Three faiths, three friends: Seattle's interfaith amigos

by Amy Frykholm in the August 26, 2008 issue

The third annual interfaith Passover Seder meal at University Congregational Church in Seattle was a “bring your own wine” event. Tables for 300 guests were impeccably set with goblets and fresh flowers; two kinds of *charoset* (a pasty blend of fruit and nuts prepared according to both the Ashkenazi and Sephardic styles); two kinds of horseradish (raw and sauced); and baskets of matzo. The tables buzzed with lively conversation.

Rabbi Ted Falcon stood at the front with a guitar player and two singers. He is a trim, white-bearded man who is constantly making jokes, but he also has an air of underlying seriousness, intensity, even melancholy.

“OK,” he said. “We’ll begin on page 22 of your handout.” After two days of watching Falcon lead services, I had learned that he never begins on page one. He is likely to start on page 22, continue on page 11 and move on to page two.

“The Haggadah takes us on a spiritual journey,” he says. “We learn to be freed from our inner pharaohs, travel in our wilderness and form our own dreams of the Promised Land.”

The participants at this event—which sold out three weeks before—were Jews, Christians and Muslims. Many came from Bet Alef, Falcon’s “meditative synagogue” that meets in one of Seattle’s suburbs. Some belonged to University Congregational Church, which was led by Pastor Don Mackenzie until his retirement in June. Others belonged to an experimental congregation led by Sufi Muslim teacher Jamal Rahman and known as the Interfaith Community Church. (Rahman calls it a church, he says, for “lack of a better term”; it’s for people who meet on Sundays to explore their “spiritual paths” together, he explains.)

Falcon not only invited members of these three congregations to the Seder but asked Mackenzie and Rahman to speak. And Falcon didn’t want generic spirituality

talk from them; he wanted Mackenzie to mention Jesus or Paul and Rahman to refer to Muhammad and the Qur'an.

This kind of interfaith gathering is an increasingly common phenomenon across the U.S. Interaction between people of different faiths is hardly new, but a qualitative shift occurred after September 11, 2001, says Kathryn Lohre, assistant director of Harvard University's Pluralism Project. "There was a strong interfaith resurgence, driven by the desire of many people, perhaps Christians especially, to get to know their religious neighbors."

Lohre says grassroots efforts have sprung up in many places. The old-style interfaith roundtables in which academics or religious leaders gathered to discuss their theological differences in formal meetings have given way to more informal efforts. These are often led or developed by laypeople, as in the case of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago, the Faith House in Manhattan, Women Transcending Boundaries in Syracuse and Daughters of Abraham in Detroit. People meet to take part in service projects, talk about family, share holiday celebrations or eat ethnic food.

For Rabbi Ted Falcon, Pastor Don Mackenzie and Brother Jamal Rahman, formal and informal meetings have led to deep friendships. They call themselves the Three Interfaith Amigos. The three men host the *Interfaith Talk Radio* show in Seattle, meet weekly for mutual spiritual direction and have embarked on writing a book together. Not only has their friendship grown over the years, but their congregations have become closer. A member of Falcon's synagogue leads the Gregorian chant group at Rahman's congregation. A meeting at any of the three congregations will likely include members of the other two.

"When we first started, the three of us were like three circles touching," Falcon says. "But over time, our circles have become more interlocked. We are still distinct circles, but we share more and more together."

In Seattle, the work of the Three Amigos has spawned the Northwest Interfaith Community Outreach, led by business executive John Hale. This organization helps to sponsor interfaith events and encourages what it calls interspiritual communication. Hale has a salesperson's easy smile and ready handshake—he seems like a man who would be comfortable in a corporate boardroom. So it was a little surprising and even unsettling to hear him speak the language of contemporary spirituality. Raised as a Presbyterian, Hale says that his upbringing "lacked

nourishment," a nourishment he didn't find until he converted to Catholicism and discovered interfaith work.

For Hale, interfaith work involves both a conversation and a way of life. "It is heart work," he says, "not head work." The image that Hale likes—adapted from Meister Eckhart—is that each faith is a house with a basement. Deep in the basement is a trap door. If you go deep enough, you fall through the trap door into the shared river that flows beneath all faiths, the source of them all.

