

Not Just a Social Gathering
Interfaith Dialogue and Multifaith Action
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Introduction:

Interfaith dialogue is popular today, especially in North America and Europe, where the religious demographics are changing with increased immigration and globalization. Some European countries, like United Kingdom, have a longer history of immigration, especially peoples of other religions. Second, third and fourth generation Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims live in London and other British cities.

Canada's influx of refugees and immigrants from different religions has primarily come in the past thirty years. Canadians now have neighbours from other cultures and religions, want to learn to know their neighbours, and are intrigued by different religious traditions. Yet many Canadians feel uncomfortable asking religious questions in a social gathering for fear they will offend; religion is often labelled as a social topic to be avoided in "polite conversation." Interfaith dialogue and education can help members of different faith communities understand their neighbours and co-workers, so they can have helpful discussions without fear of offending or embarrassing.

Interfaith activity is "*not just a social gathering*" because it is important for peace making and justice-building, according to R. Scott Appleby and Rabbi Marc Gopin¹. Religions have an ambiguous history. While religious leaders at times have supported nations' wars and tribal violence, religions and leaders have the capacity to end conflicts through appropriate application of theology and scriptures as well as speaking and acting symbolically to promote peace and justice in the midst of tension. Both authors describe the work of religious groups to provide safe places where peoples of different faiths can meet and build networks, which transcend conflicts. Without networking and positive communication among religious groups, peace is difficult, especially if stereotypes and prejudices predominate.

In Israel/Palestine, Yehuda Stolov of Interfaith Encounter² reported that organizations and leaders were labelled as working for peace and justice when they facilitated conversations among Muslims, Jews, Druze, and Christians. Interfaith dialogue was not neutral, even though Interfaith Encounter asked group participants to learn to know each other well before discussing political issues, such as "the occupation" or "the land" in Israel/ Palestine. Interfaith Encounter developed group discussion formats and guidelines to focus on interfaith dialogue, not political issues. After learning to know each other, discussions about political issues had more nuanced, personal, and conciliatory texture. No longer were the topics about strangers or abstract situations.

¹ R. Scott Appleby *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (Lanham, Massachusetts: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) and Marc Gopin *Holy War, Holy Peace* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002)

² Personal discussion on 16 December 04

Interfaith organizations—both formal and informal—are starting in many places. As people and religions enter the multifaith world, they realize this dialogue is more complex and demanding than imagined. Though invigorating, this work requires discipline and is constantly struggling with balances and paradoxes as faiths are articulated, perspectives are shared and stories are told. The complexity of religion, economics, history, politics, and culture is uncovered and is addressed as interfaith organizations promote understanding of the other’s experiences and perspectives.

Interfaith organizations may seem a natural occurrence of phenomenon, but there is much to learn from the experiences of groups and facilitators. An interfaith organization benefits from the experiments of others, especially those in conflict situations. Interfaith discussion is “not just a social gathering.” Effective gatherings are purposeful and well facilitated, requiring much reflection and advance preparation.

Brief History of Interfaith Groups

Interfaith activity has been primarily a lay movement of people who want to know and understand people from other religions better. Interfaith groups have not been the study of world religions but opportunities to meet members of other faiths, especially in one’s own city or neighbourhood.

Travel and media have made the world smaller. Individuals travel and wish to understand other cultures. Globalization has brought the realities of other cultures into homes through television and computer; and into our neighbourhoods through immigration and refugee resettlement. Many in the Western world want to be hospitable to newcomers and sincerely wish to have a safe and comfortable community for everyone. There is a keen interest to know more about our multi-faith neighbours, but a hesitation to ask individually about religion, thus groups for conversation have emerged.

Scholars and religious leaders have become more involved as globalization increases and as cities become more religiously diverse. Their participation has brought additional resources to the interfaith movement: books, lectures, group facilitation, conferences, etc.

