

Interfaith Families Project

May 2004

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FROM THE BOARD

I am not the fastest kid on the block. It has taken me the better part of this year at IFFP to figure out what the chair of the Board ought to be doing. But I do think I've got it now. Basically, I need to do three things: I need to listen a lot, I need to apologize frequently, and I need to say thanks constantly. While I have gotten a good deal of practice at all three functions this year, everyone knows that I have a long way to go if I am to serve this organization well.

Listening to the members of IFFP provides the energy that drives the Board. Identifying the needs that are well met and those that are not sets the agenda for our action. At our best, we preserve, protect, and support those things that are working well—such as the Gatherings and the Sunday School. We also try out new things in a way that clearly responds to heard needs: The Easter brunch seemed to work nicely; the addition of a spiritual advisor has terrific potential. At our most challenged, we try out new things without sufficient attention to the full range of needs and desires expressed by our members. Backwards Day, for example, was a worthwhile experiment in many ways but created unnecessary stress for many of our teachers due to our failure to listen effectively. For that I apologize.

I apologize for all of the errors of commission and omission for which the Board and I have been responsible this year. We are working hard to not repeat mistakes and to make fewer mistakes.

Finally, and in many ways most importantly, I extend heartfelt thanks to all those who have done so much to continue the IFFP tradition of evolving community through innovation and with tolerance for one another's views. While I know I will leave out many people who should be thanked—and for this I apologize in advance—I do want to single out a few:

- Our Sunday School teachers—not such a small number of people any more—who give so much energy, talent, and love to our kids.
- Heather, who has made her first year with IFFP one of growth and learning and spirit and celebration—for her and for us.
- Susan Ryder, who keeps both the big picture and the small details in focus, and helps to keep us all on task.
- Ellen Jennings, who launched another successful year of Sunday School before stepping down.
- Sherri Brown, who stepped into the almost impossible position of interim DRE and who handled the challenge admirably.
- Sam Lawson for shepherding Adult Group; Betsy Keeler for her stewardship of the DRE search; and Larry Bostian for guiding the Worship Committee—all calling for exceptional commitments of time and energy.
- For three Board members who will retire at the end of this year—Terry Fischer, Liz Stanley-Mitchell, and Adria Zeldin—who have served to make this a better place for all of us.
- And for all of the committee members and coordinators who contributed hours and hours of their time to plan and implement the activities of IFFP.

The Board still has important work to do at its May and June meetings. We will be hiring a permanent DRE, setting the calendar for next year, adopting a budget, and seating new Board members. As we do all of these important jobs, we are trying to listen. We will probably make some mistakes and need to apologize. And we certainly will owe thanks to many more people, including all of you for being here and being part of this wonderful community.

—[Steve Jackson](#), IFFP Board Chair

MAY 2004

2	Community Service Day	16	IFFP Open House <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bagels, 10 a.m.• Gathering/Teen Graduation, 10:15• Sunday School/Adult Group, 10:45	23	COA Celebration/ Picnic <ul style="list-style-type: none">* Coming of Age Celebration, 10 a.m.* Thank-You Picnic, noon-2 p.m.
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Teen Gradation/Spring Open House, Sunday, May 16

Our annual Teen Graduation/Spring Open House is our last Sunday program this year. All members are cordially invited to the graduation ceremony this year's graduates: Izaak Orlansky, Rebecca Feiden, Cori Cohen, and Luke Bostian.

Please come and extend a welcome to our visiting families. We had an excellent response to our fall Open House in September, and we hope this will be duplicated on the 16th. The feedback we get from more and more people is that IFFP is the answer they've been seeking for their families—a balance between Christianity and Judaism that's impartial and allows both spouses to feel comfortable and accepted. The schedule for this Open House includes an orientation and visits to Adult Group and the classrooms. It may be helpful to let your children know that they will have visitors in their Sunday School classes.

