

Gilroy Dispatch

Thankful for community

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by Debra Eskinazi



TOGETHER IN UNITY The full group of clergy representing all of the faith groups involved in Interfaith Community of South County.

Photo: Elizabeth Mandel

While some are interested in building walls, one group in the South Valley community is building bridges and working to create a more peaceful, tolerant world. Made up of 16 different faith organizations, the Interfaith Community of South County (ICSC) gathered for a special service on Thanksgiving Eve.

Although the ICSC is still in its first year, the group's facilitator, Susan Meyers, says the group began as a response to increased hostilities, "not just in our area, but all over the country—around people who are Muslim."

Meyers, a board member at Congregation Emeth in Morgan Hill, says things in the South Valley became particularly heated in the last decade after the South Valley Islamic Community approached the planning commission with their proposal to build the Cordoba Center, a 15-acre parcel in San

Martin that would serve as a site of worship, a community center, as well as a cemetery and open space. Not all of the community responded as positively as local faith-based organizations did.

“It brought out people’s concerns and prejudices and also the support of the community,” says Meyers.

She says that Rabbi Debbie Israel of Congregation Emeth in Morgan Hill was one of the principals who started the interfaith clergy group. “They did an interfaith Thanksgiving service last year and then they were going to do an interfaith event for the Martin Luther King Day.”

Pastor Lee Tyler of Advent Lutheran in Morgan Hill recalls their congregation would regularly hold Thanksgiving Day services.

“Well last year we decided—more than Christians are celebrating Thanksgiving,” Tyler says. “Americans do. So we invited the rabbi and the imam and their congregations to join us and that’s where it began.”

After the Thanksgiving service at Advent Lutheran, Meyers invited others interested in forming an interfaith lay group to get involved. The ICSC chose three areas of focus: education, service and social activity. Meyers says they decided to celebrate four major American holidays together.

“First of all—we are all Americans. First thing we did was to march in the Fourth of July parade.”



NEIGHBORS & FRIENDS The Interfaith Community of South County making strides in Morgan Hill's Fourth of July Parade in 2016.

Photo: Sal Akhter

As part of their educational emphasis, the ICSC has held a series of lectures called "Faith of Our Neighbors." Inviting people to come and learn about different faiths. So far the group has held two (of four) sessions; they were on Islam and Mormonism.

"When we had our Muslim group speak there were 250 people who came to the event and the Mormons had about that same number. The idea is to bring the community together," Meyers says.

The last two educational lectures in the series will be on Judaism and Lutheranism.

"We move around to one another's 'churches,'" says Meyers. "Part of the idea is to feel comfortable in one another's religious homes."

Following the election of Donald Trump, tensions are increasing across the country and hate crimes are on the rise. The need for an interfaith community is even more important now, says Pastor Lee.

"We need to care for our brothers and sisters in faith and that's not just Christian faith," she says. "And it's a little frightening right now, what our Jewish and Muslim friends are suffering is scary."

"We should have learned something by now," says Lee. "I find it deeply depressing. That's why I'm wearing a safety pin."

"The safety pin [a symbol that came out of the response to Britain's recent Brexit vote] is a sign that you are a safe person and anyone that's being harassed or bullied can turn to you for assistance and you will stand with them," she says.

"I think it's a great idea we've got to stand up and say this is not ok—you can't hurt people like this."

Nadi Akhter, part of the South Valley Islamic Community and an active member in the ICSC says the relationship goes back to the start of the Cordoba Center. "We faced some opposition from some community members and at that point some of the congregations, especially the Jewish community, Father Rubio from St. Mary's—these are the people who came for our support and told us 'You guys are not alone.'"

"It has made a big difference in my individual thinking and with the community as a whole," Akhter says. "I do get emails of support from other members of this interfaith community and even passersby sometimes."

A woman recently approached Akhter at Walmart to apologize, saying "'I want you to know that whatever Trump says is not the feeling of every American,'" says Akhter.

"Those other people—we acknowledge they are bad guys," she continues. "We condemn them. That's not right. Our faith doesn't allow it. They are hijacking our faith."

Akhter points out South Valley Muslims' commitment to the community, noting that the Muslims who make a home here are professionals and law-abiding citizens.

“We bring a lot to this economy,” says Akhter, who is also an engineer by trade and adds half-jokingly, “The iPhone that everyone else is using—I don’t know how many Muslims wrote code on it.”

But more work must be done to build bridges. “On social media every other day I am looking at one of the hate crimes,” says Akhter.

Recent examples include a 19 year-old Muslim student at San Jose State who was attacked in a university parking garage when someone pulled on her hijab.

“That’s not OK. In this civilized society this kind of makes me sad,” she says.

Because the Muslim community is small, they rely on other faith-based groups to take opportunities to be of service. Akhter says it’s not enough to sit down at the table; she believes in action and was regularly involved in the community before the Cordoba Center.

“If I’m out there with my headscarf on and helping the community, that’s going to make a statement and that’s what I believe in.”

If there’s one thing each of the participants agrees, which Akhter sums up: “We have to look at people one on one. Treat them like humans—treat them like friends and do it this way.”

The Interfaith Community of South County (ICSC) will celebrate their one year anniversary with a special Martin Luther King Day service, Monday Jan. 16, 2017 at St. Mary’s Parish, 11 First St, Gilroy. For more information about the ICSC, contact interfaithcommunity.org@gmail.com.