

Report for INTERFAITH PEACE AND HARMONY WEEK

Weaverville, California, USA

In observance of World Interfaith Harmony Week - February 1-7, 2018



Our **INTERFAITH PEACE AND HARMONY WEEK**, consisted of seven consecutive evenings of interfaith programs with a focus on peace presented by five of the diverse faiths and spiritual paths in our community. Each evening's program of prayer, meditation, or song was shared from the perspective of the featured faith for that evening. Participants gathered each evening from 4:30 to 5:15 PM during the first week of February for a brief, 45-minute reflective interlude between work day and home life. The programs

were held in the Parish Hall of the centrally located Trinity Congregational Church, which supported and co-sponsored the grass-roots endeavor from beginning to end, before and after, in enumerable ways. The series of programs was announced through press releases, window flyers, personal networks, and handouts (see attachments). The three-part format of each evening's program included: 1) a short introduction including a scriptural or inspirational passage about the importance of creating peace/harmony/unity from that community's perspective; 2) sharing a practice, custom, or ritual for creating peace and harmony as it is done within that faith community, such as prayer, chant, song, silence, meditation, movement, dance, food, etc.; and 3) individual pledges to practice compassion or a collaborative act of service for someone during the next days. The purpose of the pledges was to challenge ourselves to practice doing things with and for someone not in our usual social network, to make connections and break down old, false, barriers. The individual pledges were written down and posted on a bulletin board where they remained throughout the week to inspire others and to demonstrate how small compassionate acts can accumulate. The faiths featured during this week were presented by Qigong, Buddhist, Latter-day Saints/Mormons, Sikh, and Catholic lay individuals or as a group effort. Also, was a meditation evening and a sing-along of easily-learned peace songs from a Trinity County tradition of family gatherings. A one-page program (see attached sample) including the scriptural or inspirational passage of the evening and the presenter's contact information was provided to each participant, enabling them to reconnect with their favorite presenters and community, if they desired.

Attendance was impressive for the season, the time, and the size and character of our small town. Results were heartening at both individual and community levels: according to the attendees, the programs were of high quality, the evenings were uplifting and educational, a general redirection and renewal of energies can be felt in the community, glimmers of hope can be heard in conversations, and signs of possibility-thinking can be observed in individual action plans and ideas for next steps. Feedback has indicated success and a desire for more interfaith activities and initiatives encouraging other paths to peace.

Where is Weaverville? Weaverville, the largest city in Trinity County, is located in a forested valley among winter snow-capped mountains in rural northern California, U.S.A. It is nearly an hour's-drive away from the nearest large city in the next county. The population of "historic" Weaverville (dating from the 1850s) is under 4,000 people; it is the largest community in the county (total population of approximately 13,700). This is an economically depressed area with many of the common divisions and resistances to change as can be found elsewhere. Nevertheless, historically, Weaverville and the surrounding communities in Trinity County rally collectively and share their resources generously in times of crises, such as frequent summer forest fires. In activities of daily and annual life, much that happens depends on a spirit of volunteerism, which is declining in recent years.

We work, educate, play, and live among faces we see in the 1.5-mile strip of Weaverville town every day; however, in spite of shared gathering places and communal activities, often we have

no real understanding of how the religious beliefs and common spiritual yearnings of our neighbors intersect with, parallel, or even mirror and support our own. Culturally, there are no clear, socially acceptable ways to inquire into, share, or appeal to the personal, and essentially common, values found in the religions, faiths, and beliefs of those different from ourselves. It is rare to connect deeply with one another through our common belief in God or the Good. Some of us believe, however, that Weaverville is small enough that, with a shared will, we could focus our vision and energies toward developing stronger, diverse relationships, and we can build an inter-connected, harmonious community concerned with the welfare of one another. Could we become a model of deliberate community harmony that will ensure resilience to the destructive divisions that are multiplying, it seems, daily? Some of us think so and are reaching out to others who share this goal.

Peace Momentum Beginnings: In the summer of 2017, the extensive media coverage of tragic and violent national events was dominating the thoughts, conversations, and feelings of people in the community. The idea was born that more benefit and community safety would accrue from working together with people from local faith-communities toward peace and healing, than would come from succumbing to confusion and fear. As a first step, to create a collaborative peace-building process, an event was organized in fall of 2017 to provide personal experiences of how different faiths find and express peace in their spiritual practices and customs. We called it “Peace Week.” People gathered for nine consecutive evenings ending on September 21, the United Nations International Peace Day. For each brief evening, a presenter from a different church, faith, or spiritual/meditative practice shared with us a half-hour experience of their prayer, worship, song, traditions, and/or meditation for peace. These inspiring programs spawned interactions and connections and a consciousness that many participants desired to keep alive on a regular basis; they spoke often saying, “we needed this” and we must “keep the momentum going.”

World Interfaith Harmony Week gave us the platform to keep the interfaith peace-building momentum going, and it connected our endeavor to a thousand other endeavors world-wide. At this winter event, called Interfaith Peace and Harmony Week, presenters from additional faiths and spiritual communities among us shared their peace-centered traditions, prayers for peace, song, and inner harmony with both former and new participants, building more momentum.

