

Multifaith congregations share physical space with goal of boosting spiritual interaction

By

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As one of five religious organizations occupying the Oakland Mills Interfaith Center, Bet Aviv is in a rather unusual position where it coexists, physically and spiritually, with other congregations in the same building.



Participants at one of Bet Aviv's Lunch and Learn programs (Courtesy of Darla Strouse)

Because of the situation, the synagogue's Rabbi Linda Joseph is taking advantage of these circumstances to bring members of Bet Aviv together with members of the other congregations to form an Adult Education Bridge program to establish a greater connection and understanding between them.

Three Jewish and three Christian congregations make their home at the Interfaith Center. The other synagogues are the Columbia Jewish Congregation and Kol Nefesh; the Christian churches are the Columbia Baptist Fellowship, the Columbia United Christian Church and the St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church.

"We don't just live in a silo anymore," said Darla Strouse, an Oakland Mills Interfaith representative, as well as a member of Bet Aviv and its ritual chair. "We need to be looking at each other in terms of religious groupings and see how similar we are."

Bet Aviv was founded as part of the Interfaith Center and was built upon principles of understanding between different religious groups that are common in Columbia. The

synagogue's congregation has largely consisted of older adults, many of whom Strouse described as "empty-nesters." Faculty are hoping that the Adult Education Bridge program will bring new interest from both other organizations in the Interfaith Center and from outsiders.

The new program is based on Bet Aviv's "Lunch and Learn" programs, which meet once a week over the course of six-week terms and discuss various facets of Jewish culture and religion.

"[Rabbi Joseph] thought that now would be an interesting time to do something like this," Strouse said of the interfaith program. "It's an interesting and positive time to be doing this, with so many divisions in our world. She brought it up with the clergy [board], who all thought it was a great idea."

"We surveyed congregants to ascertain what topics they would like to compare and contrast across faiths," continued Joseph. "For six weekly sessions, one Jewish clergy and one Christian clergy per session prepare short presentations on requested topics, and after the panel presentations, open the floor to questions from congregants."

A recent session in the Adult Education Bridge focused on the idea of suffering in Christianity and Judaism, and how its depictions differ across the two religions. In another meeting, they discussed antisemitism and its roots.

"It's hard enough learning about our own faith," said Strouse. "It's nice to gather people of all different faiths together in a common way and learn about how similar we are."

Strouse also said that in the face of rising antisemitic sentiment and hate crimes, it is more important than ever that people from different religions sit together at the table to figure out their commonalities and embrace them going forward.

Correction: Oakland Mills Interfaith Center was originally listed as having two Jewish congregations and three Christian congregations. It actually has three Jewish congregations with the last being Kol Nefesh. Darla Strouse was also not correctly credited as Bet Aviv's ritual chair in the original article.