
Interfaith Families Project

December 2005 www.iffp.net P.O. Box 5413, Takoma Park, MD 20913 iffp@verizon.net 301-270-6337

FROM THE BOARD

Dear Friends,

I hope that you had a happy and delicious Thanksgiving and that you are ready for the December weather – both of them! The sharp changes in temperature this week remind me of a 17th Century tongue twister reportedly used by actors to prepare for their public performances: *“Whether the weather is hot, whether the weather is cold, we’ll weather the weather no matter the weather, whether we like it or not!”*

Just three quick updates this month:

In November we received six additional applications for the **Spiritual Director** position. Several of the applications merit serious consideration by the search committee, which is following up on them.

Thank you for helping to make the **IFFP Member Survey** a success. We received more than 100 responses (over 50 percent of the membership). The answers will be tabulated and analyzed and presented to the membership later this month.

We are moving forward with the upgrade of our website, www.iffp.net. If you have any thoughts about clever or helpful items to add to it, please pass your comments on to Susan Ryder.

And please do not hesitate to contact any of the Board members with questions, concerns, or even compliments, at any time.

Sincerely,

Danny Weiss, Board Chair

DECEMBER 2005 – JANUARY 2006

Dec. 4	Sligo Middle School <i>Advent</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gathering, 10 am• Refreshments, 10:30 am• Sunday School/Adult Group, 10:45 am• New Member Lunch, 12:15 pm	Dec. 10 (Sat.) at 5 pm	Holiday Party <i>Schweinhaut Center</i> 1000 Forest Glen Rd., Silver Spring
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Dec. 11	Sligo Middle School <i>Hanukkah</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contemplative Service with Rabbi Harold, 9:30 am • Gathering with Rabbi Harold, 10 am • Refreshments, 10:30 am • Sunday School/Adult Group, 10:45 am • Young Couples go to Brunch 	Dec. 18	Sligo Middle School <i>Christmas</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering with Lessons and Carols, 10 am • Refreshments, 10:30 am • Sunday School/Adult Group, 10:45 am • Teachers' meeting and lunch, 12:00-1:30 pm
	<p>There are no Gatherings on Dec. 25th or Jan. 1st.</p> <p>HAPPY NEW YEAR!</p>	Jan. 8	Sligo Middle School <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gathering, 10 am • Refreshments, 10:30 am • Sunday School/Adult Group, 10:45 am • COA evening meeting

IFFP weather cancellation policy

IFFP follows Montgomery County Public Schools for closure due to weather. In case of icy conditions, snow, or storms, call 240-777-2706 or check the website, <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us>.

WE WILL SEND OUT A LIST SERVE ANNOUNCEMENT IF THE WEATHER SUNDAY MORNING IS QUESTIONABLE. PLEASE CHECK THE LIST SERVE BEFORE LEAVING HOME.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Gatherings

You won't want to miss IFFP's Gatherings in December!

Next Sunday, Dec. 4th, we'll celebrate Advent, the season in the Christian calendar when the church prepares for the arrival of Christmas. (The first Sunday in Advent, Nov. 27, is the first Sunday in the Christian liturgical year.) On Dec. 11th **Rabbi Harold** will offer a reflection on Hanukkah, and on Dec. 18th we'll have a service of Lessons and Carols, similar to our 2005 Christmas service, but with a special treat this year. The Preschool class will lead us in singing "This Little Light of Mine" at the Christmas Gathering!

And a reminder: Please remember that our Gatherings are scheduled to begin promptly at 10:00 a.m. Plan to arrive a few minutes before 10:00 so you can visit friends and settle in by then. Thanks!

- Larry Bostian, Worship Committee Coordinator

Adult Group

Here is our Adult Group schedule for December:

Dec 4th - Reconciliation

The second in our Christian Rituals series will focus on Reconciliation. We will examine the Catholic practice of confession and its Protestant counterparts.

December 11th - Coming of age

We will look at Jewish, Christian, and IFFP practices and traditions relating to becoming an adult and joining a religious community.

December 18th - Christmas

We will look at this important Christian holiday, starting with an overview of its history and varied practice. We will explore the unique interfaith challenges this holiday presents (the "December Dilemma") and look at how it is celebrated in different Christian communities.

- Sam Lawson, Adult Group Coordinator

December Holiday Community Service Gift Collection starts December 4th

Beginning on **Sunday, December 4th**, IFFP will be repeating its successful holiday gift collection to benefit MOMS (Mothers Offering Maternal Support), a program of the Montgomery County Mental Health Association, a private, non-profit organization in Montgomery County. MOMS offers young at-risk pregnant and parenting teens help and support in learning to care for their babies and small children through direct services and activities such as mentoring, support groups, and educational services.

