

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

The collective 'we' of interfaith leadership

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Working with religious diversity has never been particularly easy, but in the past year it has become more politicized and polarized than seemingly ever before. However, because of this, the work has not only become more urgent, but it has also at times become more life threatening.

We have seen this most recently in Portland, Oregon, when three men were stabbed, two fatally, after intervening to protect two young girls of color who were being harassed with Islamophobic slurs. Religious minorities in America are living today in a state of anxiety, with their lives on the line, and it seems being an ally to them might mean the same as well.

This has caused me to reflect on how interfaith engagement of today is different than interfaith engagement of yesterday. In previous years, interfaith dialogue felt like a nice, feel-good exercise of unity, but now it feels more like an urgent response to divisive and violent forces actively pulling us apart across religious divides.

The past year in particular has exposed the biases and hatred brewing beneath the

surface as the United States has become one of the most religiously diverse countries.

Diana Eck, scholar at Harvard University, has noted the difference between diversity and pluralism: diversity — or the presence of diverse identities — is a fact of existence, but pluralism is the energetic engagement with that diversity. Pluralism is not tolerance alone, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. Finally, pluralism is not a given but is achieved, through intentional engagement and dialogue.

We now see that as America was becoming more diverse, we were not necessarily becoming more pluralistic.

In this changing climate, I have been working closely with students from colleges and universities across West Michigan. We have come to see, together, how interfaith engagement has shifted to become a response to the political times we live in.

Houses of worship and sacred sites are vandalized with slurs and insults. People are yelled at and even sometimes murdered for looking, speaking or acting different. Policies are being signed that discriminate based on religious identity.

So what does it mean to be an interfaith

leader amidst overt conflict and tension around religious identity and diversity?

Over this past year, my weekly dosage of hope and inspiration came from my time spent with four Interfaith Interns — one each at Aquinas College, Calvin College, Grand Valley State University and Hope College. Despite — and perhaps emboldened by — the national climate, they each returned every week with new ideas to engage and positively affect the climate on their campuses and in our communities.

In the next four Interfaith Insights, we will feature stories from these students. In them, they call on our communities to embrace relationships and solidarity as foundational to the times we are living in. They remind us to recognize our own privileges to be better allies to religious minorities on our campuses and in the world. They suggest humility and love as values to guide our conversations and actions as we move forward in our collective path.

Of the lessons I have learned from the students, the most important has been that interfaith leadership cannot and should not be a solitary journey. It is a mutual commitment to our collective fates and futures.

As engaging with religious difference and

confronting religious bigotry has become both more urgent and uncertain, the interfaith movement is in a moment where leadership must be embraced as a collective “we” rather than individual “I.” We should not ask what I can do alone, but instead ask what is possible when we work together.

Whether our relationships provide us spiritual renewal and sustenance, allies on the front lines or motivation to speak publicly against discrimination, we can no longer use a leadership paradigm where we focus on the individual’s role. We need a framework that centers on our collective responsibility. Effective interfaith leadership is inherently relational and communal.

In these uncertain and unstable times, relationships and community provide an essential foundation and inspiration to do this work. Over the next four weeks as we share the Interfaith Interns’ reflections from their experiences in interfaith leadership, we hope you find hope glimmering below the surface of our current public life.

After all, we are all needed in the commitment to a more diverse and pluralistic future for all.

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