2026 World Interfaith Harmony Week at Galveston
United Nations Official Observance

Joy, Compassion, and Meaning in Life
From Interfaith Perspectives

Tuesday, February 3, 2026
9:00 a.m.–13:30 p.m. (CT)
In-person: The Parish Hall of First Lutheran Church
2415 Winnie Street, Galveston, TX, USA
Online: Zoom

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Ven. Dr. Miaolung Shih, and *Rev.* Richard Rhoades, production oversight;
- Dr. Wei-Chen "Miso" Lee, Ms. Jacqueline Wiggins, and Ms. Eunice Park, content development;
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- Dr. Dali Wu, illustration and poster design and report editing;
- Ms. Keyun Li, report editing;
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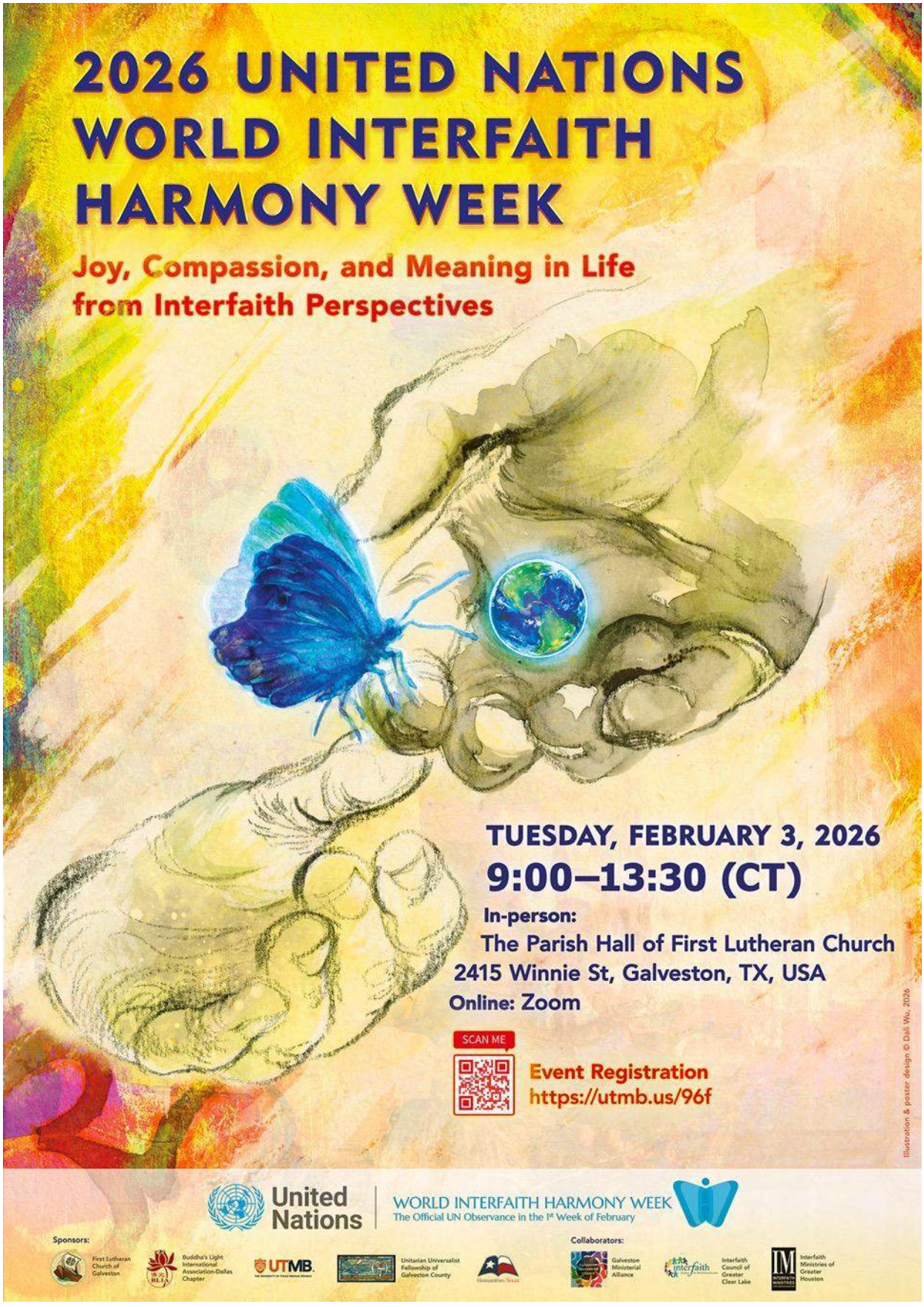
1. Sponsors: (1) First Lutheran Church of Galveston, (2) University of Texas Medical Branch, (3) Humanities Texas, (4) Buddha's Light International Association–Dallas, (5) LeReve Skin Institute, Inc., and (6) Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Galveston County.

2. Collaborators: (1) Galveston Ministerial Alliance, (2) Interfaith Council of Greater Clear Lake, (3) Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, and (4) UTMB Photography Club (Med Lens).







2026 event poster, designed © Dali Wu.

2026 United Nations World Interfaith Harmony Week

Joy, Compassion, and Meaning in Life from Interfaith Perspectives

Aim: To foster a better understanding of interfaith values and practices, build friendships among people from various faiths and spiritual viewpoints, and promote interfaith harmony in the community.

Date: Tuesday, February 3, 2026

Time: 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. (Central Time Zone, Texas, USA)

Venue: The Parish Hall of First Lutheran Church (2415 Winnie Street, Galveston, TX, USA), and Zoom Platform

UN Event Site: https://utmb.us/eya

Registration QR Code: https://utmbs.us/96f

Speaker and Moderator Registration: https://utmb.us/bpd

Zoom Link for the Event: https://utmb.us/eyt

Event Sponsors: First Lutheran Church of Galveston, University of Texas Medical Branch, Humanities Texas, Buddha's Light International Association–Dallas, LeReve Skin Institute, Inc., and Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Galveston County

Event Collaborators: Galveston Ministerial Alliance (GMA), Interfaith Council of Greater Clear Lake, Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, UTMB Photography Club (MedLens)

Background Information for Attendees:

A small conflict could become a war. Likewise, a simple smile may save a life. We hope this interfaith event encourages everyone to open up to other faiths, know each other better, and approach individual and community peace.

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AGENDA

8:30 am – 9:00 am Registration and light breakfast and background music

9:00 am – 9:20 am: Greeting and Opening

[Acknowledge sponsors, collaborators, speakers, and moderators]

1. Founding Member: *Reverend* Richard Rhoades, Pastor of First Lutheran Church
2. Founding Member: *Venerable* Miaolung Shih, Dharma Teacher of Fo Guang Shan

09:20 am – 10:10 am: Online panel

[8-minute presentation for each speaker followed by an 18-minute Q&A]

Moderator: Ms. Keyun Li, Fo Guang Shan Hua Yan Temple–IBPS in Montreal, Canada:

1. Hinduism: Ms. Sonal Wad, Hatha Yoga Instructor, London, UK
2. Buddhism: Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway, Levenson Chair and Professor, Department of History, Florida Atlantic University; Lay Dharma Teacher of Buddha's Light International Association
3. Buddhism: Dr. Dali Wu, Visual Artist and Illustrator, Montreal, Canada
4. Orthodox Christianity: *Father* Dr. Thomas Colyandro, PhD, Orthodox Scholar

10:10 am – 10:25 am: Coffee break

10:25 am – 11:20 am: On-Site panel

[8-minute presentation for each speaker followed by a 23-minute Q&A]

Moderator: *Reverend* Richard Rhoades, Pastor of First Lutheran Church

1. Christian/Catholic: *Deacon* Alvin Lovelady, Our Lady of Loudres Catholic Church
2. Judaism: *Rabbi* Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun
3. Sikh: Mr. Bo Singh, Gurdwara Sahib of South West Houston
4. Unitarian Universalism: *Reverend* Katie McQuage-Loukas, Minister of Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church

11:20 pm – 11:40 pm: Lunch

[BLIA President Ms. Cindy Lin provides a blur about roundtable activities]

11:40 pm – 12:30 pm: Roundtable discussion led by one faith leader per table

1. Set up a safe space for dialogue: no cross-talking, keep confidential, and suspend judgement
2. Everyone shares their faith perspective on "Joy, compassion, and meaning in life," what that means to you, etc.
3. Discussion around the table after hearing others' stories
    a. Why is it difficult to face the gap and cross the bridge?
    b. How can we repair what we have broken and let the healing begin?
4. Return to the panel presentation about "Joy, compassion, and meaning in life"
    a. Which morning speaker's talk inspired you today?
    b. Which morning speaker's talk is very different from your faith tradition or your moral perspective?
    c. Despite the similarities or differences, how do we approach joy, compassion, and meaning in life in a multi-faith society?

12:30 pm – 1:00 pm: Presentation from each table

Moderator: BLIA President Ms. Cindy Lin (each table speaks 5 minutes, pick one or two questions)

1:00 pm – 1:30 pm: Local activity updates and Closing

[5-min presentation for each committee representative followed by prayers and group photo]

Moderator: *Reverend* Richard Rhoades, Pastor of First Lutheran Church

1. Galveston Ministerial Alliance – *Rev.* Dick Maddox
2. Interfaith Council of Greater Clear Lake – *Rev.* Kyra Baehr
3. Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston – Ms. Kim Mabry
4. Closing Prayer – Ms. Jacqueline Wiggins and *Rev.* Richard Rhoades
5. Group Photo – Ms. Eunice Park

1:30 pm – 2:00 pm: Individual meetings with religious leaders (by appointment)

Online Panel

Panelists:

1. Hinduism: Ms. Sonal Wad
2. Buddhism: Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway
3. Buddhism: Dr. Dali Wu
4. Orthodox Christianity: *Father* Dr. Thomas Colyandro

Moderator: Ms. Keyun Li

Panelist of the Hindu Faith

Ms. Sonal Wad

CFA

Hatha Yoga Instructor, London, UK

Sonal Wad, a Chartered Accountant and CFA with two decades in global banking, is also a devoted Kriya yogi and certified Hatha yoga instructor. A passionate spiritual seeker, she authored *Unlock the Mystery of Your Consciousness*, a book that bridges Patanjali's Yoga Sutras with modern clarity. Sonal simplifies ancient wisdom into practical insights, guiding readers to explore consciousness beyond the mind. Her mission is to reveal Yoga's true purpose—not just physical exercise, but a holistic path to mental and physical well-being-making its transformative power accessible to all who seek balance, clarity, and inner growth.

Presentation by Ms. Sonal Wad

Sanātana Dharma: Joy, Compassion, and the Meaning of Life

Today, I would like to share the timeless vision of life that comes from Sanātana Dharma, often known today as Hinduism.

Sanātana Dharma literally means *the eternal way*. It is not a religion in the narrow sense of belief or conversion. The word dharma does not translate easily into English. It refers to the natural order of life—right living, responsibility, and the principles that sustain harmony within us and in the world around us.

In this tradition, philosophy was never meant to remain abstract. It was always practical. That is why Indian philosophy is called darśana, meaning *vision* or *direct seeing*. These teachings were meant to help human beings understand life, find meaning, and live with clarity and compassion.

Just as physicists develop different theories—each with its own terminology and models—to understand reality from different angles, Sanātana Dharma evolved through multiple philosophical and spiritual paths. These paths may differ in method and expression, yet they all address the fundamental questions about life—
Who am I?
Why do I or we as humans suffer?
How should I live?
What brings lasting mental peace?

A key part of this system is the Ṣaḍ Darśana, the six classical schools of philosophy which includes Vedanta, Sankhya, yoga etc. Together, they explore the relationship between the individual and the cosmos, the causes of human suffering, and the disciplines that lead to freedom from it.

These ideas are not dependent on belief in a single text or a single divine form. They are meant to be verified through experience and practice.

The Foundation: Sāṅkhya and Yoga

Today, I would like to present the philosophy of **Yoga**, as systematized in the **Yoga Sūtras of Maharishi Patañjali**.

Patañjali did not invent yoga. Yoga existed long before him. His contribution was to **organize and systematize yoga into a clear psychological and spiritual science**.

Yoga is defined very simply as:

Calming or cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.

(Citta, which is all inclusive of mind, intellect, ego, and memory)

In other words, yoga is a method to understand the mind, master it, and ultimately transcend it.

To analyse the mind, yoga draws from the framework of **Sāṅkhya philosophy**, which explains existence through two fundamental principles:

- Pure consciousness, the energy aspect of creation, spirit
- The material world, including the body, mind, and nature, matter

Consciousness or this energy does not act directly but expresses itself through the "body-mind complex" and all the material world. We are all powered by the same divine spark; our differences arise from the unique "vehicles" through which that energy is channeled. The differences are external but **the consciousness within us is the same**—unchanging, immutable, and divine.

This leads to an important question:
If We all have the Divine element in us, then why Do We Suffer or what drives us to conflicts and disharmony?

The Yoga Sūtras have an answer to that.

Sutras explain that suffering arises because we **mistake the activity and thoughts of the mind for who we truly are**. This is called Ignorance *(Avidyā)*—when we mistake our divine Self as limited to the mind or body.

This ignorance of our true nature gives rise to ego, creating a sense of individual identity.

Egoic identity creates the false knowledge that "I am the body" or "the mind," building barriers of "me" and "mine" (family, wealth, religion) all of which obscure that all of us share the same pure Consciousness within us.

This ego manifests in rigid belief systems and intellectual pride, where one feels the need to prove superiority in knowledge or status or belief.

On a collective level, this expands into national, racial, or religious identities and belief in superiority; the insistence that others must submit to your views is what sows the seeds of division and conflict between individuals and nations, which creates disharmony.

Ego is what is behind the strong likes and dislikes which drive attachment and aversion. Attachment leads to fear of losing what one is attached to.

This fear further fuels disharmony. When we feel our identity is threatened, we naturally try to protect it, which can lead to friction with others. This defensiveness, rooted in the ego, is how personal tensions can grow into larger conflicts between people, countries, or religions.

That is why the Yoga Sūtras state that **the root cause of all sorrow in this world is ego**.

And the purpose of Yoga is to help one overcome ego by transcending the mind and by helping one see one's true divine nature.

Yoga's Solution: Mastery of the Mind

The eightfold path of yoga, a structured way to gain mastery over the mind, is as follows:.

- *Yama*: Guidelines for ethical living
- *Niyama*: Guidelines for personal discipline.
- *Āsana*: Physical postures
- *Prāṇāyāma*: Breathing techniques to calm the mind.

- *Pratyāhāra*: Tuning out distractions.
- *Dhāraṇā*: Anchoring focus to an object
- *Dhyāna*: Meditation
- *Samādhi*: Absorption

Yoga does not ask us to suppress our thoughts or emotions. Instead, it teaches us to replace negative mental habits with positive, life-supporting attitudes.

While yoga is an inward journey of consciousness, it begins by changing how we behave externally.

Among these, four attitudes are mentioned which can play a critical role in creating inner harmony and emotional balance: friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

The **Yoga Sūtras** teach *maitrī* (friendliness) toward the happy. Usually, others' success triggers jealousy or comparison, which disturbs our peace. By consciously choosing goodwill over envy, we maintain a calm and steady mind.

Next is **karuṇā** (compassion) for those who suffer. By feeling another's pain as our own, we dissolve the walls of separation and move toward oneness. This compassion is naturally expressed through service, and has been shown by the path taken by enlightened beings who walked the planet to guide humanity out of suffering.

The third attitude is **muditā** (joy) toward the virtuous. Rather than feeling threatened by the goodness of others, we celebrate it. This positivity nurtures noble qualities within our own hearts

Finally, yoga sutras teach equanimity (*upekṣā*) toward those who act wrongly. This does not mean approving harmful actions, but avoiding judgment, hatred, or moral superiority. Yoga advises us to remain inwardly balanced—neither hating the sin nor the sinner—so that we respond with wisdom rather than emotional reactivity.

Through these four attitudes, the mind gradually becomes purified. And as mental turbulence reduces, inner stillness emerges.

Joy and Compassion

Yoga teaches that true joy comes from inner clarity, not external achievement.

Similarly, compassion becomes a natural expression of clarity rather than a moral obligation. By recognizing the same consciousness in everyone, separation dissolves.

Non-violence and kindness then emerge not as rules, but as reflections of this deeper insight.

