


2016

# Understanding Religious Leaders' Motivations for and Perceptions of Interfaith Collaboration

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## Recommended Citation

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**Understanding Religious Leaders' Motivations for and Perceptions of Interfaith  
Collaboration**

**ALL COLLEGE THESIS**

**College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University**

**In Partial Fulfillment for Distinction in the Department of Sociology**

**by**

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**April 2016**

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**Understanding Religious Leaders' Motivations for and Perceptions of Interfaith  
Collaboration**

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Interfaith collaboration consists of intentional constructive cooperation and positive interactions between individuals or institutions of different religious traditions. Interfaith initiatives occur throughout the world at the local, national, and international level.

Collaboration has been considered both a process and a result in and of itself. It can be a mechanism for forming strategic alliances with other organizations or congregations as well as a way to manage conflict (Herman 2005). Collaboration may also provide an integrative solution by bringing together insights from individuals with “different perspectives to gain commitment by incorporating concerns into a consensus” (Vecchio 2000:245). Interfaith collaboration is a unique form of collaboration as it may foster discussion not only on ethical views and philosophical principles but also on the theological beliefs related to social justice work. Despite the growing increase in faith-based collaborations, there has been little research examining *why* religious leaders and congregations choose to participate in interfaith collaboration.

This thesis uses the definition from the President’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships: interfaith collaboration refers to “activities and projects that draw participants from more than one faith tradition, denomination, spiritual movement, or religion and often include secular participants as well” (2010:72). Although previous research has led to insights about organizational collaboration in general, there has not been a prominent focus on the religious leaders and congregations participating in *interfaith collaboration*. For example, previous research on community organizing and collaborations “has not focused specifically on collaborations that seek to bring faith-based motivations into the discussion and solution of social issues” (Considine and Schnall 2008:9). Research has typically focused on secular collaborations or organizations “that choose not to make faith a central element of their organizing process” (2008:9). There is emerging research on faith and politics that corresponds with the increase in

interfaith political coalitions and the impact of religious pluralism on civil society (Yulich and Braunstein 2014; Weiner 2009). Exploring interfaith collaboration is essential as religious diversity increases in the United States, and because faith is often a central motivation for participating in social justice movements (Considine and Schnall 2008).

Additionally, past research has focused primarily on the motivations of the *organizations* rather than the *individuals* within the organizations (Considine and Schnall 2008). It is important to examine individual leaders' motivations for participation, as this is often the connection between the congregation and the interfaith organization. There are many reasons why individuals join groups or organizations of varying kinds; one of the main reasons is a sense of belonging and an opportunity to build relationships. According to Considine and Schnall, in addition to a sense of belonging and an opportunity to build relationships, organizations have a variety of motivations for participating in community collaborations. These motivations include: "building creativity, sharing resources and information, reducing risk and uncertainty, and facilitating coordination" (2008:8). Importantly, successful collaboration can foster positive experiences for everyone involved.

Movement towards action and involvement without discussing motivations or purposes for participation can lead to conflict within an organization. Therefore, this research seeks to further understand the motivation for and perception of participation among religious leaders in interfaith collaboration and to identify significant factors (theological beliefs, historical or societal conditions) that result in religious congregations and their leaders engaging in interfaith collaboration.

Although faith may motivate social justice work, definitions of faith vary widely. While the term "faith" can be ambiguous and may have many meanings, I use the term to describe an

individual's guiding belief or conviction. Faith is often associated with having a belief in God or following doctrines of a religion, though this is not a necessary condition for my use of the term. The term "interfaith" was carefully chosen over alternatives such as "interreligious," or "interbelief," which seem to imply that participants considered themselves religious and/or "believers" in some sense. Unlike these terms, "interfaith" is appropriately inclusive of all spiritual and philosophical ideologies.

### **Facilitating Factors**

The literature suggests three primary factors that facilitate interfaith collaboration: the decline of institutional religion, greater exposure to religious diversity, and a cultural shift from "religious" to "spiritual."

#### *Declining Role of Institutional Religion*

Early sociological theorists, including Durkheim and Weber, predicted a decline in religion due to the increasing complexity and rationalization of modern life. In *The Clash of Civilizations*, political scientist Samuel Huntington argued that confrontation with alternative ways of understanding the world would result in conflict between religious and cultural identities (1996). Although individual religiosity has remained resilient, there has been a decline in institutionalized religion.

Religious diversity may be less threatening because of the decreasing role of religion in daily life. Research reveals that as institutional religion declines in significance, individual religiosity is given more room to develop, which contributes to both complex religious identities

and growing numbers of religious “nones.” The declining role of institutional religion has led to the weakening of religious identities and therefore greater openness towards religious diversity.

### *Increasing Religious Diversity*

The United States is the most religiously diverse country in the world (Eck 2001); more than one out of five Americans affiliates with a religion other than Christianity or Judaism (Pew Research Center 2015). While diversity is often assumed to be a social good, Eck (2001) advises that “diversity” is only a description. The diversity of religious traditions and denominations in our country does not necessarily imply anything about the quality of interaction across religious lines. Patel and Meyer (2011) argue that diversity left unattended can lead to tension and intolerance, yet when diversity is positively engaged, it can contribute to increased cohesion and social capital. Robert Putnam (2007) has claimed that diversity is inversely related to social capital. This means that the more similar a community is, the higher the social capital; while the more diverse a community is, the lower the social capital. Therefore, positive characteristics associated with social capital, such as social cohesion and civic engagement, decline when diversity increases in the community. Putnam would argue that homogeneity increases “bonding” social capital, but not “bridging” social capital. Intentional interfaith collaboration and organization can be a way to positively engage religious diversity so as to increase “bridging” social capital and cohesion in the community, which could overcome the potential deficit that diversity levies on the stock of social capital in the community.

Social movement organizations have long been a part of the structure of the United States of America. Alexis de Tocqueville (1945) noted the tendency for Americans to form associations as a powerful means of action within the nation. He referred to public associations as a way to

foster the encouragement of a great example within society and to voluntarily help one another. Most importantly, he inquired whether there was a “connection between the principle of association and that of equality” (1945:107). His early writings provide a framework for understanding the importance of interfaith collaboration today and perhaps illuminate the need to expand religious representation within interfaith organizations so as to promote religious equality in society.

Interfaith collaboration has shifted from a “social activity for a small group of enthusiasts, to a social norm essential for our religiously diverse society” in the United States (Patel and Meyer 2011:2). Eboo Patel, founder of Interfaith Youth Core, believes that interfaith cooperation has become a civic necessity as the response to increasing religious diversity can be an opportunity for cooperation or a source of conflict. “Interfaith relations at the microsystemic level can be understood as the bridging of religious divides through the cultivation of meaningful interpersonal relationships between people of different faiths” (McCormack 2012:177). These relationships consist of exchanges which bridge social capital. Contact between members of different religious groups leads to more positive feelings and acceptance as well as empowering members of minority religious groups to enhance their social conditions (McCormack 2012). As religious diversity in the United States increases, interfaith cooperation can increase social capital and improve conditions for minority religions.

