Columns
Ministry



Matachines dancers perform during the "Festival of Faiths" held Jan. 24 in San Antonio, Texas. (Courtesy of Martha A. Kirk)



by Martha A. Kirk

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A first ever "Festival of Faiths" was held in our city, San Antonio, Texas, on our campus, which includes both the University of the Incarnate Word and the center of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word. The Interfaith San Antonio Alliance partnered with Incarnate Word and a number of groups so that our city might continue to grow in unity, compassion, and wisdom.

In the festival as Abigail, the wife of David (1 Samuel 25), I dramatized a story, saying:

> My grandmother taught me, "Fools turn to violence. Wisdom prepares a feast." My husband Nabal, whose very name means fool, had 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats and abundant food and wealth as we celebrated the shearing of the sheep. David sent a messenger asking for some of the food since he and his men had protected our shepherds near Mount Carmel. My foolish husband angrily told the messenger no. Who did that man David think he was? When David got the message, he was furious, taking it as an insult. He started making plans to kill Nabal and all the males who worked with us. When I learned of this, I gathered the women and started preparing food to stop the foolish pride of those two men. We packed the food, and I took it across Carmel. As I traveled, I reflected on the beauty and abundance of God's creation. All is a gift, so why wouldn't we share?
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> I was full of fear and prayed as I saw David's camp. I went and knelt before him and begged him to receive the food and not to kill because of my husband's response. His men said that he should not listen to a woman. Finally, he said he would take the food. He was grateful that I had stopped him from shedding innocent blood. When I got home and told Nabal, he was so angry his heart turned to stone. He died. I mourned as a widow is supposed to do. Soon, David took me as his wife.



Martha A. Kirk dramatizes a story as Abigail, the wife of David, during the festival. (Courtesy of Martha A. Kirk)

My drama continued reflectively, "I have had two men in my life, but I had a grandmother wiser than both. She would always say that violence never stops violence. She taught me to sing, 'Fools Turn to Violence. Wisdom prepares a feast,' She taught me to share our feasts."

In San Antonio we shared not just a feast, but a festival. Our gathering was a time of hearing each other's stories, being comforted by the beauty of each other's music, and being fascinated by the joy of each other's dance. Over 700 of us learned, and we laughed. This was part of "Dream Week," honoring cultural diversity, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream. Soon, the U.S. will be the most religiously diverse country in the history of the world.

At the University of the Incarnate Word, we are striving to welcome as Christ calls us to do by deliberately examining ourselves. I am blessed to be in networks that are collaborating so that our city may grow as a "city of compassion." The "City of Compassion" movement started locally on Nov. 12, 2009, in a service-learning project in my religious studies class at the University of the Incarnate Word.

My students decorated with olive branches and a large poster of the Charter of Compassion to sign on. Leaders of different faiths talked about compassion, and we watched the online international launch of the Charter for Compassion. Mainly through the efforts of the San Antonio Peace Center, in 2017, we got our newly elected Mayor Ron Nirenberg and the City Council to adopt a resolution to grow as a "compassionate city."

Compassion and equity are guiding principles. I had the privilege of being at the Charter for Compassion Banquet with Mayor Nirenberg, on Aug. 16, 2023, in Chicago at the Parliament of the World's Religions, where he received the Karen Armstrong Humanitarian Award for his efforts. He serves as the chair of the Mayors and Business Leaders Center for Compassionate and Equitable Cities for the United States Conference of Mayors. He invited us to stand with him. We are a part of putting compassion into action, and we in San Antonio invite you to join us in Compassionate USA.



Martha A. Kirk, far right, is pictured with San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg, second from the left, at the Parliament of the World's Religions, Aug. 16, 2023, in Chicago. (Courtesy of Martha A. Kirk)

At the parliament, before Greg Fischer, former mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, and Nirenberg spoke on a panel about compassionate cities, we were speaking about the Festival of Faiths that Louisville has had for 27 years. Fischer not only commented on how much it had built understanding and unity in the city, he invited us to go there and learn from them.

