

# ‘Be allies with us’: Breaking bread at Miami’s annual interfaith potluck

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What began as one Miami synagogue’s effort to counter rising antisemitism has grown into a communitywide interfaith movement built on shared traditions, shared humanity and shared meals.

At the third annual “Breaking Bread Breaking Bias” potluck, more than 250 people came together for an interfaith Sunday service hosted by Unity on the Bay at Temple Israel of Greater Miami, offering a sampling of religious traditions and reflections from a host of local faith leaders.

Members from the Jewish, Christian, Unitarian Universalist, Muslim and even the Vedic tradition led the audience through meditation, prayer and songs before everyone shared a home-cooked meal.

“Not only are we breaking bread, we are breaking biases, and we are continuing to build bridges,” said Rev. Juan del Hierro, senior minister at Unity on the Bay. Unity, which has been around since 1926, no longer describes itself as a “church” but more of a “meta-physical movement” that guides people on “a positive path for



Islamic scholar Iqbal Akhtar (far left), the Rev. Tawnicia Ferguson, spiritual teacher Syamarani Dasi, Judith Echeverria, the Rev. Juan del Hierro and Rabbi Jamie Aklepi gather on stage for an interfaith service and potluck.

spiritual living.” Diversity and acceptance are a part of the group’s core values, as well as virtues like generosity, gratitude, integrity and love.

“I don’t know about you, but this is exactly what the world needs — to be able to look beyond our differences and look at the humanity that we share together,” said del Hierro.

The event was born three years ago out of Temple Beth Am’s Unbiased Initiative, which partners with other religious organizations to combat anti-semitism and other types of hate. Other partners of the

event included the American Jewish Committee, Interfaith Miami, Mosaic Miami and the Jaffer Institute.

“We feel we are allies to all the folks represented in this room, and we hope you will be allies with us,” said Joanne Harvest Koren, chair of the Unbiased Initiative.

## Mayor stops by

Miami-Dade County mayor Daniella Levine Cava stopped by to offer her support for the interfaith movement in Miami, calling the potluck event a “wonderful occasion.” The mayor talked about the im-



Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava speaks at an interfaith service in Miami aimed at building bridges and bringing together people of different faith traditions. The Rev. Juan del Hierro, senior minister at Unity on the Bay, and Joanne Koren accompany her on stage.

portance of inclusion, citing divisiveness as the “number one concern” among Americans, according to some polls.

“Clearly we all know we’re living in very divided times. This is not who we are, who we want to be,” she said. “I think in Miami-Dade County, we defy the odds. I think of us as the most unified place. It’s reflected in what we see in our community.”

Levine Cava also gave a shoutout to the Temple Israel of Greater Miami, her former synagogue and current home of Unity on the Bay, the host of the event. Since Unity on the Bay left its original waterfront property on North Bayshore Drive in 2019, the church has been hosting services out of the Edgewater synagogue. Unity recently announced plans to open a new four-acre campus, what

leaders are calling a “spiritual community center” in Miami Gardens next year.

“This is where I discovered my own spirituality,” Levine Cava said of Temple Israel. “I really was not particularly in touch with the deeper meaning of my faith as a Jew until I joined this great place and in this room studied Torah, which was definitely an entry to my soul.”

Levine Cava also noted that her spiritual teacher at Temple Israel, Rabbi Mitchell “Mitch” Chefitz, who passed away last month, was someone whose teachings changed her life.

### **Buffet of religions**

In between songs from Cantor Rachelle Nelson and the Unity choir, various faith leaders from around Miami shared tidbits of wisdom from their prospective denominations.

Rabbi Jaimie Aklepi of Temple Beth Am reflected on what Judaism teaches about building bridges. She said that in the Torah, “the most repeated command is ‘Love the stranger.’”

“Thirty-six times we are commanded to love the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt. That is the commandment that teaches empathy,” she said.

Islamic scholar Iqbal Akhtar said that in his experience, the deeper he digs into his own faith, the more he finds “echoes of universal values.”

“Our Scriptures and prophets may differ, but the values of love, charity and community ring true across traditions,” said Akhtar who is also a professor of religious studies, politics and international relations at Florida International University.

“Islamic teachings consistently urge kindness, neighborliness and justice toward all people, not only Muslims,” Akhtar said. “True faith blossoms in a heart that cares for others, wanting for them the same goodness and safety that we want for ourselves.”

Judith Echeverria, a member of the Unitarian Universalist congregation of Miami said that at UU Miami, the idea of interconnectedness is central to their teachings.

“It reminds us that we belong to a great web of life held together by threads we cannot always see. When we honor that web, we realize that no one stands apart. My flourishing is

tied to your flourishing,”  
Echeverria said.

At Unity, services often include meditation and positive affirmations to experience the presence of God.

“That is where we have a greater experience of understanding God, without the labels, without the thinking. Just an experience,” del Hierro said before leading the audience in a short meditation.

### Values in action

In a time of growing division, some religious groups like the Unitarian Universalists, Unity on the Bay and others in Miami have been stepping up to take action in social justice issues.

Many have been involved, for example, in recent protests at Alligator Alcatraz, which oppose the creation of the controversial detention center and the Trump administration’s aggressive immigration policies.

Syamarani Dasi a spiritual teacher from the Sacred Vedic Arts, a cultural and spiritual center in Miami, discussed the Vedic scriptures, and the belief that Krishna — or God in the Vedic movement — is the source of all creation.

“All of us are in the family of God. It is not that there is one God in England, another in America, another in India. The Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus are not worshiping different gods ... If we love that one God, why do we quarrel? It’s because we don’t know what real love is,” Dasi said.

Rev. Tawnicia Ferguson from



People gather to fill their plates at an interfaith potluck at Unity on the Bay. The event at Temple Israel of Greater Miami offered a sampling of religious traditions and reflections from a host of local faith leaders.

the Universal Truth Center in Miami Gardens — a Bible-based “metaphysical Christian” church — spoke to the crowd about the history of her faith tradition and how it incorporates traditions from the African Diaspora.

“What happens to a story when we center the marginalized characters and reflect on their experiences rather than simply othering them?” Ferguson asked.

She said at the Universal Truth Center, teachers introduce “empowerment teachings” and embrace “New Thought Christianity” including the idea that God is in everyone.

“We recognize that, indeed, oneness does not require sameness, and assimilation does not guarantee equity,” said Ferguson.

At the end of the service, before people lined up to fill their plates, the audience pondered a

question about how their faith helps them navigate division.

“It keeps me grounded. Keeps me centered, it brings me back to what’s important,” said Unity member Richard Marshall.

A former Catholic and member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Marshall said he decided to stick with Unity after a friend brought him to a service in 2001.

He said the messaging of “universal love” and appreciating one another” resonated with him.

Pastor Juan del Hierro explained Unity movement as a set of values to help live a more meaningful, peaceful life.

“The invitation is for each of us to live into those values that we hold dear, because I know that’s what the beauty is in our faith communities, the values



The Rev. Juan del Hierro, senior minister at Unity on the Bay, and Joanne Koren, co-chair of Temple Beth Am's Unbiased Initiative, speak at an interfaith potluck at Unity on the Bay at Temple Israel.

that we hold," del Hierro said.  
"There is the divine potential  
and that final vision of a world  
that works for all."

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