

**Evolving the Greater Huntington Beach Interfaith Council to a Higher Level of  
Diversity and Pluralism**

by

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**Abstract**

Many interfaith organizations exist today, but not all of them carry the same meaning of the word “interfaith”, and some may be less inclusive than others. It is important for members and interested newcomers to be aware of the differences, and take action to correct deviations in practice. In the Huntington Beach interfaith organization, I discovered one program that restricted participation, resolved to correct it, and share my experience for the benefit of other interfaith groups. I collaborated with excluded members individually on phone and jointly afterwards, to raise the issue in transcendent discourse, first in executive meetings and later in council meetings. I succeeded in getting agreement from the leader of the restrictive program to make it all inclusive. I learned that with courage, patience, collaboration, persistence, and civil dialogue, it is possible to bring about positive change to align practices with stated goals of diversity and pluralism in interfaith organizations.

### **Acknowledgments**

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### **Executive Summary**

The purpose of this Capstone project is to correct an exclusionary practice within the Greater Huntington Beach interfaith Council, and to recruit members from religions not currently represented, so as to improve the diversity and pluralism of the council.

One program of the interfaith organization excludes non-Abrahamic religions. Having become aware of this through rejection of Zoroastrians, and other non-Abrahamic faiths, I decided to change the restrictive policy and open the program to all faiths. A Needs Analysis of the project suggested determination of stakeholders, communication and collaboration with them to decide on a joint plan. Financial resources were not needed for the project.

I communicated with other stakeholders from the Bahai, Mormon, Christian Science, and Center for Spiritual Living denominations, to get their support, and we agreed that the exclusion of non-Abrahamic faiths was not in alignment with the organization's vision, mission and purpose, and therefore needs to be changed.

This change requirement was brought to the attention of the interfaith council members and the program leader, who then agreed to change the program. This agreement was recorded in the minutes of the council meeting of September 29, 2015.

Recruitment drive for members from other religions that are not currently represented in the council, such as, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Native Americans, Coptic Christians, Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslims, has started and is ongoing, without success so far. One problem is the inconvenient weekday morning time of our council meetings.

From the experience of the project, I recommend:

- Understand what the word “interfaith” means to the organization
- Periodic review of all interfaith programs to see if their policies and operations are in alignment with the stated goals of the organization.
- Discuss any observed instances of discriminatory operations with other members
- Determine stakeholders and involve them in discussions of change projects
- Plan for transcendent discourse with all parties in the negotiation for change
- Record all verbal agreements in clearly understandable language.
- Follow up agreements with measurable evaluation

## Chapter I: Introduction

The United States of America is an increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious nation. Immigrants from many parts of the world have brought with them their diverse cultures, religions, and traditions, which they continue to practice freely under the laws allowing freedom of religion.

According to Interfaith Dialogue section in Wikipedia, “The term interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions (i.e., "faiths") and/or spiritual or humanistic beliefs, at both the individual and institutional levels.”<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the Immigration and Naturalization Law of 1965, the majority of immigrants came from Europe, and after that law, large numbers came from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

This chronological change, may explain the early interfaith groups involving Christians and Jews. Later, there was the addition of Muslims, with the common factor of Abraham being the tribal leader common to them. And, later still, we have other religions, becoming part of interfaith organizations.

Although, the dominant and privileged religion in USA, is Protestant Christianity, there is also a lower level privileged group of Abrahamic religions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Interfaith Dialogue”, *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interfaith\\_dialogue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interfaith_dialogue) .

<sup>2</sup> “U.S. Immigration since 1965”, *History*. <http://www.history.com/topics/us-immigration-since-1965> .

<sup>3</sup> Ramesh Rao and Padma Kuppaa, *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue: Living Within the Abrahamic Traditions*, ed. Daniel S. Brown (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 184.

