

## Together We Dine: Creating a dialogue as Interfaith dinners go virtual

[Lindsay Peyton](#), Correspondent

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The Spring Interfaith Council quickly pivoted most of its programs online with the onset of the pandemic. But one popular event left organizers scratching their heads: the annual dialogue dinner. Usually, about 70 or 80 guests gather at a host's home to share a simple vegetarian dinner and deep discussion about faith and current issues. The ground rule is no proselytizing; just listen and learn. When COVID struck, gathering as a large group was out of the question.

Then, Spring Interfaith discovered Project Unity, a Dallas-based nonprofit on a mission to build and sustain community through dialogue, events and education. It was just what Spring Interfaith was searching for and a date was set for "Together We Dine - Virtual." The event, open to adults 18 and older, is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 8.

Diane Hunt, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Klein Stake who joined the Spring Interfaith Council in 2020, plans to attend. "We have so much more in common that we realize," Hunt said. "It's been such a divisive time. It's nice to see that we can come together. That appeals to me."

The program will start with an introductory session, during which guests will learn about the nonprofit and Project Unity and gain a roadmap for the evening's small group discussions. "Then, without much more ado, you will be whisked off to different break-out sessions," said Nancy Agafitei, a Spring Interfaith Council co-facilitator.

### **How to participate**

"Together We Dine - Virtual" is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 8. To register, visit [eventbrite.com/e/together-we-dine-virtual-tickets-232235632027](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/together-we-dine-virtual-tickets-232235632027). by 3 p.m., Monday, Feb. 7.

In the smaller group setting, each guest will have a few moments to answer a specific question about race relations, religion and current events. Questions include: What is a common misconception about your race or religion? What recent news story about a race or religious group has bothered you?

Agafitei is grateful to Project Unity for providing a safe way to meet and continue the conversation, now across a virtual table.

Linda Barry, who co-facilitates the group with Agafitei and is a member of Holy Comforter Episcopal Church, is trying to get the word out about the event. Interfaith events are usually held during the day. Since "Together We Dine" is in the evening, she hopes more can attend. "It's an opportunity for dialogue, an opportunity for conversation," Barry said. "And it's a safe place to ask questions that you might be uncomfortable asking somewhere else." She has attended a Project Unity virtual dialogue before. "When you leave, you're just on a high," she said. "This is a really good fit for Spring Interfaith."

Spring Interfaith's annual dialogue dinner started around 2009, inspired by similar events at Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, said Anais Watsky, a founding member. Also a member of Congregation Jewish Community North and a former director of Northwest Assistance Ministries, Watsky said the concept of individuals from diverse backgrounds, connecting around a dinner table, appealed to her immediately. "I was very interested in interfaith work," Watsky said. "It was right up my alley." She has been a regular attendee ever since - and even hosted a dinner. "I certainly made friends with people I would have never known," Watsky said. "I like having friends with different religions and of all ages."

During the pandemic, Spring Interfaith found ways to continue its Women's Voices meetings and Thanksgiving dinners, among other programs. Members searched for a way to continue the dialogue dinners but were intimidated by the technology required to facilitate this large discussions.

"When we couldn't do it in-person anymore, we began searching for another way," said Agafitei, who was first drawn to Spring Interfaith through a similar dinner with Project Unity. "You get hooked," she said. "And no two (events) are alike." She hopes that if "Together Let's Dine" is successful, Spring Interfaith is able to host the event on a regular basis.

Barry agreed, adding that this type of dialogue is especially important in the current climate.

“I hear constantly about how divisive everything is getting,” she said. “One of the things that heals division is conversation.” When people see each other and share stories, they learn about other cultures in a totally different way, she explained. “The division just gets smaller,” she said. “And to me that’s the most important thing.”

*Lindsay Peyton is a Houston-based freelance writer.*