### *Cultural Shift from “Religious” to “Spiritual”*

Most sociologists today would argue that religious identity, like other forms of identity, is a dynamic process through which a variety of “religious and cultural meanings are interpreted, reconstructed, and changed over time in light of new, ever-changing historical and social



circumstances” (Ilishko as cited in Suomala 2012:364). Individuals may choose to blend institutional and popular forms of religion and incorporate a variety of religious practices, beliefs, traditions, and ethical systems into their spirituality (Suomala 2012). We are in the midst of a societal shift: an increasing number of individuals identify as “spiritual but not religious,” likewise, those who have a complex religious identity, or none at all, are on the rise (Lipka 2015). The number of religious “nones,” those who do not identify with a religious tradition, has been steadily increasing: 23% of U.S. adults are now members of this category (Lipka 2015; Putnam and Campbell 2010). The potential for complex religious identities is increasing due to a number of factors, including global immigration patterns and a growing cultural distinction between spirituality and religion, as well as increasing rates of interfaith marriage (Suomala 2012; Murphy 2015). Children from these marriages often belong to multiple religious communities and seek to affirm both identities in their life. The Pew Religious Landscape Study found that nearly four-in-ten Americans who have married since 2010 have a spouse of a different religious group (Murphy 2015). Many of these marriages (18%) are between Christians and those who are religiously unaffiliated, also called “nones.” According to Sen (2006), “The increasing tendency to overlook the many identities that any human being has and to try to classify individuals according to a single allegedly pre-eminent religious identity is an intellectual confusion that can animate dangerous divisiveness.” Including those with complex religious identities is critical as our culture shifts from “religious” to “spiritual.”

## Modern Interfaith Movements

Throughout history, social and political events have called for collaboration among religious communities to solve problems together. Religion provides inspiration for social action, and faith communities are often effective organizers. During the Civil Rights Movement, religious leaders, most notably Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., collaborated for racial equality and have since been actively involved in the War on Poverty. More recently, religious leaders have come together around issues of climate change inspired largely by Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Laudato Si*. History indicates that religion has played a distinctive role in uniting American society and demonstrates the power of political change through interfaith involvement.

National crises often bring together faith communities. In particular, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 provoked and prompted an interfaith response. September 11, 2001 evoked negative feelings and attitudes toward Muslims in America. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the ongoing wars of Afghanistan and Iraq have contributed to Islamophobia in the United States (Ayoub 2011). Interfaith collaboration has gained considerable attention since then. Takim addresses this by remarking on the events of 9/11: "Even though the Muslim community has been present in America since the late nineteenth century, there was limited integration with non-Muslims before the events of September 11, 2001. However, in the past three years Muslims have recognized that they cannot afford to live in impregnable fortresses and that living in a pluralistic milieu requires active engagement with the other" (2004:343). This active engagement has involved interfaith collaboration, which goes beyond greeting a neighbor at the grocery store to intentionally gathering for conversation and collaboration focused on issues of faith.

With the increasing role of religion in violent conflicts and crimes, scholars and practitioners have seen "potential for religious leaders and communities to transform conflict" into

opportunities for collaboration. (Neufeldt 2011:344). The United Nations (UN) held sessions on interfaith dialogue in 2007 at which the assembly president suggested, “Promoting a true dialogue among civilizations and religions is perhaps the most important political instrument that we can use to reach out across borders and build bridges of peace and hope” (as quoted in Neufeldt 2011:344). Interfaith conflict has often led to acts of terrorism and violence and therefore interfaith collaboration can be used for both political and peace-building efforts.

### **Contemporary Types of Interfaith Collaboration: Dialogue and Doing**

Religious Studies scholars stress the importance of bringing communities together through interfaith collaboration. However, each scholar seems to have different approaches to these interfaith efforts. Dr. Diana Eck, Harvard professor and founder of the Pluralism Project describes pluralism as “the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differences” (2001:70). Dialogue is an important component for her focus on interfaith engagement and involves intentional conversation between or among people of different religious traditions. On the other hand, Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Core, emphasizes collaborative action among people of different faiths or worldviews. Patel defines pluralism as “a society characterized by respect for people’s religious (and other) identities, positive relationships between people of different religious backgrounds, and common action for the common good” (2012:71). Chimzar (2014:310) claims that while both scholars understand the importance of religious pluralism, they each focus on a different approach: “Eck has a belief-based concept of pluralism which emphasizes differences between religions, while Patel has a practice-based concept of pluralism which emphasizes similarities.” Therefore, the missions of their organizations are different. The Pluralism Project focuses on research related to religious diversity

and theological discussion of beliefs, while the Interfaith Youth Core prepares college students for service and community engagement through social justice and shared religious values.

These two organizations are excellent examples of the two types of contemporary interfaith efforts: dialogue and doing. Dialogue involves conversation and communication for the purposes of deepened understanding and appreciation for one's own beliefs, and increased respect, understanding, and appreciation for other religious traditions. Doing is interfaith action through projects and participation focused on shared social justice issues.

Dialogue can occur through conversation as well as through education. Interfaith collaboration can increase religious knowledge through education. Education is essential: "Studies strongly suggest that the amount of knowledge one has of a religion corresponds strongly to positive attitudes towards that religion" (Patel and Meyer 2011:3). For example, if the media only portrays negative information and images about Islam, people are likely to have a negative view of Muslims. While knowledge of a religious tradition can shift perceptions, the strongest influence on increasing positive attitudes towards other religions is personally knowing someone of a different faith tradition (Putnam and Campbell 2010). This is referred to by Putnam and Campbell as the "Pal Al" phenomenon. People who have a friend of a different faith are more likely to feel positively toward that faith group overall. Friendship can foster a sense of trust and reduce religious stereotypes.

One example of interfaith action would be the recent involvement of college campuses in interfaith efforts. College campuses can be excellent places to foster interfaith collaboration as students of different faiths may be interacting for the first time, and this happens in a "space where they are encouraged to question, challenge, and explore their own identities and those of others" (Patel and Meyer 2011:6). In March 2011 President Obama issued an Interfaith Service Challenge

to American college and universities. This challenge called campus communities to “design and implement year-long interfaith and community service projects in order to build understanding among different communities and contribute to the common good” (Sapp 2011:280). Earlier, President Bush began the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in 2001. The renamed Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships intends to “increase partnerships between religious leaders, community projects, and the federal government” (Sapp 2011:282). Social movements often gain momentum on college campuses because they dedicate energy and efforts to issues of diversity and identity. Campuses across the country have already engaged in environmental and sustainability efforts, LGBTQ issues, gender equality, and multiculturalism (Patel and Meyer 2011). Religious diversity and interfaith collaboration may be the next frontier for colleges and universities, as college students coming from a variety of faith backgrounds can work together to provide creative solutions to challenges that affect our country.

