Worship immersion tour: Crossing religious boundaries

by Jesse James DeConto in the June 26, 2013 issue

Photo by Faith House Manhattan

Maybe Matt Kelley should have known better; he is a pastor, after all. In his United Methodist church in Nashville, fiddling with your cell phone during worship may be a little tacky, but you can get away with it if you're discreet. Not so at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

"I stupidly took up my phone and responded to a text message in the middle of the service, and I was promptly told to put that away because it's disrespectful to do during a worship service," said Kelley. "I definitely understood that I was a visitor and an 'other,' if you will. They helped me understand how I'm supposed to behave."

Abyssinian was Kelley's first stop on a tour sponsored by Faith House Manhattan, a nonprofit ministry that guides visitors through New York's diverse religious communities during three- or four-day retreats. This religious immersion experience is an experiment for Faith House, which is led by Croatian immigrant and Seventh-day Adventist pastor Samir Selmanovic.

For five years Faith House hosted "Living Room" sessions that brought Jews, Muslims, Christians, atheists and people of other faiths together at neutral sites to celebrate the major holy days in the various traditions. The turn toward immersion tours, which bring people directly into existing religious communities, reflects a new

emphasis. Faith House wants people to learn about other faiths by entering into a liturgy or sacred space on its own terms. Its ministry is an important critique of interfaith encounters that focus on commonalities.

“The problem with creating a third place is that it is artificial,” Selmanovic said, referring to the original Living Room events. But “when you’re a guest in your neighbor’s house, you are who you are, and they are who they are, and they’re a good neighbor, and you’re a good guest, and you participate in the way you feel comfortable.

“People respond better when something is happening in their places because they have ownership of it,” Selmanovic said. “We know the hosts really well, and we kind of establish the relationships between the groups.” Faith House has not eliminated the Living Room events, but they are designed for people who already know one another.

On an immersion tour that stopped at Abyssinian Baptist last July, Victoria Rentz, a Brooklyn College graduate student in psychology, commented on the energetic worship that she witnessed at the African-American church.

“I wonder how [Abyssinian members] would feel coming to my church,” she told a reporter, referring to her Catholic and Episcopal background. “I just wonder how they would take the silence or the reflective time.

“There was definitely no sleeping through that service, that’s for sure,” she said. “The music was really central to the way they worshiped in a way that it’s not in Episcopal or Catholic worship.”

On her immersion tour, Lutheran deacon Kathleen Brighton visited a progressive Jewish congregation named Romemu, which meets at New York’s West Side Presbyterian Church. Led by a trio playing bass, keyboard and hand drums, these Jews practiced ecstatic chant and liturgical dance.

“They came out into the aisle and formed a chain and danced around the sanctuary space,” Brighton reported. She loved the experience, but she couldn’t imagine many of the rural Midwesterners she grew up with participating. “They would have thought that I was taken over by an evil force—maybe not evil, but certainly not Christian,” she told a reporter from the BBC.

The participants saw a similar contrast between two Muslim congregations. They attended a Ramadan *zikr* (remembrance of God) service with a Sufi community and a Friday *juma'ah* prayer with a Nation of Islam group. In the Nation of Islam service, men and women worshiped in separate rooms. Participants ritually washed their faces and hands, and they began their worship with prostrate prayer and continued kneeling throughout. The Sufis worshiped sitting cross-legged on the floor, with the sexes together, in what Rentz described as a free-form service led by whirling dervishes—dancers who invoke God's presence in movement and song. Worshipers chanted Allah's name while bending and straightening at the waist in time with their breathing. "Both the movement and the sound contribute to the overall rhythm," Brighton wrote in an article for her church.

"These are people just like me, flesh and blood, and their expression is different, but the joy that I saw in their expressions was unmistakable," Brighton says. "It was a soul experience for me. They were very different from me, but they were also very much the same. . . . These people are worshiping God as they know God."

Another participant in the immersion tour was Ann Holmes Redding, an Episcopal priest who was defrocked in 2009 after she announced that she had added Islam to her religious identity. Redding is currently founding an interfaith organization in Seattle: Abrahamic Reunion West will invite people to cross religious boundaries to celebrate holy days together. Redding said that this model can serve people who already have relationships and the desire to be "fellow travelers" together, whereas Faith House's immersions are ideal for people who want to learn about other faiths but don't know how.

"It's not easy for a person, no matter how deep the interest in another faith or even one's own faith, to go to a place of worship that you're not familiar with and to go among strangers—you don't know how you're supposed to dress, you don't know how you're supposed to behave, what's going to happen," Redding said. "It's not easy for me as a Christian going to a church that I don't know, not to mention going to a congregation of another faith. People ask me: Can I visit a mosque? Which one? What do I have to do?"

"This Faith House immersion model really helps people make those connections," she said. "You don't have to wonder whether or not you're going to be welcomed." Faith House has "paved the way. It's going to make for fewer surprises. You don't know what you're walking into, and part of the reason you're there is to be

surprised, but this also gives you people to talk to, to help you think about what you've experienced. It's a really good model for people who are interested but don't know how to proceed."

"Immersions help people cross that threshold of awkwardness," Selmanovic said. In "learning to swim you have to go underwater a little. You come out alive and you say, 'Well, maybe I could learn to swim.'"