At the end of the nineteenth century (1893), the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Illinois, was the first major activity involving religions from around the world. During his papal tenure, Pope John Paul II encouraged interfaith discussion. The Vatican sponsored the 1986 interfaith gathering in Assisi to celebrate St. Francis’ peace journey to meet Muslim leaders in Palestine and Egypt during the Crusades. In 1993, the Parliament gathered again in Chicago to celebrate the centennial and to emphasize that this world phenomenon now has many local interfaith associations. In 1999, the Parliament gathered in Cape Town, South Africa and then in 2004 in Barcelona, Spain. There are plans for the Parliament to gather every five years. These diverse groups have begun in many cities as the result of local issues and leaders³.

³ Diana Eck, [A New Religious America](#) (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), p 371-372

Interfaith groups are still primarily grassroots organizations with few resources. A 2003 survey of groups in the United Kingdom found some organizations, such as the International Association of Religious Freedom (1900), World Council of Faiths (1936), and the Council of Christians and Jews (1942) have existed many years. But of the 140 organizations in the survey, 43% started since 2000 and 46% have a budget of less than 500 pounds per year.⁴ The movement has grown significantly in the U.K. because local authorities are now asked to consult with the religious communities, which are increasingly Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu. Jews and Christians have been in U.K. for many centuries.

No census of interfaith groups has occurred in the USA or Canada. Diana Eck at Harvard University's Pluralism Centre has documented the increase in temples, mosques, synagogues, and other religious institutions. *A New Religious America*⁵ records the experiences of many local religious groups as they acculturate to the American environment and as they experience prejudice and hostility from their neighbours. Some local groups have joined the North American Interfaith Network⁶. As in U.K., many are small associations with small budgets and little connection to national coalitions or organizations.

Multifaith/Interfaith/Inter-religious/Co-existence/Ecumenical

In North America, the terms “multifaith” and “interfaith” are interchangeable; in the United Kingdom, these terms have different connotations. In Israel/Palestine, the terms inter-religious and co-existence are also used.

Organizations may differ in name and character, depending on who is invited to the group or organization. Leaders will need to determine who attends, the principal focus, the structure of meetings, the local ethos for this discussion, and safety concerns. Interfaith organizations can be worldwide, national, provincial, regional, city, or neighbourhood. The diversity of types and geography is very wide.

- “*Ecumenical* discussions”, where all present are Christian but from different denominations; are not interfaith or multifaith, even though some of the questions, principles, structures, and ideas are similar. In Canada and USA, there are “council of churches” at local, provincial/state, and national levels, which allow Christians to work together. Discussions are generally amicable and work is cooperative. However, it is not just a social ecumenical gathering, when Protestants and Catholics from Northern Ireland gather, nor when Catholics and Orthodox from former Yugoslavia meet. Religion is embedded in cultures and/or nationalities, which may be in conflict. The theological and worship differences among the ecumenical participants may be great, but they are all within Christianity. Other religions also have discussions among their different

⁴ Local Interfaith Activity in the UK: a survey (London: Inter Faith Network, 2003), vii

⁵ Eck, op.cit.

⁶ Eck, op.cit., p. 372

traditions as well; they would probably not be called “ecumenical” because this word has Christian and Greek origins.

- Interfaith discussions, which are with two different religions, are described as “*bi-lateral*” or as “*dialogue*.” An example would be Jewish-Christian dialogue or Hindu-Muslim dialogue. Since Christianity comes from Judaism, the discussion may revolve around biblical interpretation, the meaning of specific scriptural texts, or historical – literary criticism. Other discussions may be community issues, such as civil rights, affordable housing, or discrimination.
- There are also “*trilateral*” discussions or “*trialogues*,” where three religions are involved. The discussion and action among the Abrahamic faiths—Jews, Muslims, and Christians—is a trialogue. I have found many of the USA discussions since "9-11" have been trialogues where Christians—as the majority religious group--learn to know Muslim and Jewish citizens. These trialogues hope to create more tolerance and respect in cities as well as find ways for people from the three different religious to learn to know each other. Trialogue springs from the religious environment, which has very few if any Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, and other religions. Discussions in Israel/Palestine are primarily “trialogues” including the three Abrahamic faiths. Each faith may be represented by its numerous denominations or traditions.
- Finally *interfaith* or *multifaith* can refer to all religions present in a particular environment or for the discussion of an issue. Interfaith Grand River has representatives from any faith group from the Waterloo Region wishing to participate. It continues to seek out leaders from all faith expressions in the region. Interfaith Network in U.K. has representatives from the primary religious communities in U.K.; this includes Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and a few other religions with significant populations in the U.K. The various faith communities officially select representatives to the Interfaith Network since one of the network’s functions is to connect with the government. Smaller faith communities are not on the network board, but do participate in local interfaith organizations and networks.

