

Buddhists next door

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue



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I am writing the day after commencement exercises at Piedmont College, where—for the first time in living memory—a student wearing a sparkly blue hijab walked across the stage to receive her diploma. Her family was easy to spot in the bleachers. They too wore hijab, which set them apart from the crowd as head coverings are meant to do. The women were observant Muslims, come to watch one of their own graduate from a small, church-related college in rural Georgia.

If this would not make the news where you live, perhaps you will receive my comment on it as a bulletin from the heartland, where the religious landscape is changing so quickly that most Christians do not know what to make of it. While there are not enough Jews in Habersham County to make a minyan, and the Muslims who live here have to order halal meat from somewhere else, there are two Laotian Buddhist temples in this county of 43,000 people, both built within the last ten years.

Although both communities are registered with the IRS as “church organizations” and both have active Facebook pages, they are invisible on the web page of the Habersham County Chamber of Commerce, which lists just seven churches—all Protestant—and offers a snapshot of the county’s residents as white (85 percent), black (3 percent), and Hispanic (12 percent). Since a significant number of

Protestants here view Roman Catholics not as members of a different denomination but as members of a different religion, the fact that the majority of elementary school students are Latino/a adds another wrinkle to the religious landscape.

In most ways, we resemble other counties our size, both in terms of our increasing diversity and our reluctance to embrace that diversity. It's not that we don't see our new neighbors. It is hard to miss a monk in saffron robes walking through the produce section at Walmart. We just don't know what to think about him, so we don't. Depending on what we've been taught about religious strangers, we either figure he is up to no good or we assume he is a good person in his own way, but in neither case do we give much thought to how we both fit in the grand scheme of things.

Meanwhile, there are Christians here who are wondering why our churches aren't doing more to help us live faithfully in our changing neighborhood. I am not speaking of churches that embrace the mission of bringing all people to belief in Jesus Christ. They have a way of engaging the neighbors that is working for them—or not—but those of us who have been there and done that are ready for something else.

"Salvation is not the driving reason I go to church," one lay leader in his forties said recently. "I go because I keep hoping we can talk about how Christianity is part of the bigger picture, how the Christian way leads beyond Christianity to something greater than itself." It is no longer enough to be told that he has found the best or only way to God, he says. He wants to know how his faith equips him to live in a world of many faiths, without giving up the particular wisdom that his religion brings to the table.

I know a few of the reasons why questions like his are hard for local churches to address. Some are barely hanging on as it is; why should they waste precious breath speaking well of other faiths? Others have never had much interest in searching out all of the Bible's teachings about religious strangers, since John 14:6 is enough to cork the bottle. While new texts on Christian theology feature new chapters on Christianity and world religions, churches are still catching up. But the main reason churches seem to be having a hard time helping Christians think through our place in the neighborhood is because we never had to before. Until very recently, the entire neighborhood was Christian.

The good news is that even in the heartland, basic Christian impulses are lighting the way. When representatives of Wat Lao Buddha Sattha Dhamma came before the

Habersham County Commission last year asking permission to hold a Songkran festival on the grounds of their temple, a local man presented a petition signed by ten neighbors opposing the celebration. The turning point in the 45-minute discussion that followed came when another man asked what made the Songkran festival any different from the Jam for the Lamb concert at his Baptist church.