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Burlington, Bedford Interfaith panel meets over dinner for discourse on intolerance



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The Islamic Center of Burlington Wicked Local Photo/Kim Burnett

Monday

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By Judy Wasserman**burlington@wickedlocal.com**

A rabbi, a Muslim imam, an Episcopalian rector, and a Mormon bishop have dinner

together.

No, this is not the beginning of a stand-up comic's joke.

It really happened, on Jan. 8, at the Islamic Center of Burlington.

The four clergy participated in a panel discussion on intolerance and how to combat it, and dined together with members of their congregations.

Sponsored by the Burlington and Bedford Interfaith Clergy associations, "Responding to Racism---An Interfaith Dialogue," drew a crowd of approximately 125 people on a cold winter night.

They listened, learned, talked, and agreed more interfaith efforts will be planned.

The clergy included Rabbi Susan Abramson of Temple Shalom Emeth, Burlington; Imam Shakeel Rahman Miah of the Islamic Center of Burlington; Rev. Rector Christopher Wendel of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Bedford; and Bishop Jared Koyle of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church), Billerica.

State Rep. Ken Gordon of Bedford moderated the panel discussion, and Burlington Chief of Police Michael Kent also attended the event.

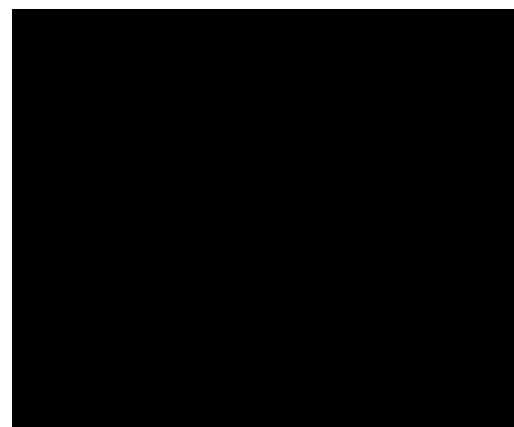
Abramson said "The learning is just beginning," and Koyle said, "This is a good start. The next question to ask is, 'Where do we go from here?'"

Kashif Ahmed of Burlington, representing the Islamic community, who has been instrumental in planning other local interfaith events, said he hopes the panel discussion "sparks interest in tonight's attendees, who will then tell other people" and the interfaith dialogue will grow.

In fact, another interfaith event is planned for Jan. 13, when Temple Shalom Emeth hosts the annual MLK Interfaith Shabbat Service; guest speaker will be Dima Basha of Newton, who came to America from Aleppo, Syria.

Gordon praised the interfaith clergy group for sponsoring the event, and said that with a gathering like this, "We can talk about what separates us but also what unites us, what we have in common."

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He added that "This is what we do in Massachusetts;" we get together; we learn about each other's experiences; and we discuss and work to solve intolerance.

Referring to the interfaith gathering, the imam said, "This is exactly what we need to do. We need to be open with each other; we need to talk. It's not impossible."

Abramson took an informal poll of how many in the audience had ever been to an Islamic center, and most had not. "Just being here is meaningful; it helps dispel misconceptions."

How does your religion respond to intolerance?

Rector Wendell said his religion strives "to loose the bonds of injustice," and that "we are on the side of victims; we stand in solidarity with them." He added, "It isn't easy though."

Imam Miah said, "We respond to intolerance with tolerance," and we must "be patient." He said that Muslims are taught if you "treat someone good, good will result." And, with a smile, he added, "Spread peace and good food."

Abramson said "the spike in anti-Semitism has been disconcerting," and seeing

swastikas "echoes deeply in our hearts," but that the Jewish people are taught to love one another and make the world a better place. Stand up to your oppressors as a community, she said, and if you save one life, it's as if you saved the whole world.

Bishop Koyle said Mormons believe that "We live with differences, while we find ways to live together." Forgiveness is important, and "never regret being a little too kind [to others]."

During the panel discussion, the participants described their individual religions, and addressed misconceptions about their religions. They answered questions on how religious intolerance affected their community, and the role of women in each religion.

The four clergy agreed that their religions condemn racism in any form, and that their religions have all experienced intolerance and oppression, some going back thousands of years.

At the conclusion of the event, Koyle said, "I hope all leave here more enlightened."

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