

Three faiths celebrate as neighbours at City Hall

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Music, laughter and a message grounded in celebration filled the atrium inside City Hall Sunday afternoon.

Around 180 Edmontonians — including Mayor Stephen Mandel — gathered downtown to take part in an interfaith worship of the three Abrahamic faiths: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The Phoenix Multi-Faith Society and the Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action co-produced the event.

During the celebration,

speakers from all three religious backgrounds explained the significance of the holidays associated with this time of year. Rabbi David Kunin told the story of Hanukkah, while Sheikh Imam Mustafa Khat-tab discussed Eid ul-Adha, the feast of sacrifice. The event concluded with a sermon by the Very Rev. Neil Gordon of All Saint's Anglican Cathedral, who spoke of the importance of hope at Christmas time.

The message religious leaders at City Hall hoped to convey was one of understanding.

"Because Edmonton has become such a diverse

community, we need to know our neighbours," said master of ceremonies Rev. Larry Wright. "These are three communities who historically in many parts of the world don't get along. But here in Edmonton we want to make a difference."

Having musical performances woven throughout the event made for a festive atmosphere. A group of Grade 3-4 students from Talmud Torah performed holiday songs such as I Have a Little Dreidel. This was followed by a choreographed number from the Shemesh-Aviv Israeli Folk Dance Association.

Michael Frishkopf, a professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Alberta, explained how music is a powerful tool in bringing together cultures. At the U of A, he directs an ensemble of Middle Eastern and North African performers, and noted his students come from all corners of those areas.

During his travels to Egypt as a graduate student, Frishkopf learned to play the nay, a type of reed flute popular in Middle Eastern music. He displayed those talents while leading a Sufi performance group at the celebration.

"Everything starts at home, so we do what we can here in Edmonton to bring people together," he said. "I think it sends a good message. Maybe it doesn't represent the world, but we do what we can here."

The encouragement of a healthy dialogue is important to creating relationships between cultures. Kunin feels that Canada's worldwide status as a multicultural, diverse nation makes it important to continue these types of events back home.

"When we sit in our little isolated groups and don't interact, then the city suffers. But when

we work together, then the city is enriched," Kunin said.

In November, there was an internal debate whether to hold the event after the conflict between Israel and Gaza. The conversation lasted about two minutes, said Netta Phillet, with the Interfaith Centre, who felt it was even more important during times of conflict to have these interfaith conversations.

"We have to embrace diversity and celebrate our differences," Phillet said. "It's not only about our similarities in Abraham, but the need to understand our differences."