

A room of ten

By [Teri McDowell Ott](#)

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“I’m going to do something weird,” Malak whispers to Katie, her bunkmate for our six-day interfaith immersion trip to Chicago. Malak slips into her cotton prayer robe, its royal blue flower print covers her head, her arms to her wrists, and hangs to her feet. She begins her prayers, facing Mecca, alternating positions of standing and then prostrating herself with her forehead to the floor while silently praying in Arabic. When she finishes, Katie, a Christian, intentionally takes a moment to say, “I don’t think it’s weird, Malak. I think it’s beautiful.”

I wasn’t sure what would come of this interfaith immersion trip. I’d never led one before. But I knew I had a good group—three Muslims, six Christians, and one Naturalist, all living and learning together in one large hostel room stacked full of ten bunk beds. During the week we visited a variety of religious communities. We listened to [Father Pfleger whoop](#) at [St. Sabina Catholic Church](#), gazed at the “O Glory of the All Glorious” in the dome of the [Bahá’í Temple](#), soaked in the smooth sounds of jazz worship at [Fourth Presbyterian Church](#), and sat in meditation at the [Shambala Center](#). We giggled embarrassedly with the Sikhs when we didn’t know what to do with the pudding they put in our hands, dined on delicious Turkish food provided by our hosts at the [American Islamic College](#), and swayed to the undulating music of the Hare Krishna chants and drums. Each experience was unique, each community welcoming and willing to answer our many questions. But it was the conversations on the bus, subways, and sidewalks in between these visits that made the experience meaningful.

After a long, full day on Monday I called my husband to say goodnight. Laughing over the phone, I described why I was so exhausted. “I’ve spent the whole day trying to explain the Trinity to our three Muslim students while also trying to navigate the Chicago subway,” I told him. “So, I got us lost multiple times and I’ve decided the Trinity doesn’t really make much sense.”

While worshipping at Fourth Presbyterian Church, I was confronted by an awkwardness I hadn’t felt before. When I realized communion was being served, a

debate quickly began in my mind as I thought through what I wanted to do in this worship moment. This was my church and my sacrament. Should I go forward to receive it, leaving my Muslim and Naturalist students behind in the pew? Would they feel awkward and unwelcome? At first, I decided I would skip communion to sit in solidarity with those who were not Christian. But as the service proceeded I realized that later in the week I would be the Christian observing a Muslim prayer service—and I would think it odd if my Muslim friends refrained from participating in their service for my sake. That was their thing. This was mine. So I went forward to receive the sacrament of Christ's body and blood.

Later, when I was the one sitting to observe the Muslims in prayer—the men in one line, the women in another, standing shoulder to shoulder, all their movements in sync—tears welled in my eyes. I'd observed Muslims in prayer before, but these weren't just Muslims. This was Malak, and Mirna, and Hind—*my* Muslim students—three of our room of ten. Here they were doing their thing. And it was beautiful.

At the end of the week, we packed up our bags, leaving behind rumpled blankets, sheets, and trash cans full of shopping bags and snack wrappers. Left behind in this mess, though, was also a quality, an air, that something holy and heavy happened in that space. In a day when religious tension is globally at a six year high, we need more people to have such positive interfaith experiences—experiences through which the “other” suddenly has a name, and a story, and a path that often intertwines beautifully with your own. We knit together a new kind of community in that room of ten; a community where religious difference does not prove to be divisive, but rather mutually enriching; a community full of human grace.

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