The Greater Huntington Beach Interfaith Council was formed in response to white supremacist violence in the city, in the 1980-1990 timeframe. Its Vision statement states “The Greater Huntington Beach Interfaith Council (GHBIC) includes representatives of the diverse faith traditions in our area, coming together to learn from and with each other and to promote interfaith understanding and harmony. Spiritual and community leaders create and promote events and programs that teach people about the faith traditions in our society. Community members join in a shared vision that celebrates similarities and respects differences, believing that in this way we create a home for all of us.

Religious leaders, lay members of all faiths and members of community service organizations are welcome to participate in this interfaith effort to create a spiritually strong community. The GHBIC is a non-profit (501C3) organization.

We envision a community of tolerance, peace, understanding and harmony, and seek to achieve this through interfaith dialogue, education, programs and activities.”

### **Issue**

In a local interfaith council, in which I have been a member for about 10 years, I discovered that one of its programs does not allow followers of non-Abrahamic religions to participate. I found this out when I privately mentioned to the program leader that a youth group from the Zoroastrian religion was interested in participating, and I was told that they could not join, because it was limited to Abrahamic religions. When I asked about this in a council meeting, I was again told ‘No’.

The stated vision, mission, and purpose of the interfaith organization indicate that all faiths are welcome to join and participate in our activities. So, I was concerned that

this violated the Constitution and Bylaws of the organization. Later, I discovered during a conversation in our executive committee meeting, that even other Christian religious groups were not allowed, such as the Mormons, Christian Scientists, and Center for Spiritual Living. I decided that I would choose this as the main subject of my Capstone project.

I also noticed that several major and minor faiths were not currently represented in the organization, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Native American, Coptic Christians, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Shia Muslims, Sufi Muslims, Ahmadiyya Muslims, etc. Although they are not barred from joining, this concerned me that not enough effort was made to reach out to such groups. I decided to add this as a secondary part of my project to improve diversity.

### **Importance of the Project**

There are many interfaith organizations. By choosing this as the topic of my Capstone Action project, I would develop an understanding of the meaning of interfaith in the minds of different people, the dynamics of power and privilege within interfaith organizations, the strength of attachment of identity to religion and the consequent behavior to have a feeling of exclusivity, the method to bring about a correction, and to share the results of my research with other interfaith organizations.

Some questions that would be important to learn and share are:

- What constitutes an interfaith organization?
- How might we determine if it is truly diverse?

- Who makes this determination?
- How might we measure if an organization is practicing religious pluralism?
- Who owns the interfaith sphere or interfaith experience?

### **Project Purpose or Goal**

The main purpose of the project is to bring about a change to the restrictive policy of the one program which currently excludes participation by followers of non-Abrahamic faiths (as defined by the leader). Successfully achieving this change, through an agreement from the program leader, which is documented in the official record of the interfaith organization, will address the issue of violation of the organization's pluralism policy as stated in its vision, mission, and purpose. The practical outcome of this change will be participation by new faith groups leading to an increase in interfaith relationships, learning and sharing of information about beliefs, customs, and traditions among a wider circle of participants.

A secondary goal of the project is to add members from faith groups that are not currently represented in the interfaith organization, thereby addressing the issue of limited diversity in the current organization. The practical outcome of increased diversity of faith groups, will be the building of relationships and learning and sharing of information between a wider variety of different faiths groups, that will be more representative of the multicultural communities we live in.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### Introduction

I reviewed the literature to find any research done to address the kinds of issues I am addressing in my project, and to find useful materials which I can apply in my methodology for this project. Following is the list of articles I found to be applicable for my project.

### Dialogue

One of the main activities in interfaith organizations is for leaders to promote interfaith dialogue. Jason Barker describes this in the following quotation:

interreligious dialogue consists of "discussions for mutual understanding held among differing religious bodies." This vague definition does not, however, provide the guidelines within which formal interreligious dialogue should be held. How can Christians dialogue with members of other religions without compromising their beliefs and lapsing into syncretism, while at the same time being respectful toward non-Christians? One of the foundational documents in interreligious dialogue is Leonard Swidler's "The Dialogue Decalogue." Swidler provides ten "commandments" for engaging in constructive interreligious dialogue. These commandments are (to paraphrase):

