

Keeping the faith: Families on Long Island embrace religious diversity

By Jim Merritt

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This Sunday morning, the Rev. Vicky L. Eastland is leading the Christian worship service outdoors on Brookville Reformed Church's lawn with a sermon that touches on what she calls her interfaith "cutting-edge ministry."

"Jesus is an example of how to be a perfect person," Eastland, 53, of Glen Cove, says, speaking from a lectern facing a laptop and flanked by an array of worshippers on a projection screen attending via Zoom. Two congregants sit in chairs on the lawn. (In pre-COVID-19 times, the Sunday service drew up to 40 people to the sanctuary.)

"Every faith can look to Jesus as an example of how to live your life," Eastland continues.

Making interfaith couples feel welcome is all in a Sunday's work for Eastland, who was pastor of a Reformed congregation in upstate Catskill when she was hired eight years ago as Brookville Reformed Church's minister. The new job included a charge to integrate "an interfaith community into the life of the church."

Eastland, who is married to the Rev. James Eastland, pastor of Reformed Church of Locust Valley, launched Brookville Multifaith Campus in 2013, opening a new chapter for the congregation founded in 1732 by Protestant Dutch Reformed settlers.

The project had a head start because of two groups already meeting in the church's building: The New Synagogue of Long Island, which serves both Jews and non-Jews, and Muslim Reform Movement Organization, a Quran study group.

"My first interfaith ceremony was a Christian and Muslim baby dedication and blessing ceremony in 2013; my first interfaith wedding was a Jewish-Christian wedding," Eastland recalled.

In the past eight years the multifaith campus — so-named to emphasize its educational mission — has grown to 125 members of all three faiths. The community includes interfaith couples who often arrive "feeling broken," rejected by their previous religious homes, Eastland said. "These couples don't want to convert, and they don't want to start a third religion, but they want to be accepted as complete families."

Eastland counsels them, helps them to heal spiritually and invites them to services in the sanctuary, which contains a cross and an ark holding a 100-year-old Torah; a Muslim prayer rug can be draped over the Communion table during occasional multifaith services. Children learn respect for both religions in classes at The Interfaith Community of Long Island, based in the fellowship hall beside the church. The hall often rings with the joyful noise of kids who "learn Christian and Jewish songs and sing and dance together," Eastland said.

Interfaith marriage is on the rise in the United States, according to recent surveys. Last month the [Pew Research Center reported](#) that 6 in 10 Jewish survey respondents who were married in the past decade have a non-Jewish spouse.

In the same period, interfaith marriages have become more common among Americans of all religions. A [2015 Pew survey](#) found that 39% of marriages in the United States from 2010 and 2014 were between spouses of different religions, up from 30% between 1980 and 1999. According to another [Pew study, in 2016](#) about 1 in 5 U.S. adults was raised with a mixed religious background — and the number appears to be growing.

Here are the stories of five interfaith families who worship on Long Island.



Clockwise from above: Religious leaders at Brookville Multifaith Campus in Glen Head include, from left, Cantor Irene Failenbogen, the Rev. William McBride, the Rev. Vicky L. Eastland, Rabbi Stuart Paris, the Rev. Enid Kessler and Sultan Abdulhameed. Jessica Albers, left, and Elyssa Berkin, of Forest Hills, with their children, Maddison and Phoenix, have found a religious home at the Brookville campus. Elyssa Berkin shares a moment with Cantor Irene Failenbogen. | Photos by Linda Rosier

Elyssa Berkin and Jessica Albers

Interfaith marriage has meant challenges as well as blessings for Elyssa Berkin, 48, director of accounts payable for a Manhattan-based energy company, and Jessica Albers, 43, a real estate agent. The couple, who live in Forest Hills, Queens, worship at Brookville Multifaith Campus.

They met on match.com, had their first date in 2005 at a Manhattan club, and got engaged a year later on a Hunter Mountain hike — which prompted parental concerns about marrying outside their respective faiths.

Albers had been raised Catholic in Brooklyn, where she attended Bible study classes and graduated from Bishop Kearney High School and St. Francis College. Berkin grew up in a Jewish family in Merrick, went to Hebrew school and celebrated her bat mitzvah at Merrick Jewish Center.

Their parents' reservations turned to support when they saw how happy the women were together. In June 2007, 150 family members and friends celebrated their domestic partnership with a reception at Fox Hollow Country Club in Woodbury. "We

incorporated her [Berkin's] Judaism and my Christianity" in the ceremony performed by a rabbi with vows written by both women, Albers explained. They married legally in a civil ceremony at the Queens Court Building after New York's Marriage Equality Act was signed into law in 2011.

When Albers became pregnant via in vitro fertilization in 2017 with their son, Phoenix, she had second thoughts about having agreed to raise their children Jewish. "Being Catholic, I wanted to incorporate my upbringing with the raising of our children," she said.

Upset but determined to find a solution, Berkin found Brookville Multifaith Campus in a Google search for "interfaith congregations." Together they attend Friday night Jewish Sabbath and Sunday church services, where Berkin said "there is a very comforting feeling of belonging to a group that we can both relate with."