The Meaning of Life According to Yoga

The meaning of life is to graduate from the illusion of the ego and overcome ignorance by realizing your identity as pure, unchanging Consciousness.

According to Yoga, this purpose is found neither in blind belief nor in escaping the world, but in the clarity of knowing who we are beyond our thoughts, fears, and physical identity.

When the mind becomes calmer and clearer, we begin to live from a deeper place within. Life continues—work, relationships, responsibilities—but we are no longer enslaved by anxiety, expectation, or the survival instinct. When we know and realize our true self as the unchanging, pure consciousness, we are not affected by things changing around us.

Yoga is a way of living in the world with wisdom, balance, and inner freedom.

Conclusion

Sanātana Dharma offers a profound yet practical approach to life.

Yoga shows us that joy is our nature, compassion is our expression, and meaning comes from living in alignment with our divine nature.

Panelist of the Buddhist Faith

Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway

Levenson Professor of Japanese History in the Department of History at Florida Atlantic University

Lay Dharma lecturer of Buddha's Light International Association

Dr. Holloway studies the bodily practices of Asian religions, beginning with the analysis and translation of excavated manuscripts written in Classical Chinese that were buried in 300 BCE, and extending to the neuroscience of contemporary Buddhist chanting. This research can be found in his two monographs published by Oxford University Press in 2009 and 2013, and his recently edited book, *Buddhism and the Body*, which was published by Brill in 2023.

Presentation by Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway

The Neuroscience Behind Developing Peace, Joy, and Compassion Through Buddhist Chanting

Today I will be discussing what constitutes peace, joy, compassion, and the meaning of life in Buddhism. The key is that being at peace and feeling joy are skills that we need to practice every day. Most people have no idea how to develop these skills. In my lectures, I tell people that the Humanistic Buddhism of Venerable Master Hsing Yun provides a roadmap for personal and social change so that cycles of positivity are attainable. I am excited to share this with you today because I believe strongly that this roadmap is something shared by all religions of the world. In these difficult times we need to discuss these very ancient ways that religion can help us experience more peace and joy.

My journey to teaching people about how to practice this began in December 2019. I was having breakfast with my wife and with Abbess Juehua 覺華住持of the Hui Ci Temple 慧慈寺 in the Shanhua 善化 Section of Tainan City, Taiwan. My wife, Shuling, and I had been invited to join morning prayers at the temple. This was the second time that Abbess Juehua had time in her schedule to invite us to stay for breakfast. As we were eating and chatting casually, Abbess suddenly changed the subject and shared with us what she had been thinking about. She said that there are an enormous number of microchip factories near here, and you can see them when you stand in front of the temple. Those engineers have stress, anxiety, and depression just like everyone else. However, none of them have ever come into the Hui Ci Temple. She said, "Ken, you are an academic, maybe you can think of a way to reach these engineers."

The best way to explain the method of how Buddhism can help people find peace and joy is to share with you a clinical trial that I designed in Taiwan with my partners at Nanhua University. They are Vice President Stella Yeh and Dean Vivian Lin. The trial is recruiting two hundred middle-aged and older women in Taiwan with high blood pressure. One group will be the control and will not have any intervention at all, and then the rest will be divided into five groups. The first group will be asked to chant the Amitabha Sutra one time a day aloud for 4 weeks. This will take 20 minutes to complete. The practice of chanting aloud is the one that we are looking for an

intervention we can pair with in future studies. This leads to the second group which will recite the Amitabha Sutra silently once a day. By comparing the active mode of praying out loud with the more passive silent mode, we hope to find a small difference in the physiological and psychological data we gather. The third group will meditate silently for 20 minutes a day on an image of Amitabha Buddha, and the fourth will trace an image of Amitabha Buddha for 20 minutes a day. Again, the active versus passive art therapy modalities will be compared with the practice of prayer. Finally, we will have people color a mandala for 20 minutes a day. People who participate in the trial will undergo measurements prior to the study, commencing after the first intervention and at the end of the 4-week study. These measurements will include taking EEG (electroencephalogram) measurements, collecting saliva samples for cortisol levels, as well as a qualitative surveys to understand sleep quality, stress levels, and levels of fatigue. The goal is to find a non-pharmaceutical, culturally appropriate way to alleviate the comorbidities associated with high blood pressure. In other words, we believe that prayer is key to increasing feelings of peace and joy.

In the summer of 2025, I gave my first lecture at an engineering company called MediaTek and another at the Industrial Technology Research Institute, which is the incubator for companies like Taiwan Semiconductor. The clinical trial I just described was in its earliest discussion stage with my partners at Nanhua University. Therefore, I lectured about my personal experience in chanting during Buddhist liturgy services and some of the stories of people I have encountered over the decades who tried chanting for the first time.

When people first walk in the door at the Miami Foguang Shan Temple, there is often very little time to tell them much about the Buddhist religion. In such situations, I simply tell them that we will be chanting in Chinese and all the words will be written out in romanization. We start slowly and then usually increase in speed, but all they need to think about is doing their best to chant in harmony with those around them. I tell them to think of it like a sing-along. If they are hesitant, I tell them that our temple has people with all kinds of different accents. We have members from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Beijing, Vietnam, Colombia, and Brazil. There are many different accents, but we work hard to harmonize.

At the end of the hour and a half service, I will always ask them in as casually a manner as I can, "How are you" or "How do you feel?" Invariably people say that they feel more relaxed, and I can see it in their faces and in their postures. They are

more at peace and sometimes have even found some joy. I offer them English translations of the sutras we chanted so they can read them for their meaning when they get home, but I also tell them that the practice of chanting is not an analytical one. We are not mulling over the deep meanings of terms as we chant. Instead, it is about simply observing without judgement *guanzhao* 關照. The importance of this is reflected in the Ming Dynasty Master Lianchi 蓮池大師 (AKA Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲袾宏 1535–1615), who said that in the history of Buddhism, more people achieved enlightenment through chanting than through seated meditation.

In closing, I believe that the key to peace, joy, and compassion is through prayer. I hope that we can encourage our members to turn to the power of prayer when they are in crisis, when they are hurting, and when life is good. Peace, joy, and compassion need to be developed daily, and the best way to do this is to embrace daily prayers.

Panelist of The Buddhist Faith

Dr. Dali Wu, PhD

Visual Artist and Illustrator, Montreal, Canada

Dr. Dali Wu is an artist and research-creation scholar whose work explores awakening, compassion, and ethical responsibility in the posthuman era. Trained in visual arts and research between China, France, and Canada, her doctoral project, *Trans-image*, weaves together Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, family and historical trauma, post-humanist critique, and contemporary art practice. Growing up within a Chinese family shaped by transgenerational trauma, she developed Trans-image as a method for exploring how images can hold personal and collective suffering while opening pathways toward spiritual awakening, transformation, compassionate agency, and ethical commitment. Her transdisciplinary practice engages bodily memory, spiritual experience, and posthuman metamorphosis as forms of ethical, relational, and societal inquiry.

Presentation by Dr. Dali Wu

Contemplating the clouds: Awakening, Compassion, and Shared Humanity in a Posthuman Age

In this presentation, I will introduce *Trans-image*, a research-creation method developed in my PhD work. It explores how *awakening*, understood through a Mahāyāna Buddhist lens, can be lived, shared, and visualized in a posthuman age. Bringing together Buddhist philosophy, posthumanist theory, trauma studies, and contemporary art practice, it asks: As technologies reshape what we call "human" and our sense of self, how can we cultivate a joy that doesn't deny suffering, a compassion that becomes tangible in daily life, and a meaning in life as a shared ethical responsibility?

Operational definitions of themes

Before I continue, I'd like to clarify two operational definitions I'll be using today. First, by **"awakening"** in a Mahāyāna Buddhist context, I mean *darśanamārga*—the "path of seeing," or a direct way of perceiving reality as it is. I'm **not** using the term to mean the final attainment of Buddhahood, or "supreme, complete enlightenment." Second, by **"the posthuman age,"** I refer to the growing fusion of humans and technology—where the boundaries between the organic and the artificial are increasingly blurred. Here I draw on N. Katherine Hayles, a leading scholar of posthumanism; this era calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of what it means to be human (*How We Became Posthuman*, 1999).

What is *Trans-image* and how does it respond to *Joy, compassion, and meaning of life*?

Trans-image is the name I give to a philosophical and artistic framework, it has three main pillars:

1. Awakening as lived experience.

Through a Mahayana Buddhist lens, I treat "awakening" not as a mystical status or a distant goal, but as a continuous practice of seeing:

- The emptiness of fixed identities,
- The interdependence of all beings, and
- the possibility of responding with compassion.

2. Images as a space of encounter.

Trans-image approaches images, both visible (drawings, diagrams, artistic installations, etc.) and invisible (imagination, inner vision, dreams, etc.), as **meeting-grounds** that bring into relation:

- body and mind,
- intimate, personal, and unfalsifiable lived memories with collective histories,
- the human and the more-than-human (animals, technological systems, spiritual presences, unconscious materials, etc.).

The aim is not to represent one religious tradition, but to invite viewers—across cultural and spiritual backgrounds—to **embody interdependence**, **remain with vulnerability**, and **respond ethically**.

3. Posthuman context: joy and compassion in a world of machines and division.

- The work reflects on how technologies (AI, networks, surveillance, etc.) reshape our sense of self and our relation to others.
- It engages with social Institutions, historical trauma, and marginalization.
- In this context, joy is not mere gratification, but a subtle, resilient faith that arises when we recognize:

"We are not alone in our suffering.

We belong to a larger living field of interdependence, across all forms of life and matter."

In short, within Trans-image, joy becomes a **shared perception**, and **resilient trust** of interconnection—whenever we can still choose care; compassion means **staying present with vulnerability, together**; and the meaning of life emerges as an **ethical capacity**: to respond, to co-create, and to participate in the repair of our shared world.

On the fluidity of existence

Moving forward, I'd like to briefly introduce *Contemplating the Clouds*, a case study within Trans-image. It explores the connection between the artist and the Self through multidimensional experimentation. Created during the COVID-19 confinement, the project reflects on the fluidity of existence while also responding to our accelerating technological transformation. In this project, clouds become a metaphor for impermanence. They embody the world's ceaseless metamorphosis and the emptiness of fixed shapes and forms. Elusive, fluid, and ephemeral, they open onto an expansive field of possibilities. Beginning on April 25, 2021, while the pandemic confinement was still in effect, I began a daily practice: for a full year, I observed and documented the cloud formations from my rooftop. Most evenings, between 6 and 9 p.m., I recorded what I saw through drawings, mixed media, also using simple everyday materials (for example, coffee stains, newspaper collage, etc.) to capture both the clouds' shifting choreography and the changes in my own inner climate—my emotional weather. Over time, the series became a quiet archive of reciprocity between the inner and outer worlds.

Now I will briefly describe the art installation process.

When no audience is present, the transparent folding screen stays inactive. The moment a visitor enters, a surveillance camera—critically repurposed to redirect extraction into care—detects their presence, and animated clouds, drawn from the cloud series, begin to appear on the screen. These images incorporate the visitors' silhouettes that keep transforming. Over time, those traces evolve into what I called "electronic clouds," blending thermal captures of the audience into layered, looping, yet ever-changing compositions. If a viewer chooses to remain still, the clouds slowly dissolve, and a "revelation tree" emerges and expands, filling the folding screen with white.

The sound is another essential part: the atmosphere combines monastic chanting, Tibetan bells, and ambient drones, and when the tree appears, a gamelan-like percussion comes in, immersing the audience in a meditative atmosphere. During the exhibition, the viewer may choose to remain still—inviting the tree to emerge—or step back and observe the cloud drawings.

This structure of free choice is central to the project, which suggests that in each moment, new possibilities can appear, and transformation always remains available, quietly, patiently, as a form of awakening-in-process.

Panelist of the Orthodox Christian Faith

Father Dr. Thomas Colyandro, PhD

Orthodox priest and scholar

Fr. Thomas is an Orthodox priest and spiritual counselor, a Fellow at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, the director of theological and spiritual studies at St. Athanasius College, and the former assistant director of the Center for Faith & Culture at the University of St. Thomas (Houston). He is on the steering committee of the International Orthodox Theological Association (IOTA) Asceticism and Spirituality Group, a member of the board of the Orientale Lumen Foundation, and an editor at Eastern Christian Publications. *Fr.* Thomas has led dozens of retreats, written or edited 10 books and many articles on spirituality and theology, and continues to focus his original work on the uncreated silence of the Holy Spirit.

Presentation by *Fr.* Thomas Colyandro, PhD

Joy, Compassion, and Meaning in Orthodox Christianity

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Orthodox Christianity offers an integrated vision of *joy, compassion, and meaning in life*—that they are not only an outgrowth of specific choices within the physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, and spiritual aspects of the human person, but also because they converge in a single theological reality: *theosis* (deification), which is the gradual transfiguration of the human person into a greater likeness with God through God's uncreated energies.

The Foundation: Pentecost and the Gift of the Spirit

The Orthodox understanding of all this begins at Pentecost. In Acts 2, Luke records both the experience and the fruit of the Spirit's coming: "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:4). The result was a transformed community: "all who believed were together and had all things in common... they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God" (Acts 2:44, 46-47). Here we see the three elements woven together: joy ("glad and generous hearts"), compassion ("had all things in common"), and meaning (worship and fellowship).

St. Gregory Palamas, in his *Homily on Pentecost*, illuminates this event's significance: "The Lord, in His all-surpassing love for mankind, showed at Pentecost that His disciples were partakers, fathers and ministers of everlasting light and life, who bring us to new birth for eternal life and make those who are worthy children of the Light."[1] He further describes the Spirit's fire: "They partook of fire, not of burning but of saving fire; of fire which consumes the thorns of sins, but gives luster to the soul."[2]

Palamas's theology provides the conceptual framework for understanding how such transformation is possible. He articulated the distinction between God's essence (ousia), His inner being (which remains forever unknowable) and His uncreated energies (energia), His outward activity, life, and power through which He relates to creation. These energies are not created effects but God Himself acting in the world. When the disciples received "tongues of fire," they participated in the divine life itself without becoming God in essence. This distinction preserves both genuine communion with God and the Creator-creature distinction essential to Orthodox thought.

The Goal of Life: Acquisition of the Holy Spirit

St. Seraphim of Sarov articulates the meaning of human existence directly: "Prayer, fasting, vigil and all other Christian activities, however good they may be in themselves, do not constitute the aim of our Christian life, although they serve as the indispensable means of reaching this end. The true aim of our Christian life consists in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God."[3] His famous saying, "Acquire the Spirit of Peace and a thousand souls around you will be saved,"[4] connects personal transfiguration to compassionate influence: the peaceful, joy-filled soul becomes a source of salvation for others through a transfigured presence.

The Prayer of the Heart: Teachings from the Philokalia

The writings of the *Philokalia* provide a practical framework for this transfiguration. St. Hesychios the Priest writes: "Let us hold fast, therefore, to prayer and humility, for together with watchfulness they act like a burning sword against the demons. If we do this, we shall daily and hourly be able to celebrate a secret festival of joy within our hearts."[5]

The *Philokalia* also connects the interior work each of us do with the relationships we hold dear. St. Evagrios writes: "Blessed is the monk who looks with great joy on everyone's salvation and progress as if they were his own."[6] Compassion itself becomes a delight, a natural response of the purified heart.

The Therapeutic Vision and Love as Source

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, in *The Orthodox Way*, articulates how joy, love, and the path to God are inseparable. On joy, he writes: "If I do not feel a sense of joy in God's creation, if I forget to offer the world back to God with thankfulness, I have advanced very little upon the Way. I have not yet learnt to be truly human. For it is only through thanksgiving that I can become myself."[7] Joy here is not optional sentiment but essential to authentic humanity, and it emerges through the practice of thanksgiving.

He further connects this joy to a realistic vision of the world: "Joyful thanksgiving, so far from being escapist or sentimental, is on the contrary entirely realistic, but with the realism of one who sees the world in God, as the divine creation."[8] Orthodox joy does not deny suffering but sees through it to the deeper truth of creation's goodness and God's presence.

On compassion, Ware is equally direct: "The way to God lies through love of other

people, and there is no other way. At the Last Judgement I shall not be asked if I was successful in my ascetic exercises or how many prostrations I made in the course of my prayers. I shall be asked, did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners: that is all I shall be asked."[9] Here the integration is complete: the path to God (meaning), expressed through love of neighbor (compassion), is itself the source of authentic existence (joy).