1. The purpose of dialogue is to increase understanding.
2. Participants should engage in both interfaith and interreligious dialogue.
3. Participants should be honest and sincere.
4. Participants should assume that other participants are equally honest and sincere.
5. Each participant should be allowed self-definition.
6. There should be no preconceptions as to areas of disagreement.
7. Dialogue can only occur between equals.
8. Dialogue can only occur where there is mutual trust.
9. Participants must be self-critical of their religious traditions.
10. Participants must attempt to experience how the traditions of others affect them holistically.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jason Barker, "The Key to Effective Religious Dialogue," *Watchman Fellowship*. <http://www.watchman.org/articles/other-religious-topics/the-key-to-effective-religious-dialogue/>.

Swidler and Barker do not mention 'Abrahamic' or other religion, implying inclusiveness of all faiths, and provide important suggestions for effective dialogue.

According to Catherine Cornille, a theologian at Boston College, there are "five preconditions for any meaningful interfaith dialogue: humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and most importantly hospitability, "the openness to the possibility of truth in another tradition."<sup>5</sup> It is important for interfaith leaders to practice and promote these attributes.

Michael Balcomb elaborates on each of these preconditions. On humility, Balcomb comments, "Logically, believers who recognize the limitations and finitude of all human knowledge ought not to find it so difficult to acknowledge that even their own traditions and beliefs should be subject to the same limitation", on commitment, "to one's own faith is in fact a necessary condition for genuine dialogue to occur. If one of the parties in dialogue is not committed to their own tradition, the other party may well feel that they are not in an interreligious dialogue at all, but merely in a personal conversation", on interconnection, "examples of interconnection could be common challenges such as the secularization of society, drug, or gang problems in an inner city, and the breakdown of the families and communities", on empathy, "Real dialogue means opening up your heart as well as your mind to sense what it really means to be a Palestinian in Gaza, a Christian in Egypt, a Sunni in Syria."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Cornille, *The im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. (New York: Crossroads Publishing Company, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Balcomb, "Religion an Obstacle to Peace," *Universal Peace Federation's interfaith journal Dialogue & Alliance*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2012) <http://www.upf.org/resources/speeches-and-articles/4856-m-balcomb-religion-as-an-obstacle-to-peace>.

### **Collaboration**

An important concept for interfaith leaders is collaboration, defined by Mattesich, Murray-Close, and Monsey, in “Collaboration: What Makes It Work”, as “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. The relationship includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards.”<sup>7</sup> In interfaith organizations, we usually have member organizations represented by individuals, and collaboration with stakeholders is necessary for interfaith leaders to implement changes.

### **Leadership**

Interfaith leaders are sometimes called upon to help resolve moral conflicts. In “Moral Conflict: When Social Worlds Collide”, W. Barnett Pearce and Stephen W. Littlejohn, describe the nature of such conflicts, as intractable, interminable, and that public discourse in moral conflicts is morally attenuated, and rhetorically attenuated, and follow up with the assertion that “there are effective ways of improving the quality of public discourse in moral conflict.”<sup>8</sup> pointing to the changing of context as a solution.

In “Leadership: Theory and Practice”, Peter G. Northouse defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal”, explaining that “it is not a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader, but rather

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<sup>7</sup> Paul W. Mattesich, *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Fieldstone Alliance, 2001), 4.

<sup>8</sup> W. Barnett Pearce and Stephen Littlejohn, *Moral Conflict: When Social Worlds Collide*, (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1997), 71-80.

a transactional event that occurs between the leader and the followers. Process implies that a leader affects and is affected by followers.” Northouse provides different approaches, and suggests transformational leadership as “one of the current and most popular approaches to leadership”<sup>9</sup>

In “Rules for Radicals”, Saul D. Alinsky, suggests in the chapter on Tactics, “Tactics means doing what you can with what you have. Tactics are those consciously deliberate acts by which human beings live with each other and deal with the world around them”<sup>10</sup>, and provides thirteen rules of power tactics.

