



The Peace Islands Institute (PII) was active throughout Ramadan, August 2011, with Iftar organizations at various churches and synagogues (friendship gatherings), and home dinners (neighborliness project) where Turkish-American families hosted their non-Muslim friends at their homes.

As PII, we believe by breaking bread together we will have a stronger dialogue and better understanding of each other's values and ethnicity. This will set an example for our children to follow and make our and future communities a better place to live in. Below you will find reflections on Ramadan dinners.

The PII contacted several churches and synagogues before Ramadan with whom we have been working together in interfaith journey. Volunteering families prepared home-made Turkish food to be served at the Iftars. Iftar dinners took place in various locations across NJ such as Dumont, Morristown, North Caldwell, Tenaflly and Riverton. More than 30 people attended each dinner, where typically half of the attendees were from Turkish-American community and the other half from the respective house of worship.



Rev. Elaine Wing of Dumont Calvary United Methodist Church expressed gratitude for co-hosting a Friendship Dinner with the Peace Islands Institute. As people arrived, they gathered in a circle to introduce each other, occasionally finding out interesting and pleasantly surprising connections.

Fr. Anthony J. Randazzo, pastor at Notre Dame in North Caldwell, remembered several families from his congregation attending dinners at Turkish homes and complimented the friendly hosts, the faith-based conversations and the delicious Turkish food. "This year those gracious families arrived at the parish house with trays of homemade humus and other Turkish delights," he added. Crispy baked bread, eaten during Ramadan, was broken and shared among new

friends. Pistachio baklava sweetened the learning experience about each other's respective faith traditions. Conversations at the tables engaged the inquisitive, faith-seeking minds. The opening grace in Arabic - Call to Prayer - around the kitchen's island unified all in sacred tones.



David Iskovitz, Director of Education at Temple B'nai Or in Morristown, joined Fr. Randazzo on the importance of coming together around a table. He described the evening as follows: "What a beautiful evening of prayer shared by Jews and Muslims experiencing the joy of God. Coming together as one we were able to silently communicate how our faiths share the same values of community, love, and obligations. Our heritages blended and created a beautiful and spiritual evening". These words resonated well with the mission of the PII and the motivation for organizing these dinners.

John Bruton, a parishioner at Calvary UMC in Dumont, said it was more than just the food. It was an opportunity to get to know and see the similarities of hard working people. He added, "I would say the dinner was a huge success and that after dining with a small family I felt they were very similar, hard working people just like me".

Ramadan dinners usually started with the Call to Prayer, followed by its brief translation and explanation. Sometimes, one of the PII members elaborated on the meaning of Ramadan in Muslims' lives, either before or after the dinner. Topics at tables ranged from personal interests to questions about religious practices and experiences in the United States or Turkey. It was such an enjoyable evening that the organizers themselves had to call it to an end after late hours!



Ramadan Dinners also served as platforms not only to learn about each other but also appreciate each other's devotion. Christians and Muslims breaking the fast together gave a deep appreciation of how food breaks down misunderstandings. Fr. Randazzo summarized very nicely the impact of the dinner: "For us Christians, the spirituality of Ramadan sounded like our

Lenten season before Easter. Our fasting and abstinence works to improve our relationship with God. Levent also emphasized that 'Call to Prayer' is not just a 'Call' to prayer but a call to 'Rush to Prayer'. God's presence is waiting to be experienced intensively through the day."

As frequently expressed by all attendees, these gatherings are important. They are opportunities of bringing together people of different faiths/beliefs – in an atmosphere of trust and friendship to worship, communicate, without any trepidation or prejudice. And, they have to continue as well put by David Iskovitz: "Most important to us was an awareness of what is possible when people meet and pray together. It is hoped that we will find future opportunities to share joyful and meaningful events together. Our congregants loved worshipping with your congregants. May we do it often". Fr. Anthony Randazzo had similar wishes as he said that a new tradition of table-centered interfaith experience begun. "The Ramadan Dinner at Notre Dame will draw more people as we accept we are 'All In Awe of the Same God'", he said enthusiastically.