Matthew the Poor, in *If You Love Me*, complements this vision: "The lesson of love can never be taught simply by words... Rather, it is taught by truly giving yourself and communicating the love and longing for Christ to those you serve... How awesome and dignified is Christian service!"[10] Christian service finds meaning in Christ's self-giving love.

The Thirst for Eternal Life: Archimandrite Zacharias

In *Thirst for Life Eternal*, Archimandrite Zacharias describes transformation after encountering the Resurrection: "'Having received the experience of the Resurrection,' we enter a new period of grace, which the Church has instituted to train us, her children, to find another place, beautiful and holy, where we will come to know the blessedness of the promise of the Father."[11]

He describes how asceticism is transformed by and in the Resurrection: "Now the asceticism changes form; it becomes positive. It does not consist of bodily hardship, but in the spiritual thirst for the 'waters of godliness.' It is expressed by an ever-increasing expectation and longing for the fiery flame of the Paraclete, which warms the heart and illumines the mind to understand the words of the Almighty Jesus and leads 'into all the fullness of His incorruptible love.'"[12]

Zacharias' most striking passage describes the interior experience of receiving the Holy Spirit: "The man who conceives the Holy Spirit in his heart becomes double. Just as the woman with child knows that she carries a new life and feels the movements of the infant in her womb, so also, he who bears the Holy Comforter feels in the depths of his soul the leapings of Him Who 'bloweth where He listeth.' The continual changes in his heart testify that he bears the Treasure of goodness, that he bears an abundance of life in his earthly vessel."[13] This maternal imagery reveals joy not as static contentment but dynamic participation in divine life. The heart carries "an abundance of life" that naturally overflows in compassion.

Zacharias explains: "As the mother subjects herself to any hardship in order to preserve the life of her child, so also the man in whose heart blows the breeze of the Spirit, does everything so as not to grieve the good Comforter with the slightest negative thought."[14]

In the end, Zacharias invites us to approach Pentecost with the expectation that we will live differently, permanently. "Let us surrender to the earthquake of the energy of His Spirit, shaking off the scales of sin and the corruption of death so that, with our whole heart turned to the Lord, we may also receive the 'burning and refreshing' gift of our Great God, which will lift us from things temporal and deceiving to things eternal and true. Then we will know that we are children of the Heavenly Father and that He has prepared for us a great inheritance, the Kingdom of Heaven."[15]

Conclusion

In the end, what emerges for the Orthodox Christian is not three separate topics but a single, integrated vision. Meaning comes from *theosis*, a type of union with God through His uncreated energies. Joy is its experiential fruit, the "secret festival" celebrated in the heart that has become a dwelling place of divine life. Compassion is the natural outflow of a heart that has received the abundance of God's own love and cannot help but extend it to others. As St. Seraphim taught, acquire the Holy Spirit, and a thousand souls around you will be saved.

Glossary of Orthodox Terms:

Energies (energeiai): The uncreated activities, power, and life of God through which He acts in the world and relates to creation. Distinguished from God's essence, the energies are fully divine yet communicable to creatures.

Essence (ousia): God's inner being, which remains forever unknowable and incommunicable to creatures.

Nepsis: Watchfulness; vigilant attention to one's inner state, particularly in prayer.

Theosis: Deification; the process by which human beings are transformed into the likeness of God through participation in the uncreated energies. The goal of human existence in Orthodox theology.

Uncreated Light: The divine light witnessed by the apostles at Christ's Transfiguration and experienced by saints in prayer; identified with God's uncreated energies rather than a created phenomenon.

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Q & A Session with Online Panelists and Audience

Question 1 (from onsite audience member):

I have a quick question, it's a very general question, so I was wondering that, maybe (coming from) your own experience, the policy experience, about how to express your compassion, with people with different needs. It can be political, faith, or just financial.

Answer from Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway:

I've written extensively about conflict, and Buddhism. There's an idea that Buddhism is this idealistic religion, but really it's something that's embedded in the conflict and challenges of human existence. I think the best way to describe that is the image of the lotus. Right? The purity that every Buddhist statue is seated upon. The lotus gets its nourishment from mud, from the filth and the difficulty of this Saha world. And so, Buddhism doesn't imagine that these conflicts are going to disappear. But rather, we are asked to learn from them, and grow from them, and develop from them. So, everyone is seen as a potential person we can learn from. Right, to be more compassionate. That's why, at the Shanhua 善化Hui Ci Temple（慧慈寺), the Elder there does a lot of work with prisons for people who are dealing with drug addiction to try and help them. And I believe that's what Father Thomas also is talking about in his speech. It is not asking about frustrations; it's about what you have done for people out in the world. And that's never easy. So, I think that we have a lot of shared ideas.

Answer from *Fr.* Dr. Thomas Colyandro:

Thank you so much, Dr. Holloway. I agree with you that religion is a participatory sport, so I think that's the word you used earlier. Yes, and this falls right in line with the question of compassion. What good is it if you're kind to yourself and that we always need that, right? It's self-respect and a type of healthy self-love. But also, then to go out beyond yourself. You know, we talk a lot in Orthodox Christianity about the fact that what good is it—And I love how Dr. Holloway quoted from my talk that—what good is it going to do if I just am alone by myself in my room and have this private relationship with God. You know, even the great, ascetical saints of our

tradition, the hermits, the ones that barely encountered people, were known to spend much of their day praying for others. So that it wasn't just this private dialogue, and it's sort of…you know, solipsistic; it started in them and ended with them. The whole idea is that it was effusive, that it was outward-facing.

Response from Ms. Keyun Li:

Thank you. Can I understand it as a touch on the theme of altruism? So, ultimately helping each other. And then to have this interfaith focus. Building on the shared understanding that we're all human. So, we're not that segmented, we're not that separated at the end of the day.

Response from Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway:

I will just add… and the key is to know the other. And so, and you didn't say this, but I was saying, it's not just a service provided or transactional. In Buddhism there's the idea that you can't be compassionate without wisdom. Wisdom and compassion are two inseparable concepts. I often think back to when I was in graduate school when I organized a group to feed the homeless and we made these ham sandwiches for them, and we went out to them, and… they didn't want them. You know, I didn't have the wisdom. I was trying to be compassionate, but I was ignorant of what they actually needed. And I think that that was a failure. It was a moment where I really learned the importance of wisdom and compassion, and, as we're talking today, how religion can be a big way to develop.

Answer from Ms. Sonal Wad:

Continuing from your point. We are mere mortals, right? It doesn't matter what religion you are, if there is grief or bereavement, or the pain of an illness. That is saying, and it doesn't matter what one's faith is. If I know a friend who is struggling with illness. I will be there for them. It doesn't matter that I pray to my God, you pray to your God, but it is being there for that person and just sharing. That's compassion, because we wouldn't want to take that person's faith away from them, but I can still share and be there through their times. I think that is what is understanding that, what we grew up with, that identity is very common But today, even listening to the interfaith discussions, I see so many similarities with Buddhism and what Father

Thomas talked about—joy and compassion. Even if the language is different, it's still the same expression, and how we find it might be different, maybe through meditation, maybe through chanting, maybe through prayers. But ultimately, we are still looking for the same Divine presence in our life, and I think that's my take on this.

Response from Ms. Keyun Li:

I think during your presentation there's one concept that you've mentioned—it's called unconditional friendliness. And I think this is very important… it's almost like the essence to what we're doing today, it's interfaith dialogue that we share and we listen to each other. Our beliefs are not the same. And we still have a common ground, a safe space to talk about it. That's why I think this is a really beautiful opportunity.

Question 2 (from onsite audience member):

I saw that joy was mentioned quite a lot. And I wonder if the Eastern definition of joy is much deeper and more nuanced than it is for us in the West to know and to love. Because we're talking about compassion and everything, but as a Lutheran, grace is kind of how we say compassion. But I've never kind of tied it to joy, and it seems like with the Eastern religions there, joy is the goal, and I wonder if we just look at it from a different angle as Christians or Westerners, because I think I kind of got that Joy means a whole lot more to the Buddhists and the Hindus. Both of those attributes.

Answer from Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway:

The term in Chinese for joy, le(樂), kuai le（快樂), right? That word, le（樂） It can also be pronounced as yue（樂)， yin yue de yue（音"樂"的"樂" meaning 'yue' from the word "music"). So joy and music are like the same character with just two different sides to it, like wisdom and compassion. Are these two inseparable things, right? But… joy and music are interconnected. But in classical times, music and ritual are also inseparable. So, the idea of the research study… that through the liturgy, which is also musical, but is also ritual, this is how we develop joy, which is part of this very old Eastern idea. But I think that what Father Thomas was talking about is not just about this thing that's just housed within this body. It only happens within the

context of family, friends, colleagues, strangers; it has to resonate outwards, to be real. Otherwise, it's this false, illusory joy, not true joy, not true happiness, so that the music and the liturgies are ways that we come together and bring people together.

Answer from *Fr.* Dr. Thomas Colyandro:

To build on what Dr. Holloway said, as the Eastern Christian in the room, you see that there's language that is consonant, with both Eastern ideas, categories, sentiments —these sorts of things, relationships., and then sort of a tagging on with Christianity ultimately is more broadly Western. So what I would say is that joy is wonderment having this experience of the other, the ultimate other being the divine. What has happened in this creation? What has happened that I am here, that you are here, that we are together? It's this sense of awe, it's this sense of discovery, it's the sense of knowing. So, yes, there's happy, there's glad, there's excited, there's pleasurable. But then there's this deeper joy of the encounter with the other. I'll leave it at that.

Response from *Reverend* Richard Rhoades:

Jesus in Scripture says, "I've come that your joy may be complete." It's that sense that there's this divine relationship that is from outside of us that is God's acceptance of us. God's love for us transforms us. In Lutheran theology we would lean into… we're to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, and body with all that we are. And we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. And so we translate that into this concept of we're freed by God's love to love God. And we live that love out as we love others. Not based on their being like me, they think like I do, they have the same political belief that I do, anything like that; but rather, I love others because God first loves them whoever they are, as humanity. All people are born in the image of the divine, so all people have opportunities to interact with compassion and that joy is deep-seated in our being, that's made complete with God's love. Not an expression of my good works, not an expression of my achievement. But rather infused with love, I'm changed. And then fitting that in, each of our traditions has liturgy that has music, and it has that same rooting that's taking place. So, there's something beautiful in there, but I think nomenclature is a challenge… the language sometimes. With our theological words, from tradition to tradition to tradition, we have to take time and break those down so we can see we're actually talking about the same thing. We just

have a different way of talking about it.

Moderator of the Online Panel

Ms. Keyun Li

Fo Guang Shan Hua Yan Temple–IBPS in Montreal, Canada

Keyun Li earned her B.A. from The University of Texas at Austin, where she had a double major in Psychology and Rhetoric and Writing. During her time in Austin, her work experience included event coordination, fundraising, media campaigns, and translation. After moving to Montréal, Canada, she experienced a profound personal shift and began reorienting her life through faith and art, taking refuge in the Triple Gem of Buddhism in 2022. She is currently a musician and composer, working across jazz, experimental music, and soundscape design. Through ongoing practice, her journey of personal growth, subjectivity, and individuation continues.

Onsite Panel

Panelists:

1. Christian/Catholic: Deacon Alvin Lovelady
2. Judaism: Rabbi Steven Morgen
3. Sikh: Mr. Bo Singh
4. Unitarian Universalism: Reverend Katie McQuage-Loukas

Moderator: Reverend Richard Rhoades

Panelist of Christian/Catholic Faith

Deacon Alvin Lovelady

Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church

Deacon Lovelady was born in Amherst, Texas, and raised in a non-Christian home. He married his wife, a cradle Catholic in 1974. He became Catholic at the persuasion of his girls in 1984 and has been active in the church with his wife and girls and then attended an ACTS retreat in 2003. He joined the diaconate program in Fall 2005 and was ordained a deacon by Cardinal Danial DiNardo in February 2011. He worked in construction for 48 years and retired in 2016, when he went to work for the Office of Correctional Ministries of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. He became Director of Correctional Ministries in 2020 and retired December 31, 2025.

Presentation by *Deacon* Alvin Lovelady

As a deacon in the Catholic Church and someone who preaches it in my parish on the weekends, I just preached this last weekend. I'm what they call a traveler. I do not stand at an ambo or a podium and preach… I walk. So, if y'all lose track of me, I'm sorry, I apologize for that. Just listen, you should be able to hear me. It's just my nature of who I am and how I present myself. I also don't preach from notes. And so, what you hear today is from the heart. I want to thank *Father* Thomas. You touched on a lot of things, but I didn't ask questions because I didn't want to step on my own toes. I was asked to come and speak today on the topic of joy and compassion and the meaning of life.

You heard the introduction about me and who I am. I grew up more out of than in a Protestant environment… grew up kind of in the Baptist church. Didn't spend a lot of time there. I had some encounters that were a little bit negative for me, so I didn't really have any church relationship until I met my wife who was a cradle Catholic. But what really made things happen for me in the church when I went to church with her, was that I met people in the church and saw and recognized people that were customers of my father who had a business. All of a sudden, I'm seeing people in the church that I had no idea they were Catholic… didn't even know what a Catholic was until I married one. But these people were customers of my dad's, so I was comfortable being around them.

I was welcomed into the church. My wife and I got married. Nine years later, our two oldest daughters asked me why I wasn't receiving Eucharist like they and their mother. I told them because I wasn't Catholic. So my wife said, "You're the spiritual leader of the family, you need to step up." And so I did and joined the church, came into the church, our Easter Vigil in 1984.

I lost a daughter to cancer in 1998, and I began to search for her faith. That was my journey… to find out how she could be so faithful. My question was, where was her God, and where was my God in all of this? How am I supposed to believe? And so, I began a journey. On that journey, there was a new movement going on… some people would call it a Revival in the Catholic Church. It's called an ACTS Retreat (acronym for Adoration, Community, Theology, and Service). I went on an ACTS Retreat and my spirit was lifted. I began to search more and more about my religion and what I wanted to do, or what am I supposed to be in all of this? Along the

journey of being on these retreats and participating in that, I became active in ACTS, which got me more active in the church, which got me more active in my faith, which drew me to the diaconate.

The diaconate was a six-and-a-half-year program for me, and in the last two years of that program they put us in an extra ministry besides the diaconate. We had to have a social ministry outside of the church. They didn't give us an option; they had about 10 ministries that we could pick from, and out of those 10 ministries one of those was the correctional ministry, which is the prison ministry; that was number three on my list. We had to pick three. Hospital ministry was my choice; I decided that the hospital ministry was where I needed to be. But they decided the prison ministry was where I needed to be. And I know that was the Holy Spirit that was guiding them. My first thought was, there's a female prison only a few minutes from my house. It has a hospital that's attached to it. So, I thought, if I'm going to do prison ministry, I can do hospital ministry in the prison. That will satisfy my desire to do ministry, and also satisfy the directors of the diaconate. But that's not where the Holy Spirit sent me. He sent me into a maximum security unit an hour away from my house. And when I walked in there and heard those steel doors close behind me for the very first time, I was little more than terrified, in a sense. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, and God walking with me the whole time, the very first time I walked in, I walked out, and I knew that that's where I was supposed to be. That was in 2009, and I've been involved in correctional ministry all along.

You heard the story about me going to work for the Archdiocese in 2016 as associate director. The director retired at the end of 2019, and I took over as director. I just retired from being the Director of Correctional Ministry. But I have not retired from prison ministry. Everybody asks me how long I'll stay as deacon and stay active, and I tell them when they close the lid on the box, that's when I'm done. When God calls me home, that's when I'm done.

I heard Father Thomas talk about compassion, and I'm going to tell you this, and I'm going to be as blunt and as straightforward as I can. The ACTS movement moved into the prisons and it became what they call Kolbe Prison Ministry. They changed the name from Prison ACTS to Kolbe Prison, obviously for Maximilian Kolbe who died in prison. We took his namesake for that. The Kolbe Prison Ministry is a movement within the prisons, not just in the state of Texas. That's where it started, but it's moving across the United States. Right now, they're in Texas. We're in almost all the

units in Texas, Louisiana, Florida, Oklahoma, and now in Kansas. The requests are coming in for more and more activity across the United States. I'm very active in that. I'm still on the board for Kolbe Prison Ministry and I'm still active in a couple of other groups that do prison ministry.