### **Power and Privilege**

Interfaith leaders need to be aware of the existence of power and privilege in society, and their impact on the behavior of the dominant groups and minority groups.

In “Justice and the Politics of Difference”, Iris Marion Young, defines Domination as “institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions.”<sup>11</sup>

In “The Myth of Pluralism, Diversity, and Vigor: The Constitutional Privilege of Protestantism in the United States and Canada”, Lori Beaman states, “The very existence

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<sup>9</sup> Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013), 5-212.

<sup>10</sup> Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*, (New York, Vintage Books, 1989), 126-130.

<sup>11</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 38.

of religions outside the mainstream is sometimes taken as evidence of diversity, of a flourishing margin that is eroding the hegemony of mainstream Protestantism and that represents the positive effects of a constitutional regime that officially separates church and state. In fact, there has been little erosion of the hegemony of the religious mainstream.”<sup>12</sup>

In “Western aka American hegemony over non-Biblical faiths”, Stephanie Ellison talks about the domination of Abrahamic faiths over non-Abrahamic faiths in the world, stating “We must consider how prominence of non-biblical faiths (be it Dharmic family, Paganism, Atheism, etc.) has diminished in several different ways on the world stage due to Western/American hegemony; this includes military, political, educational, and legal means of hegemony. Abrahamic religions include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the primary ones,”<sup>13</sup>

In the chapter of “Religious Oppression” in “Readings for Diversity and Social Justice”, Maurianne Adams and Khyati Joshi introduce the articles regarding the influence of Protestant Christianity on the development of law, politics, and social institutions of the United States. They introduce the concept of religious oppression, deconstruct the myths of ‘freedom of religion for all’ and ‘separation of church and

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<sup>12</sup> Lori G. Beaman, “The Myth of Pluralism, Diversity, and Vigor: The Constitutional Privilege of Protestantism in the United States and Canada,” (2003). ( Beaman-ConstitutionalPrivilege.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie Ellison, “Western aka American hegemony over non-Biblical faiths,” *Vichar Vimarsh* (2015). <http://www.vicharvimarsh.com/2015/08/07/westernamerican-hegemony-over-non-biblical-faiths/>.

state', outline the history of racialization of U.S. religions, anti-immigration sentiment, and suggests study of comparative religions in schools<sup>14</sup>

### **Diversity and Social Justice**

In the chapter on “Working it Out and See You in Court” in “Readings for Diversity and Social Justice”, Diana Eck describes how, many religion-based conflicts are resolved by accommodation by the employers or by the courts.<sup>15</sup>

Conflict between two minority groups, Latino and Somali Muslim immigrants, in “A Somali Influx Unsettles Latino Meatpackers” in “Readings for Diversity and Social Justice”, by Kirk Semple, shows that conflicts with dominant and minority, power, privilege aspects occur not just between Protestant Christian and other religious minorities, or between white and non-white groups, but also between minorities of different kinds.<sup>16</sup>

In the chapter “Native American Liberty Five Hundred Years After Columbus”, in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, Walter R. Echo-Hawk about the suppression of Native American religions by European immigrants, and the need for sacred sites legislation. He quotes Chief Walking Buffalo’s remarks of defiance, “You whites assumed we were savages. You didn’t understand our prayers. You didn’t try to

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<sup>14</sup> Maurianne Adams and Khyati Joshi, “Religious Oppression,” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Maurianne Adams et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 229-236.

<sup>15</sup> Diana Eck, “Working it Out,” and “See You in Court,” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Maurianne Adams et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 270-277.

