

Bay Ridge Interfaith Dialogue Project Brings Together Brooklynites

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By Beth C. Aplin & Francesca N. Tate

Food is often the bridge that unites people. Last Sunday, plates of hummus, olives and salads greeted participants in the 5th annual Dialogue Project Interfaith Study Session in Bay Ridge. The Dialogue Project, a Brooklyn organization that works to build understanding and alliances in multicultural communities, offered hospitality as Jews, Christians and Muslims listened to and learned about each other.

Hosted by the Reverend David H. Rommereim of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, the November 12 Interfaith Study Session memorialized longtime Bay Ridge resident Isabel Slater, a devout Catholic who counted the programs of the Dialogue Project and its Speaking Across Differences planning committee among her many volunteer activities. Offering reminiscences were Sister Lucille Alperti, of Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish, Sister Kathy Costello of the St. Francis DeSales School, Linda Sarsour of the Arab American Association and John Kemp of St. Andrew Roman Catholic Church.

The gathering brought residents and religious and community leaders from all over the borough together for an afternoon of friendship forming and religious education.

The educational aspect, called Table Teach-Ins, focused on three topics presented with Muslim, Christian and Jewish texts and perspectives: the role of women, ideas of wealth and poverty, and understanding prophets. Each topic featured accomplished teachers from the three Abrahamic faiths. Participants signed up for two teach-Ins, approximately an hour long each, and were encouraged to seek out those outside of their own religious backgrounds.

For example, The Rev. Khader N. El-Yateem and his wife, Grace El-Yateem, both leaders at Salam Arabic Lutheran Church in Bay Ridge, taught the role of women in religious texts from the Christian tradition.

Grace El-Yateem began the presentation by offering examples of women in the Christian scriptures who "went against the norm." "Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was pregnant, not married. Mary Magdalene . . . and the woman at the well, who went and spoke to a stranger at length, spoke to a man she didn't know. It was said she already had four husbands. Women in the Bible give us a glimpse into the role they played at that time." Mrs. El Yateem also spoke of her own upbringing, as a Christian woman who is Arab. Coming from the West Bank in the Palestinian territories, she spoke of the close friendships between Arab Muslim and Christian women in the Holy Land. This she said, is not found everywhere in the Arab world — for example, in Egypt or other regions of the Middle East.

The Muslim perspective on women in scriptures was offered by Sarah Sayeed, Ph.D., an adjunct communications professor at Baruch College, and Imam Adel Barhoum, the spiritual leader of the Beit El-Maqdes Mosque in Bay Ridge.

Rabbi Barat Ellman and Tom Gardner led the Jewish perspective; Rabbi Ellman is a Ph.D. candidate at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Gardner is a fourth-year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College.

Imam Omar Abu Namous of the Islamic Cultural Center of New York, Rabbi Micah Talcott Kelber of the Bay Ridge Jewish Center and The Rev. Dr. Daniel Meeter of Old First Reformed Church in Park Slope led the discussion about wealth and poverty.

During his teach-in presentation on Wealth and Poverty, Rabbi Micah Kelber had his group study texts from Deuteronomy, (the Sh'ma), a text from Exodus on not charging interest, a Megillah excerpt, and an excerpt from a Book of Consolation. This Consolation text, he explained, came from an Arabic tradition in Morocco, and contained stories about wealth so people who were afflicted with adversity would feel better. "Judaism is so vast, it's hard to have a 'Jewish perspective,'" said Rabbi Kelber. "It is to suggest that there is one Jewish perspective. It's like saying, 'painting is' Moreover, 'Judaism has a beauty in contradiction. You can say 'this is true, but that, also, is true.'"

The Teach-In focusing on the prophets was led by Imam Samir Alrey of the Islamic Cultural Center of New York, Monsignor Guy Massie of the Ecumenical and Inter-faith Commission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and Rabbi Jeffrey Marker of the Park Slope Jewish Center. Rabbi Marker was filling in for Rabbi Andy Bachman of Congregation Beth Elohim who, because of a pastoral emergency, could not attend.

Marcia Kannry, a Park Slope resident, founded the Dialogue Project in 2001 with more than 20 years of experience in multicultural and interfaith organizations. Among its outreach activities, the Dialogue Project hosts interfaith events, teaches students from middle schools, high schools and universities the tools the group emphasizes, such as reflective listening and examining assumptions.

The Dialogue Project sponsors Speaking Across Differences, a program launched in Bay Ridge in 2004 that seeks to bring longtime Brooklynites into dialogue with newer Arab and Muslim residents. The intensive, neighbor-to-neighbor community building and outreach program is funded by a grant from the Independence Community Foundation, and a second initiative is now underway in Cobble Hill/Boerum Hill/Carroll Gardens community.

Co-sponsors of Sunday's Dialogue were: The Arab American Association of New York, Bay Ridge Jewish Center, Congregation Kolot Chayeinu/Voices of Our Lives, Brooklyn Society for Ethical Culture, Dawood Mosque, St. Andrews R.C. Church, Grace Church-Brooklyn Heights, St. Nicholas Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Old First Reformed Church, Muslim American Society-NY Chapter, Salam Arabic Lutheran Church, The Islamic Cultural Center of New York and Christ Church Episcopal.

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