Bringing Good News:
40 Stories of Congregations and the Ministries that Transformed Them

Henry Simmons, PhD and Rita Boyer, MACE
Noah’s Pudding

CHRIST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, MARTINSVILLE, NEW JERSEY

The *Insha’Allah* Initiative began in 2009 when Christ Presbyterian Church (CPC) was invited by the Turkish Muslim Interfaith Dialogue Center of New Jersey (now known as Peace Islands) to share our faiths and traditions in the interest of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. Our Pastor, Rev. Susan Joseph Rack, eagerly took this opportunity to meet and dialogue with not only people of a faith other than Christian but, more importantly, a faith community held in great suspicion since the events of September 11, 2001.

It all began with the simple offer by Peace Islands to serve “Noah’s Pudding” to our congregation. It is a Turkish Muslim tradition to share this dessert of sweet syrup, fruit, nuts and seeds with Christian and Jewish neighbors, whose scriptures include the story of the prophet Noah. Christ Presbyterian Church in turn invited members of the Turkish Muslim community to worship with our congregation before enjoying their “Pudding” together. They accepted CPC’s invitation to worship, and we shared our stories of Noah from the Bible and Koran. The event was so enjoyed by all that it was repeated the following year with an emphasis on what the prophet Noah teaches us about stewardship of God’s earth. The impact of the “Noah’s Pudding” events was immediately evident as members of CPC respectfully listened to the Koran being read and expressed open-hearted curiosity about the similarities and differences between the Koran’s and the Bible’s stories of Noah.

Our *Insha’Allah* Initiative continued as members of CPC—nearly half of our members in over three years—responded positively to the invitation to break the fast during Ramadan in the homes of Peace Islands’ members. Peace Islands’ members accepted CPC’s invitation to join us for our Maundy Thursday Seder, a memorial of
Jesus’ Last Supper. The Initiative also includes hosting Abraham’s Table events, at which representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths engage in panel discussions of topics of mutual interest, such as Prayer and Mary, the Mother of Jesus.

The *Insha’Allah* Initiative was tested to bear fruit in August 2011 when Rev. Richards received a call from a Muslim community in the neighborhood of the church the AlFalah Center. They were looking for a worship space large enough for them to conduct their prayers each evening after sundown for the month of Ramadan. The session of CPC voted unanimously to welcome the AlFalah Center community into our sanctuary for their Ramadan prayers. The church was in turn invited to join in the AlFalah meals, served at the church, to break the fast. Through this interaction CPC learned that only one mile from the church the AlFalah Center was purchasing a building in which they hoped to establish a mosque and masjid (school). The neighbors and township, however, were raising heated objections. CPC members were moved by the heartfelt hope for religious freedom and tolerance expressed by the leadership of the AlFalah community. CPC welcomed the AlFalah Center again into our sanctuary for Ramadan in 2012 and each year until they occupy their new mosque.

In September 2011, as the anniversary of the terrorist attack approached, CPC invited the AlFalah Center community to join them in sponsoring a 9/11 Walk—A Simple Act of Hope and Courage. This was an opportunity to address the urgent need of the community for healing between Muslim and non-Muslim neighbors. Members of CPC, the Bridgewater and surrounding communities and the AlFalah Center walked 1.5 miles together from the church to the Martinsville town center. As they walked, they were encouraged to share stories of their faith and culture. Once in Martinsville the walkers had lunch together and enjoyed making friends.

This Initiative, which began organically in 2009 amid confusion about the Muslim community in our midst—their faith, their traditions and their status in America—has changed CPC’s relationship with the Muslim community from distant suspicion to American solidarity and warm God blessed friendship. Before this Initiative the congregation was largely ignorant of the Muslim tradition and only assumed we had Muslim neighbors in our area but hadn’t met them, let alone worshipped with them. The *Insha’Allah* Initiative is teaching CPC and those who encounter our members that being Christ like to all our neighbors furthers the peaceable Kingdom of God for all people of faith.

What follows is a letter is from Tarek Abdelkader, Founder and Board member of AlFalah Islamic Center to the Pastor of Christ Presbyterian:

**NOAH’S PUDDING**
The relationship between AlFalah Center and Christ Presbyterian started over two years ago, in the midst of our ongoing legal struggle to build a house of worship, when we found ourselves that summer without any place to hold our Ramada Taraweeh prayers. In the most welcoming fashion, under your leadership the congregation of Christ Presbyterian opened its church doors to us and has continued to do so for over two years now. We can’t express what a difference that has made for us. We have since both welcomed each other in our services, held peace walks featured in local news, hosted numerous joint community dinners, movie nights, and even partnered on a honeybee mini-farm.

Your actions and the support of Christ Presbyterian would have been extremely special under any circumstances; at a time of great difficulty for our Muslim community they were truly wonderful. We were—and still are—in the midst of litigation with the township of Bridgewater, as we struggle to regain our right to build a house of worship. Your courageous and warm welcome has been both encouraging and inspiring.

You have written a most beautiful chapter in the story of the founding of AlFalah, the impact of which cannot be overstated. You gave us the opportunity to be able to tell our children that not everyone is against us. Your initiative and continued leadership will undoubtedly have a lasting impact on our communities for generations to come.