The young mothers have holiday gift requests for themselves and their children (newborn to age 4). For their children, they ask for items such as children's books, educational toys, winter clothing, stuffed animals, and blankets. For themselves, the mothers request items such as clothing, toiletries, small appliances, and gift certificates.

On Sunday, December 4th, IFFP members will be able to select recipients for whom to provide gifts. Gift requests and details will be available at the welcoming table. IFFP children especially have enjoyed being able to select recipients and then participate in choosing the gifts to give.

All gifts must be new, wrapped, and marked with the name of the recipient. Gifts can be dropped off at IFFP's Holiday party on Dec. 10th, or at the gatherings on Dec. 11th or Dec. 18th. Questions can be directed to **Antoinette Eates** at aeates@msn.com or **Barbara Gottlieb** at bgottlieb@womensedge.org.

- Antoinette Eates, Community Service Co-Coordinator

New Member Lunch, Sunday, December 4th

Thank you to everyone who volunteered to serve as mentors for our new IFFP families! Don't forget, the new member brunch for mentors and new families is scheduled for this Sunday (December 4th). We hope to see you there!

Also, if you are interested in serving as a mentor for a new member family, please contact **Tova Sanders** at tova@gwu.edu. We might not need you immediately, but we are always growing and would love to get new members matched with a mentor family right away!

- Tova Sanders, New Member Co-Coordinator

Holiday Party, Sat., December 10th

The IFFP winter extravaganza Holiday Party will take place on December 10th at 5 p.m. at the Margaret Schweinhaut Center (1000 Forest Glen Road, Silver Spring, Maryland). The feast is a potluck event, and we will have complete kitchen facilities. IFFP will provide paper goods, wine, and other beverages. If your family's last name (use female head of household if they are different) begins with:

* A-G: Bring main dish to feed 10-15

* H-O: Bring dessert to feed 10-15

* P-Z: Bring side dish to feed 10-15

Please don't forget serving implements (labeled) and, whenever possible, bring food in disposable pans because it greatly expedites clean-up. RSVP to **Jessica Vistnes** by December 4th (please don't send e-mail - it's a work e-mail address). If you would like to volunteer to handle set-up and decorations and/or clean-up, let Jessica know when you RSVP. Extended family and friends are welcome - just tell us they are coming. We will need to know the numbers for table set-up, etc.

- Jessica Vistnes, Celebrations Coordinator

Get Ready to Show Your Talent at our Holiday Party Talent Show, Sat., December 10th

Last year we saw how talented our members are, or at least how brave! We have lots of musicians in this group, and many young members who are involved in local theater groups, so we know the talent is there!! The talent show provided a festive, fun atmosphere for the party, and kept the kids occupied. We would like to have a second annual talent show this year. Dress up, sing, dance, practice your holiday jokes, bring your band members and try out your new songs on us, or just bring your instrument and do a solo. Kids and adults, families, groups of friends, and Sunday School classes all can do skits -- especially those based on a December Dilemma theme. Please contact **Susan**, Sury3@aol.com.

- Susan Ryder, Program Coordinator

Young Couples Brunch, December 11th

We have many new members who we hope will join us for our Young Couples' Brunch. The group includes couples who do not yet have children, or who have very young children (including all of you with babies!).

Please join us for brunch on Sunday, December 11th after Adult Group and Sunday School. You are welcome to bring your infants and toddlers to this activity. Although the restaurant is to-be-determined, it will be in the Silver Spring area. I will e-mail you more information closer to the date.

If you have any questions about who is included in this group, what our activities are, or how many couples are involved, please contact **Kerri Mullins-Levine**, kmullinslevine@yahoo.com.

- Kerri Mullins-Levine, Young Couples Coordinator

SUNDAY SCHOOL

Holiday Notes from the DRE

While recently visiting a friend who attends a Conservative synagogue, I noticed that their newsletter featured an article entitled "What is Simchat Torah?" I was a little surprised, since I assumed that most Jews at a Conservative synagogue would know about this holiday. But, no, my friend quickly assured me that there were many members of her congregation who relied on those newsletter overviews for information. Since I know the same is true for many church members, I decided right then and there to overcome my hesitancy about providing IFFP members with basic information on their own religion traditions. In fact, given our interfaith setting, I think it's critical that our community has a structured way of sharing information about the different holidays celebrated by our spouses, partners, and friends.