Hale's assertion of oneness would likely make Lohre at the Pluralism Project cringe. Many people, she notes, think interfaith conversation means "moving toward relativism." But "the assertion that 'at root all religions are the same' just isn't true. If you do any kind of careful comparative religion, you understand just how different religious traditions are." People do not need to adopt the rhetoric of "oneness" in order to care about their religious neighbors, Lohre argues. Relying on that approach misses the complexities of the various religions.

The Three Amigos would in some ways accept and in other ways reject Lohre's point. "The question of boundaries is absolutely essential," Falcon insists. "I must find a way to connect with another faith without taking on its identity. What we are doing is acknowledging other faiths as legitimate paths to a shared universal." The three recently discussed a newspaper editorial that criticized Christian groups for holding Seders in their churches—as if the Seder is a tradition possessed by Christians. The three agreed with the critique. Their own interfaith Seder, they noted, is a Jewish celebration, led by a Jewish rabbi, but with interfaith elements.

The three are also dissatisfied with the kind of interfaith service in which participants try to find a lowest common denominator of faith. Far more intriguing and satisfying to them is offering hospitality to one another in their respective congregations and working with one another on common projects. When they speak at one another's events, they speak from their own Jewish, Christian or Muslim tradition. They cite their own sacred texts and tell stories from their own traditions.

Nevertheless, the Three Amigos also tend to blur the boundaries. For example, Mackenzie has asked Rahman and Falcon to help him serve the elements of communion at a service at University Congregational. For him, it is deeply meaningful to have Rahman and Falcon holding the baskets of bread as the congregation comes forward to share in this central Christian ritual. It links the three

men and the three faiths together. It is important to note that the UCC has a tradition of open-table fellowship at communion and that at University Congregational the elements are called “the bread of life” and “the cup of blessing.” This communion service does not focus on the christological distinctives of the meal the way that many other Christian services would.

Falcon said that, for him, being part of a Christian communion service at the church felt like being on sacred ground. Sharing bread and wine is very much a part of Jewish culture, and he has himself hosted the sharing of bread and wine with his two friends in many other contexts, including the moment of entrance into the celebration of Shabbat. He said that though he would not hold a communion service in his synagogue, he believed he could participate in communion without taking on a Christian identity. Falcon likens faith and faith traditions to vehicles—when he is in Mackenzie’s church, he is temporarily riding in that vehicle. That doesn’t mean the vehicle becomes his, but he can ride along in it for a while without compromising his own. Likewise, he can invite others to ride in his vehicle.

Mackenzie observes, “I think Christians have misunderstood the Great Commission. When Jesus says, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations,’ we think he means go and make Christians of all nations. But he doesn’t say that. To be a disciple of God means to be a disciple of love. Maybe he means that we are called to help people find the way of love.” Mackenzie, who was a Presbyterian minister before serving at University Congregational, cherishes the theological and ecclesial freedom he finds in the UCC and believes that it has helped to foster the deep interfaith relationship he has with Falcon and Rahman.

The Three Amigos also emphasize that they are all members of Abrahamic traditions. Their shared ancestor makes possible a conversation about oneness or about what Rahman calls their “large and dysfunctional family” that would be more difficult to conduct with those outside the Abrahamic faiths. The three are in conversation with Hindus and Buddhists, but “for now,” Rahman says, “we have a lot of work to do to heal the rifts in our own family.”

The Three Amigos have not shied away from difficult conversations. The height of personal conflict came in the still-unfinished process of writing a book together. “There was,” says Falcon, “a line written by Jamal about which I said, ‘If that line is in the book, then I am not in the book.’” As Rahman recalls it, the line was about the security wall built by Israel: “The wall may keep out suicide bombers, but it cannot

keep out the cries of oppression and injustice that could break through a thousand walls.” For Falcon, who grew up in a passionately Zionist family, and who remembers that his grandfather planted a tree for him in Israel every year on his birthday, that particular sentence was too one-sided—it failed to recognize the suffering on both sides that is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The two resolved the issue by agreeing never to sign one-sided statements issued by their communities. Whenever a request comes to sign a petition or a public letter, they refuse if the issues are presented in a way that takes into account only one side of the story.