Modern interfaith initiatives take diverse forms: “from grass-roots collaboration on projects such as feeding the homeless, to locally-sponsored interfaith dialogues, collaborations sponsored by national denominational bodies, and shared work on federal ‘faith-based initiatives’” (Fulton and Wood 2012:398). Interfaith organizations incorporate faith into their organizing efforts through prayer, worship services, scripture studies, reflection, sharing meals and celebrating holidays. These practices serve to “motivate and mobilize the faith-orientated members around issues of common concern, while building relationships between leaders of differing faiths” (Fulton and Wood 2012:416).

Interest in interfaith collaboration has continued to emerge throughout the last century and a half. This interest has focused almost exclusively on the social benefits of religion, while little research has addressed the recent surge of interfaith conflicts and reasons faith communities are

collaborating together in the United States. Interfaith conflict divides communities through religious intolerance, oppression and violence. Given the persistence of interfaith conflict and religious hate crimes in communities across the United States, scholars must investigate the role that interfaith collaboration can play in overcoming these conflicts and unifying an increasingly diverse society. This thesis represents an effort to extend the scholarship in this area by examining religious leaders' motivations for engaging in interfaith collaboration. It is imperative that sociologists begin to examine relevant trends in interfaith collaboration and potential directions for action research and advocacy. While the benefits of religion and interfaith collaboration are important to consider for human and community development, the lack of literature addressing the motivations for and perceptions of interfaith collaboration point out the necessity deepened examination of why religious leaders and congregations engage in interfaith collaboration.

## **Methods**

Qualitative data for this project come from in-depth interviews with ten religious congregational leaders in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota (see Appendix A: List of Personal Interviews). These leaders represented a variety of religious traditions and denominations: 2 Christian, 1 Jewish, 2 Muslim, 1 Hindu, 1 Buddhist, 1 Baha'i, 1 Unitarian Universalist, and I also sought out a religiously unaffiliated or atheist leader. This varied sample allowed the examination of variations in how religious leaders think about and approach interfaith collaboration, as well as comparison between religious traditions and denominations and the identification of factors contributing to congregational participation in interreligious collaboration.

To recruit participants, I identified three interfaith organizations in the Twin Cities Metropolitan area and contacted the leadership of these groups by phone and e-mail to explain the

research and ask for their assistance in identifying religious leaders who are actively engaged in their interfaith group. Therefore, the religious leaders were selected based on affiliation with or participation in an interfaith organization. Ten of the nineteen religious leaders I contacted agreed to participate in the research, resulting in a response rate of 53 percent (See Appendix A). I conducted the interviews in face-to-face fashion: five at the site of the congregation, four at a coffee shop or restaurant, and one at the individual's home. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, with the shortest interview lasting 39 minutes, and the longest interview lasting 1 hour and 24 minutes. The participants signed a consent form which had been approved by the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The form stated that responses would be kept confidential and that no identifying information (of individuals or congregations) would be published without the researcher first securing their additional, specific consent.

The interviews focused on the significance and interaction of both organizational and personal motivations to engage in interfaith collaboration. Questions addressed the forces which previous theory and research suggest might motivate individuals and congregations: institutional beliefs (theological understandings and congregations' core missions and values) and environmental influences (historical and social issues) (see Appendix B). Conducting interviews allowed the researcher to examine variations in how religious leaders think about and approach interfaith collaboration. It also allowed comparison between religious traditions and denominations and identified factors contributing to congregational participation in interreligious collaboration. In total, I asked each participant thirteen questions covering the following topics: personal involvement with interfaith collaboration; the congregation's theological tradition's influence on interfaith collaboration; participation of the congregation in interfaith collaboration;

social implications of interfaith collaboration; and environmental factors such as social issues or historical events that have encouraged interfaith collaboration.

With permission, the interviews were audio recorded. I then transcribed the interviews and coded them, allowing analysis of relevant themes and concepts. Analyses of the interviews in the context of relevant scholarly literature provide insight into factors which may contribute to religious congregational leaders' motivations, pressures, and purposes for participating in interfaith collaboration. In reviewing the transcriptions, the researcher identified common themes and factors that contribute to how religious leaders think about interfaith collaboration and that provide possible motivations as to why their congregation is involved in interfaith collaboration.

Although I was raised Roman Catholic, I no longer identify with a religious tradition. I do not believe that my religious identity (or lack thereof) influenced data collection as it was never discussed in any of the interviews. As a student employee of the Collegeville Institute, a cultural and ecumenical non-profit organization located in Collegeville, Minnesota, and student coordinator for the Jay Philips Center for Interfaith Learning, I have always been passionate about religion and interfaith collaboration. My experience as a research assistant and studying abroad in India further sparked my interest and encouraged me to explore the social and theological influences of interfaith collaboration.

In this thesis, I characterize the field of interfaith collaboration as a whole and then primarily focus on interfaith involvement of religious leaders in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Due to a limited sample size, results are not generalizable, but will instead provide initial understandings and a foundation for future research using larger data sets such as information from the National Congregations Study. This research can provide a sociological foundation for theological reflection on the importance of interfaith collaboration. Ultimately, I hope to promote public



understanding of interfaith initiatives and advance the discussion of the history and social implications of interfaith involvement.

## **Findings**

I will begin by discussing the various themes that emerged from the interviews with regard to leaders' motivations for participating in interfaith collaboration. I will also discuss barriers to interfaith collaboration, the influence of theology on interfaith collaboration, the personal benefits these leaders receive from their involvement, and the ways in which they promote interfaith collaboration among members of their congregations.

### **Leaders' Motivations for Interfaith Collaboration**

Five facilitating factors were found to be motivators for participation in interfaith collaboration: education and promoting understanding, ending stereotypes and preventing violence, exploring meaning, a sense of social responsibility, and a desire to include non-religious people.

#### *Education and Promoting Understanding*

Education was a primary factor for Hindu involvement in interfaith collaboration. I interviewed the Chair of the Education Community at a Hindu temple located in a suburb of the Twin Cities. The Hindu temple receives requests from synagogues, churches, and high schools to give presentations on religion or speak on specific topics at interfaith programs. In addition to a place of worship, the Hindu temple also has a school for religious education. The goal of the school is to have the students learn about Hinduism as well as other religious traditions so that students

embrace the overlapping messages found in many religions. The Chair of the Education Community at the Hindu temple shared that Hindus born and raised in the United States often do not understand the cultural aspects of their religion. Children are often exposed to different religions and cultures in the classroom at school. Therefore, the temple attempts to educate parents through their children. For example, when writing their religious education textbooks they intentionally inserted sections on interfaith perspectives. He said, “You can’t really appreciate and understand your own religion unless you learn something about other religious traditions as well. We may have our own perspective about Christianity and Islam but we also need to understand what these other religions can teach us.” Education and the opportunity to learn from other religions was the main motivator mentioned for his participation in interfaith collaboration.

