

# *Union County Pride – Interfaith Pride Celebration*

## *September 17, 2023*

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### **Welcome – Statement of Purpose**

“The intent of this service is to be an interfaith celebration in support of human identity and expression in its vast variety, particularly around issues of sexuality and gender. The intent is not to follow any particular faith tradition. We will seek commonality among various faith traditions, both theist and non-theist, in their affirmation of the goodness in humanity and their challenge that we live according to the better and more wholesome aspects of ourselves in our shared human experience.

We invite you to join us in reflection upon various texts, lyrics, and our experience of coming together from different places to recognize the humanity in one another and challenge one another to extend grace, welcome, and acceptance to all persons.”

### **Invocation**

“There is some reality beyond ourselves, though we may not understand it. We disagree on details regarding what we call spirituality, faith, humanism, our organization of religious expression, and whether that reality beyond us is personal in any meaningful way. For some, what lies beyond may be little more than principles of life humanity has uncovered or claimed along the journey of our existence. Meanwhile, we share the understanding that we are not simply lone agents. We are no disconnected islands with no impact upon one another. We are more than simply the sum of our individual selves. There are realities beyond the limits of our physical and sensory experience. Together, we see such direction and guidance that would lead us into a more harmonious and positive existence for all. We see that which unifies us in the bonds of humanity as participants in the greater experience of the full reality around us, a reality we are often too blind to recognize or remember.

In this spirit of living life together in wholeness and community, we approach this service of reflection. May we be strengthened, encouraged, and equipped with a greater sense of worth and community than before. May we give evidence to others that their lives are also just as worthy as our own.”

### **Litany of Inclusion (Three voices plus people)**

Voice 1: Together, we are all one.

Voice 2: Where you hurt, I am impacted.

Voice 3: *Where I hurt, your life is lessened.*

Voice 1: Life is about so much more than me,

Voice 2: mine,

Voice 3: *and the walls we build around those concepts.*

**People: Life is about us, a community of people.**

Voice 2: Together we are the human race in all its glorious diversity.

*Voice 3: No matter our gender identities,*

Voice 1: No matter our sexual orientations,

Voice 2: No matter the colors of our skin,

*Voice 3: No matter our countries of origin,*

Voice 1: No matter our heart languages,

Voice 2: No matter our neurodiversities,

Voice 1: No matter our faith traditions,

*Voice 3: No matter how or who might consider us as different.*

Voice 1: No matter who would otherwise us,

Voice 2: No matter whom we would otherize.

**People: We are bound together in this human experience, even with those who would needlessly complicate it.**

*Voice 3: We are bound together with those who are most like us and those who are the least like us.*

Voice 1: As much as we might be pushed to call for division, we are one.

Voice 2: We are joined in this human experience.

*Voice 3: We breathe the same air.*

Voice 1: We drink the same water.

Voice 2: We bleed the same blood.

*Voice 3: We feel the same pain, the same joy.*

**People: We are one community.**

Voice 1: We learn from one another.

Voice 2: We lean on one another.

*Voice 3: We are strongest in our diversity.*

Voice 1: We walk with one another.

Voice 2: We dream with one another.

*Voice 3: We are strengthened by including one another.*

**People: Where I am, you belong. We belong together.**

**Reflection:** "Division and discord are all too easy to sow. There are those who specialize in breaking communities apart, thinking to preserve a status quo, to build a base of power, to manipulate others into following them. They are those who would wield religion as a weapon to alienate and tear apart. They are those who would brandish political discourse to break down the bonds of our community. There are those who manipulate any and all forms of power to retain positions of privilege and status at the expense of our community. Too often, we allow those consumed with greed, anger, insecurity, or ambition to control others. Too often we allow them to hide behind religious, patriotic, or political language at the expense of society at large. Let us hear these words by Michael Gungor as part of our response."

"God Is Not a White Man" (Michael Gungor)<sup>1</sup>

[https://youtu.be/qYYeZVimVpc?si=YIGUxpS9sR\\_jb0SR&t=44](https://youtu.be/qYYeZVimVpc?si=YIGUxpS9sR_jb0SR&t=44)

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<sup>1</sup> Copyright ©2008 worshiptogether.com songs, by Michael Gungor, CCLI Song #: 5203244.

God is not a man.  
God is not a white man.  
God is not an old man sitting on a cloud.

God cannot be bought.  
God will not be boxed in.  
God will not be owned by religion.

But God is Love, God is Love,  
and God loves everyone.  
God is Love, God is Love,  
and God loves everyone.

