

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

The four B's of religious diversity: a local call for pluralism

By Katie Gordon

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This week, we welcome Eboo Patel to Grand Rapids to speak on interfaith leadership in our increasingly diverse communities and interconnected world.

The themes of his talks are similar to the conferences and sessions I have been a part of over the past few years as an alumna of the Interfaith Youth Core programs. In the most recent webinar series, a course on interfaith leadership, fellow IFYC alums and I learned the vision, skills and actions that make someone an interfaith leader. It is this topic that Eboo Patel is exploring in our community this week.

In the summer course's first



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lesson, we learned about the landscape of religious diversity in the United States. Patel used this as a way to show the implications for this increased interaction among people of different religious identities.

Picking up on Diana Eck's work in religious pluralism, Patel argues that where diversity is a fact, pluralism is an achievement. Diversity is the existence of difference, whereas pluralism is active and positive engagement among that difference.

So, when pluralism is achieved, Patel argues we respect identities, create relationships across difference, and cooperate toward the common good.

However, before we can achieve that pluralism through positive engagement, there are other ways that diversity could lead to more harm than good.

Those four directions that our responses to religious diversity can take, according to Patel, are the Four B's:

BUNKER

In the face of diversity, an individual or a community can choose to remove themselves from interaction with people who are different, thus bunkering themselves into a silo apart from the rest.

This retreat from modernity shields us from the world around us, and ultimately from people that could enrich our lives.

BARRIER

When encountering diversity, people can build barriers that further separate us from those who are different.

These walls between us can be built by denouncing, demeaning or dehumanizing others.

An example of this is the Westboro Baptist Church, which openly uses hate speech against anyone who shows disagreement with their teachings.

BLUDGEON

The most harmful of the nega-

tive responses to diversity are those who respond with bludgeons, or use violence against those who are different.

This is something we have seen far too much throughout history: difference in identity leading to reasons for causing physical harm to others.

BRIDGE

The final direction and the best choice for our diverse world is to build bridges of cooperation across differences.

These networks of engagement help create relationships between those who orient around religion differently, and thus help prevent negative consequences of diversity like identity-based violence.

In this response to diversity, we are not only bridging faith and non-faith communities, but the larger civic society as well.

Robert Putnam, renowned political scientist, distinguishes

between bonded social capital and bridged social capital.

Bonded is where the benefits of networks of engagement stay within just one silo of the community.

Bridged is where those benefits reach over barriers between our many silos of the community and reach the highest possible social good.

Therefore, building bridges between our communities not only connect us in our faith lives, but our broader civic lives as well.

In Grand Rapids, we too have this vision for a world that builds bridges rather than barriers, and uses our differences to strengthen our community rather than weaken.

To find out more about the local effort, visit interfaithunderstanding.org.

To join the national movement visit the Interfaith Youth Core's website at ifyc.org.

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