With this in mind, I've decided to create a series of short articles on the major Jewish and Christian holidays. Advent, Christmas, and Hanukkah all take place this month, and we'll be celebrating each of them -- at Gatherings, in the classrooms, and, most likely, in our own homes. As we go about celebrating this month, I encourage us all to think just a little more about the stories, symbolism, and meanings that underlie these different holidays. They share the common themes of miracles, light, and the love of God, and I believe there are also important bits about freedom, justice, and caring for the oppressed.

My hope is that this holiday season we'll embrace those closest to us, work together with those who live in our communities, and hold out our hands to those in the wider world. I wish you and yours the blessings of hope, peace, joy, and love this month and in the many months to come. I look forward to celebrating with you!

What Is Advent?

The Christian liturgical year starts with the season of Advent, which begins four Sundays before Christmas Day (December 25th). In 2005 the first Sunday of Advent is November 27th.

Advent means "to come." During this season, Christians prepare for and celebrate three advents. The first is the coming of Jesus, born two thousand years ago. The second is the coming each and every day of Emmanuel or "God with us." The third and final advent is yet to come, when Christ will gather God's beloved people into one embrace and mercifully mend a broken world.

One of the best known customs for this season is the Advent wreath. The wreath and winter candle-lighting in the midst of growing darkness can be a powerful ritual in the weeks leading up to Christmas. The unbroken circle of greens is an image of everlasting life. The four candles symbolize the light of Christ, a light that grows brighter as the weeks progress toward the festival of his birth. The color of these candles and the names given to them vary among traditions. Some families make each candle symbolize a different seasonal theme, such as hope, peace, joy, and love. They then use prayers and readings that relate to these themes as part of the candle-lighting ritual each week.

Most contemporary Christmas customs actually take place during Advent. Christmas trees, wreaths, and holiday decorations are now set up shortly after Thanksgiving and well before the actual Christmas season begins. Most of these customs are based on northern European traditions that predate Christianity. Evergreens, yule logs, candles, and festive parties were all part of mid-winter celebrations that focused on the return of the light after the darkest day of the year, December 21st, the winter solstice. Christian imagery of Christ, as Light of the World, fits in with this theme.

What is Christmas?

Christmas, or "Christ's Mass," is both a feast day and a season in the Christian liturgical year. It is the Feast of the Nativity, celebrated on December 25th, and it is a season that begins on that day and lasts until the Feast of the Epiphany, celebrated on January 6th. As the song goes, there really are "Twelve Days of Christmas."

The Christmas story tells about the events surrounding Jesus' birth and can be found in two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke. In this story, Mary, a young, unwed peasant girl, living in Galilee, conceives by the Holy Spirit and gives birth to a child the Lord tells her will be called holy, the Son of God. Christians believe that, in Jesus, God became incarnate -- divinity expressing itself in humanity. The writers of both Matthew and Luke claim that Jesus fulfills the prophecies contained in the Hebrew Scriptures and that, in the words of Isaiah, he is *Emmanuel*, or "God with us." Many Christians also think it is important that God came as a baby, born in a barn, wrapped in rags. This was not the way the Messiah was expected to come! In fact, the nativity story foreshadows many of the later teachings of Jesus, who often emphasized the importance of "the least of these," the poor, the outcast, the widowed, the orphaned -- and their connection with God.

Though no one really knows when Jesus was born, modern biblical scholars guess that his birth occurred sometime between 4 and 8 B.C.E. They have no idea which day. It wasn't until the 4th century in Rome that December 25th came to be celebrated as the official birthday of Jesus, and this date was most likely chosen to provide Romans with a Christian alternative to several important mid-winter festivals of the time. December 25th has been widely accepted as the Feast of the Nativity since then, though Eastern Orthodox churches, which follow a different calendar, celebrate it on January 6th.

What is Hanukkah?

Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday that begins on the 25th of Kislev (December 25th in 2005). It is the most historically documented of the Jewish holidays and is also the only one that has no basis in the Hebrew Bible. Instead, the story has been preserved in the Books of the Maccabees, which can be found in Christian collections of Apocrypha literature.

The most frequent translation of the word, Hanukkah, is "dedication." Jews remember the rededication of the temple. Around 167 B.C.E. the Greeks began a program of Hellenization in Israel. They outlawed Jewish rituals and forced their own practices on the local people. Mattathias, an old Jewish priest (later succeeded by his son, Judah the Maccabee), fought the Greeks with a small band of guerrilla fighters. After many years, they were able to liberate Jerusalem and reclaim the temple from defilement. However, when the Maccabees went to relight the temple menorah, there was only enough oil for one day. They lighted it, nonetheless, and a miracle occurred. The menorah burned for eight days. Thus, Hanukkah celebrates both the victory of the Maccabees and the miracle of the oil burning for eight days in the temple.

