

Interfaith Builds

In many communities, when people of different faiths build a Habitat for Humanity house together, tension gives way to laughter and individuals find new respect for one another. Coming together for the common goal of building a house with a neighbor in need has proven to be a successful way for bringing healing to divided communities and creating a sense of unity.

Habitat for Humanity is a Christian ministry, and we believe that building houses is practical expression of Christian concern. It is not the goal of Habitat supporters, however, to force anyone to change his or her faith. One does not have to be a Christian to work with Habitat or to be a Habitat homeowner.

Part of our Christian heritage is to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ who extended love and compassion to all. Habitat invites people of all faith and no faith to join our efforts to eliminate poverty housing.

Building Relationships

Upon learning that Habitat welcomes people of all faiths, one supporter, who is Jewish, said, "It makes me quite happy to know Habitat is a responsible organization that is open to partnerships with people and organizations of all faiths, while still proudly holding to its own faith. It is unfortunate, but I think that kind of acceptance and responsibility is too often lacking on all sides in today's society."

Sometimes our desires to be politically correct and our fears of offending others get in the way of being authentic. At a clergy breakfast attended by a Jewish rabbi, a pastor stood up and berated the speaker for talking about Jesus. He was sure the rabbi had been offended. After the breakfast, the rabbi approached the speaker and said not only was he not offended, but said he was glad that the speaker spoke so passionately about his faith.

A passionate response from people of many faiths can have a dramatic and unifying impact in local communities. Volunteers from As-Siddiq Mosque in Burton, Mich., helped build a Habitat house in an effort to help others during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The concepts of *mitzvah*—doing good deeds in the community—and *tikkun olam*—repairing the world to make it a better place—first led members of Congregation B’nai Israel in Bridgeport, Conn., to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity. The things that unite us can be so much more powerful than that which divides us. Individuals and faith groups can put aside their differences to transform lives and neighborhoods through projects such as the ones described below.

Multi-Faith Builds

Habitat for Humanity affiliates in many communities have brought Christians, Jews and Muslims together for projects called “The House of Abraham,” which recognizes the common heritage of all three faiths.

At a House of Abraham build in Flint, Mich., homeowner Carmelita Buford-Bray wrote simply, “Thank you, God,” on one of the floor joists of her new home, as members from about 20 faith communities wrote their blessings on the floors around her.

“What I have seen is complete joy,” said Joseph Richard Preville, development director, of Genesee County HFH. “People who don’t normally work together have come together to do something great in the community.”

The affiliate intentionally scheduled small groups from various faith groups to work together every day. “We wanted to create a mix and let people get to know one another. We wanted to show that God’s love is for every human being on the planet,” Preville said.

“The Holy Toledo Build” in Ohio also brought together Christians, Jews and Muslims to build a home, but another result was the creation of new and powerful friendships. Asif Bhatti, a member of the Islamic Center in Toledo and chair of the project, said the house was a symbolic gesture that broke down many barriers. He said people were tired of sitting around tables talking about what they might do. It was time to act, instead of just talk.

During a similar project in Winston-Salem, N.C., organizers said their build allowed participants an opportunity for honest dialogue and newfound respect for one another.

In Detroit, Mich., three dozen Christians, Muslims and Jews punctuated their prayers on a Sunday morning with the blows of hammers and the whine of power drills. Volunteers came from neighboring counties to make the point that their commitment to interfaith cooperation runs deeper than sharing occasional worship services.

Points to Consider in an Interfaith Build

Interfaith builds also bring with them questions and challenges. For example, the food coordinator of a project in Redmond, Wash., noted that cooking for 1,200 Muslims, Jews and Catholics takes not only careful planning but an appreciation for religious customs. Kitchen volunteers took care to avoid using chicken stock and to separate the food on the serving table. The food was kosher and halal—cooked in accordance with Jewish and Muslim traditions. Workers also took breaks during the project while Muslims observed prayer times.

The house dedication also requires careful planning. Habitat for Humanity affiliates present a Bible to the homeowner family. If a mosque chooses to present a Koran, or if a Jewish synagogue wants to present a copy of the Torah as well,

that is fine, but Habitat for Humanity, as a Christian organization, presents a Bible.

Prayers from all faith partners are invited, along with prayers offered from representatives of Habitat in the name of Jesus. At a dedication service in Winston-Salem, prayers were offered by Jews, Muslims and Christians at a dedication service. Rabbi Michael Ungar said that members of each group, aware that not all prayers would be of their tradition, respected the blessing offered by the others.

Representatives from each congregation also brought a small handful of soil gathered from the ground at each place of worship and poured it onto the flower bed at the new home. Organizers took great care to encourage the faith groups to continue their relationship after the build was complete.

A Spirit of Humility and Cooperation

As with any partnership, the key to developing interfaith projects is building relationships. Approaching new partners from a spirit of humility and cooperation sets the stage for success. It is important to acknowledge the opportunity for each person to live out his or her faith.

Inherent to many people of faith is the call to serve the poor, to make the world a better place and to be in service to others. Understanding that building a Habitat home is a clear expression of faith for people of many beliefs is a wonderful way to include diverse faith partners in a building project.

Establishing a strong steering committee that is careful in its planning and attention to detail is essential for an interfaith build. Members who are open and eager to learn about one another can create an environment that is respectful and comfortable for everyone. Those who trust our coming together around our

common beliefs often witness how a Habitat work site can become a place of peace and reconciliation. Many individuals who are willing to step outside of their circles develop new and lasting friendships.