

# Interfaith relations focus on friendship, pastors say

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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP)—Interfaith dialogue is on the rise—not just in formal conversations led by religious leaders, but also in local communities where friendships form as ministers of various faiths work together for common goals amid increasing religious diversity in the Bible belt.

Imam Joe Bradford (left) and Pastor Kyle Reese share a light moment at Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. Reese counts Bradford—along with a local rabbi and Greek Orthodox priest—among his best friends. (ABP PHOTO/Jeff Brumley)

Kyle Reese, pastor at [Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.](#), has been front-and-center in community interfaith efforts, especially in his dialogue with Muslim and Jewish spiritual leaders. He refers to Imam Joe Bradford as "best friend"—as he does a rabbi and an Orthodox Christian priest.

Steve Jones, who worked with Jews and Muslims to tackle social injustice in Birmingham, Ala., said the same about Rabbi Jonathan Miller. "I am closer to these guys than I am with many other Baptist ministers," said Jones, pastor of [Southside Baptist Church](#).

The emergence of a more grassroots, relational interfaith movement can be attributed to 9/11 and its aftermath, said Antonios Kireopoulos, who oversees interfaith issues for the New York-based [National Council of Churches](#).

The attacks generated both suspicion and curiosity about Islam that raised interest in dialogue "10, 20 and 100 fold," he said. He noted a growing "Baptist-Muslim dialogue" in the form of pulpit swaps and practical alliances on local issues.

Mitch Randall, pastor of [NorthHaven Church](#), a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated congregation in Norman, Okla., is among the participants. Randall noted he once had little use for the historic interfaith model and its focus mostly on annual prayer breakfasts or worship services. All that changed shortly after 9/11, when a motorist gave him a rude gesture.

"I'm a quarter Native American and fairly dark-skinned, and he probably mistook me for a Middle Eastern individual," Randall reported. "I thought, 'What must that feel like for people who truly are Muslims?'"

The result was "a quest to befriend people who are Muslim ... to break down those barriers and stereotypes." He since has developed friendships with Muslim religious leaders in Oklahoma.

"We began doing things together," Randall said, "like feeding the poor or working on immigration issues."

But the interfaith movement isn't out of the woods yet.

"That word still scares a lot of people," said Paul Chaffee, founder and editor of [TheInterfaithObserver.org](#), based in California. Many Christian conservatives see interreligious communication as an effort to blend all faiths into one.

However, Chaffee said, even some conservative evangelicals have seen the value of working with conservatives of other denominations and faiths on social issues like same-sex marriage and abortion opposition.

Meanwhile, the progress being made in interfaith work slowly is spilling over into ecumenical outreach, which experts say is a more difficult field.

"The closer you get in the family, the more the temperature goes up in the room," said Chaffee, who also serves on the board of the [North American Interfaith Network](#).

[Steven Harmon](#), adjunct professor of Christian theology at Gardner-Webb University, said he's seen that phenomenon first-hand. Ecumenical dialogue "does not have the kind of excitement or urgency there was a few decades ago," he said.

Harmon, who served on a [Baptist World Alliance](#) team that held exploratory talks with leaders of the Orthodox Church, said dialogue must focus on more than symbolic and theological meanings.

"Whether it's ecumenical or interfaith, ultimately there needs to be more emphasis on what happens on the grassroots level," he said.

As Chaffee put it: "As soon as you start making friends, it changes everything."

In Jacksonville, Reese said his relationships with Bradford, Rabbi Joshua Lief and Greek Orthodox Priest Nicholas Louh have provided him spiritual and emotional solace.

The four hang out together, gather with their wives for dinner and speak to each others' congregations.

Their friendship became so well known, they were invited to speak on local public radio monthly as "the God Squad."

"We just have such a strong rapport and we can kind of rib each other," Bradford said of the foursome's behavior on and off the air.

Reese often jokes with Bradford about growing up in a Baptist home until he became a Muslim as a teenager.

Reese noted getting to know Bradford and his community has deepened his appreciation for the persecuted, minority origins of the Baptist tradition.

"I would argue that I am a better Christian because I know Joe," said Reese, former pastor of First Baptist Church in San Angelo.

In Birmingham, Jones received complaints about his relationship with the Jewish community and its rabbi. "We were really criticized because we weren't preaching the gospel to them or trying to win them to Christ," he recalled.

For him, however, participation is simply a way of being a good Christian.

"As a Baptist, my idea of evangelism isn't 'winning anyone to Jesus' but being a good neighbor and showing respect," Jones said. "And you can't do that if you don't get together."