If you want to learn how to be compassionate, if you want to learn how to bring joy into people's lives, I'm going to tell you straight up—you have to step into their chaos. If you're not walking with them in their chaos, regardless of where they are, whether it's in prison, in the hospital, in a nursing home, no matter where they are, whether they're in immigration, no matter what's going on with them in their lives—if you're not walking with them and you're not sharing with them, you're not living compassion. And you cannot… I don't care how much joy you have in your life, I don't care how much you work in a church environment, you cannot fully have joy in your life until you work with someone that's struggling to survive. And it doesn't matter if they're struggling in a prison environment, or if they're struggling right out here on the streets. If you're not engaged with them, you're not engaged with God. If you're not engaged with the people who are struggling, wherever they are, in your own church, in your own streets, in the community around you. If you don't engage, you're not doing what you're called to do.

As people of God, regardless of what your religion is, regardless of what your background is, regardless of what you do for a living, if you don't live the two most famous commandments that Christ gave us. And yes, I'm a Christian, and I believe in Jesus Christ. If you don't believe in the two famous quotes that He gave—when He was asked about the most important commandment, and what did He tell the young man? *Love God with all your heart, mind, and being.* And the second is just as important. *Love your neighbor as yourself.* I challenge people daily, when I have the opportunity, to not go to any one quote, any one verse, any word. I don't quote Scripture to people, but if you want to quote from me about Scripture, go read *Matthew 25*. Don't just read a piece of it, read all of *Matthew 25.* And that tells you where we're supposed to be. Regardless of who you are, regardless of your religion, regardless of what you're supposed to do in your life, or your relationship is, what your profession is, I don't care how many PhDs you have, I don't care what your background is, if you're not living *Matthew 25*, you're not living according to where we're called to be. That's all I have to say. God bless y'all.

Panelist of the Jewish Faith

Rabbi Steven Morgen

Congregation Beth Yeshurun

Rabbi Steven Morgen graduated from UCLA School of Law in 1983 and practiced corporate and securities law in Los Angeles for over nine years. He began rabbinical school in 1993 in Los Angeles and was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York in 1998. Rabbi Morgen moved to Houston upon his ordination to serve as a rabbi at Congregation Beth Yeshurun and has happily remained there for more than 27 years. Before retiring, he supervised the adult education program at Beth Yeshurun, and he continues to teach an "Invitation to Judaism" course among other classes. He is involved in a variety of interfaith and educational programs in Houston.

Presentation by *Rabbi* Steven Morgen

Overview:

We human beings have been given five "senses" with which to explore our Universe: taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing. But humans all over the world seem to "sense" that there is something more to the Universe than what these five senses can investigate. We feel/believe/sense that beyond the dimensions of space and time, physics and chemistry, there is a Force, a Being, a Creator, a Power that we can somehow relate to. There is a purpose behind the Universe. There is meaning and intention. And each one of us has a specific part to play in the Universal drama. This "sixth sense" that I believe humans have is also a gift from the Creator.

Humans around the world have explored this sixth sense and developed religions to help us better understand the nature of this "Creator" and what the Creator hopes we will do here on earth during our lifetimes. Different human cultures in different geographical locations have, over centuries, refined this process of exploring "meaning" by creating, developing, and enhancing "religions." Religions are the software packages we inherit and learn to use to fine tune our sixth sense. We use religion to develop a connection with this Creator and to discipline ourselves toward actions, behaviors, rituals, and endeavors that improve our world and the creatures in it, and particularly to improve the lives of other human beings.

We too often become competitive about whose religion is better than the others or who has ultimate knowledge or correct belief.

Think instead of a human orchestra. An orchestra that includes only oboes would be a boring orchestra. Orchestras play beautiful music because there are so many kinds of instruments playing their particular part of a symphony score with great precision and artistry. Rather than argue about who is the best, we need to learn to play our own instruments (our faith traditions) in the best possible way, so that our "section" of the orchestra sounds beautiful. If we each can do that, then the entire human symphony will sound Divine.

I would also suggest that no two humans understand their own faith tradition identically with any other member of that faith tradition. The amazing thing about us human beings is that each of us is unique—physically, but also in emotional, intellectual, and spiritual ways. So, I cannot speak for "Judaism," but I can offer

sources in our tradition that speak to the specific questions presented today. I am not at all surprised that many of our presenters have touched on very similar themes. That is because each of our faith traditions is striving to understand the same Force/Creator of the Universe, and from our own traditions we have reached similar conclusions. The following are some Jewish sources on these subjects.

A. What are *joy, compassion, and meaning in life* according to my faith tradition?

<u>Joy and Happiness</u>

- It is a mitzvah (a commandment) to "**serve YHVH your God in joy and gladness** over the abundance of everything" – Deut. 28:47. We have much to by joyful about. The Universe is so amazing, an overflowing fountain of delights for the senses, the ability to connect with others spiritually, emotionally, intellectually. So much to be joyful for.
- We celebrate the Sabbath and Festivals with a special blessing over a glass of wine and loaves of bread. Why wine and bread? Because it says in the Psalms: "**wine that cheers human hearts**, oil that makes the face shine, and bread that sustains human life." (104:15)
- Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (18th Century Chassidic rabbi) said, "**It is a great *mitzvah* [commandment] to be happy all the time**."

<u>Compassion</u>

- "**Love your neighbor as yourself**" (Leviticus 19:18). Rabbi Akiba (great Jewish Sage of the Second Century) said this is the most important commandment in the Torah (the Five Books of Moses). Jesus, of course, also said it is one of the most important commandments as recorded in the Christian Bible.
- "When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them. **The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; <u>you shall love each one</u> as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt**. (Leviticus 19:33-34) Lest someone think that loving another only applies to "your neighbor," the Bible also says we must love the stranger who dwells among us.

- "Shimon the Righteous [High Priest, either Third or Second Century BCE] used to say: the world stands upon three things: the Torah, the Worship of God (Avodah), and **acts of kindness** (or compassion, *Gemilut Hasadim*).

Meaning in Life

- **Choose Life** "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. **Choose life**—if you and your offspring would live by loving the ETERNAL your God, by heeding God's commands, and by holding fast to [God]." **(**Deut. 30:19-20**)** Judaism emphasizes that life is of infinite, intrinsic value, instructing individuals to **choose life**, blessing, and goodness to elevate their existence. Hence the common expression "***L'chayim***!" Also the concept of ***Pikuach Nefesh***—that all of the commandments can be set aside in order to preserve life.
- **Purposeful Action and Mitzvot:** The Torah is seen as a guide (***Torat Chayim***) providing **instructions for living a meaningful life**, where fulfilling *mitzvot* (commandments) brings purpose to both the individual and the world (e.g., "You shall keep My laws and My rules, by **the pursuit of which humans shall live**." Lev. 18:5) Note: Jewish tradition teaches that non-Jews are only required to keep **Seven Commandments given to Noah**: prohibiting idolatry, blasphemy, murder, theft, sexual immorality, and cruelty to animals, and requiring the establishment of courts of justice.
- **Individual Uniqueness:** Rabbi Zusya (18th Century Chassidic Rabbi) taught that God does not expect us to be like Abraham or Moses, but rather that we fulfill our own unique, personal potential.
- **Partnership with God:** Human life is a partnership with the Divine, aimed at bringing holiness into the material world (e.g., see Genesis Rabbah 11:3 which suggests that by observing the Sabbath, humanity partners with God, as the world was created intentionally unfinished. God rested on the "seventh day" after creating the world in "six days," according to our tradition. God left the world unfinished so that we might do human "creative work" six days a week and rest on the seventh. Our creative work is supposed to turn God's creation (wheat and flax, for instance) into something more useful (e.g., bread and cloth).

- **Seeing holiness in everyday events**: For example, reciting blessings before we eat or drink, when we witness natural beauty or nature's awesomeness, and pausing one day a week to enjoy the world as it is instead of trying to "fix" it. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that we should see the world every minute with "**radical amazement**."

B. Who is my neighbor and/or with whom I practice compassion?

- Members of my religious community, whether they are physically my neighbor or not, and even whether or not I agree with their politics. Jews represent only 1/5 of 1% of the world's population, so as a minority we often feel particular responsibility for other Jews wherever they live. In addition, it is through our community that we are able to fully observe the rituals of the Jewish tradition, like praying in a community, sharing Shabbat and festival meals, etc. As a community we can also have a greater effect in bringing justice, peace, and kindness into the world.
- But, our tradition teaches that only one human was created at the beginning (Adam) to teach us that all human beings are of equal and infinite value. And, again, our tradition teaches that God created Adam (that is, humanity) in God's image. So each human being carries within us a spark of God's holiness. And we should look into the eyes of the person we see and find that holiness within them. One of our Sages, Ben Azzai, said that is the most important teaching in the Torah.

C. How does meaning in life enable interpersonal peace and interfaith harmony?

- You can see from all of the above that interfaith harmony is a crucial goal of Jewish faith.

D. What is my story about the joy of interfaith friendships?

When I participate in interfaith learning programs, or acts of kindness, or just fellowship, I realize that all religious faiths around the world teach pretty much the same universal values. We may understand the nature of the Divine in different ways, and we may disagree about how best to bring kindness and goodness into the world, but if we retain a large dose of humility, recognizing that no one can truly, definitively understand the Divine and therefore Divine Will, and if we can truly see the Divine reflected in our neighbor, we should be able to work together to make our world more "a better place" for all its inhabitants.

Panelist of the Sikh Faith

Mr. Bo Singh

Gurdwara Sahib of South West Houston

Over the years, Bhupinder Singh has written articles and books on themes related to Sikhism. He has been published in World Sikh News, Sikhnet, Boloji internet portals and The Sikh Review, Indo-American News, and India Herald print media. His interests are in spirituality, history, Kabir and current events. He has authored seven books and is a co-author of two other books. Before he retired he was a mechanical engineer by training and a Registered Professional Engineer in Texas.

Presentation by Mr. Bo Singh

When you're looking at me, you can see something different than what you'd normally see. And I can tell you one thing—I did not choose where I was going to be born and in what faith I was going to be born. I can choose my life partner, I can choose other things in my life, but I did not choose that. So, if God, Pure God, my God, same God chose me to be born in this particular situation, this particular environment, this particular belief, there has to be some design that I'm not aware of… not to question but to explore. Why did He put me in these shoes? I'm using this to share what our prophet, who we call Guru, has shared about the topics that we have today: *joy, compassion, and the meaning of life.*

Our prophet was born about 556 years in the place now in Pakistan called Nankana Sai, but at that time it was one country. The first statement that he made was, "There is no Hindu, there's no Muslim." Now, people will say, wait a minute, what are you talking about? And, this guy is mostly Suverto. At that time, Christianity or Judaism was not in that part of the world, and Buddhism had been thrown out of that part of the world. So, then he was dragged into a situation. We are here to justify his statement. So I'm not going to go into the details, but the point I'm trying to make is, we are all children of one God. It may look different, we may practice different customs, and we may practice different religious practices. But the basic fact remains we are all children of one God. And your God and my God is the same God.

Talking about joy, everybody has the desire to be happy. Everybody wants that in their life, whether they're in jail or whether they're in any other situation. But everybody wants to be happy in life. You look at the word happy or joy, you know, you see, is there one moment… the next moment's down, up (gesturing high with hands), it's fluctuating all the time. Is this something that you are up here and stay like this? Even if you're crucified, even if you're put in a cauldron and boiled. Even if you're made to sit on a hot pan with a fire under you. Does that change your composure… does change your mental state? That is joy. And the term that our gurus gave us, it's called Anand. And they said, everybody is looking for joy, but very few find it. I will share the exact code for that. It says,

Anand anand sabh ko kahai anand guroo te jaaniaa.

(SGGS, Pg. No. 917)

So, that means you only know that state, the state of bliss from the Guru. So what does he tell us?

Seek Grace. Our sins are removed. It opens our eyes for our spiritual discernment. It becomes sweet, not just verbal, not sugarcoating. But there is the inborn humility. Joy and bliss are experienced in all circumstances. And Guru wants us to experience that in life.

Compassion

Let's talk about compassion. Everybody believes in it; every faith believes in it. And when we talk about compassion, we talk about compassion for the other. How can there be an other? In our method: others—there's none. There's only one. So, that one is in me, one is in you, in you, in you, and in everyone. If we see that, then when we are helping someone, we are not helping the other, but we are helping ourselves. The word in the sixth picture for compassion is "Daya." And they have used different words to describe God. Basically, meaning that he's compassionate, he's kind, and all these words, using Daya. That tells us that he is compassionate in nature. And He wants us, His children, no matter what your faith, no matter what your custom, all should develop that nature, that is this nature. And I'm using the term male, pardon me. The reason for that is because in our scripture, all human beings are females who are here to marry that Man: He… God. That is why I'm using the term *He*. So, if you look at the Sikh scripture, everything is written as the female is writing, and all of the gurus were male. But they are writing as female because they consider themselves as would-be-brides or brides.

So, compassion can come when we see others as us. And to imbibe that script, the Guru started a concept of "Langar." Langar means the anchor of a ship. What does it do? It stabilizes the ship in case of a choppy water situation. So, he wanted anybody coming to a religious place not to get just the nourishment for the body, but for the mind also. So in the temple you get discourses and then you get food so that you don't go away hungry. And anybody, any religion, from any place in the world is welcome to partake in that food. If you go to Amritsar, Golden Temple, every day, 100,000 people come and take meals there. It's all free—you can Google it. So, in Langar, you get food, but there are other things that Guru wanted to be part of Langar, and that is Seva; if you're making food for this many people and serving, you're doing Seva service. Another thing was Kirat Karni, which means you're working hard and with

honest labor. We're contributing to that effort. And then there is another concept—Vand Chakna; that means you're all sharing the meal. And Naam Japna—that means when the food was being cooked, vegetables were being chopped, orders were being stirred, they were remembering God. And when the food was being served, and when the dishes were being cleaned. Today, if a crisis happens anywhere–you know, war, natural disasters–you will find Khalsa Aid, United Sikhs, are in the forefront of trying to help the situation.

Let's share a quote about compassion. I'm giving a word from Gurbani with the scripture.

Sat Santokh daya dharam seegar banavaao.

(SGGS, Pg. No. 812)

We all talk about female maybe putting on makeup to look better.

They say, you make honesty, contentment, compassion, your makeup. That should be your makeup. So, we talk about joy, we talked about compassion, and let us join these two together. And try to make it a joyful compassion.

Meaning of Life

Concerning the meaning of life, all of us struggle through our life trying to find what my purpose is, why I'm here. Well, sometimes we find it, but sometimes we don't. Sometimes you go with the flow. Sometimes you go against the flow, in all kinds of circumstances. But our growth gave us the purpose of human life. And he said that means you have been blessed with human life, and your purpose is to unite with The One. So, the quest is to reunite, and you can call Him Husband. You can call Him Father, and you can call Him any other name you want to call. You can call Him Friend, whatever suits you. But He is the source from where we have come. And our journey here is to be back in the source from where we came.

The quote is:

Bhaiee paraapat maanukh dhehureeaa. Gobind milan kee ieh teree bareeaa. (SGGS, Pg. No. 12)

Practicing Compassion

I am going to talk about practicing compassion, quoted here:

Har iko dhaataa varatadhaa dhoojaa avar na koi. (SGGS, Pg. No. 36)

He says everything that is happening is prevailing because of one Creator alone. There's no other; whatever is happening to me, to you, and everybody, it is happening because of his great design. You may not accept it, we may point forward with it, we may argue with it, whatever it is, it's happening because that's what is destined for us. So, if we are looking for interpersonal free peace and interfaith harmony, I go back to my old statement. There's no Hindu, there's no Muslim. I'm not meaning it literally, I'm meaning there is no faith as such, but they're all faiths that are our road to go to that one source. And once we do that we'll say:

Naa ko bairee nahee bigaanaa sagal sung hum kau ban aaiee. ||1||
(SGGS, Pg. No. 1299)

There's no stranger, there's no enemy. I am on good terms, in good relation, with everybody.

My Story about Joy of Interfaith Friendship

My story for joy and interfaith friendship. I think the easiest way to start will be, I would invite you to come to our place of worship and enjoy the meal there. I think that's where the door gets opened. I'm not going to talk more about it, but I'll conclude with:

Aik pitaa ekas ke ham baarik too meraa gur haiee.