“*Interfaith*” refers to a group or organization, which is engaged in dialogue and interaction so participants have a greater understanding of each other and their faiths. Interfaith groups provide a place and time for meeting people from other religions, listening to personal experiences, understanding other religions’ theology and practices, and/or participating in faith activities together.

Many interfaith groups are homogeneous, composed of all members being academics, religious leaders, lay people, women, students, youth, or young adults. This commonality determines the content and style of discussion. For example, women may meet in each other’s homes. Academics, especially theologians or philosophers, may have a much more formal discussion, including the presentation of papers. Students or young adults

may choose weekend retreats. Several interfaith group facilitators report that mixing lay members and clergy often does not work because clergy are seen as experts, so lay members listen rather than become involved. A number of interfaith groups have brought in faith leaders for an opening discussion to clarify the theology or scriptures, and then continued to meet without clergy present.

Groups usually begin by learning to know each other and hearing personal faith journeys; these personal stories illustrate how religion becomes “lived experience.” When several participants are from the same religion, their life journeys show how faith is seen and experienced differently within the same faith. Sometimes individuals tell stories of how one religion has been oppressed or has stereotyped another group of people. When both religions are represented in the gathering, important group process questions emerge:

- Can all people listen to these stories and different perspectives?
- Is the setting a safe place to speak as well as to listen? Does everyone speak?
- Discussion may take individuals into topics, which they have never considered.

Generally interfaith discussions have facilitators or very specific guidelines to keep the discussion focused and all participants feeling safe to talk.

In Israel/ Palestine, an interfaith women’s group, which met for a year, chose to celebrate religious feasts in each other’s homes. Muslim women celebrated a Succoth meal with Jews in West Jerusalem where few Arabs lived or travelled; then the Jewish women went to Arab East Jerusalem for a meal to end Eid. Both times, the guests felt fear as they anticipated going into an unknown neighbourhood. Entering each other’s homes, they were welcomed and delighted in the conversation and the foods.

A group of young adults—Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians—went to the desert for an ecumenical discussion to understand each other’s religion and culture. The desert was a different culture for both; they had good common experiences, which helped them bond; then they could talk about differences and stereo-types as well as hear stories of the effects of the political and religious culture. They had never understood the issues from “the other” perspective and were able to directly confront each other on political and religious issues.

The formal interfaith dialogue of religious leaders requires more preparation, often the presentation of well-documented papers, discussing the issues as seen from each religion’s history, theology, and scriptures. These discussions may result in the ability to share in worship and celebration, in new theological understandings, or in mutual theological research. Sometimes the formal interfaith dialogue is opened by symbolic actions.

Pope John Paul II opened doors for interfaith dialogue with Jews by attending a synagogue and greeting rabbis as a way of symbolizing his intentions and trust. He had similar experiences with Muslims and the imams. In 1986, the Vatican sponsored an important interfaith gathering and discussion in Assisi, remembering St Francis’ openness to other religions at the time of the Crusades. Pope John Paul II’s thrust was to establish interfaith conversations leading to peace and justice. After these events,

scholars and religious leaders continued the interfaith dialogue with papers and formal discussions.