God is not a man.  
God is not an old man.  
God does not belong to Republicans.

God is not a flag,  
not even American.  
God does not depend on a government.

But God is good, God is good,  
and God loves everyone.

God is good, God is good,  
and God loves everyone.

Atheists and charlatans,  
communists and lesbians,  
even ol' Pat Robertson,  
Oh God loves us all.  
Catholic or Protestant,  
terrorist or president,  
everybody, everybody loved, loved, loved,  
loved, loved, oh

God is Love, God is Love,  
and God loves everyone  
God is Love, God is Love,  
and God loves everyone

Yeah, I say, God is love

Stop the hating.  
Please, just stop the hating now,  
'cause God is Love.

## Litany of Grief

Voice 2: We grieve together for those whose lives have been ruptured by nonacceptance, by hate, by fear.

Voice 1: We grieve for so many who have never found inclusion, acceptance, and community.

*Voice 3: We grieve for those we have had a hand in tearing down.*

**People: We grieve for those we could not rescue.**

Voice 2: We grieve their loss and pain, for in it we are diminished.

*Voice 3: Our community, our society has been lessened because some lives were shoved aside, stolen, dehumanized, shunned, or removed from our midst.*

Voice 2: We grieve our own loss and suffering, our own experiences of isolation, ostracism, shame, rejection, and violence from unreasonable expectations to conform.

*Voice 3: We grieve for the many ways we and so many others have become targets of hate by people who do not understand, who can not accept the diversity around them.*

Voice 1: Amid the enormity of our grief, we grieve in particular for those particular individuals of our community whose lives have been lost in this last year. As we mention each of these names, let us observe a moment of silence.

Voice 2: We grieve the loss of Jacob Williamson, who was killed in Monroe. [Silence]

*Voice 3: We grieve the loss of Bex Clynke, who died at home in Monroe. [Silence]*

Voice 1: We grieve the loss of Jaida Peterson, who was killed in Charlotte. [Silence]

Voice 2: We grieve the loss of Remy Fennell, who was killed in Charlotte. [Silence]

*Voice 3: We grieve the loss of Ash Haffner, who died in Indian Trail. [Silence]*

Voice 1: We pause to remember and name others for whom we grieve and some of the things over which we grieve. We invite you to mention some of their names.

**People: [name people/relationships/expectations lost to division, violence, and discrimination].**

Voice 1: In our grief, we remember that we are not alone.

Voice 2: Our grief is very personal, and yet it is more than just that.

*Voice 3: Ours is an individual experience, yet it is also corporate.*

**People: This is a grief we share among one great community, a community where we all belong together.**

Voice 1: Our grief is very real, for we have all suffered loss.

Voice 2: We have lost peace, friendship, fellowship, and assurance.

*Voice 3: We have lost the comfort of a community that should have cared for all.*

Voice 2: Our grief will yet continue.

*Voice 3: Our grief will yet grow.*

Voice 1: Our grief will not conquer us.

**People: We still have a community where we belong and on whom we can depend.**

**Reflection:** “Belonging to one another does not occur naturally by simply knowing one another. Belonging is a reality that we slowly explore, work to develop, and come to understand. It becomes a reality as we begin to recognize one another, as we begin seeing something of value, something human, something worthy of our time and our attention in each other’s face, each other’s life, each other’s experience. It is only after we begin this journey of acceptance that we can truly become friends and travel together amid the storms that come raging our way. Living into the reality of our being community takes us a long way toward healing one another’s trauma, grief, and pain. It is as we become community that we overcome those issues that would divide, alienate, and place us at odds with one another.”

“We Shall Overcome” ([https://youtu.be/j\\_MFhKvGOA](https://youtu.be/j_MFhKvGOA) [Ensemble, on Pete Seger’s 80<sup>th</sup>])<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Spiritual. Public domain.

We shall overcome. We shall overcome.  
We shall overcome some day.  
Oh, deep in my heart  
I do believe we shall overcome, someday.

We'll walk hand in hand.  
We'll walk hand in hand.  
We'll walk hand in hand, someday.  
Oh deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome, someday.

We shall live in peace.  
We shall live in peace.

We shall live in peace, someday.  
Oh deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome, someday.

We are not afraid. We are not afraid.  
We are not afraid, today.  
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe  
We shall overcome, someday.

We shall overcome. We shall overcome.  
We shall overcome some day.  
Oh, deep in my heart  
I do believe we shall overcome, someday.