As the existing literature suggests, increasing knowledge about a religious tradition leads to increasingly positive attitudes towards that religious tradition. We live in a world that is rapidly changing. In terms of the changing religious representation in the Twin Cities, the Baha’i individual interviewed stated that “It’s a situation where we have to be able to intelligently and sensitively interact with people of different religious and cultural backgrounds. We have to be willing to look for the sameness.” The Hindu interviewed argued that although the United States is a society which is predominantly Christian, it is becoming increasingly secularized and therefore it simply makes sense to understand and have knowledge of other religious traditions. Knowing his children would likely grow up to prefer a secular or Christian worldview has encouraged his family to get involved with the community.

The Buddhist individual interviewed shared that his main motivation for interfaith collaboration is promoting understanding. Interfaith collaboration is important to him as he finds himself extending out into the community more and more and is looking to leave a legacy.

Interfaith collaboration is a way for him to see how he feels about his own faith and how he thinks about himself within his faith. He said it can be an interesting way to test if it is authentic for oneself. People won't engage in dialogue unless they think any kind of change will come from it.

*Ending Stereotypes and Preventing Violence after the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attacks*

Four of the religious leaders discussed the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as a main motivation for participation in interfaith collaboration. September 11, 2001, created significant fear for all Americans, in particular for Muslim communities in the United States. Indeed, many mosques began interfaith outreach in response to a concern for their safety (Takim 2004). When I asked how his interest in interfaith collaboration began, one of the Muslim leaders explained that there were a lot of negative images of Islam going on in the news after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks. It was important to him to let their neighbors know that they had been in the area for a while (their mosque had been in the neighborhood for 15-20 years at the time) and that there was no need to worry. Introducing themselves provided an opportunity to explain who they are and encourage people not to let the media paint a misleading picture of Muslims.

In an effort to introduce themselves to the neighborhood, his mosque hosted an open house. Unfortunately only one or two people showed up to this initial event. After the disappointing lack of attendance at their first open house, his mosque decided that instead of inviting their neighbors in, they would go out to introduce themselves to their neighbors. Whenever there were religious services at local congregations, members of the mosque would call and express interest in attending and ask whether they could go to the Sunday service at local churches. He said, "We went to their churches first. I think that helped a lot. The visual they might have had about who Muslims are and who they saw [at their services] were totally different." Now when he invites

them to attend events at their mosque, it is easier for them to come as they have already seen Muslims in the community. The other Muslim man interviewed, who happened to be the imam at his mosque, said that being a Muslim in the United States, one must always know a lot about their surroundings. He said, “How do they think about me as a Muslim or about Muslims in general?” These questions and this curiosity of how Muslims are perceived in the community is what initially motivated him to get involved in interfaith collaboration.

The rabbi said that September 11, 2001, prompted the Jewish community to engage in a new way with the Muslim community. She said that there is always a panel looking for a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian, especially after September 11, 2001. However, religious fundamentalism is not tolerant of interfaith initiatives. She said that, “Fundamentalists are not in the business of interfaith dialogue and that is what keeps them moving towards violence.” On the opposite end of the fundamentalism spectrum, there was also mention of an angry response from the atheist community towards religion after September 11, 2001. Therefore the pluralistic rationalist decided that it would be beneficial to have meetings with people of all different religious and nonreligious and cultural worldviews to encourage reasoned, rational communication.

Violence prevention was another reason given by religious leaders for participating in interfaith collaboration. The Baha’i leader said:

We know that there’s a door that always needs to be kept open. Consequences of not keeping it open especially in a global society: there can be extreme violence and extreme suffering. Society is made up of all the people who live in it. If they’re talking to each other and if they have sympathy for each other they can work together to make a better society.

In terms of Christians who want to do harm to those of different religious faiths, the evangelical Christian said, “They haven’t taken the time to experience who they are and what they believe. Only when you really know one another can you actually change the conflict narratives in society.”

*Exploring Meaning*

When asked why he participates in interfaith collaboration, one of the Muslim men stated that he loves religion and likes to know not just about his own religion but other religions as well:

When I do these kinds of events and organize and bring people together, I'm able to achieve the objective. I'm able to clear the stereotypes not just outside but a big goal of mine is also to clear those stereotypes inside the mosque. I think that a number of us inside our four walls are kind of isolated and have a certain perception of belief. We can only live peacefully in a community if we know each other.

When describing his previous experience with interfaith dialogues and debates, the evangelical Christian pastor stated that "It was leaving me with more questions and attention as what the purpose was in dialogue." Interfaith collaboration is deeper than commonality for him; "it became more of an exploration of meaning around the human existence." He focused on exploring meaning through interfaith collaboration. He said:

I feel it grounds the participants in an important series of basic human experience, principles or values. One is that the convictions of our own faith, if they truly reflect the creator of all things should be life giving. Only when we actually know people of other faith traditions and we engage in what it is that's transformational in each of the traditions can we be fully human. If you only know your tradition and don't care how other people experience God in the world you're almost not fully human. That wasn't afforded to people prior to some of the recent decades; except for reading books or having money to go somewhere. Now we are sharing space: hospitals, parks, and neighborhoods. If you talk about having leaders within these traditions, it's absolutely essential that you're getting together for friendship and learning because I believe you can't be fully human. That is a basis of understanding the world we live in. We need all of these people at the table. This is how the world organizes. Then we are more equipped to work together to solve our most intractable conflicts. From the base of relationship where you now understand more about how the world works and how people come at God and meaning (which loops back to help you grow in your faith tradition in profound ways if you're willing to do the work) then you can move to this deal of working on societal woes and conflicts together in more meaningful ways and I believe more powerful ways. You're not just representing just your group. You're working together on things like race, poverty, and social justice.

Many respondents reported that interfaith collaboration is a wonderful way to learn and gain new insights about themselves and their faith. After studying his own religious tradition, the Hindu individual said that he found great value in sharing his newfound knowledge with others as this has brought meaning to his life.

### *Sense of Social Responsibility*

Several religious leaders shared that they believe interfaith collaboration to be socially responsible and a sign of being a well-informed citizen. It is about knowing how to be an activist in the neighborhood and state. “If we don’t talk with each other we’re very likely fighting with each other or being indifferent to each other.” The imam believes that “This is our responsibility, our duty toward our people. Why not do it in a collaborative way in our faith activities?” Collaboration because of a sense of shared social responsibility was a common theme in the interviews.

The imam posed several questions in response to why he participates in interfaith collaboration. He said, “I am here to help the community. So why not communicate in interfaith community with the atmosphere of trust and cooperation? I cannot do a lot by myself, Christians cannot do a lot by themselves, nor Jewish people. Why not all of us as part of the community help serve our communities?” For him, caring about his relationship with God also means caring about his relationships with the people around him. As an imam he encourages his Muslim congregation to be aware and involved by moving their faith into action.

