

Interfaith Festival of Gratitude
Oshkosh, Wisconsin, November 22, 2015
The Reverend Doctor Thomas C. Willadsen, pastor First Presbyterian Church

On a chilly November evening, in the wake of terrorist attacks in Paris and Mali and an escalating refugee crisis in Europe, more than 100 people from more than a dozen faith communities gathered at the Grand Opera House in downtown Oshkosh, Wis., Sunday evening, Nov. 22, to give thanks.

This was the sixth Interfaith Festival of Gratitude at the Grand. The venue is an architectural gem on the National Register of Historic Places. It is owned by the City of Oshkosh, so it's everybody's public space, and nobody's sacred space.

Three different Christian denominations were represented: The Rev. Tom Willadsen, pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Oshkosh, emceed. Father Edward Looney of Saint Raphael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church shared his gratitude for Pope Francis' visit to the United States in October.

Pastor Karen Jewell of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church organized a choir that included singers and musicians from four different Lutheran congregations. Paraphrasing Psalm 133 she quipped, "How good and pleasant it is when Lutherans dwell together in unity." The music sounded good too!

The Rev. Taiso Byran Bartow, from Zen River Sangha, rang a bell as he led a Buddhist meditation sequence that set a tone — in every sense — for the evening.

Congregation B'Nai Israel's representative, Ben Frank, taught a simple Hebrew at the festival.

Some young women from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community recited a poem in Urdu. Members of Oshkosh's Baha'i Community led a prayer for unity. Members of Eckankar shared personal stories of the importance of their faith.

The Society of Friends sang a song about their founder, George Fox. The Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, from Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship shared a reading that expressed gratitude for all kinds of things — even vegetables.

Gwen Carr represented the Cayuga Nation of New York with a challenging message for festival attendees.

Altogether representatives from nine different religions took the stage and expressed sentiments regarding their approach to expressing gratitude.

A free-will offering raised more than \$500 for The Hub, a joint resource center of social service providers and non-profit agencies of all kinds in Oshkosh. The Hub helps families attain financial stability by connecting families to all available resources.

The festival concluded with more than 50 people on stage singing, “Let There Be Peace on Earth.”

At a time when it is tempting to withdraw into a safe cocoon, the Interfaith Festival of Gratitude showed that people of all religious traditions hold in common a strength that is more durable than any force that might threaten or divide. The spirits of love, cooperation, wonder and openness were all on display.