

# Congregation Emeth Takes the Lead - Initiating Interfaith Organization in South Santa Clara County

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For several years, Rabbi Debbie Israel, Congregation Emeth, had been concerned with the growing lack of tolerance and respect for cultural diversity in her community. The resistance faced by the Muslim community in response to their attempts to create the Cordoba Center with a Mosque and school on land they owned in San Martin was the catalyst that pushed Rabbi Israel to initiate the Interfaith Alliance of South County in 2015. Comprising 16 clerical leaders from Morgan Hill, Gilroy and San Martin, the Interfaith Alliance has worked hard to build and model an atmosphere of trust, with open and honest conversations about the issues confronting each of the faith groups.



The Interfaith Alliance has led interfaith Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Day services; published letters in local newspapers; and gathered the multi-faith community together in marches and rallies in solidarity and support for one another, especially in response to anti-Semitic or anti-Islamic actions and sentiments.

Two years ago, inspired by the interfaith service honoring Dr. Martin Luther King - which was led by all 16 members of the clerical Interfaith Alliance - a group of lay leaders and I decided to take Rabbi Israel's brainchild one step further. We launched the Interfaith Community of South County (ICSC).

Open to all faiths and denominations, the ICSC is committed to creating compassionate communities through educational, social and service programs.

From the outset, the 22-member steering committee, representing 18 local faith organizations, agreed to highlight what we have in common by celebrating the four major American holidays – Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Day. Our introduction to the community was at the Morgan Hill Fourth of July Parade in 2016. We marched with flags and our banner, singing *This Land is Your Land*. Our local clergy joined us, riding in vehicles behind us. Marching down the street to an audience of hundreds of happy fans, we were greeted with resounding applause!



We now join with the clerical Interfaith Alliance to coordinate and lead services on Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Day.

Our commitment to education is evident at our twice-yearly “Faith of Our Neighbors” program. Together with the clergy, members of the ICSC take turns hosting an event at their respective places of worship, where they warmly and openly share their beliefs and traditions with the almost 300 attendees. To date the Muslim, Mormon, Jewish, Lutheran and Catholic congregations and the Buddhist Meditation Center in Morgan Hill have all hosted the program.

Current service projects of the ICSC focus on the needs of homeless families in our community. Several of our faith congregations participate in the Safe Parking Project, which provides select homeless families and individuals with a safe, secure and stable place to park their cars overnight. We also support Cecelia's Closet, a local organization that provides clothing and school supplies for families in Morgan Hill, Gilroy and San Martin.

Having fun together is also a large component of the ICSC. Together, members of the alliance enjoy concerts and speakers, Hawaiian luaus, and dinner in the Sukkah. The jewel in our social crown is the Interfaith Festival. This year's festival will take place August 19, from 1 - 5 pm at St. Mary's Church in Gilroy. The festival, open to the entire community, will feature food, music, dancing and children's games, showcasing the many interfaith cultures of South Santa Clara.

Quoting Rabbi Hillel: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself alone, what am I? And, if not now, when?”

The Interfaith Community of South County is responding to Rabbi Hillel: we are moving forward as a group now. To learn more about the ICSC, contact [interfaithcommunity.org@gmail.com](mailto:interfaithcommunity.org@gmail.com) or check out our Facebook page: Interfaith Community of South County.