<sup>16</sup> Kirk Semple, “A Somali Influx Unsettles Latino Meatpackers,” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Maurianne Adams et al. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 286-289.

understand. When we sang our praises to the sun, moon, wind, you said we were worshipping idols. Without understanding you condemned us as lost souls.”<sup>17</sup>

Sue Nowicki talks about the difficulty of being an atheist, in the chapter on “Modesto-Area Atheists Speak Up, Seek Tolerance” in “Readings for Diversity and Social Justice”. She writes, “It’s clear that atheists are an overwhelming minority, and atheists say there are several misconceptions about their beliefs. Several strongly make the point that they are not Satanists, immoral or dumb.... They’d like faith groups .... to be more tolerant of their views.”<sup>18</sup>

The article “Oral History of Adam Fattah”, in “Readings for Diversity and Social Justice”, Amna Ahmad, expresses the problem Muslims face in getting accommodation for their religious needs like prayer space, time off for prayers at the mosque, and the prejudicial attitude of some teachers in schools, such as faced by his mother at a parent-teacher conference.<sup>19</sup>

Marshall Rosenberg provides a system of communication in “Nonviolent Communication” (NVC) which can be useful in meetings and one-on-one discussions in interfaith organizations. The NVC process (observing what is happening, our feelings, our connected needs, stating our request to the other party), being aware of

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<sup>17</sup> Walter R. Echo-Hawk, “Native American Religious Liberty,” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Maurianne Adams et al (New York, Routledge, 2013), 278.

<sup>18</sup> Sue Nowicki, *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Maurianne Adams et al (New York, Routledge, 2013), 297.

<sup>19</sup> Amna Ahmad, “Modesto Area Atheists Speak Up, Seek Tolerance,” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Maurianne Adams et al (New York, Routledge, 2013), 294-295.

communication that blocks compassion and the many examples make it worth reading and applying.<sup>20</sup>

In “From Mindfulness to Heartfulness”, Alane Daugherty explains how our brain works to store past experiences and reacts from the storage space when stressful situations present themselves. In her book Daugherty provides suggestions on how to de-stress by stopping our thought process, take deep breaths, presence ourselves in the current environment, and focus on what needs to be done, using our cognitive brain instead of the subconscious brain. This can be useful in interfaith dialogue, meetings, etc.<sup>21</sup>

“Great Peacemakers” by Ken Beller and Heather Chase, provides inspirational examples of great leaders who have made a huge difference in the world, by their thinking, commitment, compassion, and integrity, to promote the cause of peace. The authors point out the five paths to peace taken by different leaders as “choosing nonviolence, living peace, honoring diversity, valuing all life, and caring for the planet”. Interfaith leaders have much to learn from that.<sup>22</sup>

In her book, “The Logic of Failure”, Dietrich Dorner, makes us aware of unintended consequences of well-intentioned plans and actions, which can result from not paying enough attention to possible side-effects. When making plans to promote interfaith harmony, we also need to think of possible adverse side-effects in terms of how

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<sup>20</sup> Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Alane Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness* (Bloomington, Indiana: Balboa Press, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Ken Beller and Heather Chase, *Great Peacemakers* (Sedona, Arizona: LTS Press, 2008), xi.

our words and actions may be interpreted differently by people of different faiths based on different world views.<sup>23</sup>

### **Inclusiveness**

Safi Omid writes about how in the beginning, interfaith involved Christian denominations, then it included Jewish religion, and later Islam. Omid also points out how power and privilege still rests with the religions that are able to host interfaith conferences and events.<sup>24</sup> I infer that interfaith should now be inclusive of the new immigrant faiths, and how power and privilege of Abrahamic religions may influence tendencies to favor restriction of participants.

### **Summary**

The literature was analyzed,

- to obtain some confirmation for the evolution of the meaning of “interfaith” in history, towards my interpretation of involving all faiths, especially in the case of my interfaith organization with its vision, mission and purpose implying that. I obtained some support for that in Omid’s article.
- to refresh my learning about leadership skills, collaboration, solving moral conflicts, power and privilege, communication skills, dialogue, obtaining other

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<sup>23</sup> Dietrich Dorner, *The Logic of Failure, Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situations* (New York: Perseus Books, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Safi Omid in “The Asymmetry of Interfaith Dialogue,” in *On Being with Krista Tippett* (2015). <http://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-the-asymmetry-of-interfaith-dialogue/8076> .

opinions to avoid unintended consequences of decisions, hegemony over non-Biblical faiths, close association of identity with religion, social justice, etc., so that I can apply these skills as needed in identifying the reasons behind the restrictive policy of one program – power and privilege of the Abrahamic faiths, fear of diluting identity of program participants by interacting with other faiths, and forming my strategy and tactics to be used in my methodology to bring about social change in the restrictive program.

