

MAIN LINE FAITH

Lower Merion's monthly interfaith gathering exploring the world's religions, philosophies and spiritual teachings

By DAVID ROBINSON

Common Ground is an interfaith fellowship, centered in Lower Merion, created and sustained by the thoughts and actions of a diverse group of people sharing the globe's major and minor faiths.

As Common Ground's founders, Kit and Andrea Thomas explained, the goal is "to explore and celebrate the underlying universal principles that are at the core of all the world's diverse religions, philosophies and spiritual teachings." Common Ground assembles on the first Sunday of the month at The Cynwyd Club on Trevor Lane in Bala Cynwyd.

The gathering, called a Sacred Space Celebration, begins at 3:30 p.m., preceded by an optional, guided peace meditation at 3 p.m.

At the December gathering, the theme was "One Flame, Many Lights." Reflecting the interfaith approach was the introductory quote from Hindu Chandogya Upanishad: "There is a Light that shines beyond all things on earth, beyond us all, beyond the heavens, beyond the highest heavens. This is the Light that shines in our hearts." Representing Common Ground's light heart was the additional quote from New Orleans' gift to comedy, Ellen

DeGeneres. Speaking of man's individual and universal fear of the dark, she said, "In the beginning there was nothing. God said, 'Let there be light' And there was light. There was still nothing, but you could see it a whole lot better."

The mantra of Common Ground is, "Whatever the question, Love is the Answer."

The Sacred Space celebration began with individual members speaking and calling for a blessing on the gathering (the invocation) asking for, "growth and goodness."

Delwin Fiddler, from the Nations Dance Theater, offered a Lakota prayer and spoke of "many hearts, one spirit." He closed with a prayer song that ended with a spiritual message carried to the heavens through the haunting notes of his flute.

Reading their poetry as guest speakers were teen-agers Tammy Miller and Yousef Kromah. They come from We the Poets, a program within Philadelphia's Arts and Spirituality Center. The program reaches over 2,000 students and is guided by Lower Merion resident Kathy Cohen, Ph.D. Both poets used "rap" syncopation in their delivery. Miller's poem told of the inner city teen's struggle for a better future, and Kromah (from the Al Aqsa Islamic Academy) spoke of his life on the streets changing upon "seeing the light and the light is Islam."

Stephen Wise led the choir and audience in singing, *Listen, hear O Israel and know that God is One*. Other musical offerings included the Sanskrit chant: "Let the universe be filled with peace and joy and love and light" and American gospel music version of the Vedic scripture, "Let Us Be United."

Members of various faiths lit a candle, spoke of "One light joins us all" and noted: Islam celebrates The Time of Mt. Arafat in remembrance of God testing Abraham; Christianity celebrates the birth of Jesus and his message of love; Buddhism remembers Siddhartha Gottama's (the Buddha's) enlightenment in December; Judaism retells the rededication of the Temple; and Kwanzaa celebrates the bonds of love in families and communities.

The Rev. Susan Teegen-Case from Arts & Spirituality Center was the featured speaker. She noted, "We



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celebrate light at the time of deepest darkness," and remembered a painting titled *Pregnant Darkness*, she created during a dark moment in her life. On a spiritual retreat in New Mexico, she thought of the fear, pain and isolation in that dark moment, yet also clearly saw and felt the light of thousands of stars visible in the desert sky at night, away from city lights. She reminded the gathering that each of us carry a light within, and noted that strength lies in the balance of seeing the dark and knowing that light will follow.

Common Ground's Denny Daikeler closed the Sacred Space gathering with a prayer on the approaching darkest night of the year and the season of new possibilities that begins thereafter.

Following each Sacred Space Celebration – usually ending after 5 p.m. – Common Ground's fellowship continues not with a coffee hour, but with a light vegetarian meal prepared by Spirit Foods.

Common Ground additionally offers fellowship gatherings through the month as members may join in a book circle; film circle; spirit dancing; or daily 5-minute morning prayer calls; and their newest addition,

a reflection and prayer Blog (known affectionately as a "Plog"). In February, Common Ground will begin a second Sunday gathering at The Cynwyd Club.

For further information, visit the Web site: www.commongroundfellowship.com



Yousef Kromah, of We the Poets and a student at the Al Aqsa Islamic Academy, reads his work at the Common Ground gathering.



Delwin Fiddler, from the Nations Dance Theater, spoke of "many hearts, one spirit" at Common Ground's gathering.