(SGGS, Pg. No. 611)

You are one father and we are all your children, and everybody is my brother. When I say brother, not literally, but whatever you want to call it… sister, brother? Thank you very much.

Panelist of the Unitarian Universalism Faith

Reverend Katie McQuage-Loukas

Minister of Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church

Rev. McQuage-Loukas is a Galvestonian. After living in New England for a time, she returned to the area to be the minister of Bay Area Unitarian Universalist Church in Clear Lake. She enjoys watching the ducks in a nearby duck pond, NBA basketball, and mystery novels.

Presentation by *Reverend* Katie McQuage-Loukas

Unitarian Universalism is a merger of two traditions that arose from Christian roots but ultimately went far beyond them, to become a faith with no creed or belief system. Instead, it is grounded in shared values and community covenants, promises to journey together in our spiritual and material lives.

Our Unitarian ancestors argued that the cultural forms of religion were temporary and transient, and that our task as religious beings was to seek the truth at the core of faith. They argued that human beings created in the Divine image had the capacity to grow closer to the Divine, and that our individual religious experiences were just as relevant and meaningful as sacred scripture and historical traditions.

Our Universalist ancestors argued that any deity worthy of worship would love their people, and there could be no damnation or eternal suffering.

In time, both traditions grew strong humanist elements, focusing on the human capacity for love, justice, and great achievement.

Today Unitarian Universalism affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person, as well as the ties that bind us into a larger web of life—we are both individuals and communal beings.

Today Unitarian Universalism holds people with many distinct faith backgrounds, who choose to come and share in our communal life and offer those gifts to the larger community. We include Christians and Jews, Hindus and Buddhists, Muslims and pagans, and humanists and atheists—spiritual seekers of all kinds.

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, in *A House for Hope*, writes: "Within the theological house of progressive faith, there is room for tremendous variety, diversity, and dissent. But there is also a defining focus: a devotion to the flourishing of life. People of progressive faith care for the sacredness of this world, this life, here and now. We do not look to a world to come that will be more valuable than this world. We cherish our bodies, this earth, this time, and place that is within our grasp. We reverence the intimate, intricate, and unshakeable reality that all life is connected. We honor and respect the bonds that tie each to all, that weave us into an inescapable net of mutuality."

This is, for us, the greatest source of joy.

As we connect with each other across our differences, bound too by our similarities, the creative tensions and frictions are sources of growth and wisdom. The spark of every human spirit offers something joyous to the whole, and thus we receive those gifts with delight. Our pluralism is a source of wonder and transformation in every act of worship and service.

The recognition of the sacred in every being and in the earth, itself, also calls us to compassion, to always ground ourselves in love, justice, and equity. To live out our values, we are called to action. We must live our lives in the awareness of the lives of others, how our lives intersect, and the possibilities for transformation at those intersections.

It is in our connections to one another, and the paths created for the sacred movement of love and justice, that we find meaning. We find it in the human capacity for compassion, generosity, and care. That capacity is grown in our engagement with each other, and as we grow in wisdom and courage, we are empowered to resist the destructive powers at work in our world.

Unitarian Universalism also reminds us that the work itself is a source of joy. It must be. Because we will not see the full results in our lifetime. We might see milestones, or even only glimpses of the changes we are making—to make our world more just, more fair, and more kind—but our faith in each other and in our communities reminds us that we are just one link in a chain that extends behind us and ahead of us. To live out meaningful lives of compassion and justice is inherently joyful, to feed us and nurture our spirits, even when it is a struggle.

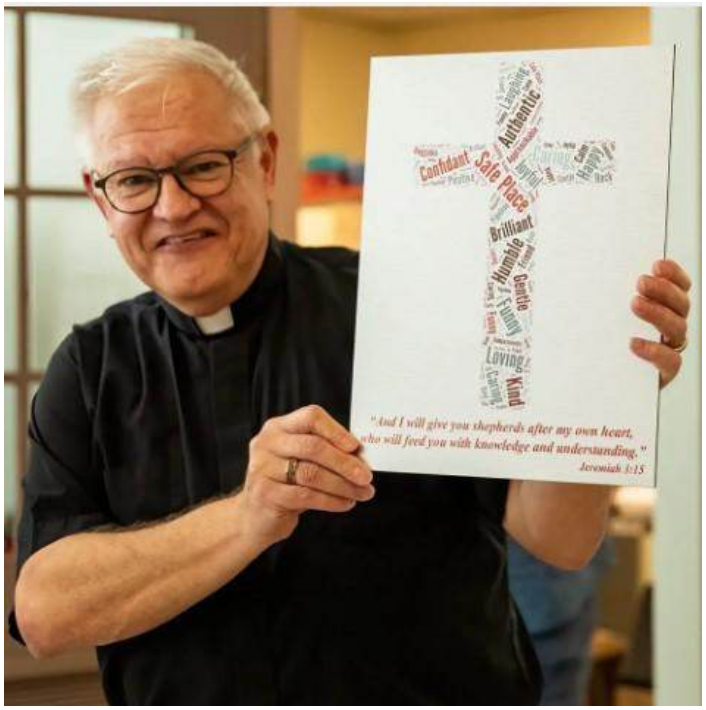
The ultimate meaning of our lives is to be agents of love—the ordinary love of family and friends, the courage of resistance to oppression, and the willpower to enact change as we seek justice. Unitarian Universalism reminds us, always, that it is we who have the power and ability to act in this world and to reshape it in the image of our hopes and dreams.

We are called to expand our circles of life and flourishing so that they encompass more, connect to the expansive circles of others, and build the Beloved Community.

Conclusion by the Moderator, *Reverend* Richard Rhoades

We continue to hear the very practical connection to how all this works together across all these faith traditions. We're speaking a similar language. And we're hitting at similar themes that are present in each one of these traditions. And certainly, by understanding that in one another, it opens our eyes perhaps more to be able to walk together as we are able. To be able to respect and honor one another. And to live with respect… and hopefully that does bring about greater harmony throughout the world, and less of the wars and enemies and all that kind of conceptual thinking, which ends up doing more harm to the world and harm to love than anything else.

Moderator of Onsite Panel



Reverend Richard Rhoades

Pastor of First Lutheran Church, Galveston, TX

Reverend Richard Rhoades is a pastor based at First Lutheran Church of Galveston, Texas. He was ordained as a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in June 1990. He has served the following ministries: Curwensville Area Lutheran Ministry, Curwensville, PA; Friedens Lutheran Church, Gibsonville, NC; Kimball Memorial Lutheran Church, Kannapolis, NC; Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Newington, NH; and most recently, First Lutheran Church, Galveston, Texas. Pastor Rhoades has served as a Dean in both the North Carolina Synod and Texas Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod of the ELCA. He has served on numerous boards and currently is the Acting President of the Lutherhill Ministries Board. *Rev.* Rhoades has participated in community ministerial groups and most recently served as President of the Galveston Ministerial Alliance, an interfaith association of religious leaders. He attended Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, before transferring to The Ohio State University, where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Genetics. He also studied at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, where he was awarded a Master of Divinity Degree.

Roundtable Discussion

Opening remarks given by Ms. Cindy Lin

I'm here to learn. Learn from everybody. You know, I'm so happy that everybody shares their religions and thoughts about how to be joy, how to be compassionate, and then to learn the meaning of life. Since our time is so limited, and later we will have the roundtable discussion led by each religious leader, I want to get everybody started with lunch. Then we will go on to the discussions.

From 11:40 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., we will have our roundtable discussions. At each table right now, I believe you all have a one key person there to lead the discussion. And on your table, there's a list. They have set up four different categories and majority discussion. There are five questions. The first one, A: Why is it difficult to face the gap and cross the bridge?

Then B, how can we repair what we have broken? And let the healing begin? Then the return to the panel presentation about joy, compassion, and the meaning in life. There are three more questions. Which morning speaker's talk inspired you today? And which morning speaker's talk is very different from your faith tradition or your moral perspective?

And C is, despite the similarities or differences, how do we approach joy, compassion, and meaning in life in a multi-phase society. It's like a working lunch. So, whenever you eat your lunch and start to discuss all those five questions, later, around 12:30 p.m. to 1 o'clock, we will have a presentation from each table.

Roundtable Presentations

Presentation 1 by Ms. Claudia Barlow (First Lutheran Church)

Hi everyone, I'm Claudia. I will say we didn't follow all the discussion questions, but we had a lively discussion. What I guess I'd like to share is just that we were all struck by how much we all have in common. Across our different faith traditions, the fundamentals seem very similar to me. I think that we often spend a lot more time discussing what we feel is different across our faiths and this today was very much about what we have in common. I think we ought to use that as a launching pad for how we can go forward from here to work together to make the world a better place, to spread joy and compassion, and help people feel like they have a meaningful life.

Thank you.

Presentation 2 by *Rev.* Kyra Baehr (Interfaith Council of Greater Clear Lake)

I think we were more verbose than your table over here. We went through and really looked at what is it, why is it difficult to face the bridge and cross the gap? And we felt like, so many times there are differences between our different faith traditions. It's not what was focused on here today. Thank you, God. And yet, what we recognize is the way to overcome that is having these kind of conversations, learning from one another. That we can't underestimate the history that has gone before us but we've not always played well together in the world. And yet, what we're learning to do is to start to choose to move past those experiences and begin to be open to how do we take a direction together to take action. So something like this, gathering us together to focus on compassion, to focus on justice, to focus on the ways that we move forward with the meaning of life and joy, all of those, we felt, were basic. Learning to have respect and understanding and then support each other in our different traditions was a part of that. We also then went into… to show up with curiosity.

So the second piece—our answer was, building human relationships… to see and get to know each other. We found that the speakers today did such a great job of presenting the key to really getting to know someone and living in an awareness of

who they are and being willing to experience each other as human. When we recognize our common humanity, we go beyond what our beliefs are. I was sharing that I had a friend in an interfaith group in Arizona who always said: "Don't tell me about your dogma, tell me how your faith moves you. And when I understand how your faith moves you, I relate to that because I can see how my faith moves me." And so, we talked about that whole concept of 'Walk a mile in your shoes,' you know? And to be open-minded and curious and available to learn from one another. I felt like we learned from one another. I think we all did today. In our interfaith group, we go to one another's services, so learning how you worship, and what does that feel like for you? We also talked about that aligning to our greater purpose then helps us to move beyond those differences… about our greater purpose of creating a world of compassion and joy and very profound meaning.

When we looked at our speakers, we said we love them all. Each one brought something unique and wonderful, and we were touched in different ways by each of the speakers that presented today. You know, whether it was about music, or whether it was about art, or whether it's the Sikhs. I have to just take a moment to honor the Sikhs. I was in Arizona when a Sikh was shot after 9/11, and our interfaith group was very involved in supporting our Sikh community. It's part of the thing that really cemented some of our interfaith group at that time. I also was at the Parliament of World Religions where they fed us every single day with Langar, so I have a special place in my heart for that and I just have to acknowledge that.

We wanted to talk about the whole idea of music and chanting and how that moved us, but also recognizing that as each speaker spoke, what we did was feel into the power of spirit that was moving in them. Everyone had the power of spirit, and that touched us. To recognize that we're all striving for goodness, and in that, that we have a desire to elevate all, not just a particular group. We're all seeking to elevate one another.

I think when we talked about compassion and joy and meaning, I'm going to tell my personal story, because it's one that really transformed me in compassion. I had an experience of being with the Dalai Lama. Before the Dalai Lama walked into the room, there were 200 of us faith leaders present in Arizona. Before he walked into the room, there was this wave that hit me. And the tears just started rolling down my face. And I knew I experienced compassion that I'd never, ever experienced, a level of compassion like that in my life. And when I experienced that, I looked around. It took

about two or three minutes before the door opened, and he walked in. I realized everybody had tears streaming down their faces, all of the faith leaders there. And what occurred in that moment was a recognition that he carried this level of compassion so completely and purely that it became a wave that goes out before him and touches the world. I realized in that moment that we each have an imprint, and the meaning for us is—what is my imprint? How do I impact the world with what I carry in my soul, and that I carry it so powerfully that it waves before me and touches into the hearts and souls of others?

As we were talking about that, we talked about, really, what do we embody in ourselves? And that that is a part of bringing the meaning and the fulfillment of compassion and joy that will come forth in whatever tradition we're operating from, and recognizing that, as many of you spoke, we are all one. We are one humanity. There's no other out there, and when I am clear in that, then I can really see you as my brother and sister, and all of life has great meaning and great joy in it. Thank you.

Presentation 3 by Mr. Terry Conrad (Clear Light Project)

Thank you. We had a very interesting table, and this has been a very, very beautiful day. It really is quite inspiring. I'm a prison chaplain in the Texas Department of Justice. I've been doing this work for 26 years. I go every week, mainly working on the Ramsey unit. As a chaplain I teach a couple of classes to inmates, and one of the things about being in a prison… I've never been anywhere where there was more love. You just feel it. You walk in those gates. And as the deacon said earlier, there's a sensation of having those gates closed behind you. But as soon as you get inside and you start interacting with personnel, and particularly with the men, it's powerful. It's palpable, the level of love there, and how open these men are open to not only being loved, but receiving it. And so that's been a very transformative thing in my life doing that work.

What I found this morning to be very interesting was that every single presenter talked about the same thing. There were no differences in what we talked about, and how we talked about it. And I don't think there's an accident here; for tens of thousands of years, we have survived because we could discern the spirit of every living thing. Each living thing, each plant, each animal, every form of life that we

engage with has a very particular spirit. And so then the inquiry comes, what's this spirit? What's our spirit? What's the human spirit? And the first ones to write that down or the pre-Hindu text of the Rigveda, that, say, our essential human nature is love, compassion, joy and equanimity. Then this shows up in all the later Hindu texts and the Buddhist texts and the Bible. There's no way that these four don't present themselves in the essential quality we all have. My tradition's Buddhist, and in Buddhism, the love, the activity of love, is our true nature. And compassion is the expression of that. Joy is the experience of that. And equanimity is the wisdom of that. That's how we realize it, through cultivating an equanimous mind.

What touched us this morning at the table that I was sitting at? I think we all felt that every speaker really had something quite profound to offer us. One thing that stood out was a rabbi talking about God's work… all of us having to engage in God's work. And that can involve addressing war, addressing conflict. What we need to do to solve the problem are acts of loving kindness. Don't just leave it up to God… prove it ourselves. I just think that we all felt the UU presentation was quite wise, particularly this notion of freedom where nobody can tell me what to do. That's good. I think it's even coming around in terms of, you know, scholarly looks at humanity. I'm trying to define this notion of freedom, and that's the first principle. There's no one telling us what to do. Also, freedom to move and other things that touched us. Then the deacon talking about love being in the chaos. I think everyone at the table singled that out. Not only being able to recognize the chaos, but being willing to engage it. Not just running from it, or being brave in the face of chaos, but taking action like a revolutionary.

We talked a little bit about the kind talks that were given this morning. At our table we have the Sikhs, the Unitarians, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian; our table was pretty cosmopolitan. Certainly, it was a joy just having this conversation. So very much gratitude for all you've done. Thank you.

Presentation 4 by *Rabbi* Steven Morgen (Congregation Beth Yeshurun)

Interestingly, our table said many of the same things, and about how music sort of touches the human soul deeply… how we're moved by that. If you put out some goodness and love and kindness out into the world, it has a rippling effect. We were

talking a lot about how do you respond to a lot of the hatred and violence that's going on in our country right now. One way was to just be kind to the people that you know, the people in your circle, and it hopefully has this rippling effect. But also, if you're going to a demonstration, not to yell and scream at the other people because that just adds to the divide. But to have positive messages about love and compassion and humanity and human dignity and try to get everybody to recognize that we're all human beings.

So those were some general things. I thought of a couple other things. One is from a Hindu source; actually, what I really love is the story of the blind men and the elephant. You probably have heard this story before if you've done interfaith work. These blind people encounter an elephant, but they encounter different parts of the elephant—the tusk, the trunk, the toe, the tail, the ears, etc. And then they start arguing about what an elephant is, based on the part of the elephant they came in contact with. Since they can't agree about what an elephant is, they go to the wise man, and the wise man tells them: You are all correct, and you are all wrong. Right? You're all correct that the part of the elephant that you encountered you've described pretty well, but you haven't seen the whole elephant. And so when we're talking about God, or that unity of the force, power, whatever we call it, it's invisible, so we're all blind, in a sense.And we have our own faith traditions that we use to connect to it. Then we can get caught up in arguing about how we've described that encounter to people of other faiths. That's the whole theological thing that it doesn't really do us any good. We're still trying, I think, to reach the same being. And as somebody else said, the most important thing is… that being is trying to tell us to be good and kind to people in the world. So, you can either get caught up in some theological, arcane discussion about how many angels dance on the head of a pin, or you can just go out and be good in the world.