### Chapter III: Method

#### Introduction to Implementation

Currently I have observed two problems in the Greater Huntington Beach interfaith council. One is a general situation of lack of sufficient diversity of faiths represented in the council. The second problem is the restriction of participation in one of its regular programs, to followers of Abrahamic faiths as defined by the program leader. My immediate goal for change is to increase the diversity of membership in my local interfaith organization, and to open up participation in one of its ‘Abrahamic only’ programs, to people of all faiths. My target are leaders of this program, “persons” per Kendall et al.<sup>25</sup> There are over 20 interfaith organizations in Southern California according to the listing of the Office of Religious Life, University of Southern California.<sup>26</sup> My long term vision is to share and spread what I learn from results of my current project to other interfaith organizations.

In this chapter I will provide a brief statement of the problem, my goals for change, stakeholders, analysis of needs, strategy for implementing the change, my project evaluation plan, evidence of results achieved, and a summary of the main points of the implementation.

#### Stakeholders

The following stakeholders, are members of faiths that are not currently invited to the restrictive program, identified with the roles they played in forming my approach to implementation, their roles in the organization, and their perspectives on the issue:

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<sup>25</sup> Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max, *Organizing Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual* (Santa Ana, California, Seven Locks Press, 2001), 39.

<sup>26</sup> “Interfaith in L.A./Southern California,” *Office of Religious Life, University of Southern California*. <http://orl.usc.edu/interfaith/la/>.

- Bahai faith representative, currently vice-president of GHBIC, suggested discussion in the executive committee, agreed that the restrictive program needs to be changed to allow other faiths to participate.
- Mormon faith representatives, executive committee members of GHBIC, agreed with discussing the issue in executive committee meeting, and agreed that the restrictive program needs to be changed to allow other faiths to participate.
- Center for Spiritual Living representative, executive committee member of GHBIC, agreed to participate in the discussion of the issue, and agreed that the restrictive program needs to be changed to allow other faiths to participate, expressed frustration at the restrictive policy of one program.
- Christian Science Church representative, Secretary of GHBIC executive committee, agreed to participate in discussion, and agreed that the restrictive program needs to be changed to allow other faiths to participate.

### **Needs Analysis**

There are books and articles on concepts of change, leadership styles for bringing about change, collaboration, and related topics, which provide guidelines and suggestions towards achieving successful change. My proposed solution has tried to follow some of those suggestions.

One of the important factors in initiating activity towards change, is to determine if there is a real issue that needs to be addressed and negotiated. Jayne Docherty states, “In order to negotiate, the parties must first agree that they have a conflict or

dispute”<sup>27</sup> After becoming aware of the issue of denial of participation in an interfaith project, I started talking to other members, and got confirmation that this was an issue. I also got agreement from them that it was an issue that needs to be discussed.

In building a coalition of supporters, I referred to factors influencing the success of collaboration suggested by Mattessich et al<sup>28</sup> and was satisfied that several applicable factors were met, such as mutual respect, appropriate cross-section, self-interest, ability to compromise, stake in process and outcome, open and frequent communication, concrete attainable goals, shared vision.

I talked to the stakeholders over the phone, individually, to inform them about the issue and my opinion about the need for change, and to get their response. I agreed with their suggestion to discuss the issue in the executive committee meeting with the leader of the restrictive program, to understand his reasons for the restriction and arrive at a mutually agreed decision to make the program inclusive of all faiths. Depending on the outcome of the negotiations, we would then consider bringing it up in the council meeting.

### **Evaluation Plan**

The efficacy of my solution will be evaluated based on whether the leader of the restrictive program agrees to change his policy to open up the program for participation

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<sup>27</sup> Jayne Seminare Docherty, *The Little Book of Strategic Negotiation*. Intercourse, (PA: Good Books, 2005), 19.

