

Breaking bread together brings a great understanding

Written By Marni Walsh

'Open hearts and inquiring minds' came together April 22nd when Trinity Primrose Pastoral Charge hosted a dinner for Muslim friends from Brampton, says Reverend Candice Bist. 'We discovered much in common with our Muslim guests, were blessed by their prayers, and encouraged by our mutual love of the divine spirit.'

A second event, 'A Feast of Gifts,' held the day before at High Country United Church in Camilla, and organized by the ecumenical justice organization Dufferin KAIROS, was aimed at community building with indigenous and newcomer neighbours. Doug Fisher of the Mohawk Nation opened the sharing time by acknowledging the original inhabitants of this area, and thanking the water, fish, soil, insects, food, plants, and four legend animals, birds, wind, moon, stars and lastly the Great Spirit.

The feast was 'an amazing event,' says Reverend LeeAnn McKenna of Partera International, 'the food was superb and about 65 people were in attendance.' Ancestral and immigration stories were shared among neighbours, including the journey of Syrian immigrants like nine year old Hamoudi Al Haj Ali whose family escaped to Jordan from Syria before coming to Canada.

Hamoudi's 10 year old sister Fatema, who recently won a public speaking contest at school, shared her speech about her family's painful flight from Syria. The Al Haj Ali family arrived two and a half years ago, barely speaking any English, and now her father is fully employed and her mother recently qualified as a personal support worker.

Reverend McKenna said, 'It was very emotional. In small groups, people who were willing told their stories; some of the newcomers could not bring themselves to share beyond the small circle - the pain remains huge. The stories that were shared 'were beyond wonderful,' she said, but also 'horrible and sad.'

Cory Jones, of the Ojibwa First Nations, shared his story of going university to become an engineer. Up until 1960, the right to go to university was denied to indigenous people unless they agreed to 'disenfranchisement.' Mr. Jones said that for him, 'community is that place and those people who accept him.'

At the Feast of Gifts, each person spoke about the food they brought to share, the history behind it, and why it was special to them. The event ended with all gathered in a circle playing musical instruments and, says LeeAnn McKenna, 'thanking one another for a very powerful day.'

Reverend Candice Bist told The Free Press the dinner held at Trinity Church April 22nd opened up the idea of conversation as inspired by 'Fearless Dialogues,' a listening project created by peace workers who propose that the first step to peace is listening to others. In an effort to understand one another better at the dinner, 'we asked questions that had nothing to do with religious doctrine,' says Rev. Bist.

The evening at Trinity was led by Reverend Bist and Reverend LeeAnn McKenna from Shelburne, and Imam Subedar and Imam Zahir from the Great Lakes Mosque in Brampton - Jamiat Ul Ansar. Approximately 60 people gathered for the event, pairing off and discussing 'Who am I?' 'Why am I here?' 'What is my gift?' 'What do I find challenging about my faith?' 'What must I do before I die to have a good death?' Reverend Bist says the room 'buzzed' with conversation as everyone discussed 'our shared humanity.'

'Our humanity is the key thing,' says Reverend Bist. 'What is most important right now is compassion. If we do not have compassion, and understand that we are all connected, how can we even begin to solve problems like environmental issues?'

After a wonderful dinner created by the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge with their guests in mind, including delicious contributions from Syrian friends in Shelburne, the group returned to the sanctuary for prayers and readings that highlighted the similarities between Christian and Muslim faiths. The evening of conversation closed with the traditional United Church blessing 'Go Now in Peace.'