

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Action turns our faith into social justice

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What does it mean to pray with our feet? We've heard this language recently, from participants in the March for our Lives to the pope's Palm Sunday sermon where he told the youth "you have it in you to shout." It is a call for social justice, and "praying with our feet" isn't seen only in the Christian tradition.

Social reformers in different religious, secular, and spiritual traditions are well-known, from Mahatma Gandhi to Malala Yousafzai to Abraham Heschel. Of course, one doesn't need religion to care about social justice, and not everyone who practices religion is a social reformer, but this question of praying with our feet has been on my mind recently. My recent appointment at Grand Valley State University is to oversee a social justice center around religious, secular and spiritual identity. And I now am seeking to understand what it means to use our religious and spiritual identity as a lens to push for social justice.

Maurianne Adams, an author, professor and leader in social justice education, defines social justice as "reconstructing society in accordance with principles of equity, recognition and inclusion." How do we work to remove barriers, how do we strive to make the world a better place? How do we push to not only make the world better, but to make it more equitable for all people? How do our thoughts and meditations turn into actions and deeds?

One way to do it is by participating in

interfaith work as an act of social justice. By joining the table and hearing the stories of other religious and secular people, we gain empathy for our neighbors. But interfaith work needs to be more than just being tolerant or coexisting; it needs to be radically inclusive.

Martin E. Marty, in his book "When Faiths Collide," reminds us that "one of the problems with tolerance within pluralism is that those who tolerate often have the power or the will to remake 'the other' into some manageable image. Hospitality permits — indeed, it insists on — regarding the other as being really different."

In our interfaith context and work we need to go beyond just talking about living together. We put our interfaith into action by building friendships and communities with people of various traditions. By doing that, we continue to make this world more just by becoming friends as we gain more appreciation and knowledge of different worldviews.

When I was a student at Emory University, the Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe was the chaplain and dean of religious and spiritual life. Her social justice work allowed her to transform the historically Methodist university into a vibrant community full of people of various spiritual identities. One instance of this radical inclusiveness was when she

made me question whether putting on the "coexist" bumper sticker was enough. She argued that we needed to move to a more enthusiastic engagement with our religious diversity. She wrote that it required "constant education, cultural sensitivity, respect and multilingual communication."

When she planned events and programs, she recognized the small details, because "by being sensitive to even the smallest detail, the chaplain makes room in the community for everyone." She brought students, staff, and faculty to places like Northern Ireland, Cuba and South Africa, where she worked with them to "explore the root causes of conflict and build relationships between Emory University and communities in the U.S. and around the world."

These trips allowed students, faculty and staff to move interfaith from a classroom or table to action and seeing our shared values. She brought in speakers of various identities to speak about the broader themes of life, justice, peace, and inclusion. It was because of Susan Henry-Crowe that I went into interfaith work.

Henry-Crowe is now the chief executive of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, the social justice arm of the Methodist church. She holds the church to the social principles around equity, inclusion and social justice. Her office is near Congress, where she spends part of her time praying for and pushing the United States government to continue to act justly. She continues to use her Methodist faith to work for a better world.

After Charlottesville last summer, she

wrote to U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions pleading with him to go back to his Methodist faith. She challenged him directly to "more justly uphold the protections and rights of people of color and religious minorities than what we have seen in your seven-month tenure at the Department of Justice." She calls all of us to be actors of change, responding to injustices "not out of a desire to win, but out of a fullness of love."

For me, Henry-Crowe epitomizes putting our faith-based and secular values into social justice. She calls us to put our faith into action, to live a socially conscious life and live out our values as we continue to make the world a better place, just as she lives out the social principles of her Christian faith. I am pleased that she will be in Grand Rapids next week to deliver the annual Rabbi Sigal lecture on "Social Justice as a Faith Based Initiative."

I hope that you will join us as we explore turning our religious, secular and spiritual traditions into a lens for social justice.

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Rabbi Sigal Memorial Lecture

- "Social Justice as a Faith Based Imperative"
- Tuesday at 7 p.m.
- Eberhard Center, Grand Rapids
- Information and free registration at interfaithunderstanding.org