



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Steven D. Rhoads

## New York State Senator Steve Rhoads Brings Together Local Faith Leaders for Interfaith Roundtable Discussion Series

STEVEN D. RHOADS August 21, 2023

| ISSUE: **INTERFAITH DIALOGUE, COMMUNITY SAFETY, FAITH LEADERS ROUNDTABLE**



Senator Rhoads broke bread with faith leaders from across his Senate District at three Interfaith Breakfast Meetings in August.

New York State Senator Steve Rhoads was proud to host his first series of three Interfaith Roundtable breakfast meetings, bringing together local religious leaders from all faiths for an open and honest discussion of the issues that matter most to their communities. Senator Rhoads invited over 110 faith groups from across his Senate district to attend the three

Interfaith Roundtables that took place on August 9 at the Grand Stage Diner in East Meadow, August 15 at the Embassy Diner in Bethpage, and on August 17 at the Mediterranean Diner in Bellmore. The interfaith discussions were attended by local representatives from various denominations of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other faiths.

At each of the meetings, Senator Rhoads welcomed the faith leaders, highlighted his role as a New York State Senator, and spoke about the importance of interfaith dialogue and how it can help to bring people of different faiths together to better understand each other's perspectives. He discussed legislative proposals for the 2024 session as well as the resources and partnership opportunities available to the faith groups through his office. The Senator's action-focused meetings are a huge step towards uniting the greater community and bringing people together. During the meetings, each religious leader took the time to share their own beliefs, experiences, and successes and challenges facing their congregations. Topics discussed ranged from Senator Rhoads' anti-hate crime legislation to community safety, cashless bail, artificial intelligence, mental health, overcoming the effects of COVID, parenting, education, cyber-bullying, preserving the family unit, as well as the value of mentorship programs. Everyone in attendance was able to appreciate the differences between the different faiths while also recognizing the common ground that exists between them.

The diverse group of faith leaders shared a commitment to work together to find common ground and build meaningful relationships. Through an open dialogue and discussion facilitated by Senator Rhoads, a powerful and unifying consensus was reached that will hopefully benefit the entire community.

The Interfaith Roundtable breakfasts were a huge success and lay the groundwork for faith-based unity and understanding. In response to many influences trying to divide our

community, inspiration for the Interfaith Roundtable discussions came out of the Senator's hope that our faith and humanitarian values can serve as a bond that brings us together. Senator Rhoads hopes to continually gather the group of faith leaders to always stay attuned to the needs of his constituents. The Senator believes this type of open and productive dialogue is an important part of building a strong and vibrant community.

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*Senator Rhoads said, "I was happy to be able to host three successful Interfaith Roundtable discussions this summer and it is my hope that these are the first of many intercultural interfaith conversations that will foster an environment of mutual respect and understanding between people of all religions, spiritual paths, and cultural backgrounds. With acts of hate against religious communities on the rise, it was time to for action – that's why these interfaith meetings were so important. It's imperative that we come together as a community to show a united effort that hate has no place in our community and work towards actively promoting understanding and tolerance. As a Youth Minister for over a decade, I was truly inspired by the conversations and ideas that were shared. These meetings were a great success because they enabled attendees to more deeply understand the value of religious diversity and to recognize the commonalities that we all share. It was a great opportunity to come together and bridge the gaps between different faiths and unite as a community as well as support local diners as they work towards bouncing back after COVID. I look forward to hosting more Interfaith Roundtable discussions in the future to promote understanding and foster positive dialogue to better our community."*

**Rabbi Ira Ebbin of Congregation Ohav Sholom said,** "I think the greatest gift that Senator Rhoads gave us at this meeting was each other. I've been serving at my Synagogue in Merrick for 13 years and while I have friendships with some of my fellow clergy colleagues, there are so many whom I have never even had the honor and pleasure to meet. At this roundtable, we not only discussed how much we have in common with each other, but we also discussed and proposed many very practical opportunities to collaborate on community and charitable projects that our respective memberships can work jointly on. I think this

could be a game changer for our community, and I'm so appreciative to Senator Rhoads and his staff for creating this long overdue initiative.”

**Nanda Sundri from the Executive Board of Directors of the AsaMai Hindu Temple in Hicksville said,** “I was very happy to meet Senator Rhoads at the Roundtable Breakfast. He seems genuinely interested in working with all the interfaith groups. He listened attentively to everyone. He was not like some politicians who just wanted their agendas to be heard. I have full faith that he will work for the advancement of all our communities and continue to bring about the unity and stability we all need.”

**Imam Thanvi from Bellmore Masjid said,** “New York State is a harmonious blend of cultures, faiths, and traditions, each contributing to the richness of our collective existence. The Quran reminds us that we were made into different nations and tribes so that we may know one another. Embracing this wisdom, we must actively seek opportunities for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. In a world often marked by division and misunderstanding, interfaith initiatives become the cornerstone of peace and coexistence.”

**Fr. Ralph Sommer from St. Bernard’s Roman Catholic Church in Levittown said,** “So often different faith communities face similar challenges but since they go at them alone and isolated from one another, they can end up with the impression that the challenges are theirs alone. When we get together to share our experiences and challenges we build a solidarity that moves us beyond our limited view. We can support each other by praying for each other. And perhaps we can work together on creating a culture that supports family life and gives strength to those who are struggling with any number of issues.