

People of Faith Doing Stuff Together

MANITOBA MULTIFAITH COUNCIL



A story is told about a leading liturgical scholar, who was asked about “peace liturgies” during the heyday of the peace movement. This individual responded with something along the lines of “Aren’t all liturgies peace liturgies?” The story may be as much legend as fact, but the insight remains. Is not the hoped-for end for any liturgy the arrival of a reign of peace and harmony between all of God’s children, even all of God’s creation? Similarly, is not the calling for each of us to be *people of faith doing stuff together*? Millennia upon millennia have demonstrated that it’s not quite so simple... or is it?

Communities across Canada, in recent years, have seen the rise and removal of “tent cities.” Recently, after a visit to his hometown of Peterborough, Ontario, our Manitoba Multifaith Council Treasurer came back feeling a deep sense of discomfort at reactions to homeless folk who’d put up tents at various locations (including in a park across the street from, and on the front lawn of St. John’s Anglican Church).

Back in Winnipeg, he penned a Letter to the Editor of the *Peterborough Examiner*:

“‘We’ have homes, or apartments, or condos, and ‘they’ have tents that they’re setting up on public property, or in public camp-grounds. ‘We’ pay taxes. ‘They’ take free lunches when offered,

resort to aggressive panhandling... and add an addiction-infused lifestyle to our fair city. ‘Us’ and ‘them’... ‘We’ and ‘they’... Can lines be so conveniently drawn, really?

“Another community leader, in another time and place, who also, apparently, was ‘homeless’ or at the very list, ‘of no fixed address,’ was recorded as having said, ‘The poor you will always have with you’ (Matthew 26:11, NIV). How accurately prophetic those words, calling us not to divide the world, or even communities ... into ‘us’ and ‘them.’

“I wonder if the root discomfort I was sensing during my brief visit to the Lift Lock city has more to do with how the presence of homeless encampments reminds us that society is rife with divisions, and yet, need not be that way. Or that the presence of those whose only option for shelter is to erect a perhaps unseemly tent points to not just an individual’s poor choices, but society’s choices that have brought about failure to provide adequate food, water and shelter for any and for all?”

For Brad Smith, priest of St. John’s, Peterborough, reaching out to homeless people has been a bruising experience, but it has also deepened his faith and his calling as a priest. “I’ve been ordained almost a decade and a half now and I’ve never felt more intensely connected to my vocation as I have this summer,” he says. “The experience of going out and meeting the people and listening to their stories and connecting them with the supports they need has been life-giving...” ([Diocese of Toronto website](#)).

People of faith doing stuff together moves us beyond zones of comfort and affluence. It can also bring about conversations, and choices, that are anything but simple, and a far cry from what’s “known” or “acceptable.” We might do well to remember jazz musician Duke

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See You There!

Ellington's instructions to his band members: to play the notes as written, but "leave some dirt in there somewhere..." In other words, when old patterns and assumptions need tweaking or discarding, we do well to pay attention to those frustrations, and prayerfully, soulfully consider how these might be transformed into gift.

Here's another of the key principles with *people of faith doing stuff together*: not underestimating the value of listening, not to provide a rebuttal to another person's argument, but instead to understand more about where the other person is coming from, and what that can teach us about ourselves.

Through our work as Manitoba Multifaith Council – whether coordinating sales of the Multifaith Calendar, receiving nominations for the Lieutenant Governor's Award for the Advancement of Inter-Religious Understanding, offering leadership through each February's Multifaith Leadership Breakfast, or, most recently, co-sponsoring with Winnipeg Police Board "A Path to Safety," a conversation for community members as together we seek to promote an inclusive culture of safety – what's clear is that the more we explore and learn another's point of view, the more we learn about ourselves. Whether we self-identify as "Anglican," "Lutheran," "Roman Catholic," "Jewish," "Buddhist," "Atheist," "Agnostic," anything or nothing in between, *people of faith doing stuff together* brings opportunities both familiar and unfamiliar, demanding and rewarding.

In a world punctuated by 30-second soundbites and 140-character tweets, the act of "holding space" for heart-inspired, soul-filled conversations can be rather refreshing. It can be as countercultural as it is empowering, freeing us for the kind of conversations, in some respects, for which we've been waiting our whole lives. *People of faith doing stuff together* involves attending to the manner by which values are expressed, always with openness to further conversation and dialogue. First and last, and at points in between, we become aware of what it means to be a caring community of seekers.

We recently learned of a newspaper clip in

the Jewish Heritage Centre of Western Canada's archive collection. From the December 3, 1942 edition of Winnipeg's *YMHA Review*, it announces an Inter Faith Symposium held that same night at the YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association] auditorium, with Dr. E. Crossley Hunter, pastor of Knox United Church, Rabbi Solomon Frank, and Father Frank R. Wood, reported as "one of the leading Roman Catholic clergymen in the city," discussing "Things We Have in Common." In the still frighteningly unpredictable years of World War II, the writer reported how they'd "had occasion to discuss religious matters with Fr. Wood at great length, and had found him to be keenly aware of the need of creating better understanding between Jews and Gentiles." Indeed, it's quite remarkable how such an event took place at a time when Protestants and Catholics did not automatically consider themselves as part of the same faith group.

Clearly, *people of faith doing stuff together* has been happening long before we arrived on the scene. In these troublesome and challenging times, it is also never finished.



Manitoba Multifaith Council, and its predecessor, Manitoba Interfaith Council, has been engaging individuals and faith communities throughout our province and beyond since the 1950s. Its mission: To promote multifaith dialogue and understanding, while collaborating to serve the community as a whole. Its vision: People of diverse faiths working together to build a just and caring society. For more information, email: info@manitobamultifaithcouncil.ca.

MMC Executive: Belle Jarniewski (President), Payam Towfigh (Vice-President), Paul Peters Derry (Treasurer), and Ray Harris (Secretary).

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