Social justice issues and charity projects are examples of interfaith collaboration in action and represent the *doing* component of interfaith collaboration. There were several social justice

issues that religious leaders mentioned working together on, including the marriage amendment in Minnesota, gun violence, and homelessness.

Four of the religious leaders mentioned interfaith collaboration around the issue of marriage equality. In 2012 the state of Minnesota voted on a constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage. Several of the leaders discussed opposition to the constitutional amendment being a source of support and cooperation from local congregations. However, not all congregations in the Twin Cities supported the opposition. The minister from the Unitarian Universalist congregation stated that “some theological things you just can’t work around,” meaning his congregation was not able to collaborate with all of the Christian denominations but they were able to join together with Jewish groups, ELCA Lutherans and the United Church of Christ in their anti-marriage amendment work.

The Unitarian Universalist congregation also does a lot of work with gun violence and explained that “We just don’t have a voice. The compelling voice on gun violence is the African American community. That’s where people are getting killed. I mean, certainly there is gun violence everywhere, but they have a much higher proportion of gun violence.” He explained that it is essential for them to join the conversation on gun violence so that they can support those congregations who are more affected by issues of safety and violence.

Aside from political interest or social justice issues, there has been significant success with interfaith charity projects, where rather than talking about theology, congregations will work on projects together focused particularly on the issue of homelessness. In 2009 the Evangelical Christian pastor began to assess what could be done with his building and church, and homelessness was at the top of the list. Belonging to the downtown interfaith clergy group provided him with resources and engaged participation from the stakeholders in the community who were

currently working to alleviate homelessness and poverty. This led to a three-way partnership between the county, a local homeless shelter, and his church to open a winter shelter for fifty adults. He suggested that members of the downtown interfaith clergy group have mentored him in this area and pointed him to the right people.

The Catholic priest also discussed a housing project in the neighborhood that brought together a Catholic church, Protestant church, and a mosque. Although the project did not develop, it brought the three congregations together. The imam interviewed shared that interfaith charity projects are important because, “It is not only a discussion in our faith, but you move to action to serve the community. This is what I want the most. We can talk for years and years but you must move down to actions in order to have your faith in action.” Most notably, several of the leaders interviewed were a part of the collaboration and creation of a non-profit organization to meet the needs of the homeless in the Twin Cities. The rabbi explained that the non-profit was created to coordinate all of the programs that already existed at each of the congregations to address homelessness. She said that previously they had each been providing different services such as a food pantry, overnight shelter, thrift store, etc. and sometimes were competing against rather than coordinating with each other. The creation of a non-profit organization allowed the religious leaders to focus their energy and efforts on other aspects of ministry and interfaith involvement, while providing the financial support and volunteers for the non-profit organization. This project provided permanent housing for one hundred single men and is evidence of what can happen when congregations work together.

It is also important to note that a few of the religious leaders did not mention any involvement in social justice initiatives or charity projects. The Hindu, Buddhist, Baha’i, and pluralistic rationalist made no mention of participating in charity projects together. Social action



may be less of a priority for these congregations due to their suburban location and the relatively high socioeconomic status of their congregations. A few of the leaders from those four congregations explained that they focus their efforts on religious education or engaging in interfaith dialogue rather than doing service projects, whereas the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders discussed the issue of homelessness as one that was important to them and a cause to collaborate on. This discrepancy could be due to the location of the churches, mosques, and the synagogue as they are in closer proximity to poverty in the city, confronted by the homeless and hungry on a daily basis.

### *Inclusion of Non-religious*

It was important to include those of no religious faith in the sample as not only is a lack of religious identity becoming increasingly common (Lipka 2015) but doing so allowed examination of other social forces beyond religious identity and theological tradition which may influence involvement in interfaith collaboration. In an attempt to include an individual of no religious faith, I was advised to speak with the leader of a local pluralistic rationalist society. An interview was also conducted with a Unitarian Universalist minister who identifies as a humanist. An unexpected motivator identified through these two interviews for participating in interfaith collaboration was that of further including nonreligious people (atheists, agnostics, pluralistic rationalists, secular humanists, etc.) in interfaith collaboration.

The minister from the Unitarian Universalist congregation shared that because his congregation consists mainly of atheists and agnostics, sometimes they are not allowed “in the club” or invited “to the table.” Despite experienced exclusion from interfaith collaboration, respondents understood including those who are not religious to be essential, as society becomes

increasingly secular. According to the Baha'i individual, interfaith collaboration is important, because, "We've become such a secular society; there are people who don't believe in God and it seems like there has to be dialogue and discussion or the results will be devastating." Including atheists in interfaith collaboration is a possible response to the decline of institutional religion and the cultural shift from religious to spiritual.

The leader of the pluralistic rationalist organization claimed that, "Here in the Twin Cities our goal as pluralistic rationalists is to increase the outreach of the interfaith community [toward non-religious people]. We want them to actually invite these people, because these people are probably going to be a huge dynamic and huge demographic in the future." The very nature of the pluralistic rationalist organization is interfaith and includes people of various religious and philosophical traditions. The group's philosophical stance is that dialogue is the only way to rationally communicate. "If we want to be a part of the world, pluralistic rationalists have to engage in reason and dialogue. Rational dialogue is the only way to verbally communicate new ideas and worldviews in a moral way." When asked why atheists attend and belong to his pluralistic rationalist organization, he stated that "They are there to show people that atheists are not evil and that they can be logical and rational." Although interfaith organizations may intend to be welcoming and inclusive, as the interviews indicated there are still groups of people who feel left out of the interfaith conversation, in particular those without religious faith. Interfaith organizations may not think to or know how to include atheist, agnostic, or secular organizations in their interfaith efforts. According to the leader, the goal for pluralistic rationalists and atheists is to get interfaith organizations to think bigger and broader by including those of no religious faith in their interfaith collaboration.

## **Factors Limiting Interfaith Collaboration**

The interviews made it apparent that there were just as many factors limiting and constraining interfaith collaboration in the Twin Cities as there were factors promoting it. The three factors expressed most frequently from religious leaders as factors hindering them or their congregation from participating in interfaith collaboration included limited time, lack of interest from members in the congregation and the broader culture, and the responsibility of the leader to engage the congregation in interfaith activities. At least one (and in a few instances, all three) of these factors was shared by each of the religious leaders as a reason for lack of participation in interfaith collaboration. In addition to these three most common barriers limiting participation, four other reasons given were: fear, cultural and language differences, exclusion of Dharmic traditions, and the negative influence of Christian history.

