

REFLECTIONS ALONG THE WAY

Dear friends,

During last month's "Reckoning with Antisemitism as Christians: Listening to Jewish Voices" event, I stood at the front of the Knox Room at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and said something like this:

"Next, we invite you to form groups of three—try to find people you don't already know. Take the next few minutes to discuss: what did you hear that resonates with your own experience? What questions might you have for the panelists? It's seven o'clock right now, so let's reconnect at about seven ten."

And then—the best part!—I got to watch the magic happen.

Strangers turned to one another, stood up, and moved their chairs into small circles. People introduced themselves and shook hands. The room's silence transformed into the animated murmur of dozens of simultaneous conversations.

On the dais, my co-facilitator, Noah Schoen, and I took in the scene. Speakers were grappling with their words, gesturing widely, meeting the eyes of their partners. Their hearers leaned forward, with curious, open faces. We could almost hear them listening.

Conventional wisdom would have it that Americans aren't very good at listening to one another these days. People say we're so polarized and disconnected that civil dialogue is out of the question. But again and again in the past few weeks, I've seen just the opposite:



- I saw spiritual leaders laugh and process and plan with each other the morning after the presidential election, building new connections and nurturing longstanding bonds through the **We Have to Talk** interfaith dialogue series.
- I saw people of every age and ethnicity, every faith and perspective, bring casseroles to share and stories to tell at the **Love Anyway Feast**, a local example of a national initiative bringing people together around a common meal.
- I saw community members linger long after the annual **East End Interfaith Thanksgiving service** had ended, greeting neighbors, congratulating the choir on its moving performance, sharing conversation over cookies.

On each of these occasions and many more, I heard people say, "We needed this." We needed it, like food or shelter or safety. In a complicated world, we are all so hungry for genuine connection: to hear about the world from our neighbor's perspective, to have the opportunity to ask honest questions, to share our own views and know that we are truly heard.

And our churches can be the places where that hunger is satisfied. Our churches can set the table for meaningful connection across difference, conversations that support and sustain us. This is the simple, unsung work that churches have been about for generations: nurturing the camaraderie that grows while singing hymns side by side, or building a ramp for a neighbor, or peeling potatoes for the sauerkraut supper. Churches are places where we can be known and heard, where we can feel loved, where we know we can belong.

Loneliness, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy says, is an epidemic. Over seventy years ago, Dorothy Day named the cure: "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community." In the days to come, let's continue to nurture that essential community, one conversation at a time.

Your sister in Christ,

The Rev. Liddy Barlow
Executive Minister
Christian Associates of Southwest PA



Photo by Brian Cohen

*Want even more ecumenical news and events from across Southwest Pennsylvania? Subscribe to **Unity n'At**, a monthly e-newsletter from Christian Associates! Visit casp.org/signup to be sure you're on the list.*