Interfaith dialogue develops in many ways as new groups and organizations begin in different locations. The Interfaith Network for the United Kingdom published: Local Interfaith Activity in the U.K. (2003) in which 170 interfaith organizations are listed with 60% having begun within the previous two years. 46% of these groups have budgets of less than \$1000/year. There is a wide variety in these organizations, based on the religions present, community ethos and concerns, and local leadership in various localities. Though Census Canada has produced population statistics on religions in Canada, I am unaware of any surveys of interfaith organizations.

Since September 11, 2001, there has been increased interfaith activity in North America, especially among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Trialogues among the Abrahamic faiths have taken place in different cities to break down prejudice and stereotypes as well as to deflect the “terrorist rhetoric” in the U.S.A. Christians, Muslims, and Jews have meaningful conversations and learn to know each other’s faith story. Interfaith groups have increased again after the USA invaded Iraq.

“Multifaith” in the United Kingdom refers to an organization of religious groups where the focus is working on a common project or solving a community problem. Dialogue and greater understanding is secondary, but usually does occur. In many communities, the multifaith group is brought together by the local government or a particular institution, which needs an issue discussed or wishes to find solution(s) to community problems. United Kingdom has groups working on government policies, which affect housing, education, prisons, and social services. National protocols have now been established describing how and when local authorities are to work with mandated multifaith councils, in which leadership and participants reflect the religious census of the area.

Some invitations to participate in a multifaith committee may come from another faith group or a voluntary agency. The Church of England has consulted with local governments to begin mandated councils; Anglicans and other Christian denominations have established multifaith committees, which specifically address issues that different religions are confronting in specific localities. In Bradford and Leeds, England, Methodist and Anglicans are working with Muslims and other religions to establish community services and to advocate with local governments.

In the multifaith context, religious leaders or representatives may be called together to discuss how religion is presented and taught in the school system as well as how students from different traditions are accommodated as they celebrate religious holidays. The committee or council may work toward development of affordable housing or establishing community centres with appropriate services. Some provide education about different religions as well as interfaith discussion groups.

The U.K. experience has also demonstrated the need for multifaith groups because many individuals from specific religions are clustered in particular neighbourhoods. Leaders meeting together advise the government through multifaith councils and then often provide mechanisms for interfaith dialogue, so people can learn to know each other. This is an important factor for social cohesion: networking with others as well as breaking down stereotypes and prejudices.

Leaders from churches and interfaith/multi-faith organizations in U.K. emphasize the need for governments to work with religious leaders to provide for the needs of citizens from many religions. Currently in Canada, governments are just discovering an environment with many religions and have rarely brought religious leaders together to establish appropriate protocols and councils. The opening of the Ontario Parliament in 2003, for example, was based on Christian traditions, including the Lord's Prayer and many symbols. This type of ceremony no longer reflects Ontario's context, since Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Jews, and other religions are Members of the Provincial Parliament. An appropriate multifaith activity would be for the provincial government to mandate an ad-hoc, multi-faith commission to examine the opening session and bring recommendations to Queen's Park before the next election.

Ontario Multifaith Council has been established to "ensure adequate and appropriate religious services and spiritual care for persons in institutions and community-based agencies and programs."⁷ Through a series of regional councils, a provincial board and connections with chaplains and leaders from the faith communities, Ontario Multifaith Council advises the government and advocates for the religious needs of Ontario residents who are in institutions. Most recently, the council staff has been working on restorative justice projects as well as assisting homeless offenders who are being released from prison.

Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) in Ontario, Canada, was initially called together in 1986 by a provincial commission studying social assistance (Social Assistance Reform Commission). Since faith communities provided many health and social services for economically marginalized individuals and families, the SARC wanted a multifaith review of their study and recommendations. ISARC continued as a multifaith advocacy organization, working on issues of hunger, housing, children, refugees, homelessness, disability and social assistance. The primary purpose of ISARC was advocacy at the provincial policy level with/for those who are economically marginalized, though through collaboration, representatives from the different religions learned more about each other's faiths as well.

Multifaith and Interfaith are not exclusive categories. An organization may be functioning at both levels: dialogue and community action. The importance of distinguishing these terms is to see different functions and to be clearer about purpose.

