

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

An interfaith Thanksgiving celebration: Unity through diversity

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Last week, the nation celebrated Thanksgiving, and in Grand Rapids, 24 organizations came together for the 16th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration.

It was a wonderful contrast to divisiveness and hatred so prevalent in the news these days.

This year's theme, "Unity through Diversity," began with a welcome in five languages. Then came songs led by adults and children of the Baha'i community, including the stanza:

*Ye are drops of one ocean,
Ye are leaves of one tree,
Come and join us,
In our quest for unity
It's a way of life for you and me.*

Musical selections included the Jewish community choir singing "Modim Anachnu Lach" (We Give Thanks), a children's choir from the Grand Rapids

Buddhist Temple and Zen Center, and the congregation's antiphonal singing of Psalm 133 led by sisters from the Dominican

Community.

Passages were read from the Christian Scripture extolling the theme of love, "Let us love one another because love is from God."



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(I John 4:7). Imams from two of the area's Islamic centers shared passages from the Quran including a recitation whose translation reads:

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. Indeed, God is all knowing and all aware. (Surah 49)

The filled-to-capacity Trinity United Methodist Church also experienced music and dance from the Christian youth program at Camelot Woods, as well as sacred dance from the West Michigan Hindu Temple.

A secular humanist father and his daughter shared their moving story of interfaith thankfulness to the various communities who cared for them as they faced her battle with cancer.

This packed Thanksgiving celebration program also included a keynote from Joe Jones, president of the Grand Rapids Urban League.

His talk, "Be Perfectly Yourself," was based on a quote from the Trappist monk Thomas Merton: "The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to

ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them."

Bringing unity requires embracing diversity and seeing it as a strength in our community.

In the words of Joe Jones: "No matter how much our lives might leave us fully immersed in sameness (gender, race, religion, geographic region, class, political beliefs, etc.), we must take the opportunity to know folks who are fully different from us enough that we can love them, advocate for them, and see them as our other selves."

Jones challenged each of us to value diversity, work at it and not be afraid of getting out of our comfort zone.

Referring to his upbringing in Detroit, he noted:

"I lived in a pretty homogeneous box as a youth. It wasn't as if I grew up in this melting pot, surrounded by people of different cultures and faiths. And so, I

can honestly say that if it wasn't for my desire to live in a more diverse community, if the intentionality wasn't there, if I wasn't deliberate about it, I'm certain I could talk myself into finding great joy living in my comfort zone. But, I refuse to take the easy way out. I refuse to reside in my comfort zone, and I want to encourage you to keep doing the same. Wouldn't you agree that this is some hard work?"

This year's event brought over 400 people together to give thanks for the diversity in our own community, and to accept the challenge to respect those who may not look like us or worship as we might.

Doing so makes us a stronger and healthier community.

Let's make this a yearlong project, and meet next year to again celebrate an interfaith Thanksgiving bringing unity through diversity.

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