Since our campus was to be the San Antonio venue for the first festival, Nirenberg said that it would be good for me to go and learn. Also, the Rev. Wyndee Holbrook, the Interfaith San Antonio Alliance director, went because they were to host the festival.

The multifaith children's story session in Louisville inspired me to create something similar in our San Antonio Festival of Faiths. Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and

Sikh friends helped by bringing and reading books. Deepti Kharod, a fine UIW professor in early education, introduced her "belief in play" research. We could all learn from the book *The Christmas Mitzvah*.

In the book Al Rosen, a Jewish man, would do his Christian friends' jobs on Christmas so that they could spend time with their families. Al explained that a mitzvah is a good deed. This is a true story of a movement of kindness. Once, I gave a math exam so that a Muslim friend could be with his family and community for their big Eid al-Adha feast day. It wasn't hard to do. Why don't we all start learning each other's big days and see if we could substitute for one another at work?

I was helping my cousin who follows the path of Buddhism with her festival "display and dialogue table" on Thich Nhat Hanh, poet and peace activist. In the months leading up to the festival, I kept turning to the courage and wisdom of Thich Nhat Hanh and his friend, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Merton's ideas continue to be significant inspirations behind the Louisville Festival of Faiths. Throughout the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hahn would go back and forth between the opposing groups that were trying to destroy each other, to help them recognize the humanity of "the other."

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We are all interconnected. How much we need courage like his. Christians on the right and on the left pull away from each other. The Hindu and Muslim conflicts in India have spilled over as tensions in our city. The Israel and Hamas conflict in Gaza has spilled over as tension in our city.

Can we learn wisdom from Abigail? "Fools turn to violence. Wisdom prepares a feast."

Every Thursday morning since the second week of the pandemic, invited by our mayor and hosted by the Rev. Ann Helmke, the city's faith-based liaison, faith leaders have gathered on Zoom for "At The Intersection," or "@TheIntersection." We consider pressing needs and how we can work together for the good of our city. I am not sure how to do that, but I show up every week. I cherish seeing Mandeans, Methodists, Mormons, Muslims, and more lovingly committed to the common good. Every week, I have a fine Catholic parish community, Mission Concepción, and I have

a circle of caring people of many faiths via @TheIntersection, as spiritual support and motivators to service.

We, the University of the Incarnate Word, have committed ourselves to the Laudato Si' Action Platform, the challenge of our leader, Pope Francis, that care for creation is urgent and important, and that Catholics *must* be allied with people of all faiths. In light of that, generously funded by Interfaith America, we have had educational and service programs for our students and the public with local groups of Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Native Americans, and Sikhs. As crowds of all faiths came into our festival, some of them recognized their pictures on our Interfaith Care of Creation display and dialogue table, and others considered how we could serve together in the future doing projects like building gardens together in Guatemala where children are malnourished.

All day long, people's minds and hearts were being opened as they came close to people they might never have been around before, including Sikh men in turbans, Muslim women in hijabs, Hindu dancers or matachines dancers. I had organized a panel about *Three Mystics Walk into a Tavern: A Once and Future Meeting of Rumi, Meister Eckhart, and Moses De León in Medieval Venice*. Jim Harrington, co-author of the book, invited all to go deeper into the mystery of God that we may come closer to each other. A rabbi, an imam, and a Christian scholar shared during a panel moderated by Michael Romero, UIW Pastoral Institute director.

As we listen deeply to each other, we are all gifted. As we release ourselves into the compassion of the Holy One, we are transformed. We start to let go of the violence in our own hearts.

The very first public statement of our community, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word of San Antonio, Texas, was published in the San Antonio Daily Herald. We wrote that on Dec. 1, 1869, all persons "regardless of nationality or creed are welcome" at Santa Rosa, the first public hospital in the city. People of all faiths were welcome. Hoping to heal divisions and build bridges, in 2024, we have been blessed in having the opportunity on our campus to host the first city "Festival of Faiths." Like Abigail, we shared a feast of friendship, and we shared a festival of faiths.