Interfaith Grand River (IGR) has one hour for discussion (interfaith) and a second hour to work with local issues, whether these be coordinating a peace march; planning a series of

⁷ From the Ontario Multifaith Council's web site www.omc.ca

workshops on different religions, talking with media about accurate representation of religions; meeting with the regional police chief; or working with the local school boards on specific concerns.

As mentioned before, many multifaith organizations provide mechanisms and support for interfaith dialogue. As leaders work together on projects, they engage in interfaith discussion and increase understanding and respect. In Israel/Palestine, a significant number of multifaith groups have emerged to work on water projects and research since water is vital to members of all religions. This collaboration has increased the understanding and respect for people of other religions.

The Inter-religious Coordinating Council in Israel, which has 71 organizations as members, is primarily multifaith but has significant interfaith functions:

- Serves as a resource centre and information clearing house
- Reflects upon and clarifies issues of mutual concern
- Promotes both current and new inter-religious and inter-cultural program initiatives
- Fosters awareness in Israeli public of new inter-religious developments
- Facilitates communication with public officials and religious leaders⁸

This council is working at multifaith and interfaith activities simultaneously.

Inter-religious is a term used primarily in Israel. The Inter-religious Coordinating Council of Israel (ICCI) connects a wide variety of religious communities and institutions in Israel and promotes understanding and discussion among those groups. Sarah Bernstein⁹ reported that it was important to have a steering committee to work with many religious groups in Israel. ICCI brings participants together for interfaith discussion but finds individuals need to work on customs, beliefs, and theological issues since the more contentious issues in Israel/Palestine are very difficult. She and the council see that ICCI is a tool to build better understanding, peace, and better relationships among different groups.

Co-existence is another term used in Israel/Palestine where peoples “co-exist” together, often in very different communities without regular interaction. Co-existence involves interaction and working together so that “others” are not faceless, but become real humans. Rabbi Arik Asherman has been more specific about the use of co-existence as a context and philosophy for *Rabbis for Human Rights*¹⁰. This group performs significant and symbolic actions with Arabs and has planted olive trees in controversial areas, held conversations with Muslim and Christian Arabs, and expressed concern when Jewish or Arab families lost members in violent episodes. Co-existence means dialogue as well as joint projects with Arabs and others in Israel/Palestine. Co-existence and inter-religious both acknowledge the deep rifts among the Jews and the Arabs, who are primarily Muslim and Christian.

⁸ 2001 Guide to Inter-religious and Intercultural Activities in Israel, the ICCR guide and annual report, page v & vi

⁹ Conversation with Sarah Bernstein on 6 December 2004

¹⁰ Interview with Rabbi Arik Asherman on 10 December 2004

“Interfaith” and “Multifaith” are the primary terms in today’s discussion. The distinction made in the U.K. between these two terms is useful, even though there is some overlap. It is helpful to know whether a group exists primarily for dialogue and discussion or whether there is an “action” or “advisory” component to the group’s function.

Purposes of Interfaith Groups

One of the first tasks for a group, organization or coalition is to define the purpose of its existence. In some situations, the group may be facilitated by a larger organization and participants know ahead of time the activities and goals. For example, Interfaith Encounter organizes groups for women, students, young adults, lay members, or clergy and the incoming participant knows the purpose, activities, guidelines, time frame, etc. Other groups in Israel/Palestine have a specific focus, often concerning water, followed by religious toleration. An initial incident can bring people together and as the group meets, it will need to focus itself with a purpose or mission statement.

The Roman Catholic Church has identified four types of interfaith discussion or encounter:¹¹

- Dialogue of life – living together in friendship
- Dialogue of social action – working for peace and justice
- Dialogue of intellect – seeking deeper understandings and truth through discussion, debate, and research
- Dialogue of religious experience – sharing insights from prayer and meditation.

As Interfaith Grand River was formed, the KW Council of Churches set the initial agenda before contacting possible participants and the religious organizations in the region. The purpose was both interfaith and multifaith. After meeting twice, the group decided to select a name and a purpose. In 2004-05, the IGR spent time reviewing its purpose as well as organizational structure. The meeting structure of discussion and community concerns remained, even though IGR had a heavy community agenda.

