

## **Interfaith Religious Education for Elementary School Children**

### **Kathie Armstrong**

I was the Director of Religious Education for Elementary Schools with the St. John Catholic congregation from 1992 until my retirement in 2017. I worked in both of the two largest Interfaith Centers in Columbia--first at Oakland Mills Interfaith Center (OMI), then at Wilde Lake Interfaith Center, then back to OMI, and finally to Wilde Lake again. There were literally hundreds of individual interactions within the interfaith community that were a source of growth and blessing to me.

I remember getting help from Cantor Auerbach to plan a Seder for our Catholic boys and girls and their families, and learning from her and a member of the Columbia Jewish Congregation the depth and breadth of the Passover. When I talked with them about the similarities of the Seder meal and our Catholic Mass, I found an openness and readiness to deepen their understanding of our worship as well.

We did this Seder for the families who belong to KAFE (a group of families with young children who get together). We did not change the Seder at all—as is often done by Catholics to make it more like our Mass. Instead we did it just like a traditional Seder. As we talked afterwards, we were genuinely surprised by the similarities to our Catholic Mass. As Catholics, we all know that Jesus' Last Supper was probably a Passover meal, but still knowing it and experiencing it are sometimes quite different things. Some of the prayers are quite similar in meaning. Of course there is the sharing of matzah (bread) and juice or wine, as well as other foods designed to recall the events of the Passover. During the Mass we too are calling to mind events, but this time of the life, death and resurrection of the Lord. In both cases we listen to scripture—the Passover story and the gospel of Jesus' life.

But perhaps the most joyful experiences of interfaith cooperation for me were the planning and executing of our annual Summer Interfaith Programs. These programs were created several years before I came to OMI in 1992. Betty Ewer, one of the pastors of Columbia United Christian Church (CUCC), was the moving force behind them. They were similar to Vacation Bible School, but they were interfaith. There were no models or pre-packaged programs to guide us in building an interfaith program. We worked together to find a common theme and message, and lessons that would highlight the gifts and wisdom of Judaism that we Christians have received from our Jewish brothers and sisters. In addition, there was a goal to help the participants to appreciate this inheritance and see how Christians and Jews live out their faith in similar ways.

Usually the Summer Interfaith Programs happened during one of the weeks in the early summer once school was out. Families gathered in the early evening for a shared meal provided by the OMI congregations and then there were intergenerational activities based on a theme. One year they created a village in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel to include what people would be doing and what games the children would be playing to simulate what Jesus' life would have been like. Another year the theme of hospitality and bread was used in the retelling of the story of Abram and Sara being visited by three strangers—how do we experience hospitality, how important is bread in

our lives, and how can we help others to have the bread they need to live. Working together brought us close to one another and helped us discover the gifts within ourselves and others.

We developed such an affinity for and enjoyment of each other that our “work” of preparing these evenings became fun. So much so that I often said that if the kids attending the Interfaith Program had half as much fun participating as we had preparing, our job was well accomplished. Working together brought us close to one another and helped us discover the gifts within ourselves and others.

In later years, when the number of Jewish congregation children began to drop off, the Christian congregations at the Meeting House used more traditional Vacation Bible School formats. These continued for several years, but the number of children in the various congregations began to drop and fewer and fewer families attended so that finally the congregations could not see the benefit of all the cost and preparation and time that was required to continue.

All the ministers, pastors, rabbis, and cantors at OMI were resources for me. Sometimes just in normal conversations, someone would say something that raised a question and you saw something about religion and spirituality that you never thought of before from another point of view: What does Genesis mean? Why do you say that prayer? As a person of faith, what is most important for you?

Being a part of the interfaith center was a gift. Whenever I wanted to ask a question about religion, I had a whole gamut of thought to explore. Interestingly, it didn't dilute my Catholic identity, but enriched it. I can't imagine what my experience as DRE would have been like if I didn't have these great people available to me as resources and as friends.

*Adapted from Creative Tension, pp. 134-137*