We heard from a Catholic priest, a Jewish rabbi, several Protestant ministers and others.

Highlights included chants by a Native American elder and a Buddhist priest and songs led by members of the street community. It was one of the most memorable services during my 10 years as chaplain and served as a model for other interreligious gatherings over the years.

I often wonder why we don’t hear about more of these kinds of gatherings that are welcoming to all folks. It seems so natural and healthy for a community to hold events that openly invite and include a diversity of people and viewpoints. In my opinion, this is the only way forward — if we truly want

to move forward.

Through my wife Carol, I learned that a group was meeting here in the Asheville area to help plan a conference for March 1-4 at Lake Junaluska.

I asked George Thompson, a retired Methodist minister and chair of the executive committee, if he would describe the intent of the conference. He said it’s “designed to attract people of all faiths or no faith that have a heart for building peace in their communities.”

“[The conference] is hosted by the Lake Junaluska Assembly as a program of the [regional] United Methodist Church. The committees that plan and execute the event are composed of persons from various Protestant denominations and the three Abrahamic faiths (Jewish, Islamic, and Christian).”

George told me that “this year’s theme, ‘Meeting the Other: Can We Talk?’ invites all participants to reach out to those that are different from one’s self, bridging divisions of misunderstanding, racial [tension], gender bias, and generational divide.”

Keynote speakers will include Rabbi Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, who has extensive multifaith experience, the Rev. T. Anthony Spearman, pastor of an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Greensboro and current president of the North Carolina NAACP, and Professor Juliane Hammer, an Islamic Studies scholar at UNC Chapel Hill.

Rabbi Kreimer’s profile caught my attention when I read she is leading a current campus chaplaincy project in Pennsylvania that includes chaplains of five major faiths as well as humanists.

The conference began about 10 years ago and grew out of a desire by some residents at Lake Junaluska to address major global issues such as economic justice, healthcare, peace-making and nonviolence.

“To involve the participation of more diversity of age, ethnicity, faith and gender” there will be a dialogue session with the three keynote speakers in the Humanities Lecture Hall at UNC Asheville.

One evening performance will be by Abraham Jam, a Muslim, Jewish and Christian trio whose website states, “harmony, where we sing different notes that are beautiful together, is even better than unity, where we all sing the same note.”

The hope is that the gathering will “model with civility and respect how to communicate within a culture of contentious diversity while upholding our various core values and religious traditions.”

As Tammy McDowell, assistant director of programming at Lake Junaluska, says, “In these polarizing times, it is exciting and hopeful to see a diverse group of people gathering together to discuss their differences with love and respect.”

Rabbi Phil Bentley, also on the committee, told me the goal is “to help people learn how and why to reach out to people who we might consider ‘other.’” He says that early youthful experiences between Jews and Christians led him to be “involved in interfaith activities and councils everywhere I lived and worked throughout my life.”

It’s encouraging to hear this conference seeks to move communities forward along a progression in religion I call the “Three C’s”: from Competitive to Comparative to Cooperative.

For more information, visit lakejunaluska.com/peace or call 800-222-4930.

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