

The New York Times

By [PETER APPLEBOME](#)

Published: November 21, 2010

PLEASANTVILLE, N.Y.



James Estrin/The New York Times

Singing “This Land Is Your Land” with Woody Guthrie’s daughter, Nora Guthrie, center in white blouse.

This is the season of good vibrations, or at least better vibrations than the rest of another crummy year. And interfaith services in Westchester County and elsewhere are getting to be as much a part of Thanksgiving as turkey, football and indigestion. Yet that is not to say there isn’t a message in it all.

Once, Pleasantville was best known as the mailing address of [Reader’s Digest](#) magazine (in nearby Chappaqua until recently). But it has long had its share of off-center literary and cultural types and, since 2001, the adventurous Jacob Burns Film Center.

Until fairly recently, members of the local clergy meant representatives of churches. Then Rabbi Sameth, whose prerabbinical songwriting credits included [Loretta Lynn](#)’s “Pregnant Again,” joined the Pleasantville Clergy Association, after his congregation was formed in 1997. He was followed by Dr. Mahjabeen Hassan, a Pakistani-born physician of the Upper Westchester Muslim Society, and this year by Victor Fama, a Bronx-bred health care lawyer and Catholic-turned-Buddhist of the Many Branches Sangha.

So it was natural that the interfaith group’s members saw a metaphor in their midst — a story line about diversity, tolerance and the changing nature of religious experiences that went counter to much of the imagery of discord and division in the news.

That was magnified in their reading of “American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us,” a much-praised new book on religion in America. The authors, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, found, paradoxically, that Americans are not only deeply divided and polarized along religious lines, but also increasingly tolerant and more likely to intermarry, change religions and accept the faith of others.

THE message seemed obvious, that the more people of different religious backgrounds shared their experiences, the more they understood each other and transcended what Mr. Phillips called religious exceptionalism: the belief that there’s only one path to God and that one’s own religion has it. And so evolved this year’s interfaith service, with the idea of ending with “This Land Is Your Land.”

As things turned out, Ms. Guthrie, who lives up the road in Mount Kisco, agreed to participate, as did a selection of estimable Hudson Valley musicians. These were not entirely Rabbi Sameth’s musical roots, but came pretty close. (“George Jones is God,” he said. “You heard that from a rabbi.”)

It’s not as if all were sweetness and light around here. Ms. Hassan’s group has tried for eight years to build a mosque in northern Westchester. It’s still trying. She said daily life for Muslims was worse now than after 9/11.

This gathering at the synagogue, built in 1847 as an Episcopal church, might not change that much, but then, who knows? “My Buddhist friends say we can only begin by changing ourselves, and by changing yourself and those close to you, sooner or later the world changes,” Mr. Phillips said.

There were readings from the Old and New Testaments, the Koran, and “Thankfulness and Buddhism on Thanksgiving.” There was the bell choir of a Lutheran church and Ms. Guthrie’s account that her father, when asked to specify her religion when she was born, announced: “All or none.”

At the end, the musicians and clergy crowded the bimah. Rabbi Sameth played piano, and Mr. Phillips played bass. The country-and-western rabbi, the bluegrass minister, the physician in the [hijab](#), the Catholic-turned-Buddhist lawyer and everyone in the packed synagogue sang along to “This Land Is Your Land.”

Afterward, there was cider and pumpkin pie, a small moment of American grace in a world often searching for just that

E-mail: peappl@nytimes.com

When he was asked to present a six-word bio at an interfaith breakfast recently, Rabbi Mark Sameth of the Pleasantville Community Synagogue came up with this: “Nashville songwriter turned rabbi: Who knew?”

Maybe it took a country-and-western rabbi to put together the interfaith [Thanksgiving](#) service that ended Sunday with Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists singing “This Land Is Your Land” along with [Woody Guthrie](#)’s daughter, Nora Guthrie.

But then the idea for doing the song came not from Rabbi Sameth, but from the Rev. Steven Phillips, pastor of the United Methodist Church of Pleasantville, who is sort of a bluegrass minister. If it takes a country-and-western rabbi and a bluegrass minister to make a point, so much the better.



James Estrin/The New York Times

Jews, Christians, Buddhists and Muslims assembled Sunday for an interfaith Thanksgiving service at the Pleasantville Community Synagogue.