### Litany of Purpose

Voice 1: We live together in unrealized potential.

Voice 3: *We need not be at one another's throat, eternally striving as enemies.*

Voice 2: Every faith tradition makes some recognition that we should live at peace, in community, in love.

Voice 1: This is how we build community, how we build civilization.

Voice 3: *It is how we prosper.*

**People: It is how we grow together.**

Voice 1: It is how we move beyond our unwarranted fears of the "other."

Voice 3: *It is how we raise a new generation to reach beyond the failings of previous generations, including our own.*

Voice 2: We have long known the best way forward is in loving one another.

Voice 3: *We have long struggled to practice that same love.*

**People: It is love, however, that brings us peace and life together.**

Reflection: "The kind of love that brings us together and builds community is not an emotion. It has nothing to do with romance. It is not about feelings. It's not even about enjoying one another's company. It is the decision to seek the welfare of one another.

This kind of love begins with accepting ourselves and setting aside our fears, our uncertainties, our insecurities. It looks upon others with an open heart and a willingness to listen, to learn, and to see one another's humanity.

This kind of love has the power to bring us together, to unite us, to make one another feel heard, feel seen, and find belonging. Choosing to look upon one another with love and acceptance is so much greater than any simple cessation of hostilities. It sets aside all those conflicts that arise from greed, envy, wealth, tradition, or some claim to supremacy of any kind.

This is love, but a love that brings and builds peace as it molds us into community. Rather than emotion which may come and go at the whim of a hormone or mood, this love sees value in others that enhances our own experience of life. It allows us to extend our definitions of family, of friendship, of community, of belonging. It grants us the means to lay down so many of our burdens and the conflicts that would divide us. It transforms us into a community where all can be welcomed, nurtured, tended, and learned from.

Join us as we sing the words of this spiritual about laying down our burdens and animosities to take up community in its place.”

“Gonna Lay Down my Burdens” (<https://youtu.be/XrHhFTw88To> [Golden Gate Quartet])<sup>3</sup>

**Gonna lay down my burden  
Down by the riverside. (3×)  
Gonna lay down my burden  
Down by the riverside.  
I ain't gonna study war no more.**

**CHORUS:**

**I ain't gonna study war no more,  
Study war no more.  
Ain't gonna study war no more. (Repeat)**

- 2. Gonna lay down my sword and shield...**
- 3. Gonna lay down my heavy load...**
- 4. Gonna walk down that road of peace...**
- 5. Gonna join hands with everyone.**

**Being Seen: Genesis 16 / Al Hadid 27:4 / Bhagavad-Gita 6:30 / Origin of Maize  
(Ojibwe/Chippewa)**

The Hebrew Scriptures more often call us to reflection than they prescribe what we should or should not do. They don't so much tell us what the God of Abraham is like and what God wants as often as they press us to reflect on the experiences and examples of others that we might make better decisions of our own. The Hebrews found God working in unexpected ways and changing the course of their lives as well as their notions of who God and humanity's place in the universe.

Hagar was a woman. Hagar was an outsider. Hagar was enslaved. She had been bought as property in Egypt. From Abraham and Sarah's perspectives, as to that of most anyone, she was property to be used and abused for the benefit of her masters. She had no autonomy at all. Whatever Abraham and Sarah decided to do with her was far beyond her control. Oh, she had a will, but she had little recourse to use it. While she was a human being, the world around her granted her no personal agency. She had limited options, if any at all.

Since Sarah had been unable to bear Abraham a male heir, Hagar was seen as an available surrogate for birthing the required heir. Sarah gave her to Abraham as a wife for just such a purpose, and she conceived. As far as that was concerned, the plan came to fruition. Hagar, however, did not see herself as nothing more than property. She found in her pregnancy a sense of self-satisfaction that neither Abraham nor Sarah has expected.

Perhaps Hagar did not express her growing sense of selfhood in the best of ways, but she acted upon this new worth she claimed for herself. Sarah became upset. She thought Hagar was being uppity. After all, even if she had given her to Abraham as a wife, Hagar was simply a slave. Sarah felt despised by this slave acting above her station. Sarah was

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<sup>3</sup> Spiritual. Public domain.

angry. Her understanding of the social and economic order around her was upset by Hagar's words and actions. Her own position and standing was being challenged not only by Hagar's fertility, but also by her attitude. After complaining to Abraham, she unleashed her fury upon Hagar.

Hagar fled.