The other one I wanted to mention was, there's a Chasidic story about two guys sitting at a pub. They're having a couple of drinks and one guy says to the other: Do you love me? And the other guy says, sure, of course I love you. And then the guy says, well, do you know what hurts me? And the other guy says, well, no, I guess I don't really know what hurts you. What hurts you? And the first guy says, well, if you don't know what hurts me, how can you say you love me? So, I think that's another thing about us… to really understand another person, you have to know what their pain is, what causes pain for them, and be able to respond to that with human compassion. Thank you.

Roundtable Discussion Closing Remarks by Cindy Lin

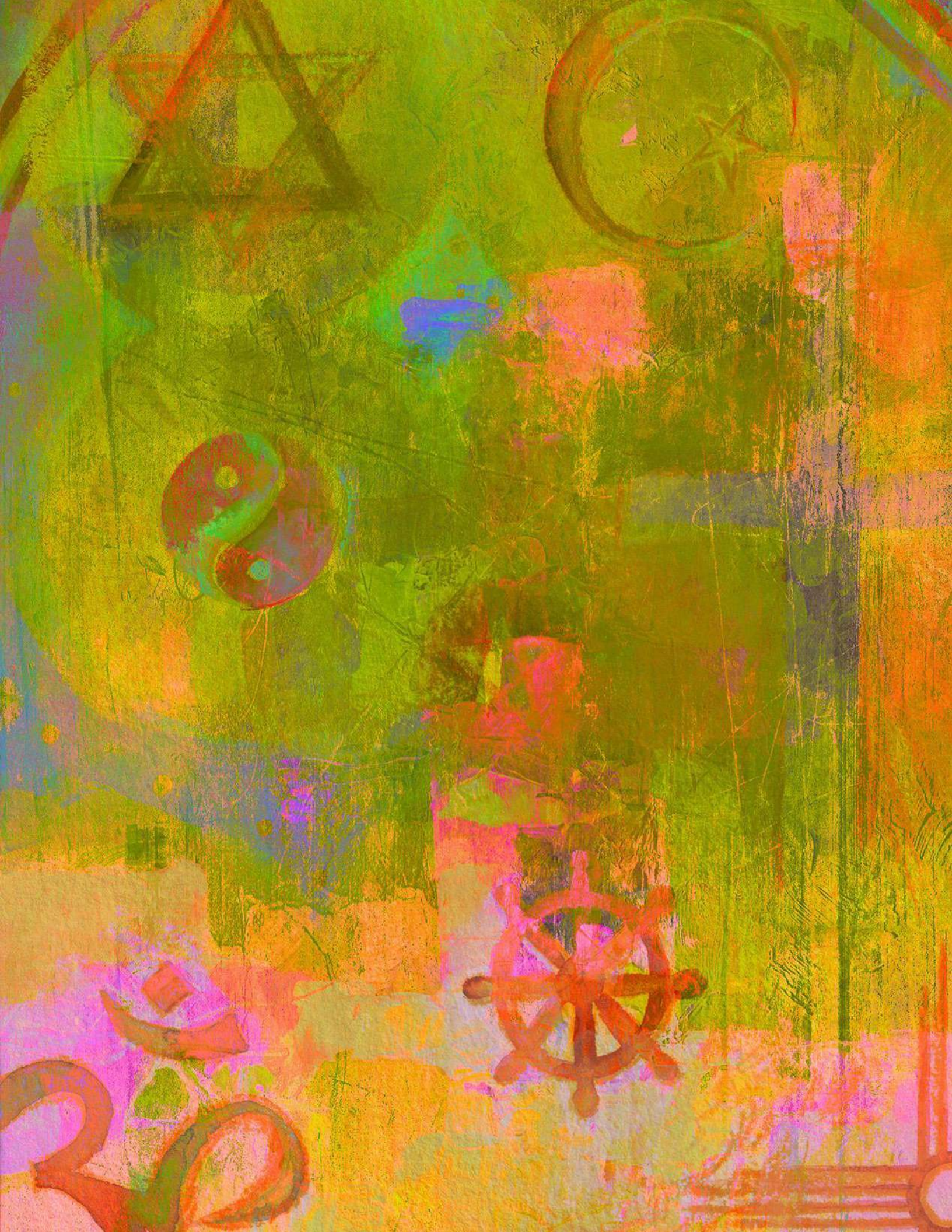
Our presentation session is done and I've got my last few words, okay? In Buddhism we often learn that life is precious. Of course, life is precious. Why? Because it is impermanent. *Impermanent*. So, that's why in Buddhism we always believe every moment matters. So every smile on your face matters. And kind words matter. And every act of our compassion matters. So, this might be interesting for everybody. Thank you.

Moderator of the Roundtable Discussion

Ms. Cindy Lin

Buddha's Light International Association–Dallas, President

Ms. Cindy Lin is a lifelong learner who values compassion, mindfulness, and service. Inspired by Buddhist teachings, she practices applying wisdom and kindness in daily life. She enjoys reading, organizing community activities, and working with others to serve society. Through learning the Dharma, she understands the importance of impermanence, gratitude, and right action. Challenges are opportunities for self-reflection and growth. She strives to cultivate a calm mind, speak with sincerity, and act with integrity. With faith in the Buddha's teachings, she hopes to continue walking the path of wisdom and compassion while benefiting others and society.



Local Activity Updates and Closing

1. Galveston Ministerial Alliance – *Rev.* Dick Maddox
2. Interfaith Council of Greater Clear Lake – *Rev.* Kyra Baehr
3. Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston – Ms. Kim Mabry (represented by *Rev.* Kyra Baehr)
4. Closing Prayer – Ms. Jacqueline Wiggins and *Rev.* Richard Rhoades

Moderator: *Rev.* Richard Rhoades, Pastor of First Lutheran Church

Remarks from *Reverend* Richard Rhoades

We are almost done with our event. This has been rapid and quick and beautiful. I'm moved with the thought of all this, because we did; each of the traditions spoke of the same concepts, the same roots that are present. It's in the saddest possible iteration of any of these faiths that we see violence. And that we see hatred. In the United States, we have white Christian nationalism that is very active in Christianity. And it's scary, because it is an iteration of misunderstanding, mis-theologically heretical, and the UUs, I don't think this group would be a challenge, because so much is anchored in hatred, and they're missing out on the love and the intent of the Creator, which is for us each to see each other as human, to look into the eyes of one another and see someone for whom God already has chosen to love them, period. God has formed them into who they are, period. And we are but to live this together. So our challenge is then, how do we live that out? Because the voices of hate can be ever so loud, and they're not nice. They're rude and they will over-talk one another. And they will take and push their point. So how do we live into our best iterations of who we are as a community that can walk together. This is transitioning us into lifting up some of that.

Remarks by Galveston Ministerial Alliance *Rev.* Dick Maddox

We are grateful to be a part of this event. It's the fourth year of occurrence. We're grateful for Richard's leadership in this. By the way, there's five of us here from the Ministerial Alliance today and so I'm proud of that fact. Richard is a true leader for us in many areas, but he's always been a champion for this event, and he brought it to us and allowed us to collaborate with so many others to bring about this event.

So what does a Ministerial Alliance do, or what is it, anyway? They vary from place to place, but here in Galveston it's called the Galveston Ministerial Alliance. We meet every month, except the month of July, which we take off. We have anywhere from 13 to 20, you might think I would say just clergy, but there's more than that. We invite and welcome anybody that is a religious leader or a person who has interest in the church, or the mosque, the temple, those types of things, and has leadership interests, and is curious about what goes on in the religious community here in Galveston.

We're old! I got a message from one of our partners, as we call them, in the Alliance a while back, that was quoting from the *Galveston Daily News* of 1913, where the Galveston Ministerial Alliance was protesting a tango ball being organized by the Board of Lady Managers. We would supervise the operation of the litigant, Rosenberg Women's Home, on the basis that the dance would be, quote, "both improper and absolutely harmful to the morals of the community." We still debate that issue. It's truly interesting to be a part of an organization that goes back at least to 1913. One of the joys of our organization, too, is we have poor memories, or any documentation of the memories, too. We're delighted when we get these little historical morsels that come to us. But when we start talking about a program or something that we've done for a while, nobody knows when it started, how long we've been doing it. In fact, I'll tell you in a few minutes, one of our biggest endeavors is—we are the sponsor for the Ball High School Baccalaureate Service. We know it goes back at least 60 years, but nobody knows beyond that. Maybe AI will help us with that, though.

Anyway, what is it about what we do? I think there's just a few things that I have surmised in my 10 years of participation in this particular ministerial, as I'm currently the secretary-treasurer. I wish they had told me what was instilled in that before I took it, but, no, it's been a joy.

I think the first thing that I can glean, and Richard and those who come to this may see it a little differently, but just let me give you this particular perspective. Most of our

partners come in to build the collegiality of those who are in this same arena of life, in which we are somehow called, truly called to be about the business of the spiritual life of people in our community and beyond. The hardest job I ever had was being a parish minister, a clergy person. I did it for 15 years, and then God called me to be a hospital chaplain. That was a wonderful career, but I am going to tell you, being the parish minister is the hardest job I ever had in my life. There are so many things—assail you, your conscience,and your sense of purpose and meaning and joy and compassion. And how all your congregants, your parishioners, have different ideas about all those things, and they want to elevate those to a level of importance. It's not doctrine before you. So it's very difficult. But we're delighted in our alliance. Throughout 2025, we had people who came to our meetings, partners from 14 different religious traditions. It's wonderful to have that kind of diversity. We also had people who came to us, perhaps they may be partners, who represent social service agencies, educational and governmental groups who come to share about this community that we call Galveston. So, it's well done in terms of who comes. Our activities include the Ball High School Baccalaureate Service, and we are given the opportunity to provide the opening prayer invocation at every monthly meeting of the City Council for Galveston.

The next thing I will tell you is not only is it for support that I think we gather, but there is a sense among us that we need to be responsible leaders in our faith organizations. We need to know what's going on in the city of Galveston and beyond… perhaps about what is being done in the areas of social justice and social services. St. Vincent's House is one of our premier organizations that we just hold in such high regard. Our partners want to know what's happening at St. Vincent's House, and what's going on at the First Lutheran Church. Do they need help this year? What's happening at the Salvation Army? Why is it that they don't have as many beds for women as they do for men. Are they doing anything about that? So we very much feel a responsibility to keep up with the pulse of this community, and what's happening, what's not happening, that we might be able to get engaged in? Housing for those who don't have shelter. We have a wonderful clergy person here from Galveston Central Church, Michael Geinger. He is the authority on transitional and emergency housing in this whole area. There is nobody who knows as much about it and who's doing as much about it. So, we go to the Ministerial Alliance meetings to hear from him. Michael, what else do we need to do? What is missing? Where do we go from here? Tremendous. So we feel that responsibility. We invite speakers from all of these

different places that will keep us up to date. We know that our congregants expect that from us. When they ask about the status of housing for the people in the streets here, we really should know, because when people ask that question they want to be a part of helping with that.

We also, from time to time, do a little bit of advocacy, and advocacy, by the way, includes the word in a generic sense of dissent. So, we will, at times, take the status, if you would, or take the position of advocacy, sometimes dissent on issues that are in the public sphere. We took a position on the Bill that was enacted by the Texas legislature that provided for chaplains in public schools. We discussed that among ourselves; you know we are an organization that is represented by individuals who represent churches and temples and mosques and what have you. So, it's always an issue for us that we deal with from time to time—can we speak with one voice under the umbrella voice of the Galveston Ministerial Alliance. Or is that not appropriate? Should we speak as individual churches of those who wish to participate and endorse or dissent against a particular public issue? Is that the route that we should take? So we grapple with all of that and we have had times where we've done both.

And the criteria that we use, by the way, so you might be informed of this, if you hear the Galveston Ministerial Alliance speak on an issue under the rubric, the title of Galveston Ministerial Alliance, then that means there has been a discussion among us that says the nature of this event, this issue, has risen to the level of importance, critical importance, that it calls for us and allows us to speak with one voice by virtue of the consent. That's a little bit rare, but it does happen. But we also feel the freedom to come together and anybody can raise a social justice issue, a social service issue, oppression, justice, whatever it is, you're free to bring that before the group for consideration, just to see if they know about it. Aware of it, again, being responsible to our parishioners and congregants. But also, we are interested in hearing the diversity of perspectives and interests and influences that go with that. And that is a joy to do, believe it or not, because we are called to represent not only our congregants and parishioners, but we are God's faithful representative to all faith communities. We are human. We're a human being. So, as we sit and listen to each other and those perspectives, we learn.

I want to embarrass Vicki Smith here for a moment. She started coming to the last meeting a year ago. We did not have anyone from the Latter-Day Saints tradition. We wondered what she would be like? Will she fit in? Will she feel comfortable? All those.

And I want to tell you that over this past year, we have benefited and we're joyful over the fact that Vicki has brought to us a perspective that we had not yet been brought to this group to understand. As she talks about the projects and the programs that the Latter-day Saints did in their history, and their governments, we are joyful because we learn from the perspective of others who were not within our vision before she came. So we appreciate that; it helps us to be more faithful in our walk when we do that.

We rose to the level of consensus when we issued a letter of solidarity published in the *Galveston Daily News* about the October 7th event when Israel was attacked by Hamas. We deemed that went to the level of consistency among the group, and we spoke under the umbrella voice of the Galveston Ministerial Alliance.

Now, let me just conclude with this: Why did they really come? One of those religious leaders had truly come—it's because it's an oasis.

Interfaith Council of Greater Clear Lake – *Rev.* Kyra Baehr

Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston – Ms. Kim Mabry (represented by *Rev.* Kyra Baehr)

Mission of Interfaith Council of Greater Clear Lake:

The Interfaith Council of Greater Clear Lake is a gathering of representatives of faith-based communities and individuals dedicated to promoting respect, support, and understanding. We celebrate our spiritual and cultural diversity as we engage, partner, and respond to each other.

We meet monthly at various faith community locations, usually the third week of the month. Our email is **interfaithcouncilgcl@gmail.com**. You may also contact *Rev.* Kyra Baehr for information at **itskyra@gmail.com** or by telephone at 602-418-6086. We welcome all faith representatives. We are currently hosting service projects together and other community opportunities to gather and demonstrate interfaith cooperation through prayer, education and calls for peace. Our website is in process and can be found at **interfaithcouncilgcl.org**.

Interfaith Ministry for Greater Houston

At IM Houston we believe when our vulnerable seniors are in need of comfort and a warm meal, we provide for them. When we see those in need of community and a sense of belonging, we welcome them. We believe when those around us are in need of help, and we serve them. To support our mission, text IM Houston to 53-555. Our mission is to bring people of diverse faith traditions together for dialogue, collaboration and service, as a demonstration of our shared beliefs.

Ms. Jacqueline Ellisor Wiggins

Ms. Jacqueline Ellisor Wiggins is a member of the Galveston Interfaith Planning Committee. Her commitment is to open dialogue and cooperative efforts among people of diverse faiths. Through her involvement she wishes to collaborate in building bridges that connect people from all backgrounds and create opportunities for positive engagement.