<sup>28</sup> Paul W. Mattesich, *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Fieldstone Alliance, 2001), 8-10.

by all faith groups, then following up on his agreement over time, to see if he actually allows non-Abrahamic individuals to participate in the program. I will periodically check with him to see his readiness with the new program policy, then invite other faiths to participate in the program, and check if there is any problem.

For my Capstone project, an evaluation of the change will be conducted after the implementation is completed, and after it has been announced to the interfaith council members. The evaluation will also be done periodically, as participants from non-Abrahamic faiths start participating in the currently restrictive program.

The evaluation, will involve interviewing council members, new participants in the program being changed, and will seek answers to some of the questions such as:

- Did the program reach its goals and objectives?
- What impact did the program have on its recipients?
- Who benefited from the program?
- What were the positive outcomes?
- What were the negative outcomes?
- What should be improved/changed in the program?

The change will be quantifiable, in terms of how many new faiths are being represented in the organization, and how many new faiths are participating in the currently restricted program.

**Artifacts**

Discussions were held individually and jointly with stakeholders. Before we could have a formal meeting with the program leader in the executive meeting, the issue was brought up by one of the stakeholders during our council meeting, when I brought up a related point in another program where only Abrahamic speakers were invited to speak on three consecutive panel discussion events. At that point, the stakeholder asked the leader of the restrictive program that he needs to change that program, and the leader agreed to do that in front of the council. This was recorded by the secretary, in the Minutes of the council meeting.

The secondary part of my project about recruiting new members has not progressed, and will continue over the next few months.

**Results**

Summarize the main points of the implementation.

The main points of the implementation involved determining the stakeholders with whom I communicated to get their opinions, and having reached agreement on the plan to change the restrictive program, we put our issue on the agenda of the executive committee meeting. But, before that meeting, the issue was brought up in the form of a suggested action item by one of the stakeholders, and an agreement was obtained from the leader of the restrictive program to open up his program to all faiths.

## **Chapter IV: Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

In the Huntington Beach interfaith council, in which I have been a member for about 10 years, I discovered that one of its programs does not allow followers of non-Abrahamic religions to participate. I found this out when I privately mentioned to the program leader that a youth group from the Zoroastrian religion was interested in participating, and I was told that they could not join, because it was limited to Abrahamic religions. When I asked this same question publicly in a GHBIC monthly meeting, I was again told 'No'.

The stated vision, mission, and purpose GHBIC indicate that all faiths are welcome to join and participate in our activities. I was therefore concerned that this violated the Constitution and Bylaws of the organization. Later, I discovered during a conversation in our executive committee meeting, that even other Christian religious groups were not allowed, such as the Mormons, Christian Scientists, and Center for Spiritual Living. I decided that I would choose this as the main subject of my Capstone project.

I also noticed that several major and minor faiths were not currently represented in the organization, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Native American, Coptic Christians, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Shia Muslims, Sufi Muslims, Ahmadiyya Muslims, etc. Although they are not barred from joining, this concerned me that perhaps not enough effort was made to reach out to such groups. I decided to add this as a secondary part of my project to improve diversity.

**Conclusions**

When I had to decide on the topic of my Capstone project, I saw the opportunity to convert my personal issue into the Capstone project, as it offered the interfaith action to bring about a social change in the local interfaith organization, and to share the research with other organizations through publication of its details.

My original purpose was to personally negotiate with the leader of the restrictive program, a change of his policy to allow other faiths to participate in his program, and if I did not succeed, I was going to bring it up in the council meeting for discussion by all council members.

At first I was hesitant to bring up the issue in front of other members of my organization, realizing that I was from a minority faith and the others were from relatively larger faith groups that were established in this area. But when I became aware during a chance conversation, that some other Christian faith representatives were also excluded from the program, I then decided to go forward with action to change the program with the collaboration of others. From this experience I have learned that one should have the courage to politely inquire with other members about their inclusion or non-inclusion, instead of keeping quiet.

I also learned from applying the lessons I had learned in my class work at CLU, how useful they were during my determination of stakeholders, my communications with them, and in convincing them of the worthiness of my goal to align our programs with our organization's stated inclusive vision, mission, and purpose.