Phoenix and his sister, Maddison, born in 2019, were welcomed into the faith community in Jewish baby-naming and Christian baptism services co-officiated by Eastland and Irene Failenbogen, cantor of the campus' New Synagogue of Long Island. Passover and other Jewish holidays are celebrated with Berkin's sister in Port Washington, and Catholic holy days with Albers' family in Brooklyn.

"We like to say our kids are lucky: They get the best of both worlds," Berkin said.



Brian Brewer, left, is a Pagan, while his husband, the Rev. Jude Geiger, is a Unitarian Universalist, the minister at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington, right.

The Rev. Jude Geiger and Brian Brewer

As a minister for the past eight years at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington, the Rev. Jude Geiger has officiated at more than 80 weddings, many uniting interfaith couples. "Often it's folks who can't find anyone to marry them with a religious ceremony," Geiger said.

A quarter of those couples are members of the LGBT community, like Geiger, 45, and his spouse, Brewer, 46. The couple, who married in 2015 in a Unitarian Universalist ceremony co-officiated by a Pagan high priestess, moved last year to Montclair, New Jersey, after living in Huntington.

Geiger was raised in a Roman Catholic home in central New Jersey. He got a master's degree in urban planning from New York University and worked in New York City government before attending Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University.

Brewer, chief communications officer at the Cancer Research Institute in Manhattan, was born on an Air Force Base near Bitburg, Germany, the son of two U.S. Air Force members. He said that his mother, who had become a "born-again Baptist and took the family with her," cried when he was "outed" as gay at age 17. Since college Brewer has identified as a Pagan, a faith he said enables "a journey of self-discovery and self-empowerment." Brewer belongs to a gay men's Pagan group, which meets, he said, "around the cycles of the moon and the sun," in ceremonies that include prayer, drumming and meditation.

Although Brewer is not a member of the Huntington fellowship, which welcomes Pagans, he occasionally attends services. "I love listening to my husband's sermons," he said.

Geiger said the couple occasionally discuss religion, without major disagreements. "I come from a tradition where we're more about shared values and how we live in the world, than what people's individual beliefs are," Geiger said of Unitarian Universalism. In the years since he married, Brewer said his parents, whom he calls "accepting, loving people" and sees regularly, have become allies.

"My mother loves the fact that I'm with a minister," he said.



Nina Ahmed, who is Muslim, and her husband, Vinod Rathore, who comes from a Hindu family but now identifies as agnostic, look at wedding pictures. | Photos by Linda Rosier

Nina Ahmed and Vinod Rathore

Nina Ahmed, who was born in Philadelphia and grew up in Kashmir, India, was engaged to someone else when she fell in love with Vinod Rathore, who was born in central India.

They met at Stony Brook University while she was studying for an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering and he for a graduate degree in computer engineering. Their friendship grew on coffee dates at the student union and on skiing, hiking, bicycling and white-water rafting trips — "everything outdoors," she said.

One day, Ahmed told Rathore she was thinking of going back to India to marry her long-distance fiancée. Rathore objected, saying, "No, then we won't be friends anymore," then did something that surprised her and both of their families: "He went straight to my parents — he's very brash that way" and made a successful marriage proposal, Ahmed said.

In India, marriage between a Muslim and a Hindu might have caused a "societal backlash," Ahmed said. But in the United States "we were away from all that confusion and anger." Rathore said, "When two people from different backgrounds like each other, the rest is secondary." They married in 1996 in a civil ceremony, repeated their vows in a separate Hindu ceremony in India and recently celebrated their 25th anniversary.

Their son, Samir, 18, and daughter, Neha, 16, grew up in a multifaith, multicultural environment. "We haven't forced anything on them," Rathore said. At home in

Huntington they mark Ramadan with an evening meal, though they don't fast, Ahmed said, and light candles during the Hindu Diwali Festival. They celebrate Christmas and Hanukkah at friends' homes.

Rathore, who was raised in a traditional Hindu family but now identifies as agnostic, said he follows these traditions "more as a cultural connection."

For a happy interfaith marriage, Ahmed said, "you have to get to know one another fully, to discuss everything, including uncomfortable topics such as what your families expect from you."



Barbara, an Episcopalian, and Bob Festa, a Zen Buddhist, find spiritual connection in meditating together. They were married in 1956 in a Methodist ceremony. | Photos by Linda Rosier (standing and meditating); Fest Family (wedding)

Barbara and Bob Festa

The Festas, both 86, met when they were sophomores in the choir at Bayside High School in Queens. They went to the senior prom together, married at 21 and have been together in every way since — except spiritually.

Bob grew up as a Methodist, and Barbara, who had a nonpracticing Jewish father and Lutheran mother, grew up unaffiliated with a church. "I kept asking, 'Can we go to church?,' and Mom said, 'Why?'"