There were not many options before her. She was pregnant. She was alone. She was vulnerable. She needed to keep near sources of water. There were no paved highways or truck stops where she might eat, drink, and relieve herself. Water meant traveling known paths. It meant remaining in danger with little to no way to protect herself. She really had no known destination where she might find safety. She had fled her captivity, but she was hundreds of miles from home with little options in an unjust and dangerous world.

It is here that God's messenger finds Hagar at a spring of water. This no-account, enslaved girl who has run away from her mistress with nowhere to go was not invisible to God. She was not unknown or unnamed. The world around her might treat her as little more than property, but God calls her by name, telling her that her suffering is known by God. She has been seen. She is known. She has been heard. Her pleas and plight have reached God's presence, and she has the attention of heaven.

Hagar returns to Abraham and Sarah, but she returns a changed woman. God has spoken to her. More than that, God has promised that this fetus she carried would do more than simply survive. He would become a multitude of nations with a future.

That meeting with God's messenger was impactful enough that she gives Yahweh a new name, "God who sees me." From this, the spring of the place is also renamed, "Well of the Living Who Sees Me." God has seen her. God has not simply recognized her, but has spoken to her with care and blessing. She has been seen. She has been heard. She has been known, for beyond her social status and capital. Though enslaved,

It is not the Hebrew Scriptures alone that speak of our being seen and heard. The Ojibwe/Chippewa Nation story of the origin of maize also speaks of a youth of minor import being heard and seen, and to whom is given the knowledge to grow maize for the benefit of his people.<sup>4</sup> The Qur'an speaks repeatedly of Allah as the One who sees and hears. The Bhagavad-Gita, likewise makes the same claim. We are seen, even when and where it would appear we are invisible. Even when we feel we are unseen or ignored.

It is not, however, enough that we be seen, heard, and recognized by a spiritual entity. It is also important that we see one another, as well. Abraham and Sarah failed dramatically in this regard. Their inability to see Hagar not only sent her on this journey of escape during her pregnancy. It also sent her fleeing some years after the birth of Ishmael, her son. She once more found that she was seen by God, who offered her guidance and hope. Abraham and Sarah, however, failed to see her as they should have from the very beginning.

We all have experienced with Hagar what it means to not be seen. We know what it means for others to fail to recognize our humanity, our worth, our shared dignity. Meanwhile, we also tend to fall prey to failing to see others. If we fail to address our own failures in this regard, how can we possibly expect to rectify its disastrous effects on the

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<sup>4</sup> Ojibwe/Chippewa Nation. "The Origin of Corn."

<https://www.americanfolklore.net/the-origin-of-corn/> citing, Schoolcraft, Henry R. *The Myth of Hiawatha and other Oral Legends, Mythologic and Allegoric, of the North American Indians*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1856. Edited by S.E. Schlosser. Article in the public domain and part of the cited work.

world and society all around us? I can't change how another persons sees or fail to sees others in the fullness of their humanity. I can, however, change how I view and treat them. Am I willing to treat others with all the dignity and respect I would wish they would offer me? That is the real issue, isn't it?

#### Litany of Responsibility

Voice 2: We cannot change one another.

*Voice 3: We can only change ourselves.*

**People: When we are transformed, the world is changed.**

Voice 1: We look for a world where all are seen.

*Voice 3: Where none are ignored,*

Voice 2: Where the humanity and dignity of all shine through.

**People: Where the humanity of each is recognized and respected.**

Voice 1: We seek a world where all have a place,

*Voice 3: Where all belong,*

**People: Where you matter to me, and I to you.**

Voice 2: Beyond the clouds that would block our vision,

*Voice 3: Beyond the darkness that blinds our eyes,*

Voice 1: Beyond our failure to open our eyes.

*Voice 3: Beyond our hesitancy to see and be seen.*

Voice 2: Beyond our fear of what we might encounter,

Voice 1: There let us direct our steps.

*Voice 3: Let us journey together into that new reality.*

**People: Let us live as one in the sunshine of a new world.**

Reflection: "Our inability to see one another is not so much due to forces beyond our control and barriers erected to keep us apart. It is due to a clouding of our own minds that we too easily allow to grow, darken, and deepen. It is due to our actions, our inaction, our being too rushed to stop and look, to listen, to share experiences, to learn from one another. When we move beyond that, a new world shines through, a new reality for us to embrace and enjoy."