Interestingly, the eight days of Hanukkah were originally modeled after the number of days in Sukkot. Hanukkah focused on the victory of the Maccabees, who had been unable to celebrate Sukkot during their time as fugitives. It was only later that the miracle of the oil became more central to the Hanukkah story. Now, with the lighting of the candles in the menorah, the focus is, at least in part, on the miracle of the light. The light of the menorah is holy. By it, Jews rededicate themselves to the temple, God's dwelling place, wherever it may be.

- Ellen Jennings, Director of Religious Education

COA Prep

On October 22nd, the COA Prep class took a trip to the Outdoor Center of For the Love of Children (FLOC) in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. The group participated in a day-long ropes course to strengthen relationships among group members and promote team building. After rounding a mountain and maneuvering through the rough terrain to find the center, we enjoyed a challenging and fun-filled day of physical and mental activity. We started out with some games to build trust and confidence and then moved on to activities requiring everyone to work together and think creatively. In all of the tasks, the group achieved success. The day ended with a more personal encounter on the high ropes course and zipline. All of the students (and adults) challenged themselves individually and ended the day with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

- Sarah Dammeyer, COA Prep Teacher

GET INVOLVED

Join and Use our Yahoo List Serve

For new members, or those who have forgotten, you can join IFFP's free list serve by sending a blank e-mail to iffplistserve-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. Please send a copy of your e-mail to **Jeff Kenton**, our list serve coordinator, at Jkenton@verizon.net).

You can send non-commercial e-mails to our membership from the Yahoo Groups website. If the message is not directly related to IFFP, please put "off topic" in the subject line.

Calling Singers and Instrumentalists of All Ages!

It's the time of year to put together our 3rd annual IFFP holiday chorus and band! We welcome all levels of talent to join in the fun as we assemble our Advent, Hanukkah, and Christmas programs. Please contact me as soon as possible by e-mail if you are interested (mshego@comcast.net). Thanks!

- Marci Shegogue, Worship Committee member and music leader

All-Star Speakers Coming to Our Conference in January

Now is the time to register for Dovetail's National Interfaith Families Conference, entitled "HOW INTERFAITH FAMILIES CAN THRIVE AND CONTRIBUTE IN A POLARIZED WORLD." Speakers will include **Rabbi Harold White**, **Rev. Heather Kirk-Davidoff**, **Ellen Jennings**, Imam Faizul Khan, Imam Karim Abu Zaid, Rev. Michael J. Kelley, Swami Atmajnanananda, IFFP's own "founding mothers" and interfaith teens, and many more!

Local producer Gerald Krell will screen and lead a discussion on his film "Three Faiths, One God: Judaism, Christianity, Islam." **Rev. Julia Jarvis** will help you in "Developing Your Own Spirituality Within Interfaith Marriage." Sheila Gordon, the founder of NYC's Interfaith Community, will lead a panel on "The Interfaith Couple as Model in the Modern World." And the very erudite and entertaining Rabbi Allen Secher and author Ned Rosenbaum will disentangle "Interfaith Marriage in the Bible."

WHERE? Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church (BHPC) and Bethesda Jewish Congregation (BJC),
6601 Bradley Blvd., Bethesda, MD 20817

WHEN? Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Birthday Weekend, January 13-15, 2006

HOW? Go to www.dovetailinstitute.org to register.

WHY DO I HAVE TO PAY TO REGISTER?

The registration entitles you to all meals, starting with Friday dinner and going through Sunday lunch. Optional Shabbat services, Presbyterian worship service, Catholic mass, and "IFFP-style interfaith gathering" are included. Come learn and celebrate! Come help young local interfaith couples find their way! Come meet the members of other interfaith groups from around the country! Don't miss it!

- Sue Katz Miller, IFFP Member

Women's Spring Retreat, April 28-30, 2006 (Friday-Sunday)

Every year, 20-30 of us leave our families and responsibilities at the door and join other women of IFFP in a weekend of sisterhood, conversation, reflection, great food, laughter, relaxation, walks on the beach, and getting to know each other better. If you haven't come before, you won't want to miss this one.

Planning for the Spring 2006 Women's retreat has begun! During the Gathering last week, we passed along a sheet to get a sense of how many IFFP members hope to attend. If you did not sign up on the list last week but plan to attend, please send a note to **Tova Sanders** (tova@gwu.edu). As properties at the beach are rented far in advance, this list will help us to reserve a space that will accommodate everyone. (Expressing interest at this time does not indicate a full commitment to attending. We will be asking for a final commitment early next year.) Thank you!!!