### *Lack of Time and Volunteers*

The largest factor preventing religious leaders from participation in interfaith collaboration was a lack of time and available volunteers. Several of the leaders stated that all of their staff are volunteer, so whatever little time they had must be devoted first to taking care of their members and therefore interfaith collaboration is often on the periphery. Considering that they don't have any paid staff in their organization, both of the mosques are doing their best to provide interfaith opportunities with an average of one event a month. Whereas a lack of paid staff seemed to limit the Baha'i and Buddhist communities from engaging in interfaith activities, both leaders reported being involved in interfaith individually or independent from their faith community.

The Catholic priest explained that ministry is constant circles of priorities and, unfortunately, interfaith is often not on people's radar; rather it is a peripheral activity. In terms of

his congregation's involvement in interfaith collaboration he said, "We have been so preoccupied with basic survival and safety, with poverty, injustice... there hasn't been a whole lot of time for interfaith. Plus it's a neighborhood predominately of color and that group is African American and there's a lot of distrust going across the color line." In the Catholic Church today, there are far fewer priests than parishes. The priests are very busy and must decide how to prioritize their limited time. Therefore interfaith involvement may not take priority. The Evangelical Christian pastor described how many of his friends and fellow ministers in the downtown interfaith clergy group are so busy trying to "plug holes" in their institutions and solve financial problems or declining membership that they simply don't have time to participate in interfaith collaboration.

The Buddhist individual interviewed shared that sometimes outreach can feel like a strain:

We have a Catholic Church virtually across the street from us and we've had almost no contact with them. I thought about that; I should go over and meet the priest and tell him what it's about. It's totally crazy how little communication there is in some ways but everybody's kind of, "How do we work with what we have?" "How do we meet the needs of the people we have?" One of the biggest obstacles is time. Also an element of fear: How will this interaction change us? Is this person going to represent us well?

This quote highlights several of the hesitations that religious leaders have in engaging other congregations in the neighborhood and how the limitations of time can limit communication.

#### *Lack of Interest in Interfaith Collaboration*

The Evangelical Christian pastor blatantly stated that the biggest challenge to interfaith collaboration is that no one values it and the broader culture could care less. "There are not enough advocates for it. The evangelical world is not only disinterested, but distrusts it. It sees [interfaith collaboration] as a way of being relativist, threatening and diminishing of Jesus and the mission in their world as a whole, so they don't care about it." It takes time and effort that many Evangelical

Christians may not be willing to put in. Likewise, the imam said that there are some mosques that have never done interfaith work because there is a lack of understanding and they see no need for it.

The Hindu individual felt that his temple should play a more active role in interfaith events as they have a large facility and auditorium. However there are insufficient numbers of people to participate, as people are often preoccupied with their own tradition and don't think to look beyond. Although the Hindu community theoretically supports interfaith dialogue, in practice it is not happening. He admitted that for the moment much of the congregation is too preoccupied with themselves; "The participation from our communities is quite disappointing in interfaith events." He said, with generating funds to pay off loans being one of the biggest priorities of the temple, interfaith collaboration is an area where they could do more.

#### *Interfaith Involvement Dependent on Leader of Congregation*

Interfaith collaboration is often initiated by the leaders of religious congregations. Although there may be interest among the members, it often takes the leader of the congregation to act as a representative of the religion and develop connections with local congregations. This expectation and lack of participation from members was sometimes expressed with frustration by the religious leaders. In particular, the rabbi shared similar sentiments that members of her congregation often see interfaith collaboration as *her* work rather than *their* work. While they appreciate her involvement, they believe interfaith collaboration to be the responsibility of the rabbi. My data suggest that involvement in interfaith collaboration is incredibly dependent upon the energy and intentions of the religious leader. It involves asking how much time one has and

how much interest there is for interfaith collaboration within the congregation. Often, this requires the leader to be willing to host events at their own congregation, rather than just attending.

In the case of the two Muslim congregations, one respondent clarified that it is not the ministry leadership that determines the direction of interfaith collaboration for the mosques but the scholarly leadership. Therefore, their involvement in interfaith collaboration will be dependent upon their theological understanding of religious diversity, not necessarily the energy or effort of the imam. This was also true for the Hindu leader. He made the important distinction that in Hinduism, the Hindu priest is primarily responsible for performing religious ceremonies and is not expected to give sermons. The philosophical knowledge of the religion is not considered the responsibility of the priest but of scholars. This leadership structure seemed to be a factor for both the Muslims and Hindu, as it placed the responsibility for interfaith collaboration on volunteers and members rather than on the religious leadership of the congregation.

### *Fear*

As mentioned in the discussion of responses to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, fear can be a motivator as much as a barrier to interfaith collaboration. The Roman Catholic priest stated that many devout Catholics may fear losing one's Christian identity by participating in interfaith collaboration. Unfortunately suspicion can lead to ignorance. He said, "It's easier for people to congregate to their own and be comfortable with their own. At the very least ignore the 'other'. But more likely to suspect the 'other' and to become afraid of the 'other' if not perpetuate some kind of violence." However, more often than not, getting to know the 'other' has been an enriching experience for all interviewed. Instead of minimizing their religious faith or identity,

each individual claimed that the more they learned about other faiths, the more they were able to deepen their understanding of their own beliefs.

### *Cultural and Language Differences*

One limiting factor that was mentioned by the two Muslim leaders was that of cultural and language differences being a reason Muslims may not participate in interfaith collaboration. With many Muslims in Minnesota being recent immigrants, they may be overwhelmed with the transition to life in the United States and understandably focused on assimilation and adaptation rather than interfaith collaboration. The imam said that, “When I come from new land to new environment I’m concerned about specific things in my life: maybe my job, my accommodation, my kids’ education...the list would go on and on. Where is interfaith in your life? One needs to take care of the principal things in life first.” He said that when the first Muslims came to Minnesota there was only one mosque and now they have sixty four places of worship in the state. He believes that Muslims need more time to understand the issue of interfaith collaboration.

### *Exclusion of Dharmic Religions*

Until recently, interfaith collaboration often meant collaboration among only the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), leaving the Dharmic traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Jainism) on the side of the conversation. The Hindu individual suggested that this was especially true after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as there was an urgent need for the Abrahamic traditions to foster harmony among themselves. He believes that, as a Hindu, he has a very different and unique perspective to offer and it has been difficult to be excluded from the interfaith conversation. He also said that there is no representation

from the smaller Dharmic religions (Sikhism and Jainism) and although no one in the community would expect or want him to, he has found himself obligated to present a Sikh or Jain viewpoint at interfaith programs because they are otherwise absent from the conversation. As sister faith traditions, the Hindu temple shares space with the local Jain community, which has a small shrine within the temple. He believes that there should be increased participation of Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist traditions in interfaith activities in the Twin Cities.