Immersion participants encounter surprises even within their own traditions. "There is a dress code," Redding noted of Abyssinian. "Women are not supposed to wear scanty clothing or short shorts. There were no sleeveless tops. People expect this if you're visiting an Islamic group or an Orthodox Jewish group, but people don't expect it going into Christian settings."

The cell phone incident taught Kelley as much about New York as it did about Abyssinian. "A lot of people in my part of the country think that New York's pretty godless, and of course nothing could be further from the truth," Kelley told the BBC.

"One thing that really struck me was how all these communities have to have a strong sense of their own identity just living in close proximity to each other. Nashville is a very diverse city, especially the part of Nashville that I serve in. Even though our neighbors are right here, it's a lot easier to pretend they're not, to not notice just how diverse our neighbors are. It's not so easy to do that in a place like New York."

Kelley said vandalism, arson and a bomb threat against a mosque that opened last year in Murfreesboro near Nashville suggested that New York might have something to teach him. "It teaches us something about where the rest of our country is going, and because it is so much more obvious there, it allows us to examine something about our own communities.

"Where I live in the South, going to church is mainly still part of a cultural norm," Kelley says. "When you ask people, 'What particular difference does Christianity make in your life?' you can get raised eyebrows. But in New York, a lot of folks can articulate to you what it is about their religious faith that shapes them as a human being."

Helping people articulate their identities across religious lines is what Faith House is trying to do. "Interfaith engagement is not about making the world a better place or

seeking world peace," Selmanovic said. "It is a matter of understanding yourself. It's a matter of grasping your own identity in the presence of the other. You need to see yourself through the eyes of the other. The stranger can see what you cannot see and can say what you cannot say. People from other religions are precious to us. Melchizedek was needed to bless Abraham. The astrologers who came to Bethlehem—what were their texts? What were their rituals? God brings revelation sideways. God shows up sideways because it's an unguarded moment."

Selmanovic has experienced this process firsthand, as he recounts in his book *It's Really All About God: How Islam, Atheism and Judaism Made Me a Better Christian*. He grew up culturally Muslim in Croatia in an atheistic family in which "there were two doctrines, unspoken, but as solid as any religious dogma can be. The first doctrine was called Pleasure: 'Thou shalt enjoy life,'" he wrote. "It always came down to relationships. And food. . . . And there was wine-making. . . . The second doctrine of our religion was Honor: 'Thou shalt not be a jerk.' One must be generous, honest, and hardworking – especially hardworking."

Selmanovic befriended a Christian while serving a required term in the Yugoslav army. "Why do you always have to be thinking about God?" Selmanovic asked his friend. "Why can't you just enjoy a sunny day, for example?"

"When I walk into a sunny day, I walk into a gift," the other soldier said. "When you walk into a sunny day, what do you walk into?"

"I had no answer," Selmanovic wrote. "For weeks after our conversation, the idea that Someone gifted life to us would not leave me. The thought held me in its grip: Can reality be relational?"

Selmanovic soon converted to Christianity, and his parents temporarily disowned him. Still, Selmanovic found that his parents' affirmation of the material world stayed with him and helped him come to see the kingdom of God as something that would come to earth, not in an afterlife. He found support for this view from a Jewish rabbi he later met in New York.

"Rabbi, what is Judaism teaching about eternal life?" Selmanovic asked. "I don't hear you talking about it much. I need to know."

"One world at a time, my friend, one world at a time," he replied.

Selmanovic recovered some of his nominal Muslim heritage in the aftermath of September 11, when he found that many Americans were viewing all Muslims as potential terrorists. “In the former Yugoslavia, Muslims were peacemakers who saw violence as a failure to submit one’s life to Allah,” he wrote.

Faith House is headquartered on the grounds of Union Theological Seminary. Union professor Paul Knitter, a leading scholar of interfaith relations, is one of Selmanovic’s mentors. Faith House aims to pay for its operations by charging a few hundred dollars for each participant in its immersion tours.

Selmanovic said raising money for Faith House has been a challenge over the past five years. Secular institutions don’t generally support religious ones, and religious groups typically support their own faith’s agenda, not an interfaith one. So Selmanovic has had to call on a group of about 40 friends to fund the ministry.

“We are happy to receive anything from others, but I’m exhausted from fund-raising,” he said. “You have to raise funds, and then you have to work with what you have raised. You have to ride two horses at the same time.”

Selmanovic thinks there is a market for immersion tours, perhaps serving groups of clergy, congregational groups or students.

“You come to New York as a Western city of pilgrimage,” he says. “You don’t have to go half a world around, because ‘half the world around’ is right here. There is more diverse Judaism, Islam and Christianity in New York than anywhere else in the world.”

Selmanovic said Faith House is focused right now on religious immersions, but the tours could expand to include a “capitalist” tour of Wall Street or an “activist” tour of key LGBTQ social spaces.

“We don’t see this as tourism. It’s a new thing,” he says. “It’s not mindless tourism. It’s challenging, thoughtful immersion. It’s contextual travel. This kind of visit to New York is much more fulfilling than running around and going to museums. Our hope is that we will attract smart travelers.”