News



by Peter Feuerherd

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In 2017, Bishop Charles Thompson, then of Evansville, Indiana, approached Benedictine Fr. Godfrey Mullen, pastor of St. Benedict Cathedral Parish, to ask the parish to spearhead Catholic participation in "One God, One Community" — Evansville's interfaith community effort.

There was pushback from some parishioners.

The fear was that Catholic faith would be presented in a wishy-washy way, a milquetoast compendium of beliefs intended to be palatable to a wider community. Thompson was soon off to become archbishop of Indianapolis, and Mullen was left to deal with the anxiety.

They needn't have worried from the track record of the series of events sponsored by the group over the past year.

"It could not have been more powerful," said Mullen. Among the four participating congregations — including Evansville's First Presbyterian; Temple Adath B'Nai Israel, a Reform Jewish congregation; and the Evansville Islamic Society — friendships have emerged and discussions, much of the time over ethnic food, have flourished as the diverse religious community of Indiana's third-largest city gets to better know each other.

"One God, One Community" has offered programs on history, immigration, theology, the role of sacred space, rituals and holidays among the different faiths. While there is much pleasant community-building, the group has not shied away from sensitive issues. The group once sponsored a talk by Christian Picciolini, a former white supremacist. In the process, the congregations have discovered a common core of values, even if clothed in different cultural and historical terms by the three Abrahamic religions.

Rabbi Gary Mazo said his congregation has joined in support for projects — such as the local Habitat for Humanity — with members of the other congregations. "There's a desire to be part of something bigger than ourselves," he said.

"People find support. They are not alone. They feel validated," he said, noting that the small Jewish community in Evansville, which has declined in number over the years, welcomes being part of the wider civic and charitable life in the city.

That affirmation is needed in a difficult time for interfaith relations, Mazo said. Evansville has had its nastier moments, including shots fired at the synagogue — no one was injured — and a car that rammed the Islamic Center soon after 9/11.

Evansville's Muslims also see the interfaith group as a bridge to the rest of the city, said Mohammad Hussain, a physician and president of the Islamic Center. Each group sponsors particular events, and it was left to the Muslims to provide an Independence Day celebration. The Islamic Center responded with food and fireworks, after an interfaith discussion of the role of religious faith in patriotism.

"We understand we have different faiths but are walking on the same path," said Hussain.

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Religious leaders said the group has reinforced their own beliefs while creating greater respect for others.

Some in the group cooperate beyond the regular gatherings. For example, Mazo and the Rev. Kevin Fleming, pastor of First Presbyterian, cover for each other on vacations. The church and the congregation have also exchanged pulpits.

While the Catholics are newcomers, the origins of the group grew out of a 2014 comedy tour that came to Evansville featuring a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim gently lampooning differences and commonalities. The Catholic parish's 3,000 members are the largest of the congregations.

Evansville's effort can be a model for other cities, the religious leaders said. Each tradition had a variation of the pushback of fear that beliefs would be watered down to accommodate a common denominator. But that hasn't happened.

"As long as there is respect, and no one resorts to proselytizing, it's an easy thing to do," said Mullen.

He said that despite divergent traditions, other religious congregations face similar issues. The personalities in congregations may hold different beliefs, but they are remarkably similar, as religious organizations deal with internal conflicts, fundraising and other practical issues.

While each group is different, in many ways they are very much the same, said Mullen.

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