

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# Through tension and feasting: An interfaith Thanksgiving

**Kyle Kooyers** *associate director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

"It's not a dinner!"

Every year, the planning committee for the Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration jokes that this phrase should be the unofficial tag line for the event. This annual celebration is a service in which various traditions offer gratitude in their own traditional language, customs, songs and scriptures for the beautiful diversity of our community. Light refreshments, in the form of potluck desserts and hors d'oeuvres follow the celebration — but it is not a dinner!

The image of a potluck is an apt way to view many of our interfaith spaces, especially the Thanksgiving Celebration. Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith Youth Core and author of "Out Of Many Faiths," uses the potluck analogy to critique the idea that interfaith spaces are attempting to be "melting pots" in which traditions all blend and become indistinguishable from one another. A potluck, by contrast, is a gathering in which each food item reflects the diversity and distinctiveness of the home from which it came.

As Patel explains, "For the larger community to eat, everybody is expected to bring a dish. Certain guidelines are given, but nobody is expected to follow a precise recipe." Therefore, the more diversity you have among food items, the more enjoyable the potluck! As a community grows, the representation around the table expands. Patel writes, "As the demographics of the population shift, so will the flavors of the food on the table. Along the way, conversation happens, palates widen, fusions emerge. There are tensions, there is feasting."

Certainly as our own interfaith community building efforts have grown, we have experienced that tension and feasting. As a part of the ongoing Standing Together Partnership, which brings together churches and mosques in the region, a Grand Rapids church offered to host a summer potluck for their own congregation and one of their neighboring Bosnian mosques. As food responsibilities for the event were being discussed, the pastors expressed concerns about Christian attendees being unfamiliar with the halal dietary restrictions.

In response, the imam smiled and quipped, "That's an easy one. The Muslims will bring all the meat!" In the end, the church supplied the veggies and dessert, while the mosque brought delicious halal chicken and kafta (a lamb and beef based sausage). In this case, the tension had an easy remedy, and the feasting took place with ease.

However, in other cases — like our annual community Thanksgiving — the tensions are not so easily resolved. Beyond the typical event decisions of location and keynote speaker, this celebration follows the more nuanced conversations pertaining to cultural representation and the historical implications of the event itself being associated with the Thanksgiving holiday.

On one hand, it is wonderful that for 20



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## 20th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration

**When:** 7 p.m. Monday

**Where:** Cathedral of St. Andrew, 301 Sheldon Blvd. SE, Grand Rapids

**Information and free registration at:** [InterfaithUnderstanding.org](http://InterfaithUnderstanding.org)

years, diverse religious, spiritual and secular communities have gathered from around our city to tell stories, sing songs, reflect on scriptures, chant mantras and offer words of gratitude for our shared home. On the other hand, Thanksgiving as a holiday is problematic for many in that it represents a history of colonialism, oppression and extermination — which understandably excludes native communities and indigenous spiritualities from the celebration.

In this tension, Patel is wise to point out that "conversation happens, palates widen, fusions emerge."

When we come together to share our stories and different experiences within this city, we begin to see each other in a new way. Our perspectives widen. Connections emerge. We see that we are neighbors in this place. We also see that we are neighbors with vastly different experiences within this place — for some very good, for others very difficult.

In sharing and listening, we begin to see ourselves in the "other" and the "other" in us. As we hear the differing ways each of us experiences Grand Rapids as home, we inevitably find that our very life and well-being is bound up in the lives and well-being of the people living around us. We find that we can have "thick dialogue" about the ways our history and holidays affect those around us. And we find that our stories can in fact intersect with those who at first seemed vastly different.

Certainly, as the Interfaith Thanksgivings of years past have shown, there is tremendous power in sharing gratitude with the many religious, secular and spiritual traditions that call Grand Rapids home. The 20th annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration will take place Monday at the Cathedral of Saint Andrew. Whether you have attended over the past two decades or join us for the very first time, I can promise that you will see and hear some new things. We invite you to join in the spiritual potluck, the tension and the feast, to be filled and changed by the rich experience of community.

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**The Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration this year will be Monday evening at the Cathedral of St. Andrew, 301 Sheldon Blvd. SE in Grand Rapids. To learn more, go to [InterfaithUnderstanding.org](http://InterfaithUnderstanding.org).** Submitted by Douglas Kindschi



**The Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration brings together people of various religious, secular and spiritual traditions.** Submitted by Douglas Kindschi

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