### *Impact of Negative Christian History on Interfaith*

Lastly, a few of the non-Christian religious leaders shared that there may be some people who are uninterested in participating in interfaith collaboration due to previous negative experiences with various religious traditions, in particular with Christianity. For his congregation of Unitarian Universalists, the minister said that he encourages his congregation to participate in interfaith collaboration by talking about the common goals they share and most importantly because the total number of Unitarian Universalists in the state is only about four thousand. He said, “We have no effect whatsoever except by joining in coalitions politically or socially. We can do very little if we don’t reach out.” Reaching out to increase size requires setting hesitations aside.

The Hindu individual described instances where he was invited to speak at an interfaith debate or event that involved undermining his tradition and an effort to convert. He felt that a lot of work goes on in the name of interfaith dialogue that actually seeks to undermine his own religious perspective and explained that he knows many people who have had similar feelings and experiences. He has “come across many Hindus who don’t see any value in [interfaith collaboration] and they consider their tradition sufficient. Some Hindus generally have suspicions that it [interfaith collaboration] is a ploy to convert.” Muslim and Jewish communities have a



struggle of historic mistrust and fear and it can be hard to get members involved. The rabbi explained that there are tension points when people come together for interfaith dialogue; historical issues influence their interfaith involvement today. She said that “Two thousand years of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism has an effect on our relationships today and our conversations today.” Similarly, the imam made a comment addressing Christianity’s negative impact on the Muslim world and Muslim countries through colonization and evangelization. These are factors that may prevent Jews and Muslims from participating in interfaith activities, and those in the Jewish and Muslim community may have to confront their fear of Christianity to fully participate in interfaith collaboration.

### **Theological Influence**

A factor expected to contribute to religious congregational leaders’ participation (or lack thereof) in interfaith collaboration was their theological tradition. Three themes of theological understanding emerged from the interviews: acceptance, tolerance, and conversion.

The Unitarian Universalist, pluralistic rationalist, and Baha’i expressed that acceptance of religious differences makes sense and can be a practical way to cooperate in a pluralistic society. Over eighty percent of the Unitarian Universalist congregation consists of atheists and agnostics, though in its nature, Unitarian Universalism is all-encompassing. The Unitarian Universalist minister said:

Unitarian Universalists in general are leaders in multifaith work, again because we have many different traditions in our tradition. More or less the theology of Unitarian Universalism is that well-considered theological viewpoints are valid and so, since we think that, then we have Buddhists, we have atheists, we have agnostics, we have Lutherans, Catholics, Hindus, etc.

Unitarian Universalism is about the respect for different paths to truth and this is one of its seven principles.

While rationalism is often associated with an atheistic worldview, the leader of the pluralistic rationalist society distinguished his group as a society which considers rationalism a method and practice rather than a worldview. The pluralistic rationalist society consists of atheists and theists as well as conservatives and liberals, all of whom commit to practice every day reasoning regardless of their religious faith (or lack thereof). The leader strongly believes that there are ways to find morality other than through a scriptural source.

The leader from the Buddhist congregation stated that his community is “advocating basic goodness of all people and curiosity of other religious traditions.” Those who practice Buddhism in the West may or may not consider it a religious identity and this may be a reason why their community is open and almost indifferent towards interfaith collaboration. Along with the Buddhist, the Baha’i leader said that his tradition’s respect for the validity and legitimacy of other religions is what drew him to the Baha’i faith from the beginning. Baha’is believe interfaith collaboration to be a positive phenomenon as they believe in the oneness of humanity and the oneness of religion. Those who practice the Baha’i faith consider it to be a fulfillment of all other religions and this is exemplified in their principal of unity in diversity as applied to religious pluralism. Religious pluralism and diversity are present in many religions. In terms of Hinduism, the Hindu leader said that:

Sometimes there’s more diversity within Hinduism than outside it. There’s just a variety of beliefs, ways of worship and practices. Whatever is true, the opposite is also true in some parts of our community. It is also quite usual to go to a home shrine and find pictures of Jesus Christ among the Hindu deities. I think we accept diversity as a part of life and the way things should be and are intended to be. For this reason interfaith dialogue is truly a very peaceful and intellectual affair, not one where you thrust your beliefs on somebody else.

A significantly different viewpoint was expressed by the Abrahamic traditions which focused on tolerance of truth found in other religions, embracing universal ideas and teaching respect for other religions *while maintaining a distinct path to truth*. The two Muslim leaders stated that in order to be a good Muslim, one must balance both a right relationship with God and a right relationship with people. People are an extremely important equation in Islam and it is important how one interacts with one's neighbors. One of the leaders referenced a phrase in Islam, "Whoever you're talking to is either your brother in faith or brother in humanity." Differences will be present and both Muslim leaders quoted from the Quran, "We have made you in nations and tribes so that you may know each other" (49:13). For them, it makes sense to know one another in order to be able to communicate, to support, and to serve together.

The idea of welcoming the stranger is important to Jewish people, according to the rabbi, because Jews were strangers in the land of Egypt. It is not about welcoming only those in need, it is about accepting the 'other'. She said,

Theologically welcoming the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt means you have to welcome someone that's different. So that's our theological basis. God saved us from slavery, we need to be open to everyone and so what does that look like? It's very complicated.

Their belief in welcoming the other is displayed on the entrance to their synagogue. She said when the building was established, the presiding rabbi put the quote "May this house be a house of prayer for all peoples" from the book of Isaiah over the doors. She said that from the beginning they have wanted to be welcoming, and this quote was literally the cornerstone of their building.

The Second Vatican Council opened the doors for interfaith collaboration in the Catholic Church, and both the Catholic priest and Jewish rabbi discussed the influential change in interfaith dialogue and collaboration brought about by the Second Vatican Council. Although the Second Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate* declared all religions to have aspects of truth and

goodness, in particular it welcomed Jews and Muslims to a faith conversation. The rabbi noted that, “Once the Catholic Church said that the Jews didn’t kill Jesus-- the Romans did; it opened the door for a lot of conversation, before that, not so much. We were looked at as the people who killed Jesus. We were bad.” The Second Vatican Council demonstrated that Catholicism is able to and should embrace different cultures and spiritualities. This encouraged Catholics to meet and engage with the ‘other’. The priest said that “As a child, we were taught to be afraid of dialogue with the ‘other’ for fear that it might influence us to somehow lose our Catholic faith or endanger it. Our relationship frankly was to try to convert them.” The Second Vatican Council affirmed the validity of other faiths for Catholics and allowed them to learn from other religions. Since the Second Vatican Council, the priest said that he believes there to be a lot of tolerance in the Catholic Church for interfaith collaboration, especially with recent examples of Pope Francis encouraging engagement with the ‘other’.