Leadership Largely Judeo-Christian

Though there is an increase in inter-faith dialogue, leadership and facilitation in U.K. and North America has largely been from the Judeo-Christian community. There are some obvious reasons for this:

- Many refugees and immigrants are busy earning an income for their families and do not have time to engage in an interfaith organization. A Sikh man has said he has not had time for interfaith activities until his retirement. Establishing his family and making sure his children are well educated has been his first priority.
- Though the refugee or immigrant wants to be understood and accepted with religion and culture, s/he is working hard to assimilate. Learning the predominate culture and customs has a higher priority. Until recently, many new

¹¹ Faith Meeting Faith (London: The Methodist Church, 2004), 57

Canadians have given up spiritual practices, which portray differences. Muslim women have not covered their hair, Sikhs have cut hair, Jewish men do not wear yarmulkes in public, etc. Maintaining one's dress, even for religious reasons, has been a hindrance to employment. The interfaith movement as well as the increase in residents from their religious community has increased tolerance in some communities and has given many people the strength to retain or return to their spiritual practices, especially those that differentiate them.

- There are leadership differences among the different religions. Judaism and Christianity have clergy, many of whom are employed full time by the congregation or other church organizations; they may see interfaith discussion and education as part of their responsibility. For other faiths, the clergy/religious leadership may be more focused on worship, meditation, maintaining practices in the centre of worship and meditation. Laity may be expected to represent the religion in the community, not the clergy. A number of religions do not have clergy but are primarily lay led. Some religious leaders do not speak English (or the lingua franca) and cannot participate in discussions.
- Interfaith discussion is not seen as important, even for those from countries, which have many faiths. We as Westerners want to know about our neighbour's faith; in countries, such as India, we would probably have grown up with Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Christians all in the same neighbourhood. We would have learned about these religions, especially if they are present among aunts, uncles and other family members. Being cordial and friendly is important, but interfaith discussion may not even be an acceptable topic in social gatherings.
- Some who do not participate in interfaith organizations and activities are Christians, Jews, and others, who are more conservative, feel uncomfortable, or are not allowed to participate based on theology and decisions of their faith community. For example, some conservative Christian denominations do not have the theological basis to participate in interfaith discussion. In Waterloo Region, they have been invited numerous times, but have chosen not to participate or have been instructed by their leaders not to participate.

Important Guidelines for Interfaith:

The following guidelines for an interfaith organization have emerged from reading, discussions with interfaith participants in U.K. and Israel/Palestine, and reflection on Interfaith Grand River's short history as well as a previous attempt to begin an interfaith organization in Waterloo Region.

- ***No one religion should be in a majority.*** In Waterloo Region and for most of North America and Europe, this means that all Christians should still be in a minority, even though Christians often are an overwhelming majority in the populace. A similar guideline would be operative in Israel that Jews—even with all the different denominations or traditions—should not be in the majority. It is often as difficult to contain the majority religion to a minority status; many want to participate and this general interest is positive.

In interfaith dialogue or triologue, facilitators should attempt to have an equal number from each religion as participants. Everyone can speak because others from this tradition are present and the diversity within each religious group can be experienced.

- ***More than one person should represent each religion.*** The principle for these first two guidelines is that all should have a voice. As topics are discussed, persons from the same religion can confer with one another; less assertive persons will know they have the support of others. Different participants may be more informed on some issues than others. This is an important solidarity that allows each to speak as well as to figure out how their own faith and traditions relate to the experiences of others in the discussion.
- ***Power is always an issue.*** In most European and North American societies, Christians have been the majority religion, sometimes even the state religion in the country. How do we graciously open the doors and invite others into discussions and activities? We are so much a part of the culture that the symbols, language, and events refer to our faith, but not to the faith of others. Many of us feel we are in the minority because our denomination is smaller or has beliefs running counter to the primary culture; yet we are Christian and have authority in the culture, especially compared to other religions.