Closing Prayer led by Ms. Jacqueline Ellisor Wiggins

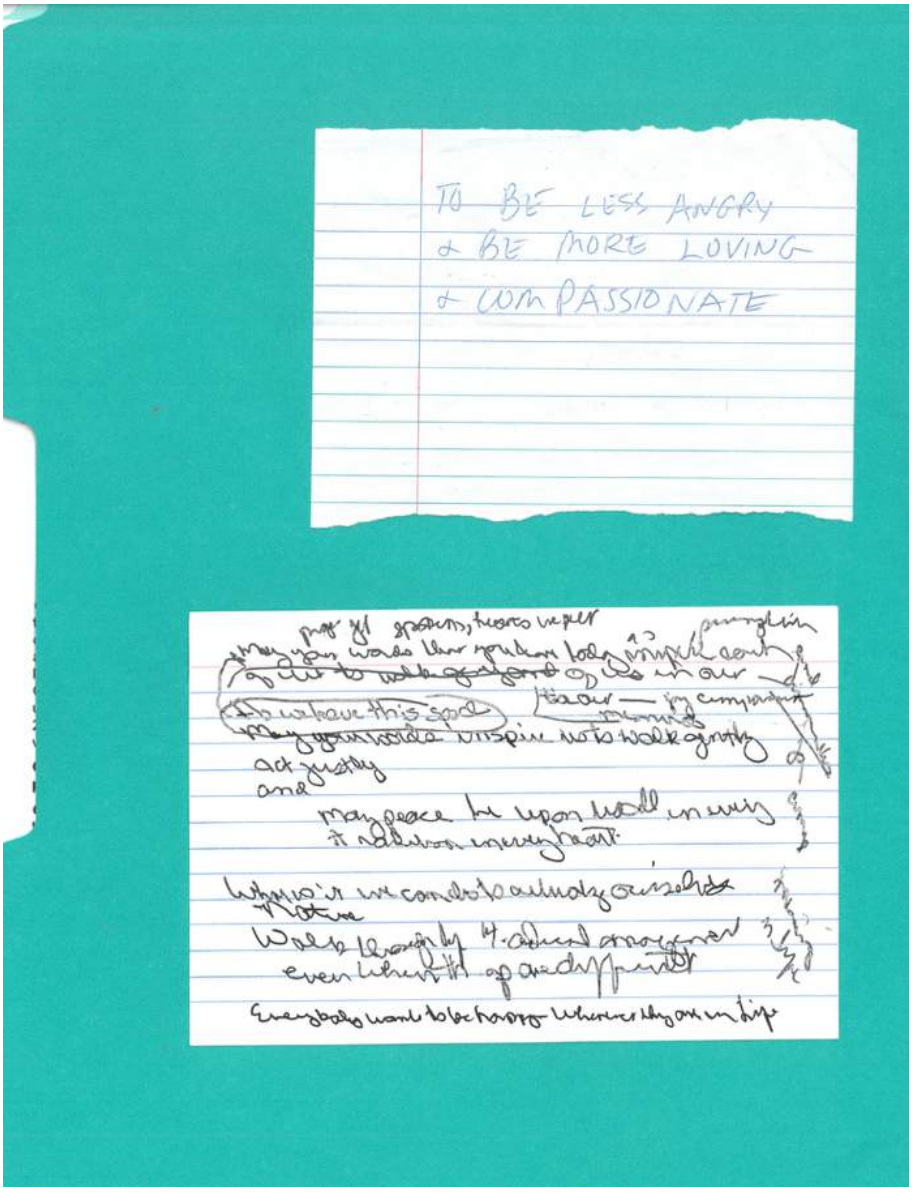
As we leave this space, I ask the Creator… I ask that the prayers that you have written… I ask that the words that have been spoken at the table that you have shared… I ask that the hearts… each heart that we felt will inspire each of us. I ask that it will strengthen each of us as we continue our journey.

We pray for world peace. Please pray for the small churches that their light will not go out. Thanks to Rakh Mun Maai, on whose blessings we enjoy delicious food. Remember that master. We pray to be less angry and be more loving and compassionate. Hear our prayers for all the children and families still in prison in and across the country. We pray for freedom, for health, and wholeness. And also, we lift up special prayers for the brother of this requester. Here, this prayer, O Lord. We pray for peace, love, compassion for all of God's people. Here and now, God is breathing in presence, and the miracle of this gathering. Peace is possible. Peace is. Peace is now. Connection is possible. Connection is. Connection is now. Understanding is possible. Understanding is. Understanding is now. As it is here in this place, it is so for everyone, everywhere. Here now, God is. And so it is. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

We request prayer for harmony and peace in our world, and in the hearts and souls of all people. May all become pure expressions of compassion, joy, and love in multiple ways. How good it is for brothers and sisters to sit and dwell together. Amen. May the one who makes peace in the heavens above make peace for us, if we're all instruments, and all who dwell on earth. And let us say, amen.

Prayers collected

During the event, handwritten prayers were collected. These prayers became the closing prayer, led by Ms. Jacqueline Wiggins.



Prayer Request:

Harmony & Peace in our world & in the hearts & souls of all people.

May all become pure expressions of compassion, joy and love in meaningful ways.

Please pray for the small churches that their light will not go out.

(1) - Hinei Mah Tov u'Manaim shevet achim gam yachad

- How good and pleasant it is for brothers (and sisters) to sit (dwell) together.

(2) Oseh shalom bimromav hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu v'al kol Yisrael (v'al kol yoshvei teve l)

V'imru "amen"

May the One who makes peace in the heavens above Make peace for us and for all Israel (and all who dwell on Earth).

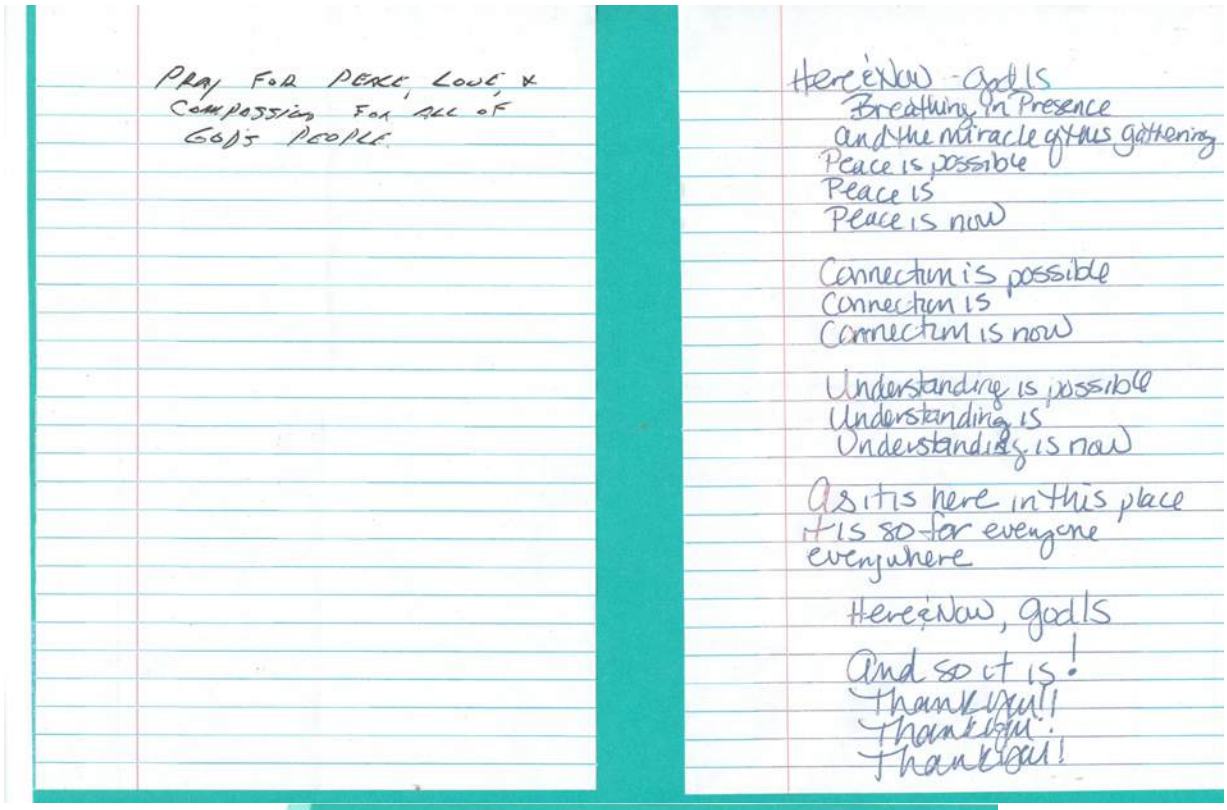
And let us say "Amen"

For all the children & families still imprisoned in Dilley & across the country - a prayer for freedom, health, and wholeness

¡libertad!

Also - prayers for my brother at work

Hear our prayers 02/11



PRAY FOR PEACE, LOVE & COMPASSION FOR ALL OF GOD'S PEOPLE

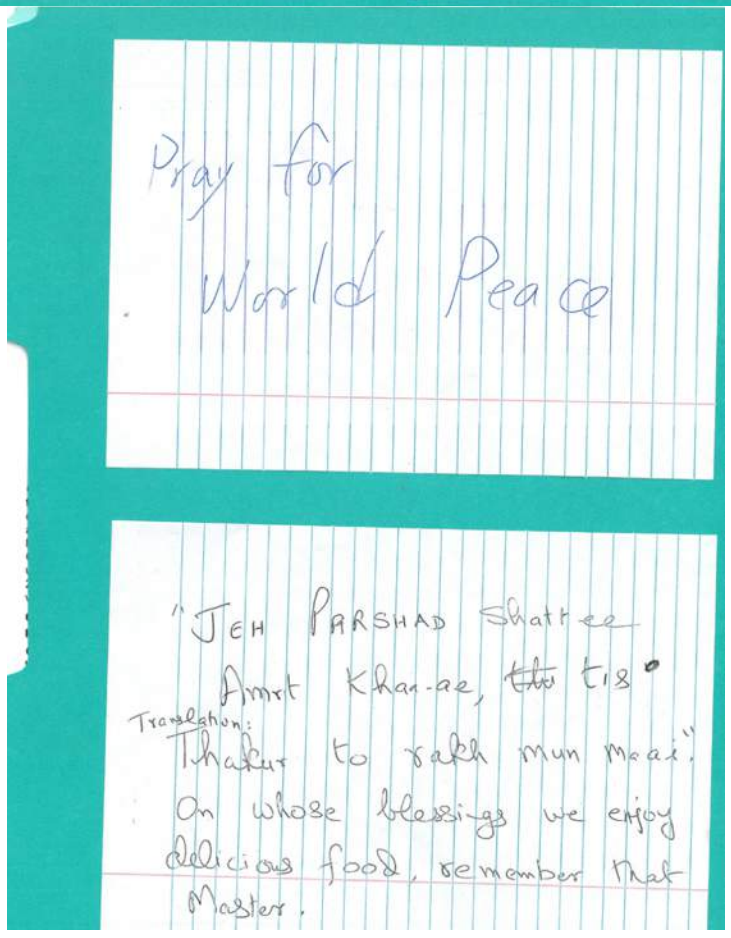
Here & Now - God Is
Breathing in Presence
and the miracle of this gathering
Peace is possible
Peace is
Peace is now

Connection is possible
Connection is
Connection is now

Understanding is possible
Understanding is
Understanding is now

As it is here in this place
it is so for everyone
everywhere

Here & Now, God Is
And so it is!
Thank you!!
Thank you!
Thank you!



Pray for
World Peace

"JEH PARSHAD Shatt-ee
Amrt Khaa-ae, ~~tha~~ tis"

Translation:
Thakur to rakh mun maa"
On whose blessings we enjoy
delicious food, remember that
Master.

Photo Gallery

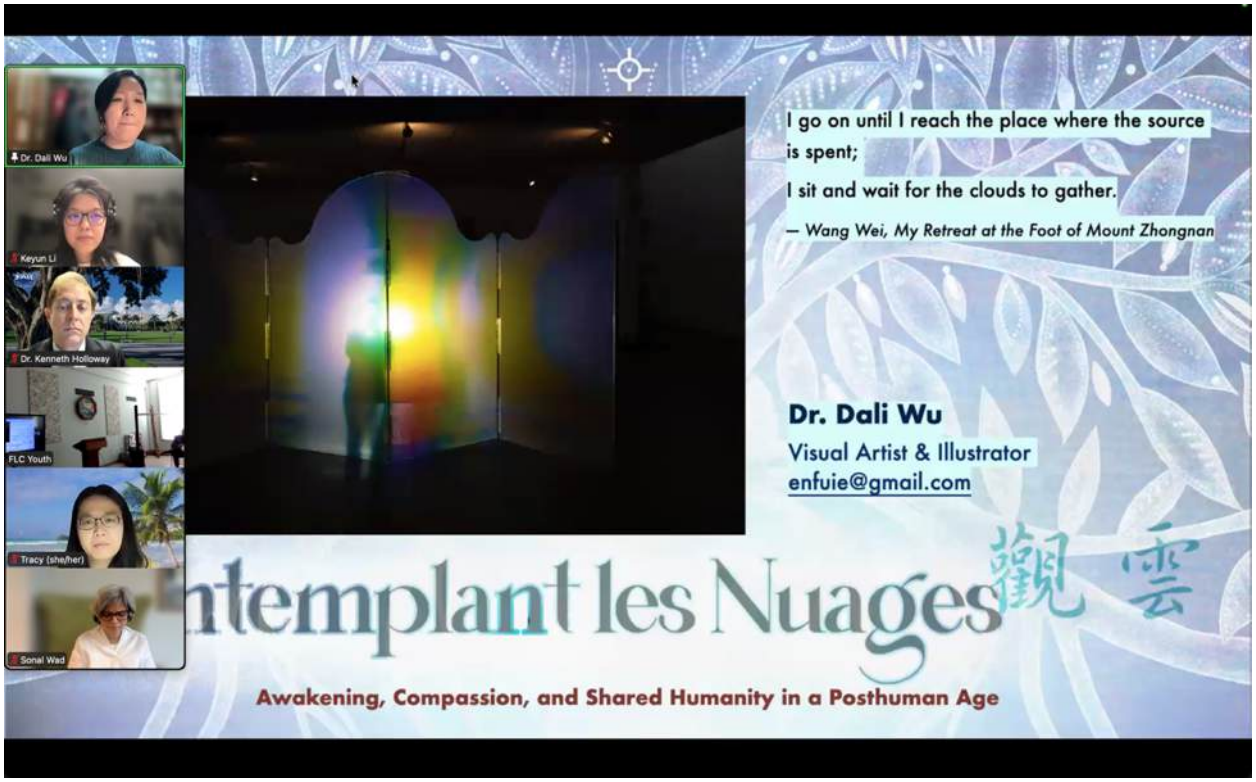
Online Screenshots by Ms. Keyun Li; onsite photos by Ms. Eunice Park.

Photo above, Lutheran Volunteers.

Pictured above, certificate presentation honoring our onsite sponsors, collaborators, and volunteers.

Above, Sonal Wad and her presentation.

Above, during Dr. Kenneth W. Holloway's presentation.



Above and below, Dr. Dali Wu's presentation.

Above, during *Fr.* Dr. Thomas Colyandro's presentation.

Above, *Rev.* Richard Rhoades talking to audience and online panelists.

Above, in-person audience in dialogue with online panelists.

Above, *Fr.* Dr. Thomas Colyandro interacting with the audience.

Above, during *Deacon* Alvin Lovelady's presentation.

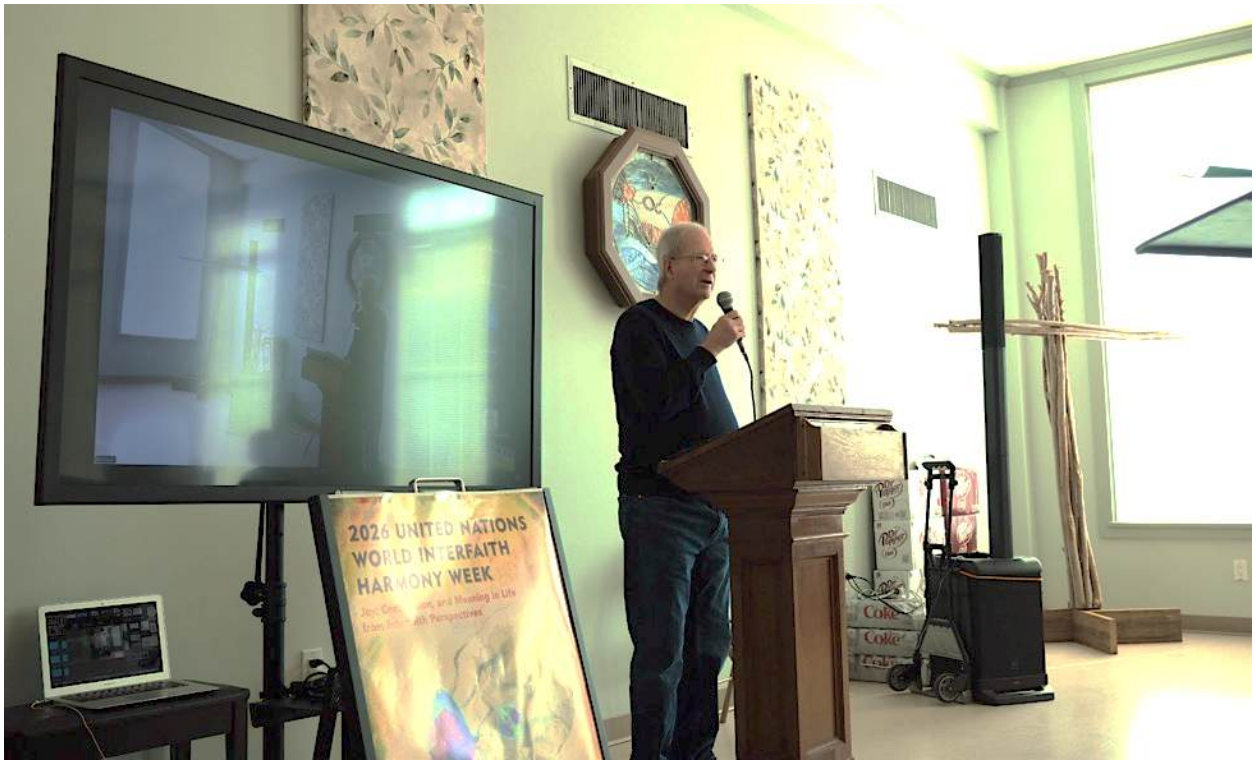
Above, *Rabbi* Steven Morgen giving his speech.

