

*The below speech was given by Rev. Mark Lukens at the **Interfaith Thanksgiving Celebration for Religious Freedom in America**. This event was held at the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury, NY on Sunday, November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2010.*

*Rev. Lukens is Chair of the Interfaith Alliance – L.I. Chapter as well as Pastor of Bethany Congregational Church of East Rockaway.*

On behalf of Bethany Congregational Church and of the Interfaith Alliance's Long Island Chapter, I want to offer a word of thanks to Bishop Murphy and to all of the other speakers for taking the time to come and speak to us at this important event, and of course, Willow, for making such a joyful and beautiful noise unto the Lord.

My paternal ancestors arrived on these shores in 1694, fleeing religious persecution and seeking the same things that have inspired the millions of other immigrants to this land in the centuries since: the freedom to worship or not worship according to the dictates of their own conscience and the opportunity to build a better life for themselves and for those who would come after them in what for them, as it has been for all of us, a brave new world in which they hoped the bonds of class and caste, the fear and hatred that had enslaved their people and locked them into seemingly endless spirals of violence, retribution and still more violence would give way to a new reality, a new community defined not by struggles for dominance and the barriers of intolerance, but rather, by the highest teachings of their faith as they strove to become the people their God called upon them to be. As they worked toward that dream along with others of every creed and color; as they learned to live and to make room for one another, to overcome their fears of and prejudices toward one another it was then that they began to realize the gifts that each brought to the others. And as together they defended the liberties they cherished in times of war, but also in the great internal struggles to liberate those the American dream had somehow left out or left behind, as they listened to the words and participated in the deeds of leaders and prophets of liberty, justice and equality from George Washington, to Abraham Lincoln to the Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Americans of every stripe have come to understand that the striving for liberty is at the very core of our humanity, a gift from our Creator that when it is denied to some, is denied to all. The lesson of this nation at its best has always been an echo of the teachings of the world's great faiths and most enlightened philosophies: that I am my brother's keeper, not only in terms of the integrity of their bodies, but in terms of the opportunities of their spirit as well- and that when you are afraid to build you mosque or your synagogue because of the bigotry of others, my right to build my church is in danger. That when you cannot wear your turban or your hijab for fear of ridicule or retribution, when zealots threaten to burn your sacred text, my freedom, my house of worship and my sacred texts are also at stake. Liberty, my sisters and brothers, is a fragile thing. It is for all of us or it is for none of us and it must be defended-not just on the battlefield, but by the

courage to stand up and speak out when those freedoms are denied to my neighbors by my neighbors. By the willingness to be vigilant, to name the powers of fear and bigotry right here in our own government, our own communities, our own houses of worship, indeed within our own hearts.

We all know that there are those among us today who will insist that America is a “Christian” nation. And personally, I will admit that if by that, they are calling on those, like myself who profess Christianity to re-dedicate ourselves to the Gospel of unconditional love of neighbor: to seek justice, feed the hungry and eschew worldly power in favor of the blessings of liberty and abundance for all, then I would applaud that call. But if, as is too often the case, they are asserting a claim to cultural dominance and a demand for a privileged place for those who claim the Christian faith, then their call is no less than a blasphemy against the God we worship and a distortion of the Gospel every bit as much as it is a perversion of both the intentions of the founders and the principles on which our democracy is built. To deny to our sisters and brothers the liberties we expect and take for granted for ourselves, to demand for ourselves a place of privilege at the expense of others, to turn our backs to those who like our own ancestors have come here as strangers in a strange land with the same aspirations, the same dreams, the same desires which are common to all human beings of every creed and every nationality- is to deny our faith and to deny the hope and the dream that is America, this grand experiment in human liberty, this country that we love.

And yet, as I stand here before you my sisters and brothers I can see the realization of that dream in a way that my ancestors could not possibly imagined. And I am not only grateful for that, but if my Calvinist forbearers will forgive me, also a little bit proud despite the many wrong turns, setbacks, and missteps in our past and in our present. Because you and I together, as Muslims, as Jews, as Sikhs and Buddhists and Humanists and Christians, as Americans all, we are the community, the nation of Jan Lukens’ dream. We are different in theology and rite but all of us, whatever faith we claim, share a faith in the sacred gift of liberty, and in the dignity and preciousness of the human spirit. And Finally, I am grateful to be counted here among and alongside all of you- people who renew my faith and my spirit with the example of your courage, your grace and your commitment to this blessed place, this great nation, this city on a hill. Thank you.