End-of-the-Year COA Ceremony/Thank-You Picnic, Sunday, May 23

The entire community is invited to this year's COA Ceremony and picnic. With background music provided by a chorus of cicadas, this group of six kids will share the fruits of their yearlong learning with the IFFP community. Led by this year's 8th-graders, the ceremony allows adults to witness the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood; gives 5th-, 6th-, and 7th-graders an idea of what they can look forward to in their COA year; and lets the Teen group welcome the COAers to the next level. Participants include Rachel Boylan, Steven Dobek, Fiona Kohrman, Casey McGrath, Alison Scharman, and Sam Ricci. COA Leader Sharron Mendel and IFFP Spiritual Director Heather Kirk-Davidoff will be officiating.

Following the COA Ceremony will be our fabulous finale picnic. There are no kitchen facilities, so please bring food that is ready to eat and stored in coolers in your cars until we adjourn to the fields to eat. This is a casual potluck event. IFFP will provide paper goods, beverages, and Popsicles. Each family should bring enough picnic fare to feed 10-12 people. Kid-friendly fare and finger food work well. If last name of the female head of household begins with:

- * A-J: Main dish
- * K-Z: Side dish or salads
- * Board members: Dessert (other than Popsicles)

Let's hope for good weather and a big turnout for our last bash of the season. Questions? Call Jessica Vistnes.

* HELP NEEDED—Since Jessica will be away, we need three volunteers to help with the picnic. If you can purchase drinks (soda, seltzer, juice) or Popsicles, or bring and set up the paper goods that Jessica has, please contact the office, 301-270-6337. You will be reimbursed for everything you buy.

Dovetail Conference—Berkeley, Calif., Aug. 6-8

Are you excited about meeting people from our "sister" independent interfaith groups in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco? Would you like to hear how other interfaith couples around the country are welcoming their babies, educating their children, or mourning the loss of their parents? Would you like to hear a popular murder mystery writer explain why he chose an interfaith couple as the protagonists of his book series?

Every two years, the Dovetail Institute, the only national organization supporting all interfaith families, has a national conference. It is an exhilarating experience. About a third of those who attend are young couples looking for guidance (some of whom go on to found new interfaith groups); a third are movers and shakers from the major independent interfaith groups around the country; and a third are rabbis, ministers, counselors, academics, and others who serve interfaith communities.

This year, the conference is Aug. 6-8 in Berkeley, Calif. Heather and I will be there to present IFFP's program on various panels, and we would love to have more IFFP people join us—to raise the national awareness of IFFP and to attend as many of the simultaneous sessions as we can, so that we can learn as much as possible from this opportunity. Young couples, teens, parents of teens, and COAers are especially needed. Do you have family in California you'd like to visit anyway? Contact me for more information (or check out the Dovetail Web site: www.dovetailinstitute.org). Please join us.

—[Sue Katz Miller](#) (former IFFP Board co-chair, adult interfaith child)

WOMEN'S RETREAT

I have been a member of IFFP for four years and have enjoyed greeting many individuals from this organization in my usual harried way. However, this was my first Women's Retreat and I am so glad that I went! Prior to setting off for the weekend, I was bogged down with the day-to-day pressures and developed so many good reasons for backing out. But, my little voice (Lauren) told me I should go, so for once I listened to my little voice.

My rewards were many...from the interesting discussions (Betty Thompson was a great facilitator), to the depth and breadth of all of the interesting women, the food (of course), the mountain air and surroundings, and the little kayaking trip that a few of us indulged in.

The Women's Retreat weekend provided a unique and inviting opportunity to truly connect with some of our fellow members. Although there were a wide variety of differences in careers, parenting approaches, stages in life and family, and ages, many of us could find one or more strings that connected us in some way.

The topic of transitions was very thought provoking and clearly very applicable to one and all. Many, many thanks to those of you who created such a flexible and welcoming plan!

—Robin Thieme

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Seeing a box turtle crawling across the road.

Cynthia Wayne and I saw a shooting star from the deck of our cabin.

Getting to know each other as whole women, beyond our roles as IFFP moms/teachers/board members/staff.

Seeing Heather having fun instead of leading and organizing.

The sheer pleasure of driving the twisting roads through the beautiful Shenandoah Mountains without having to hand out airsick bags to my children.