"I Can See Clearly Now" - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g\\_rB4v75jqU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_rB4v75jqU) [Johnny Nash)]<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Copyright ©1972 Sony Music Entertainment UK Limited, Johnny Nash.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g\\_rB4v75jqU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_rB4v75jqU)



I can see clearly now, the rain has gone.  
I can see all obstacles in my way.  
Gone are the da-ark clouds that had me  
blind.  
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny  
day.  
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny  
day.  
  
I think I can make it now, the pain is  
gone.  
All of the bad feelings have  
disappeared.  
Here is that rainbow I've been praying  
for.  
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny  
day.

Look all around, there's nothing to lose  
now.  
Look straight ahead, nothing but blue  
ski-es.  
I can see clearly now, the rain has gone.  
I can see all obstacles in my way.  
Gone are the dark clouds that had me  
blind.  
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny  
day.  
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny  
day.  
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny  
day.  
It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny  
day.

#### Litany of Hope

Voice 2: We hope together for a better world.

*Voice 3: We hope for a world in which all are seen.*

**People: We hope for a world where all belong.**

Voice 1: We hope for a world where no one needs to hide.

*Voice 3: We work for a world in which that hope is much more than any wish upon a star.*

Voice 2: We strive to make that world a reality within our own lives.

**People: I cannot change you; you cannot change me.**

Voice 1: We can each, however, allow change to come upon ourselves.

*Voice 3: We can encourage, strengthen, love, and support one another in the path of this hope we share.*

**People: This is a dream where all belong,**

Voice 2: where all are seen,

*Voice 3: where all are heard,*

Voice 1: where all are loved and included

*Voice 3: can begin here and now.*

Voice 2: It can begin with me; it can begin with you.

Voice 1: It can begin as each of us allows the hope of this dream to become the reality of our lives, the response we determine to make to all we encounter.

*Voice 3: It is a dream and a hope calling us beyond our fears to face the world according to this love we know can best carry us forward.*

**People: It is a dream we can transform into reality, a reality we live.**

Reflection: "We have the power to transform reality around us. We can't change it all in one day. We can't change it in a week or a month. We can, however, change reality among ourselves, that reality binding each one to another. We can transform our community by transforming our

relationships, by transforming ourselves. This is not a task we take up as individuals in isolation. It is a charge we take on in community. Together, we can tackle those forces that would isolate and distance us from one another. Together, we can walk this journey of life within a new expression of community, of belonging, of mutuality and interdependence.

You belong to me. I belong to you. We belong to and with each other. We are one blood. We are one community. We breathe the same air, drink the same water, and bleed the same blood. Together, we can make a home for one and all. We make a home where all can find belonging, security, love, and support. We can build this new reality that works for all of us and remains open to others.”

“Home” (Pearson & Holden)<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jevGL7i1BVQ>

**Hold on, to me as we go,  
As we roll down this unfamiliar road.  
And although this wave (wave) is stringing us along,  
Just know you're not alone,  
'Cause I'm gonna make this place your home.**

**Settle down, it'll all be clear.  
Don't pay no mind to the demons  
That fill you with fear.  
The trouble, it might drag you down,  
If you get lost, you can always be found.**

**Just know you're not alone,  
'Cause I'm gonna make this place your home.**

**Settle down, it'll all be clear.  
Don't pay no mind to the demons  
That fill you with fear.  
The trouble, it might drag you down.  
If you get lost, you can always be found.**

**Just know you're not alone,  
'Cause I'm gonna make this place your home.**

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<sup>6</sup> Copyright ©2012 Interscope Records. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jevGL7i1BVQ>

## Benediction

Voice 1: This is who we are in all our diversity.

Voice 2: We are broken.

*Voice 3: We are bruised.*

Voices 1, 2, & 3: We have feared to face our demons, our faults, our failures.

Voice 1: And yet,

Voice 2: those failings are essential

Voices 2 & 3: to our shared human experience.

Voice 1: They are part of how and why we belong to one another.

*Voice 3: They are part of how we can lean upon and support each other to become that community in which we so yearn to live.*

Voice 1: May we join together in this shared purpose of belonging together.

Voice 2: May we grow together to build this dynamic and diverse community that finds strength and purpose in belonging together. May our welcome, inclusion, and love transform our lives, our community, our world as this hope of belonging transforms us and becomes a contagion of goodwill, love, and care for all the world of humanity in all our diversity.

Voices 1, 2, & 3: May we join together in all our diversity to build a new community in which all are seen, heard, and valued – where all fully belong.

Voice 1: So let it be. So let us be.

**People: Let us be one community, undivided, where everyone belongs.**

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