

Newsday



From left to right: Dr. Sultan Abdulhameed of the Muslim Reform Movement Organization, Pam Gawley of The Interfaith Community, Rev. Vicky Eastland of the Brookville Church, Rev. Enid Kessler of The Interfaith Community, and Rabbi Stuart Paris of The New Synagogue of Long Island, pose for a portrait at The Brookville Church. (Nov. 13, 2013)
Credit: Barry Sloan

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The Brookville Reformed Church is carrying out an unusual experiment: congregations of Protestants, Jews and Muslims are not only sharing the same worship space, but intentionally learning about each other's religions and forming a multifaith campus where they stress the commonality of their beliefs.

On Sunday, they will hold a special Thanksgiving service where religious leaders from each of the groups will preach -- but base their homilies on the religious text of one of the other religions.

A Muslim leader will preach about the Torah. A Protestant minister will preach about the Quran. A rabbi will preach on the New Testament.

The groups are also marking the day with an official declaration that the church grounds are now a "multifaith campus."

They will dedicate a new sign that lists all their names and even changes the name on it from the Brookville Reformed Church to the Brookville Church to be more inclusive.

The event is the culmination of years of the church, which for three decades was under the guidance of the now-retired Latino advocate the Rev. Allan Ramirez, moving to open itself to other faiths and stress understanding rather than strife.

Now, the congregation is taking it to another level. Sunday's event is the first of what the groups expect to be many interfaith gatherings at the church.

"Many of our global wars have been fought over religion and continue to be," said the church's new pastor, the Rev. Vicky Eastland. "If we are going to change that, we have to start dialoguing with one another and building relationships."

Looking ahead

Many synagogues and congregations of other faiths on Long Island have merged in recent years to save money as their membership and funds dwindled. But the experiment in Brookville goes beyond financial incentives and a landlord-renter relationship.

The Rev. Tom Goodhue, executive director of the Long Island Council of Churches, said he does not know of a similar effort anywhere on Long Island that involves three religions. As the region, and the country, becomes more diverse, he said, what is happening in Brookville may be a harbinger of things to come.

"They are doing far more than just saying, 'Let's share the sanctuary,' " he said. "This is really taking it a step further."

"This is a breath of diversity that is really quite unusual," he added. "I think it is the wave of the future."

Adding to the complexity at the Brookville church, a fourth group deeply involved in the effort is the Interfaith Community, a group of married couples from two faith traditions who are raising their children in both religions. The majority are Jewish people married to Roman Catholics.

Besides them, the other groups are the Muslim Reform Movement Organization, which holds a weekly study group of the Quran at the church, and the New Synagogue of Long Island, a synagogue that caters in part to unaffiliated Jews.

Leaders of the groups say the partnership has opened their eyes to many of the commonalities among Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Eastland noted that all three are religions that trace their origins to Abraham and have similar value systems, such as serving the needy.

"The Quran quotes the Bible. The Quran talks about Jesus," said Eastland, who has studied the Quran with Sultan Abdulhameed, a Stony Brook atmospheric science professor who heads the Muslim Reform Movement Organization. Eastland now keeps a copy of the Quran on a table in her office.

Yet while the groups are studying and appreciating one another's religions, they are not giving up their own. "There is no blending here," said Rabbi Stuart Paris, who heads the New Synagogue of Long Island and holds Shabbat services most Friday nights in the Brookville Church sanctuary. "We're not looking to found a new religion."

'On the same page'

The groups are not simply renters at the Brookville church, founded in 1732 and one of Long Island's oldest churches, but active participants in managing it. For instance, when the church was looking for a replacement for Ramirez, Pam Gawley and Sarah Cirker, leaders of the Interfaith Community, took part in the interviews of candidates.

"I'm certain I was the only Jewish girl on Long Island searching for a reverend," Gawley joked.

The groups contribute financially to the church and meet together regularly to plan events and discuss proposals such as financially supporting an overseas missionary. Some Protestant members of the Brookville Church along with Eastland regularly attend Paris' Shabbat services and the Quran study group.

During the Shabbat services, the communion chalice and plate are removed from a table in the sanctuary, and replaced by a Torah and a candle.

The interchanges are a constant inspiration for Eastland. "The thing that has surprised me the most," she said, "is how much we are on the same page."