Building Welcoming Communities through Interfaith Relationships

The shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood on October 27, 2018, was a tragedy on a scale never experienced in Pittsburgh. With 11 worshippers murdered and seven more injured, it was the deadliest attack on a Jewish community in the United States.

Squirrel Hill is one of the largest predominantly Jewish communities in the U.S. and has historically been the center of Jewish life in Pittsburgh. It is also one of the region’s most diverse, welcoming, and tight-knit neighborhoods – the once home of Fred Rogers and his inspiration for “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.”

The brutality and hate that fueled the massacre shook Pittsburgh, the nation and the world. However, in the aftermath of this unconscionable act, a unification of the broader Pittsburgh community – from all faiths and backgrounds – represented the shared values and ideals that define Pittsburgh as a truly unique and special place. The strong community response in support of the victims, their families, the first-responders, and the Jewish community became a source of inspiration to many across the world.

There are numerous examples of interfaith communities coming together in the aftermath of the shooting to show support, encourage healing, and raise money for the Jewish community. One notable example was how the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, in coordination with two national Muslim organizations, Celebrate Mercy and MPower Change, raised more than $238,000 through an online crowdfunding campaign to support the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh “Our Victims of Terror Fund.”

Interfaith leaders provided some of the most powerful voices of healing and community following the shooting. It is important to note that the fundamental relationships between faith leaders in Pittsburgh were not formed in the aftermath of this tragedy. Rather, these interfaith relationships, built around compassion and a shared sense of unity and purpose, were longstanding in nature and a defining aspect of the faith community in Pittsburgh prior to the tragedy.

When 50 worshippers were murdered and dozens more injured by a gunman at the Al Noor and Linwood mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand in March, the Pittsburgh Jewish community rallied to support the New Zealand Islamic community. In the aftermath of the shootings, the Tree of Life Congregation established a GoFundMe page that has raised tens of thousands of dollars to aid the Christchurch families and community. Congregants also attended Sunday classes at the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh in solidarity. A similar relief effort was launched by the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh.
The importance of interconnectedness and the leadership role that faith leaders play in civic life has shined through in the aftermath of these tragedies. How were these bonds and this culture of trust formed? What are the lessons and takeaways that the civic and faith communities in metro Atlanta can learn from Pittsburgh?

The staff of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette was awarded the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News Reporting for their coverage of the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue. You can view the coverage submitted here.

Further National Coverage

*A Massacre in the Heart of Mr. Rogers’s Neighborhood*
New York Times – August 27, 2018

*Muslim Groups Raise Thousands for Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooting Victims*
New York Times – August 29, 2018

*Synagogue shooting hits home for many in Atlanta’s Jewish community*
AJC – October 28, 2018

*After Pittsburgh, the interfaith response sends message of solidarity across the religious divide*
Vox – October 28, 2018

*Their fellow congregants died in Pittsburgh. Now Jews are supporting Muslims in New Zealand.*
Washington Post – March 18, 2019