

Interfaith service returns to place where it started

People of many religions
will gather to celebrate
what they have in common

BY CHARLES HONEY
PRESS RELIGION EDITOR

GRAND RAPIDS — It was a snowy, miserable night. The Rev. Tom Bolster expected few would show up at St. Andrew's Cathedral for the first interfaith Thanksgiving service.

To his amazement, more than 400 did.

"The leaders of that effort felt that meant there must be a thirst for this kind of opportunity," Bolster recalled of that 2000 gathering.

The thirst continues, and so does the service. The ninth annual Community Interfaith Thanksgiving Service returns to the cathedral tonight after rotating among several sites.

Bolster, who hatched the idea when he was cathedral rector, is excited to see the service return. He said it is fitting, given the opening of Cathedral Square and the assigning of the ecumenically minded Paulist Fathers as cathedral priests.

"That is a significant building, and it enshrines the history and aspirations of the diocese," said Bolster, pastor of St. James Catholic Church. "But it also houses celebrations and rituals."



PRESS PHOTO/LANCE WYNN

Together: The Rev. Jennifer Browne, left, Nadia Ghebre, center, and The Rev. Tom Bolster stand in St. Andrew's Cathedral, where tonight's service will be held.

IF YOU GO

Thanksgiving service

Offerings from the Community Interfaith Thanksgiving Service will benefit ACCESS and the Kids Food Basket meal program.

When: 7 p.m. today

Where: St. Andrew's Cathedral,
265 Sheldon Ave. SE

INTERFAITH

CEREMONY BUILDS TOGETHERNESS

CONTINUED FROM B1

The Thanksgiving service has become a ritual and a source of unity for the faith community. Services at Congregation Ahavas Israel, Fountain Street Church and other venues have highlighted West Michigan's increasing diversity and offered a soothing counterpoint to religious tensions elsewhere.

Planned by a committee that includes Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu leaders, the service will include an African drum ensemble, an anthem by the diocesan choir, a recitation from the Quran and a Buddhist prayer.

"I don't know what better way we could celebrate our oneness than by worshipping God together," said Michael Hampton, a Baha'i who will deliver a reflection at the service.

That message is consistent with the Baha'i faith, which recognizes all major religious figures as prophets of the same God.

Nadia Ghebre, a Grand Rapids teen of Eritrean heritage, said she looks forward to reading Baha'i scripture at the service.

"I think it's just cool to learn about other people's religions," said Ghebre, 13, a student at Knapp Charter Academy. "If you're not willing to learn about somebody else's, why should they be willing to learn about yours?"

Understanding and sharing faith traditions is part of "the hope for our future," said the Rev. Jennifer Browne, co-chairwoman of the event with Bolster.

"Participating with others doesn't equal compromising (your beliefs)," said Browne, associate pastor at First United Methodist Church. "In fact, I think that's what God wants us to do. That doesn't mean I agree with their doctrines or rituals, but it does mean that, just as God's creation is full of diversity, so are religious expressions."

Browne said she has gotten to know people of other faiths through the service, something that is needed in today's world.

"The only way we're going to work through the violence, both physical and emotional, that occurs between religious groups is to recognize and build on our common humanity," she said. "So this is one little step toward that goal."

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