

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Empowerment: The fourth pillar of interfaith leadership

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College is a time of deep community. There are students, faculty and staff of all kinds in the classroom, passing on the sidewalk and sharing common spaces. Two years ago, when I was introduced to interfaith engagement as a sophomore in college, the foundational framework was a clear model to building intentional community. Following the lead of the Interfaith Youth Core, many student interfaith organizers today seek to provide spaces that allow individuals to voice their values, engage across lines of difference and act for the common good.

For us at Aquinas College, this took form in small groups, sacred site visits and days of service. Each event provided an opportunity to ask big questions and meet a few new neighbors. Eventually, many of us developed an interfaith lens, exploring narratives and building relationships in spaces not explicitly labeled "interfaith." Coffee dates, book clubs and yoga partners have been just a few wonderful outcomes.

We have a broad community of support these days. Partnered with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, the intercollegiate movement has afforded students the opportunity to put on larger panels, combine resources to attend community events and



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be present beyond our campuses. As we advance in our undergraduate careers, we are simultaneously growing into the greater community through intentional organizations and intimate relationships.

Most recently, we have been witnessing the impacts of our past political cycle. We are becoming intimately aware of the rise of polarizing and dehumanizing rhetoric. We feel our communities are being challenged, even torn. With campuses fragmenting, many students seek something greater, craving authentic conversations and spaces for vulnerability. I remember one student specifically voicing the most common unasked question: "But how and why and where do I belong now?" We're looking for spaces to ask and to heal.

Our "voice, engage and act" model has been successful in organizing a community, but we are stumbling to sustain this space. What happens when our religious and political institutions portray our being as inherently conflicting? How do we engage if those different from ourselves are dehumanized? What is the common good if not extended to

all our neighbors? What do we value?

This year, we leaned into what is becoming the fourth framework pillar, empowerment. It is not a new idea to stand with and defend the community of which you are a part. Yet, in this divisive climate, how do we define who is worthy of our community? How do we stand for those who are otherwise deemed unworthy? How do we keep from perpetuating pain? How do we heal?

Unlike voice, engage and act, I'm not sure that we have a best practice for empowerment quite yet. Originally, the idea of empowerment felt like an act of survival done out of necessity. I would have defined empowerment as moments of activism, protests and statements. I would have seen it as public and physical resiliency. Currently, this definition is growing to include relational one-on-one support, phone calls, and hugs. It is really anything we can muster.

I don't know that anything could have prepared our student leaders for the overwhelming necessity for this next pillar of interfaith engagement. I'm not sure that we knew the kinds of stories or realities that sat among us each week, nor our place in them. Reflecting on the gray area of this past year, a common theme of complacency was challenged. Rather than remaining silent, how can we stand against injustice? How do we empower our neighbors in sustaining and authentic ways?

While it may have been sloppy, unplanned and unfiltered, students rose in solidarity and conviction. Some marched in Washington and a number of sister marches across the world. Others wrote thesis papers and bought shirts or yard signs in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Our LGBTQIA+ community organized and participated in countless panels, open forums and gatherings. Stickers and anonymous letters were circulating reminding us that immigrants are a blessing. On Valentine's Day, many letters of revolutionary love were delivered to refugee services and area mosques.

Responding to a time of crisis for our interfaith and greater Grand Rapids community, our students began to show up. Simply learning to be present with, stand next to and hear the pain of our neighbors. Solidarity and support took many forms in a few short months.

I'm still not sure what I would define as the best action for empowerment, how I would clearly articulate allyship. What I do know is that we cannot back away from one another. Our communities can and should be healing. Our time together has the power to be validating, spiritual and so very human. The empowerment of one another is sustaining and life-giving.

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