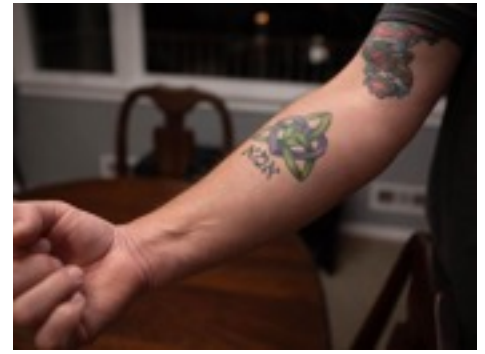
Before she and Bob were married in 1956 in the Broadway Temple-Washington Heights United Methodist Church in Manhattan, she had to be baptized in the faith.

The couple spent the next 6 1/2 years in Unitarian Universalist congregations "filled with wonderful people," Barbara said. "But I wanted more bone and gristle and worship."

After attending an Episcopal service, she recalled, "I said, 'holy Toledo,' I want to be confirmed in this church." She's a longtime member of St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Plainview, regularly receiving Holy Communion.

Bob's spiritual journey to Buddhism got an unexpected assist from martial arts classes in the 1970s, where he learned meditation — a foundational Buddhist practice. "I did a lot of research and settled on Zen as the place I wanted to be," he said. In his early 60s he took vows as a lay Zen practitioner at a public ceremony "in which you accept the Buddha's teachings."

The couple's spiritual paths intersect when they meditate together at home in Huntington. "I think we're still both growing spiritually," Bob said. "You gotta do that until you die."



Amy and Steven Schombs, center and second from right, say a prayer over the Sabbath candles at their home in East Northport with their children, from left, Cara, Hailey and Ian. A tattoo on Steven's arm has a Trinity knot for his mother and a Hebrew inscription that means "mother" for Amy's mother. A Jewish prayer book sits alongside Celtic Christmas ornaments on a table at the Schombs' home. | Photos by Linda Rosier

Amy and Steven Schombs

Amy and Steven Schombs, both 50, of East Northport, are raising four children to live interfaith lives. But Amy said they weren't surprised when their oldest son, Ian, told them one day, "I feel like I might not be interfaith, which is no religion. I feel like I might be Jewish." After a talk with a rabbi and a year of Hebrew school and Bible studies, Ian made his bar mitzvah at 14, a year after the traditional age of 13.

For Steven, a religious rite of passage had also been delayed. He grew up the youngest of five children in a Roman Catholic family, but when he was 12 one of his siblings developed Hodgkin's disease, and his parents stopped sending him to catechism classes. He made his First Holy Communion at 21 and became active at East Northport's St. Anthony of Padua Roman Catholic Church, serving as head usher at the 7 p.m. Mass.

Amy, who was raised in a Conservative Jewish home in Hollis Hills, Queens, was introduced to Steven in the 1990s by a college friend. They began dating, which did not sit well with her family. "It was not my parents' expectation to bring home someone that wasn't Jewish," she said. "But I couldn't understand how religion could stop us. Steven was the kindest man I had ever met."

They also encountered resistance from clergy of both faiths, including a rabbi who, Amy recalled, told them their marriage would be "a bomb waiting to explode." Encouragement came from a Catholic priest whom Amy said advised them to "go forward with a Jewish wedding for my family to feel comfortable, but also to go through Pre-Cana," a course offered for Catholic couples preparing to marry.

They were married by a rabbi in 1996 at Temple Emmanuel in New Hyde Park, where Amy had had her own bat mitzvah.

At The New Synagogue of Long Island, where they now attend services, "I've learned so much about the Jewish faith," Steven said. "I enjoy the Shabbat services, and I joined a Kabbalah [Jewish mysticism] class with the rabbi. I didn't know what Kabbalah was until I married Amy."

Amy said that having the "same level of spirituality" as her husband helped them grieve together when their mothers died 18 months apart. "It doesn't matter if I call myself Jewish and my husband Catholic," Amy said. "We're praying to the same God."



When the Rev. Vicky L. Eastland was hired eight years ago as Brookville Reformed Church's minister, the new job included a charge to integrate "an interfaith community into the life of the church." Credit: Linda Rosier

Resources for interfaith families

Brookville Multifaith Campus (2 Brookville Rd., Glen Head, BrookvilleMultifaithCampus.org) offers interfaith weddings, lifecycle ceremonies and occasional multifaith worship services and programs. The campus includes Brookville Reformed Church, where services are on summer hiatus and will resume Sept. 12 on Zoom and in-person; The New Synagogue of Long Island, which returns from summer break in September; Muslim Reform Movement Organization, which hosts in-person prayer on Fridays and Quran studies on Sundays via Zoom; The Interfaith Community of Long Island, which offers Christian and Jewish religious-education classes for children 3 to 14, and an interfaith parent support and education group, both of which are scheduled to resume in September.

Unitarian Universalist congregations on Long Island attract people of varied faith backgrounds and beliefs. Unitarian Universalism is grounded in the humanistic teachings of the world's religions, drawing "from Scripture and science, nature and philosophy, personal experience and ancient tradition," according to the Unitarian Universalist Association. Services, weddings and life-cycle ceremonies can incorporate rituals from the religious heritages of interfaith couples. For more information, visit liacuu.org (Long Island Area Council of Unitarian Universalist Congregations) or uua.org (Unitarian Universalist Association).

— **Jim Merritt**