The Vision for our Interfaith Peace and Harmony Week: Each invited presenter was given the following vision, to consider their participation and to align their program with our purpose:

- to experience peace from the diverse customs of prayer, worship, meditation, silence, and chanting – as well as through other sensory modes such as movement, music, song, fragrance, food, and service – presented to us in a program each evening by an individual or group in the spirit of sharing their traditions and practices for peace;
- to gather in a respectful environment of prayer, meditation, and learning, connecting with the hearts of one another, punctuated with an evening or two of community songs of unity, meditative movement, and/or sound/vibration;
- to lay aside partisan politics and doctrinal theology and other currently contentious or divisive issues of the day;
- to transition from daily “busy-ness” to calmness, briefly between work life and home life;
- to refresh our spirits through refreshing breezes of scripture, revelation, inspiration, reflection, gratitude, sound, silence, and spirit;
- to become aware of and grateful for the many local and global peace-building efforts;

- to consider how we can contribute to making a difference toward building a community known for its peaceful, harmonious character, as an inspiration for others to do the same;
- to support one another in contributing ever-more acts of service for the well-being of all, through collaborative efforts and practicing compassion.
- To begin, begin again, create, celebrate, and continue the momentum –
 because peace does not spontaneously combust.
 It must be built and maintained through relationships and transformations.

~~~~~

**On Reflection, Results, and Suggestions:** In the days and weeks following our Interfaith Peace and Harmony Week, observations, reflections, and suggestions have been collected during informal conversations and in-town encounters with participants.

- For the size of our community, season, and time, the attendance rate (22 average per evening) was impressive relative to attendance at other club and activity meetings where only five-to-ten people might attend -- not including the theater, of course.
- The respect and honor given to each of the presenters, the quality of the presentations, and full participation of the participants on each evening was remarkable. One participant mentioned how positively the audience was affected by the evenings, and how surprised she was when others respectfully embraced the foreignness of a 20-minute silent meditation despite the initial discomfort with the silence. The after-talk confirmed how deeply touched people were during several of the programs.
- Some presenters were grateful for being “thought of” and invited to share their faith with others in such a meaningful way, rather than being ignored or dismissed, as is their usual experience. Afterward, they were impressed with the respectful attention they experienced as the audience listened to their gift of sharing prayers, history, and meaningful practices.
- One participant was grateful that her perceptions of who the Sikhs are were changed to a more accurate understanding and appreciation. The principles of sacrifice and of serving others – abundantly – was demonstrated by the meal they provided with us and by sharing their young son’s birthday with us on their particular evening with us.
- Another participant said she now had a better understanding and appreciation of the purpose and fruits of the close Mormon family units. She was impressed with how well-behaved the children were. It was noted how they lived their principles by collaborating on their presentation, by bringing their children, and by providing refreshments unbidden.
- Heart-to-heart connections were experienced with elderly members of an immigrant family although there was no common language – just by being together respectfully, by valuing one another, and by the graciousness of that family.
- An extraordinary heartfelt encounter was observed between two individuals, presenter and participant, that one might think of as stereotypically inimical/hostile to one another.
- At least two individuals have been thinking deeply how they can become engaged in the community in a way that will foster greater harmony and well-being for all, not just in their areas of usual, personal interest. One of them hopes to resurrect a community garden.
- Rather than organizing into a “club” or association, we are experimenting with an “organic” model of organization, within in which the initiation of a peace/harmony/unity-related activity

by any individual is encouraged. We hope that the participant/supporters in this week of evenings are coalescing into a self-organizing group, without formalities, that will feel empowered and supported to initiate their own peace-building activities throughout the year.

- Our local newspaper created a colorful image for one of our first “Peace Week” press releases (see logo on first page of this report). The editor has agreed to continue to use it to identify subsequent peace endeavors. And to let us use it on our flyers, etc.
- There has been a suggestion to have a flag made with that “Trinity Peace” logo on it. The flag can then be placed in front of any venue that is hosting a peace-related activity.

### **Suggestions:**

- We need to attract more families, youth, and children into these “conversations” around peace and harmony.
- The 4:30 to 5:15 PM time slot – though chosen in consideration of short winter daylight and weather conditions at night – was not convenient for working people. The summer 5:30 to 6:00 pm slot was nearly ideal for a brief transitional period of prayer between work-a-day activities and personal/family activities – although, just a bit short from the presenter’s view.
- There are still a handful of other faiths represented in our community that we have not shared prayers with and learned from. The Muslim family accepted the invitation for this endeavor after all the evenings had been scheduled. Still more connections to make.
- Encourage each of the presenters to attend some of the other presenters’ evenings.
- Convene gatherings in which the various faith-based communities are integrated rather than segregated into separate time slots.
- Some subsequent peace-related activities need to be broader than the interfaith theme to engage more of the community.
- Some participants want to have more sing-along and dance for peace initiatives – especially during summer months.
- Invite experienced trainers/facilitators for teaching various skills that promote and support harmonious relationships: Non-Violent Communication, consensus forming skills, violence de-escalation skills, mediation skills, Appreciative Inquiry, leadership and development training, diversity training for dismantling of prejudices, Dances for International Peace, etc.
- The many wonderful peace-building movements occurring around the world, many initiated by individuals like ourselves, seemed to be below the level of conscious awareness or confidence. It is unclear if the connection to a world-wide movement has bolstered individual participants or not. It has been suggested that more awareness of other movements might be inspiring and validating.
- Collaborate with other organizations in town who have a harmony and unity consciousness and who sponsor community activities.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of all the presenters, participants, and supporters,

Lisa Floyd