And, when the agreement was obtained from the leader of the restrictive program, to open it up for all faiths, I learned that success is possible against odds that may be lined up against one's plans, with patience, dialogue, and collaboration.

From my experience on the project, I was also able to come up with some answers to my questions, which I could share with others involved in or considering interfaith work:

- What constitutes an interfaith organization?  
An interfaith organization is defined by its stated vision, mission and purpose, but also by the actual operating practices of its leaders.
- How might we determine if it is truly diverse?  
The degree of true diversity is determined by the variety of different faith groups (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Native American, Zoroastrian) that are represented in the interfaith organization.
- Who makes this determination?  
Anyone who examines the membership list of the interfaith organization impartially, can make this determination about the degree of diversity in the organization.
- How might we measure if an organization is practicing religious pluralism?  
Whether an organization is practicing religious pluralism can be measured by examining the Minutes of their meetings and/or by asking questions to the members, to see if the meetings and events promote a genuine effort by members to understand the beliefs and traditions of each other.
- Who owns the interfaith sphere or interfaith experience?  
Active members of interfaith organizations and the religious institutions they represent in the organization own the interfaith sphere and experience.

### **Recommendations**

I have the following recommendations:

- Review the current vision, mission, and purpose of the interfaith organization, and improve the statements as necessary to ensure sufficient diversity in membership and pluralism in its meetings and programs.

- Review existing programs of the interfaith organization periodically, to see if their operational policies and practices are in conformity with the stated vision, mission, and purpose of the interfaith organization.
- Discuss outreach program to recruit new members from faith groups that are currently not represented, among members of the interfaith organization.
- Discuss extending membership to individuals not affiliated with any religious institution, including atheists, among members of the interfaith organization.

I am following up with participation in a review of the wording of our organization's vision, mission, and purpose with fellow members, to improve its clarity and consequently deter future incidents of exclusionary practices in any of our programs.

I also plan to continue efforts to reach out to other communities not currently represented in our council, and recruit some new members. But my recommendation would involve other members of the organization besides just myself, and thereby improve the chances of achieving our goal.

### **Limitations and Implications**

Pros of my recommendations are:

- Review and enhancement of the current vision, mission and purpose of the interfaith organization will help to sustain the positive change achieved by the project, and prevent misinterpretation to justify future discriminatory behavior in the organization's meetings or programs.
- Review of existing programs periodically, will uncover any discrepancies between practice and goals of the organization, as well as come up with ideas to improve their effectiveness.

- Discussion of an outreach program to recruit new members will increase the chances of succeeding with more people involved in the resulting effort, and increase diversity in the organization.
- Discussion of including atheists and other individuals not affiliated with any religious institution, could result in increasing the diversity of the organization and gain more members to fight against social injustice.

Cons of my recommendations are:

- Review of the current vision, mission and purpose statements and efforts to improve the language, may result in pushback from some members who may not like the new wording as potentially going against their thinking.
- Review of existing programs periodically may uncover discrepancies, which may offend program leaders of the target programs and lead to defensive arguments by them, that could escalate into disharmony and potential leaving the organization by some of them.
- Discussion of outreach to recruit new members from currently unrepresented religions could result in blocking such effort by some members whose world view does not accept the validity of some religions.
- Discussion of including atheists in the organization, may upset some religion representatives and lead to some of them leaving the organization.

Possible solutions to overcome the Cons are:

- Pointing out the importance of the review and the benefits accruing from it to promote pluralism, and peace and harmony between different communities, and the important historic role the reviewers are playing towards that goal.

- Prior to review of existing programs, it should be explained to members that the purpose of the review is to make needed improvements that would benefit all members as supporting their loyalty to the organization's goals, and that the review was not for criticizing anyone.
- Education about religions we are planning to reach out to for new members could reassure potential objectors of the validity and commonality of these religions.
- Pointing out that atheists are also children of God, and the important thing to know would be if they share the goals of the interfaith organization.

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