Daniel Rossing in “Preparing for Dialogue in the Holy Land”¹² explains that Jews in Israel must be sensitive to their power in interfaith settings. He reminds Jews to be sensitive to the plurality of Christians in Israel, the historic presence of Christians in Israel/Palestine, issues that may offend Christians, and the “maze of relationships with the Islamic world. His advice would be appropriate in North America and Europe only substituting Christians for Jews and then adding Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and others to the list of whom we should be sensitive to in a variety of ways.

Some may groan about this being hard work to recognize power differentials, but it is essential for an open conversation. While others are trying to be assertive and speak out, the Christian needs to spend more time listening and making sure that the point is well understood.

The facilitator, chairperson, or steering committee should be alert to power dynamics, so all have a chance to speak and participate.

- ***Representatives will be chosen in different ways.*** Since Christianity is well organized, often in hierarchical and Western patterns, we may expect others to select their representative. As discussed before, this is not realistic. So what is

¹² [America](#), September 13, 2004, p 18-21

needed in a representative for a multifaith organization or an interfaith dialogue among religions? Several traits are important:

- a. The participant has a good reputation in his/her religious community
- b. The participant understands faith, tradition and organization, so issues and concerns can be explained to others. This would also mean facility in the language used for discussion.
- c. The participant will take information or concerns back to her/his faith community for reaction and response. These can then be brought to the interfaith table.
- d. The participant has realistic expectations of how the faith community may respond.

Different religions, such as Sikhs, have lay leadership or religious groups have reasons for not sending persons whom we would see as clergy. For example, some priest/priestesses are primarily to assist in worship and meditation; they have few functions outside the church or temple. Yet in the same religion, a priest or priestess will decide to be more pro-active on community issues. Lay leaders often know what is realistic to expect from their “spiritual leaders”

- ***No Proselytizing.*** This is a cardinal rule and probably should be first. Entering into interfaith/multifaith organizations and activities is not for proselytizing. Christians need to be especially alert because other religions have experienced the negative effects of Christian crusades, missions, and evangelism. Often the proselytizing has been mixed with the economics, politics, and culture from Western countries. Though the arrival of health care and education in countries may have been beneficial, the local religion and culture would have felt an assault from Western culture.

Some religions like Judaism do not proselytize, although they do have some converts, primarily through marriage. Islam can be very assertive in evangelism, but strongly feels the sting of Christianity’s crusades and other activities among Muslims. Hinduism and Buddhism welcome others but are not as assertive.

The purpose of interfaith discussion is to learn to know the other people and their faiths. Respect for their traditions, beliefs, history and values is essential, even though one may disagree with a doctrine, interpretation of history, or practice.

- ***Expect convergence and divergence.*** The interfaith discussion will not end up with all individuals or all religions agreeing on a particular issue or perspective. All agree to be respectful and work at understanding the other person’s position, however, understanding does not mean agreement. Each participant agrees to listen respectfully and to work at understanding. The end result is not one belief or a common perspective on an issue. Though this may happen, it is not the goal of the group or the meeting.

As an example, Interfaith Grand River was asked to discuss a new chapel for a local hospital. Several Buddhists expressed the desire instead for a “quiet room” where a patient could die with family and spiritual caregivers present. This “quiet room” had nurses coming only as requested by the patient, family or spiritual caregivers. The family and others were allowed to remain in the room for six to twelve hours after the patient died. Unexpectedly, all IGR members agreed that this was more significant than a chapel. Where hospital chaplains expected divergence, convergence occurred.

Conclusion

Interfaith and multifaith organizations create a dynamic encounter where individuals are involved in listening and then voicing their faith. Understanding and respecting others occurs in a complex set of relationships that builds community among participants as well as energizing peace and justice in the larger community. Even though many individuals desire to participate, commitment to the interfaith group and one’s own religion is needed. It is “not just a social gathering” but can be hard and rewarding work as cultures, religions, and experiences from around the world are shared.

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