

At interfaith families group, a rabbi does the Easter sermon

by [Debra Rubin](#)

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SILVER SPRING, Md. (RNS) On the second night of Passover, Rabbi Harold White will lead a traditional seder dinner with matzoh and bitter herbs and all the trimmings.

Five days later, he'll deliver the sermon on Easter Sunday.

That's what life looks like inside the Interfaith Family Project (IFFP) in suburban Washington, where Jewish-Christian couples have decided their kids shouldn't have to choose one faith over the other. Instead, they can do a little of both.

With as many as half of Jews marrying non-Jews, this year's overlap of Passover and Easter is prompting more than a few families to find new ways to navigate the dueling holidays, much like the annual "December dilemma" pitting Christmas against Hanukkah.

Increasingly, such families are turning toward one another for guidance, creating both formal and informal programs. For families at IFFP, it means hosting regular Sunday morning "gatherings" and bringing White and the Rev. Julia Jarvis on as staff clergy to help guide the project.

Not surprisingly, an interfaith Easter will look and feel a little different. There will be no talk of the Eucharist, White and Jarvis said. Instead, services will focus on renewal.

"For both Jews and Christians, the springtime is the season of rebirth," said White, who was ordained by the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary.

The project started in 1995 when four women from interfaith marriages were trying to figure out what to teach their children. IFP now numbers some 120 families and runs a Sunday school that teaches about Judaism, Christianity and Hebrew literacy.

IFFP teaches about Judaism and Christianity separately, but also emphasizes the things they have in common, such as welcoming the stranger and pursuing justice. Many participants consider themselves neither Christian nor Jewish, but simply interfaith, said longtime member Sue Katz Miller.

"No two people are going to have the same belief system, even if they're both Jewish," said Miller, who was raised Jewish by her Jewish father and Episcopal mother.

The group's Sunday gatherings -- "Calling it worship is a bit of a hot-button issue," Miller said -- include reflections from Jarvis or White, secular and religious songs, and prayers. Participants pray both the Lord's Prayer and the Sh'ma, Judaism's most central prayer.

Rather than presenting God as the "Father, Son and the Holy Ghost," or that "Jesus is the only way," Jarvis said, "We teach that Jesus is a historical figure and how he lived."

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, she said, "he taught them to pray to God and not to him, that he too prayed to God and that he was filled with God, and we are filled with God, too."

"It's not about saying children have to follow Jesus, and not about Jews being the chosen people," said Jarvis, who was ordained in the United Church of Christ.

For White, the group's focus "means that Christians get a better understanding of who they are through a better understanding of Judaism, and Jews get a better understanding of who they are through the study of Christianity."

While IFFP may be among the best organized, it's not the only intentionally interfaith congregation in the U.S. In Philadelphia, two

ex-pats from the Washington group are trying to start their own version of IFFP. So far, the group has five families but no clergy.

"There's nothing else like it around," said Felise Shellenberger, who is Jewish. "You can educate your children in a way that's educational, not judgmental and is about both faiths."

The Shellenbergers expect some seven or eight families to attend this year's Passover seder, where they will use an interfaith text. They're not planning to host an Easter service.

"That is an activity that is very church-centered, unlike a seder, which is very family-centered," said Shellenberger's husband, Mark, a United Methodist. Most families in the group "almost always go to the Christian family's church" for Easter, he said.

In Chicago, the 18-year-old Interfaith Union defines itself as a resource center for interfaith families, working with about a half dozen priests and a handful of rabbis, according to Eileen O'Farrell Smith, the project's director. The group counts about 180 active families, and offers joint Hebrew naming/baptism ceremonies, a Sunday school program for children and Friday evening Shabbat dinner clusters.

While these interfaith groups aim to make Jewish and Christian members equally comfortable, some mainstream religious leaders wonder about the faith that's transmitted to children.

"I don't believe you can be both Jewish and Christian," says Sister Mary Boys, a theologian at Union Theological Seminary in New York and a veteran of Christian-Jewish dialogue. At the same time, she said, "People who are open to learning about another religious tradition will in the process learn more about their own."

Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, the former president of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly, said religious identification requires not just knowledge about a given faith, but also an "emotional affiliation." He wonders how a child who celebrates two different faiths "gains not only a respect for and an allegiance to key elements" of each, but also an emotional connection to allow him or her to choose

one.

For their part, IFFP organizers aren't concerned.

"We're not trying to inculcate any particular belief system," said Miller. "People feel spiritually supported by being together as a community ... independent of any particular credo."