- Tova Sanders, Retreat Co-Coordinator

UPDATES

Baby Welcoming Ceremony

Recently I had the pleasure of attending **Jen and Rob Liebreich's** baby welcoming service for their son, **Joseph Benjamin**. The service, written by Jen and Rob and officiated by **Rev. Julia Jarvis** and **Rabbi Harold White**, gave me occasion to reflect on IFFP's spiritual history and growth over the past seven years.

My family joined IFFP in the fall of 1998, as Julia began her tenure as our spiritual director. At that time, IFFP was primarily a **Sunday School for children, plus an occasional adult discussion group**. Julia soon added the Gathering, which, as old-timers will remember, met in the hallway.

In those days there was a lot of nervousness about the Christian aspects of IFFP. We were intentionally Jewish and Christian in our teaching and celebrations, but we were only beginning to figure out what that meant. That year, in one of our classrooms, I presented the Godly Play Advent lessons to the community. As I told the simple story of the mother Mary and the father Joseph, carefully avoiding any venture into Incarnation theology, a little boy sitting next to me said, "Joseph wasn't Jesus' father – God was!" In those days, only the children felt free to discuss that sort of thing.

Gradually, quietly, and inexorably, IFFP has moved into a new era of spiritual discussion, and this is well illustrated in Jen and Rob's service, which was beautifully interfaith and proudly both Jewish and Christian. The culmination of this was the water ceremonies. They began with the ritual of B'rit R'chitzah, the washing of little Joseph's hands in the ancient Jewish purification rite. Then, Julia baptized Joseph, "in the name of the Creator and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." She continued, "He will walk in the waters of both the Jewish and Catholic world. Let us rejoice in the gift of new life!"

Just before the baptism, Jen read her own explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity, which Julia introduced by saying it was the best one she had ever heard. I quote it here in full: "One of the least easily explained mysteries of Christian faith is the Trinity. It is important to me to bless Joseph in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit because these words emphasize the special nature of God as being in and around all of us all of the time. We hope Joseph will experience all aspects of the divine and that he may become a whole person whose spirit will blossom through mind, heart, and action."

Those of us who have attended recent Gatherings have heard Rabbi Harold tell us the Jewish understanding of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. During that first year of Julia's leadership, we had a Gathering that included a communion service. It had to be very carefully planned so as not to offend anyone, despite the fact that the blessing and sharing of bread and wine come to us directly from the Jewish tradition. Now, we bless and share our food and drink at the end of every Gathering. And now, we have baptized a baby into our interfaith community. We've come a long way.

- Elizabeth Gelfeld, IFFP Member

Thanksgiving Food Drive

IFFP's Thanksgiving Food Drive resulted in approximately 500 pounds of food and toiletries for the Capital Area Food Bank. Thanks to all who contributed and thanks especially to **Steve Brescia**, who transported the many bags of donated items to the food bank.

IFFP Volunteers

We are very grateful to all the members who have volunteered to fill the many needs of our community. It is vitally important for a community like ours to have a strong volunteer base. Members as volunteers plant the seeds for our involvement with each other, activities, and the outer community. If you would like to join any of the activities but have yet not signed up, please contact **Susan**, Sury3@aol.com.

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Eco-Friendly Holiday Activity

You probably have heard that compact fluorescent light bulbs use much less electricity than traditional bulbs. Using them would help you save money and protect the environment. But making the switch may feel like one more dull item on the "to do" list. Thanks to member **Diane Ives**, here's a way to make it more fun. The Georgia Interfaith Power and Light project has put together Hanukkah and Advent light kits, encouraging families to replace a traditional light bulb with a compact fluorescent bulb each time they light their holiday candles. Their "study guides," which include prayers and scientific info to accompany the light bulb exchanges, are available at <http://www.gipl.org/CFLs.html>. While IFFP is not participating in their fund-raising activity, you can download the study guides and then buy your own light bulbs — Home Depot and Costco both sell them.

- Holly Cooper, Newsletter editor

IFFP Board: *Chair:* Danny Weiss, DWeiss2205@aol.com • *Vice chair:* Betsy Keeler, betsy.keeler@dc.gov, Betsyharvey@starpower.net • *Secretary:* Mark Cohen, cohenmarkp@aol.com • *Treasurer:* Richard Harris, rharris@nasw.org • *Board Members:* Erica Burman, ericaburman@us.net • Phil Jakobsberg, pjakobsberg@wabtec.com • Sam Lawson, sam.lawson@sdlawson.com • Ian Spatz, kois@erols.com • Rebecca Weiss, becndan@aol.com
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