

Voices: Respond to crisis by building bridges across faiths

January 26, 2022

The hostage crisis at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville Jan. 16 followed a theme that has become too familiar in our country. Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker welcomed a stranger in from the cold who then turned on the rabbi and three congregants in what the FBI is now treating as a terrorist act.

This is the third time since 1999 services have been interrupted by violence in a house of worship in Tarrant County. For me, this incident brought memories of waiting with parents of teenagers present at the shooting at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

For the Jewish community, this event brings pain and frustration over another in a series of antisemitic acts of violence. And for the Muslim community, it brings the frustration of their faith being used as cover for a violent ideology.

As I listened to Jewish and Muslim acquaintances share these feelings last week, I became aware of how easy it can be, as a Christian, to have a different response than I would to a church shooting.

Do we have the same level of concern? Do we bring it up as a prayer request in our Bible studies? Do we pause in our worship services to pray for those involved?

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, the “expert in the law” wanted to justify himself by clearly defining the meaning of neighbor. He compartmentalized the concept of neighbor to separate out those he should love from those he shouldn’t worry about. Jesus used the parable to turn

this view upside down.

Jesus' parable and the Colleyville synagogue attack intersect for us as a call to consider how we love our neighbors well, especially those with a different belief system than our own.

Do we recognize and give attention to their pain? Do we choose to pass by on the other side of the road? Do we stop and show mercy?

Steps to building bridges

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us."

As diplomats commissioned for service in God's kingdom, what are some steps we can take to build bridges that fairly represent Jesus to our neighbors of other faith traditions?

The first step for me has been to **look beyond the labels** we apply to our neighbors and see them as individuals created in God's image. Something changes for me in multi-faith relationships when we talk less about our disagreements and talk more about life, our different backgrounds and our families.

When we share our stories, we begin to see people beyond the labels and opinions we apply to one another. The disagreements are still there, but they exist in a shared sense of humanity rather than opposition. We start to become neighbors who care for one another as individuals.

This leads to **the next step of listening and learning**. We easily can be tempted to make assumptions about others instead of listening to them. I have discovered people of other faiths have no interest in being my evangelistic project. In fact, they suspect most Christians talk to them only

in an attempt to convert them.

On the other hand, when I listen to them as human beings, they often express curiosity about what I believe and why I believe it. Most people are not offended by my faith in Jesus, but they can be offended by the thought that my only interest in them as a person is in converting them. When we listen carefully, we begin to build the trust foundational to building bridges.

The third step is intentionality. If we want to build bridges to people of other faiths, we must build them on **intentional relationships**. We don't sacrifice any of our convictions by sharing a meal, having a conversation or working on a community project together.

True multi-faith relationships are not about watering down our faith commitments, we just express our commitments respectfully.

Respect goes a long way toward building authentic relationships. Listening, demonstrating respect and valuing the other person are vital tools for any relationship, and they are critical if we want to be bridge builders.

Otherwise, like the expert in the law, we can define our neighbor according to those who look or think most like us. Then it becomes easy to walk by on the other side of the road racing to our next appointment.

Caring for the whole community

As ambassadors for Jesus, Christians can and should demonstrate the way of Jesus by allowing him to turn upside down our understanding of neighbor. We can determine to see others in his image, listen to and learn from their stories, and intentionally build authentic relationships with our neighbors of other faiths.

The time to build these bridges is now, so when a crisis hits our community,

we already have that network of relationships that can make our communities more resilient.

We work at Multi-faith Neighbors Network to build bridges of mutual trust and respect among faith leaders so, as Christians, we can demonstrate the love and grace of Jesus as peacemakers in our communities.

We invite you to join us March 6-7 as we demonstrate how this multi-faith work happens at the Global Faith Forum in Keller. You can learn more at <https://globalfaithforum.com/>.

John Thielepape is the director of projects for [Multi-faith Neighbors Network](#).