Above, during Mr. Bo Singh's presentation.

Above, *Reverend* Katie McQuage-Loukas giving her speech.

Above, *Rev.* Kyra Baehr presenting during the roundtable discussion.

Above, Ms. Cindy Lin moderates the roundtable discussion.



Above, *Rev.* Dick Maddox gives remarks.

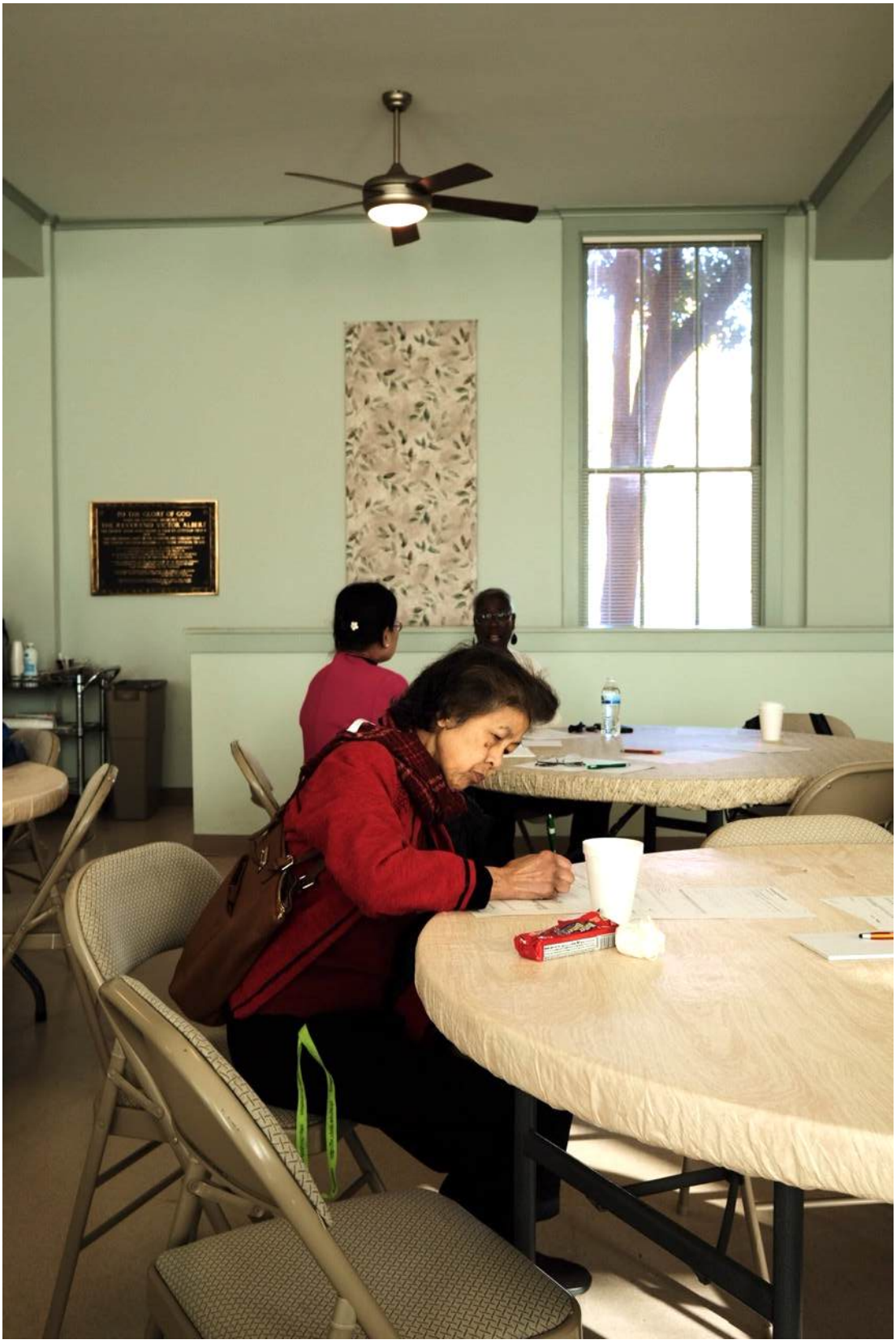
Above, Ms. Jacqueline Ellisor Wiggins leading closing prayer.

Group photo with online and onsite attendees.

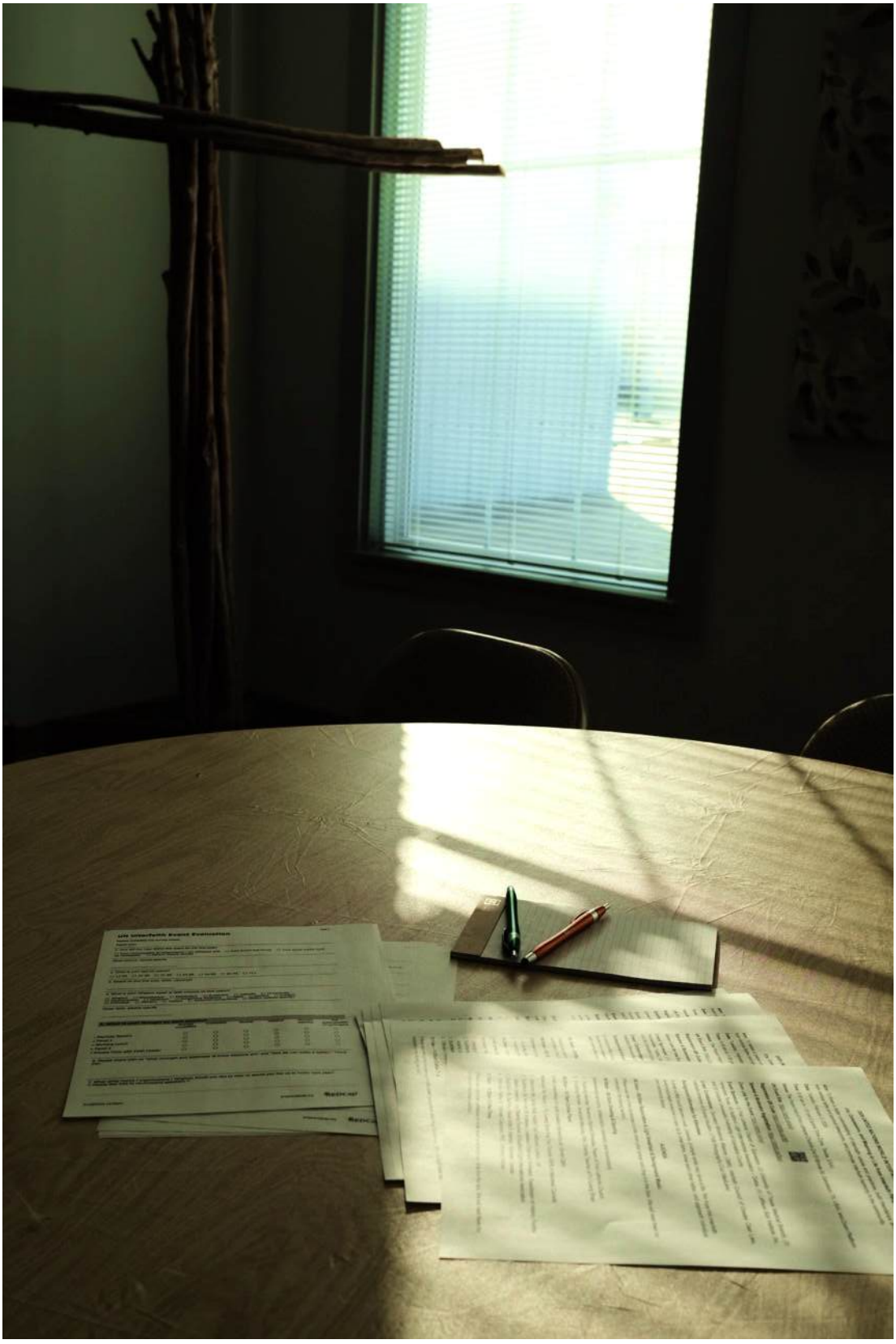
Above, Ms. Keyun Li moderates during online panel.

Above, lunch break dialogue: informal conversations across faith traditions.

Lunch break conversations: listening, learning, and connection.



Event evaluation in progress.



Completed evaluation forms.

Special Thanks

We would like to offer our special thanks to our Planning Committee.

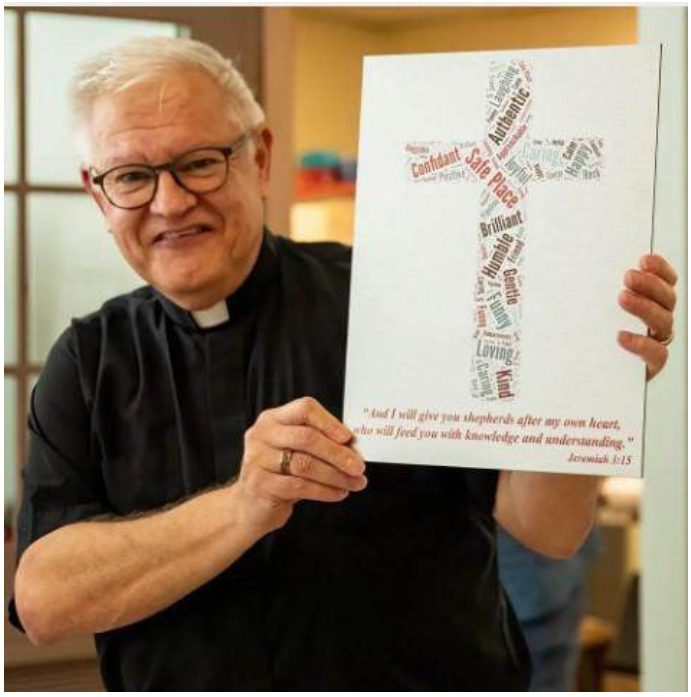
Founding Members

***Ven*. Dr. Miaolung Shih**

Global Recruitment Member and Project Advisor (Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Cannon), University of the West, CA

Dharma Teacher, International Buddhist Progress Society-Dallas, TX

Venerable Dr. Miao Lung is a Dharma Teacher based at the International Buddhist Progress Society-Dallas (Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order, Texas Branch). She works on guiding those who wish to learn Humanistic Buddhism and meditation as well as leading the project of donating the Encyclopedia of Buddhist Art to universities in Texas. Currently, she is the global recruitment member and project advisor based at the University of the West. Previously, she was an instructor at the University of Texas Medical Branch, where she led a research project to enhance brain and cognitive functioning with the Humanistic Buddhist Practice Mindfulness app and artificial intelligence. She is a member of Parliament World's Religions, the American Academy of Religion, and the NGO Committee on Status of Women, New York.

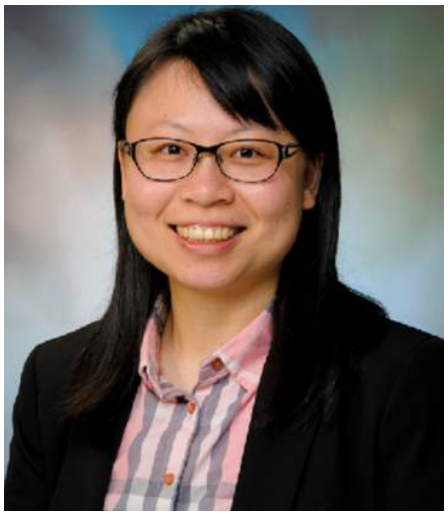


***Rev.* Richard Rhoades**

Pastor of First Lutheran Church, Galveston, TX

Reverend Richard Rhoades is a pastor based at the First Lutheran Church of Galveston, Texas. He was ordained as a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in June 1990. He has served the following ministries: Curwensville Area Lutheran Ministry, Curwensville, PA; Friedens Lutheran Church, Gibsonville, NC; Kimball Memorial Lutheran Church, Kannapolis, NC; Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Newington, NH; and most recently, First Lutheran Church, Galveston, TX. Pastor Rhoades has served as a Dean in both the North Carolina Synod and Texas Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod of the ELCA. He has served on numerous boards and currently is the Acting President of the Lutherhill Ministries Board. *Rev.* Rhoades has participated in community ministerial groups and most recently served as President of the Galveston Ministerial Alliance, an interfaith association of religious leaders. He attended Capital University in Columbus, Ohio, before transferring to The Ohio State University, where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Genetics. He also studied at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, where he was awarded a Master of Divinity Degree.

Planning Committee



Dr. Wei-Chen "Miso" Lee, PhD

Assistant Professor, Department of Family Medicine, The University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX

Miso is a health services researcher and assistant professor at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. Her research focuses on examining health disparities in racial minorities and rural populations and identifying strategies to address disparities found. A native of Taiwan, she resided in Taipei before coming to the United States 16 years ago.

Jacqueline Ellisor Wiggins, JD, LLM, CLU, ChFC, MS

Jackie is an attorney and works as an Advanced Sales Consultant at MassMutual Life Insurance Company. She consults with financial advisors in creating strategies in estate planning, retirement, and business continuation planning. Jackie's faith tradition is African Methodist Episcopal (Methodist). As a member of Bethel AME in Bloomfield, CT, she fellowshipped and engaged with a variety of faiths. She has also worked on many social justice projects with a variety of faith-based organizations. Jackie believes that there are certain fundamental human rights that derive from human nature and are independent of and prior to society and government. There are basic needs to which all individuals should be entitled, and their interests should be protected. As Jackie approaches retirement, she is searching to work in the intersection of faith, social justice, and law to protect those rights.

Dr. Dali Wu

Dr. Dali Wu is an artist and research-creation scholar whose work explores awakening, compassion, and ethical responsibility in the posthuman era. Trained in visual arts and research between China, France, and Canada, her doctoral project, *Trans-image*, weaves together Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, family and historical trauma, post-humanist critique, and contemporary art practice. Growing up within a Chinese family shaped by transgenerational trauma, she developed Trans-image as a method for exploring how images can hold personal and collective suffering while opening pathways toward spiritual awakening, transformation, compassionate agency, and ethical commitment. Her transdisciplinary practice engages bodily memory, spiritual experience, and posthuman metamorphosis as forms of ethical, relational, and societal inquiry.

Ms. Eunice Park

Ms. Eunice Park is a first-year medical student at the University of Texas Medical Branch. Integrating her psychology and religious studies background with her professional journey to become a physician and personal faith, she is constantly finding ways to interact with those around her, eager to learn from people's stories and to understand the intersection between faith, life, and humanity.

Parliament Affiliated World Interfaith Harmony Week Event

A United Nations (UN) Official Observance

World Interfaith Harmony Week (WIHW), conceived to promote a culture of peace and nonviolence, was first proposed by King Abdullah II of Jordan at the United Nations in 2010. This was quickly adopted by the UN General Assembly, declaring the first week of February each year as World Interfaith Harmony Week, calling on governments, institutions, and civil society to observe it with various programs and initiatives that would promote the aim of the WIHW objectives.