

More Alike Than Different

Pulled From: The Capital Times

On a planet soaked with blood for centuries in the name of religion, tolerance can be as hard to find as a cheap tank of gas.

But for a few hours on Sunday afternoon, almost 100 believers of assorted faiths banded together for an interfaith celebration of Thanksgiving at the Warner Park Community Recreation Center.

"There will be no peace in the world until there is peace among the world's religions," George Hinger said, quoting theologian Hans Kuhn.

Hinger, who is Roman Catholic, is a co-founder of the Greater Madison Interreligious Association (GMIA), one of the many groups that sponsored the Thanksgiving celebration.

"We encourage anybody to become part of us, and we discourage trying to convert each other," he said.

From the compelling wail of a Muslim call to prayer to a dance of universal peace, the service emphasized the tenets that unite rather than divide the faithful.

Represented in the service were followers of the Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Eckankar, Jewish, Muslim, Sufi and Wiccan religions. They celebrated diversity through word, music and movement.

Youth of the Madison Baha'i Community recited and sang the "Unity Prayer" in four languages as an expression of their belief "in the unity of all people, nations and religions."

Sauk Prairie seventh-grader Raina Petersen explained why she and her friends were asked to participate in the program.

"They thought it would be nice to see the future of the Baha'i faith perform and teach everyone about our religion," Petersen said.

"We follow the prophet Baha'u'llah and...believe all the religions' prophets build on what the other prophets have said before them, and they are all trying to get across the point that world unity is a good thing."

The Baha'i faith is rooted in the sands of the Middle East, which is also the birthplace of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Islam.

Salih Erschen, amir of the Madison Muslim Dawa Circle, is a native of Wisconsin who "took on" the Islam faith a dozen years ago.

Erschen challenged cultural traditions like Halloween, Santa Claus and Thanksgiving in his talk, saying that the latter "marks the genocide and the decimation of the first-nation people."

"As the Pilgrims established themselves in this land, they stopped at no limit to achieve a sense of freedom, and today, people are still dying in the name of that supposed and illusive freedom," he said.

The Muslim leader said after the service that he believes Allah is the same God worshipped by Christians and Jews, but thinks Jesus was a human prophet instead of the Messiah.

Salvation relies upon the mercy of God, and warfare is an unfortunate weakness of humanity that the Koran limits to a type of "gentleman's war" banning fire and the killing of women, children and the elderly, Erschen said.

"The fact that there is warfare among mankind is a part of the human condition," he said. "It is not that God is condoning warfare, but human beings are hell-bent towards it."

Wiccan High Priestess Selena Fox, who founded the Circle Sanctuary in Barneveld and is also president of GMIA, represented pagan and native religion in the ceremony with an Iroquois prayer of Thanksgiving.

"We are a nature religion, which means that we recognize that what some people would call 'spirit' is not only indwelling in humans, but within the whole circle of nature," she said. "We seek to be in harmony not only with other humans but with the greater circle of life."

Jampa Khedup of the Deer Park Buddhist Center led Thanksgiving celebrants through a Tibetan chant and said, "Love and compassion is the universal religion."

The Thanksgiving ceremony concluded with a dance of universal peace, incorporating sacred phrases from seven major religions. The GMIA performers were led by Joharala Joy Wood from the Sufi Order of Madison, which welcomes the oneness of all religions.

College student Jinting Wu has been to other interfaith events and attended the ceremony with her friend, Dan Durica.

"I am always interested in interfaith communication because I see that religion oftentimes creates more hate than love, and there's definitely a lot of room for people to have more dialogue with each other," she said.

Durica, a self-described "community-oriented" pagan, said that he is sometimes "pessimistic about religion because...it creates divisions between people."

"This event is pretty hopeful because I see people of different faiths trying to learn about each other," he said.

AWARENESS WEEK

- What: Events intended to encourage people to learn more about each other's beliefs.
- When: Dec. 10-16, including a celebration in the Capitol rotunda at noon Dec. 12.
- For information: Contact the Rev. John-Brian Paprock, Inroads Interfaith Ministry, 236-9622.