

# Initiative launched to share Christian, Jewish, Muslim pulpits

WASHINGTON - It will happen for just one Sunday in June, but on that day, dozens of houses of worship across the United States will open their pulpits to clergy from the other two Abrahamic faiths to read from their scriptures.

The project, called Faith Shared, is set for June 26. A few synagogues and mosques are among those that have signed up for the initiative, as well as Christian communities across the denominational spectrum, including one Catholic church in North Carolina.

"Just having something public is not going to be a big, big deal here, but to have someone come in and read from the Quran and to recognize publicly the existence of Islam and to reverence and respect is a good thing for the church to do," said Jesuit Father Pat Earl, pastor of St. Peter Parish in Charlotte, N.C.

The project is co-sponsored by the Interfaith Alliance and Human Rights First.

"The United States is the most religiously diverse nation in the world," said the Rev. C. Welton Gaddy, a Southern Baptist minister who is president of the Interfaith Alliance, during a May 18 conference call with reporters. "Crucial to peaceful relationships across this land, as well as to our democratic form of government. Are pluralism and religious freedom."

Rev. Gaddy said, "We're calling upon congregations to say by means of their actions, 'We come from different traditions, hold different beliefs and engage in different rituals in our churches, mosques and synagogues. Have different beliefs yet emphasize religious freedom and search for answers to life's questions through our respective faiths.'"

"The perception of the United States abroad has an influence on the ability of the U.S. government to lead on human rights," said Tad Stahnke, Human Rights First's director of policy and programs. "In this work we know that bigotry and hatred can create a climate of hostility where it is more difficult for individuals to exercise their

rights, and to be protected from violence and discrimination. These events are noticed around the world.”

Father Earl, in a May 27 telephone interview with Catholic News Service, said he was prompted to sign on to the Faith Shared initiative after recalling things he had heard during meetings of Mecklenburg Ministries, an interfaith clergy group in the Charlotte area.

“I’ve heard from Muslim imams about what they and their congregations have suffered just from the fear, the fear of what they call Islamophobia,” Father Earl said.

One recent instance was related to an Islamophobia conference held in Charlotte earlier in May. “Some of the clergy coming here had trouble flying here because of the fear of some of the pilots, and so they were late getting here,” said the priest.

According to The Charlotte Observer, at least two imams wearing traditional garb heading to the conference were taken off one plane when the pilot allegedly said he would not fly with them as passengers and they had to catch a later plane to Charlotte.

Father Earl told CNS that details of the pulpit-sharing plan have yet to be worked out at St. Peter. One complication, he said, is that June 26 was chosen earlier to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Jesuit order’s staffing of the parish, with Jesuits assigned to the parish in past years invited to the celebration. “And so how to work this in without distracting from the focus of the weekend is a delicate matter. We’ll have to work that out,” he said.

Rev. Gaddy said, “This event will help counter the common misperception abroad that most Americans are hostile to Islam. It will send a message that Americans respect Muslims and Islam, as they respect religious differences and freedom of religion in general.”