

Rev. Jodi Hayashida takes multi-faith approach to social justice

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The Rev. Jodi Hayashida stands Tuesday in front of Maine People's Alliance on Lisbon Street in Lewiston.
Russ Dillingham/Sun Journal

AUBURN — The Rev. Jodi Hayashida served for over two decades as the First Universalist Church congregation's spiritual guide before moving on to a mission well beyond church walls into communities across the state.

Now spearheading Multifaith Justice Maine (MJM), Hayashida is channeling a passion for faith and social justice into a movement of inclusivity, one that unites those of many faiths to create systemic change.

Raised in the Boston suburb of Bedford, Massachusetts, Hayashida said her mother's family is from Maine, dating back centuries.

"Even though I'm technically from away," she laughed, "I feel like I should get some credit for deep Maine roots."

After years of living and working in Auburn, she's planted her own roots firmly in the state, where her ministry continues to grow in new ways.

As a lifelong Unitarian Universalist who went to seminary straight out of college, Hayashida's beliefs have been shaped by the teachings of a tradition that encourages and promotes development of personal faith. But her faith, she explained, is dynamic, evolving over time and shaped by the complexities of real life.

"Our beliefs don't exist in a vacuum," she said. "They are constantly tested and refined by the simple act of living. Sometimes, that means my beliefs demand I change the way I live. At other times, reality has changed my beliefs."

Adaptation led Hayashida to what she calls "community ministry," which she said means to "care for the world outside the walls of the local congregation." It's a place where the hunger for spiritual nourishment and desire for justice aren't limited to parish walls or a single community of faith.

As the director of MJM, a coalition organized under the Maine People's Alliance, Hayashida has been working toward unification of people across the state who are in pursuit of a more just society.

"Multifaith Justice Maine builds power across the lines of our diverse spiritual and religious beliefs as we work collectively to create a just and radically loving society," Hayashida said.

The organization's work, she said, ranges from advocacy and bearing public witness, to legislative action and community-building. These efforts are all toward what Hayashida describes as "a beloved community that embraces and supports all."

Since beginning her work at MJM last year, Hayashida has addressed some of Maine's most pressing issues, like training poll chaplains to ensure voters feel safe at the polls, advocating for housing as a human right and reframing substance use disorder as a public health issue. These issues, and many more, are not just political issues but moral imperatives rooted in a respect for the sacredness of all life, she said.

For Hayashida, the essence of faith is found in a radical and reverent care for one another and in recognizing that "the holiness of this world is ultimately a mystery beyond our comprehension." She said it's a holiness woven into every part of life.

Hayashida's theology is far from traditional, so rather than engaging in what she calls old-school, patriarchal, academic theology, she prefers contemporary theologians, poets and thinkers broadening the "collective understanding of where and how holiness is made manifest in this world." She said the fresh approach to faith has helped her connect with people across religious divides and not just in moments of shared worship, but also through collective action and organizing.

“Connecting with people outside of my own faith tradition is as easy as connecting with people, period,” Hayashida said, adding that whether through her involvement in the Lewiston/Auburn Multifaith Association or simply by engaging with neighbors, she sees every interaction as an opportunity to foster understanding and compassion.

Yet, she admitted, reconciling different belief systems can be challenging. It requires a solid dose of humility and is often an “invitation to meet the Holy in ever-expanding form.” That, she said, is a process of embracing one’s own faith without imposing it on others.

After decades of ministry, Hayashida believes that her faith has one constant: the recognition of holiness in every life.

“If we look deeply enough, we can witness the seed of holiness in every single life ... and once we see it, it becomes impossible to unsee it,” she said. For her, the ability to recognize the sacred in all things is a source of profound joy and heartbreak — a necessary foundation for the work of justice.

Hayashida’s work may have shifted away from the parish, but her ministry continues through the building of cross-faith bridges and championing justice through the kind of faith that isn’t confined to walls, and through a shared struggle for a beloved community honoring the dignity of all.

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