Rahman is a slight Bangladeshi man, a third-generation Sufi teacher with an infectious, musical laugh. He teaches about Islam primarily through stories, humor and quotations from the Qur’an and the poet Rumi. He is a Sunni Muslim who believes that he is called to serve Seattle’s unchurched. While not hawkish, he does highlight the suffering of Palestinians and issues a strong condemnation of Israel’s policies. “What kept us talking, what allowed us to wander into this territory and stay while we tried to understand each other better, was that we were already longtime friends,” says Falcon. “We had a lot invested in our relationship.”

The Three Amigos’ experience is emblematic of a larger reality in the U.S. today, says Haim Beliak, a Reform rabbi who is a member of several interfaith associations and a board member for the Progressive Jewish Alliance in the Los Angeles area. Because Christians and Jews in particular have been in conversation now for many decades, a level of trust has been built. Serious conversations about Israel and Palestine can take place between them because they have a history that is distinct from the tradition of Christian anti-Semitism. The challenge now is to include Muslims in such discussions and thereby resist what Beliak sees as a tendency in some quarters for Jews and Christians to pit themselves against Muslims by emphasizing a “Judeo-Christian” tradition. “When I hear that phrase,” Beliak says, “I feel as if I were being speared by the hyphen.”

Recently, Mackenzie, Falcon and Rahman reflected on who was showing up at interfaith events and who wasn’t. They acknowledged that it is often easier to communicate across the lines of faith than to communicate with members of their own traditions who are suspicious of interfaith work. Falcon is ordained in the Reform tradition, but his synagogue is unaffiliated; he invented the term “meditative Reform” to describe the kind of Judaism he practices. Rahman designates himself a

Sufi teacher, which places him to a certain degree outside conventional Muslim structures—though those structures are comparatively loose.

On the Christian side, the three acknowledged that they have their own biases against conservative Christians, whom they tend to see as narrow-minded and prejudiced against Muslims. In response, the Amigos decided to attend together a service at Christian Faith Center, a megachurch with two campuses in Seattle, led by pastor Casey Treat.

During his sermon on the day the Three Amigos visited, Treat remarked that "Christians and Jews share the same God, but Allah is a different matter." Mackenzie and Falcon both gasped. After the service, Rahman, Mackenzie and Falcon were invited to Treat's office. Rahman used the occasion to say to him, "I don't think Jesus would have said what you did about Muslims."

Rahman, Falcon and Mackenzie later worked with members of Treat's congregation on a Habitat for Humanity project for a local Muslim family. One important lesson from the experience, Rahman says, was the recognition that while he, as a Muslim, feels wounded by the behavior of many Americans, he is not alone in that feeling: many Christians also carry wounds. By understanding this mutual woundedness, the Three Amigos say, they have become much more patient when they confront people who disagree with their interfaith work. Instead of responding with anger or accusation, they try to ask more questions.

They used this insight when Rahman was asked by the director of Camp Brotherhood, an interfaith retreat center with a long history in Seattle, to donate a copy of the Qur'an that would be placed in the center's chapel alongside the Bible and the Torah. The proposal turned out to be controversial among the camp's board members, so the idea was dropped—and the board ended up removing all holy books from the chapel, something the three were not happy about. But instead of responding angrily and forgoing their association with Camp Brotherhood, the three have continued to try to meet with the board members to find a mutually agreeable solution.

Lohre of Harvard is convinced that informal interfaith efforts like that of the Three Amigos will continue to grow. If such efforts had been merely a reaction to September 11, they would have faded long ago. But because so many people are now involved in interfaith friendships and because so many interfaith activities have

involved young people, interfaith work is not likely to vanish—and the relationships can only deepen. The most successful groups, Lohre says, provide acts of service and hospitality as well as activities for people of different generations.

Not everyone is prepared to applaud such encounters. Anxiety about the loss of “shared values” is heard from many corners, leading some people to turn inward. And interfaith conversations are clearly in their early stages—they have not yet been a force in stopping wars, nor have they succeeded in shutting the doors of Guantánamo or in healing the wounds in the Middle East. But thousands of people have had concrete encounters with neighbors who belong to a different religious faith.

One often hears quoted in interfaith circles these words of God from the Qur’an: “O humankind, we have created you out of a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you might come to know one another.” At this point in history, coming to know one another remains a critical task.