—Sue Katz Miller

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The IFFP women's retreat was once again a great success! This year the theme was transitions: the internal adjustment we each make as a change in our life occurs. We shared our experiences with various transitions in our lives, including coming out of the "mommy fog" as our children start school, seeing our children go off to college, caring for our parents, and making changes in our professional lives and careers. For me, the retreat dealt with a very meaningful topic, as I move through the transition of my son departing for college this year and the adjustments my husband and I have had to make as empty-nesters. The retreat facilitator as well as other IFFP women helped me discuss and understand the changes that have occurred in my life and my adjustment to them. Additionally, I was able to socialize with and get to know many IFFP women better. The food was wonderful, as always, and the wine flowed! I am grateful for our yearly women's retreats and the opportunity for reflection and introspection they have provided me.

—Adria S. Zeldin

Sunday School

Class for Kids with Special Needs

Next year IFFP will offer a mixed-grade (upper elementary to middle school) class for kids with learning disabilities or other special needs that make it hard for them to thrive in a regular Sunday School class. We'll call it the "Mixed Grade Class" and it will be taught by Mary Wichansky and Ellen Jennings.

For details, please contact Ellen Jennings. If you know of a family who might be interested in joining IFFP because of this class, please contact Sherri Brown.

Wait Till Next Year...

As our year at IFFP winds up, I've been thinking about what I'd like to do next year in light of all that I've learned this year. I'd like to suggest two things I think we should do differently in the coming year: I think we should offer more options for adults. And I think we should fail more.

For years, IFFP has operated as a single-cell organization. In general, we planned programs with the idea that every member would participate, or at least should be able to do so. Our Adult Group discussions are intended to be for everyone, for example. We don't plan to meet during school vacations or holiday weekends because not everyone would be there. If it's not something that most people want, we tend not to do it.

But a format that worked in one way for a group of 20 families works in another way for a group of almost 100 families. I've talked to a number of long-time IFFP members over the past months who remember the early days with some nostalgia. They miss the intimacy of those early Adult Groups, for example, and they feel a bit embarrassed about the number of people in our group now whose names they don't know. And as I've talked with the newer families at IFFP, I'm aware of just how big our group is. It's hard to get to know so many people at once.

I propose that in the coming year we multi-track more often. It's helpful to have a few occasions each year when all the adults in our group meet together to give input into our evolving understanding of our group's mission and purpose. But most of the time, I'd like to offer two, three, or more options for adults during our Sunday School time. I'd like to be sure we have some "entry level" conversations where some of our IFFP veterans can mentor younger families and even couples considering getting married or having children. I'd like to offer more adult religious education—classes on particular topics that might even involve some preparation. I'd like to make time for one or more book groups to meet. I'd like to have a series on religion in public life resourced by members as well as outside speakers. The more options we have, the more ideas we'll come up with. And the more chances we'll have to talk about something that matters to us while getting to know others in IFFP.

I'd also like to offer more options for worship. There was enough interest in our "Adult Level" Gathering on Backwards Day to suggest that we should offer such a thing on a regular basis. But we also want to preserve the integrity of our half-hour, whole-family Gathering. The Worship Committee has been brainstorming about how to offer another kind of Gathering at another time, either regularly or occasionally, and we welcome your ideas as we explore different options.

But here's the thing: If we offer a number of things for adults to do, we greatly increase the chance that something we try will fail miserably. We will offer something that no one will come to. We'll put time into planning and preparing something that will flop—guaranteed.

And that's okay. Experiencing occasional failures means that an organization is risking, stretching, growing. There hasn't been a major failure at IFFP this year, and that concerns me. If we start expecting to succeed all the time, we'll become risk-averse and conservative (God forbid!). I think we should make it a goal in the coming year to have at least three big failures. I'm convinced we'll be much more likely to innovate, and to expand, if we agree to try things that we aren't sure will work.

This has been an incredible year at IFFP—we've grown in so many ways, and our organization feels strong, focused and energized. I know I've grown a great deal this year, in large part due to the challenge and support I've received at IFFP. I look forward to talking and dreaming more with each and all of you as we continue to discern our direction for the year to come.

—[Heather Kirk-Davidoff](#)