Evangelical Christians form a significant subset of the Abrahamic religions since they maintain an expectation for conversion to their religious beliefs. This continues to be an impediment to interfaith collaboration today. The Evangelical Christian pastor stated that interfaith collaboration “was a challenge to the decision theology that was imbedded in my experience. Part and parcel to decision theology is an Evangelical Christian’s responsibility to lead people to know Christ.” Among eleven religious leaders, he is the only Evangelical Christian who participates in the downtown interfaith clergy group. He thinks this may be because other Evangelical Christian pastors may not see the value in interfaith collaboration, especially as they are unable to convert the other participants. He recognizes that much of the narrative in American Evangelism is about conquering and converting the ‘other’: “I felt like the gospel and the kingdom of Jesus was sent to heal not to conquer. It was about reconciliation and love and Jesus recognizing people outside of

his tradition were drawn to Christian faith or the principles of the kingdom in some ways more than from within the tradition.” He explained that:

Christian mission is embodying Christ and inviting those who are in proximity to the conversation on a basis of trust and long-term friendship; it’s community. The interfaith conversation for me really challenged all of the coercive and proselytizing conversion tendencies. An important part of my vocational call is not to fix Evangelicalism, not to reform that world but it’s to be a person to emphasize the best of what I believe is in that movement.

These three theological differences—acceptance, tolerance, and conversion—facilitated interfaith collaboration for some congregational leaders while inhibiting it for others. In general, however, the interviews seemed to downplay theological motivations while most of the explanations from the interviewees emphasized the personal and professional benefits of their participation.

### **Personal Benefits of Interfaith Collaboration**

All of the religious leaders discussed their appreciation for friendships formed through interfaith encounters and the incredible importance of the relational aspect of interfaith collaboration. The Hindu leader said that he thinks a lot of prejudice, stereotyping, and hatred is based on ignorance. He has seen this in his own life when he said, “I’ve had negative opinions about certain communities because I didn’t know anyone from that community. Once I started interacting with people, they’re quite like me or if not there is a reason why they’re different.” His quote is a perfect example of the ‘Pal Al’ phenomenon presented by Putnam and Campbell previously discussed in the literature.

Five of the religious leaders interviewed have formed friendships with one another by belonging to a downtown interfaith senior clergy group. As senior clergy of their Jewish, Christian,

Muslim, and Unitarian congregations they (and their predecessors) have met monthly for more than a decade. It is through these monthly meetings that they have come to know and learn from one another. Belonging to the downtown interfaith clergy group is all about personal relationships. The clergy and religious leaders have breakfast together every month. Many of the leaders interviewed focused on the aspect of fellowship and friendship that has developed from belonging to the downtown interfaith clergy group. They genuinely enjoy each other's company and are able to then learn from each other and talk about larger issues and ideas. While their goal and mission is to get to know one another and truly understand each other, there is also a desire to effect change.

The downtown clergy tend to be theologically and politically liberal. The Unitarian Universalist believes that it tends to go in the same direction, "being open to other points of view is a mental practice that leads to progressive political stances and progressive religious stances." Because they are all progressive liberal people, he claims that they don't really argue as they are very understanding of each other.

All downtown senior clergy are invited to be a part of the group. The Evangelical Christian pastor said that landing at that table he was just there to learn and explore. He said that it has become an open-ended friendship and is surprisingly inclusive, curious, and welcoming. The Roman Catholic priest was invited to join the downtown interfaith clergy group when he moved in as a new pastor in 1991. Relationships were expressed as one of the most important aspects of interfaith collaboration. The priest specified that the group is a senior minister group, meaning that their associate leaders are not included in the group. He expressed that this became a sort of support group for senior ministers. They got to know each other's personal lives through both celebrations as well as disappointments such as illness and divorce. These sorts of things got shared and the group became very close. Several of the religious leaders interviewed said that this became their

most important support group in ministry, more important than their own congregations. “We all agreed that we could consider doing things together like hunger and housing but not at the expense of knowing each other,” according to the Roman Catholic priest. Therefore none of these breakfast gatherings were for project meetings, they were for personal conversations. He said, “We got to know each other very powerfully, carefully, and lovingly.” While the downtown interfaith senior clergy meet monthly for breakfast, there is also an effort to get their members more engaged and this happens through interfaith events and activities that the group hosts. The personal experiences of the congregational leaders revealed the significance of how building social capital through being together and forming friendships can lead to interfaith action. As a result of their positive experiences, the religious leaders desire to involve members of their congregations in their interfaith efforts.

### **Promoting Interfaith Collaboration**

One question asked of all participants focused on what they believed to be the best way to promote interfaith collaboration. The Unitarian Universalist minister mentioned that the downtown clergy group was going to be hosting sessions in what is called the World Café format for large group discussion. This format involves participants sitting together at tables and discussing questions before sharing responses from their conversation with the large group. The Baha’i individual said that he also prefers the dialogue approach because, “You get people talking for themselves and not as representatives of a group.” He is a strong believer in dialogue and thinks that sometimes the start to the dialogue is simply to provide information and use that as a basis for further discussion.

Both of the Muslim leaders shared stories of hosting open houses at their mosques to meet their neighbors. The imam suggested that inviting others to the mosque or Islamic center allowed them to see how Muslims function and this can open the door for them in turn to invite Muslims to their congregations: “Once you start some kind of communication with people that mistrust is eliminated, so you build trust with the leadership.” He expressed that the First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion but that is not what happens in reality: “Everyone needs to know that you can coexist in one society. There is a lot of hatred going on. Tolerance is negative. It should be more of respect for where the other person is coming from. It is imperative for people to know each other along those lines. This should be the foundation for interfaith activities.” Once they connected with their neighbors, his mosque felt compelled to move beyond their local neighborhood into the larger Twin Cities area. He even said that since there were no synagogues in the suburb where his mosque is located, they went to the closest one in a nearby town.

The Buddhist believed it to be very important to involve children and young people in interfaith collaboration. He has taught meditation courses to groups of both Muslim and Mormon children and also hosted meditation sessions at college campuses. He said that it is important to be respectful and connect the information from Buddhism with other individuals’ own traditions. Children have an eagerness to learn and a refreshing sense of curiosity. He feels that “the stronger the roots are for young people, they’ll feel more freedom to explore less out of frustration of their own tradition and more out of richness.” Feeling safe enough to explore was an interesting idea that he focused on during his interview. He suggested starting from a place of worthiness, as a lot of people “shop around for spiritual traditions because they’re looking for some kind of safety.” The Buddhist practice of meditation is one that can be incorporated into various religious traditions and this lack of competition or conflict with religious identification can be appealing to children



as well as college students. These are just a few of the ways that congregations collaborate and promote interfaith involvement for their members.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Through interviews, I explored the motivations for and perceptions of interfaith collaboration with ten religious leaders engaged in interfaith activities in the Twin Cities. All of the religious leaders and their respective congregations considered interfaith collaboration essential, though each had different reasons for participating. My research made it apparent that motivations for participation in interfaith collaboration appear more practical than philosophical, that the experienced personal benefits of participation are what most encourage commitment.

This exploratory study was limited to ten interviews with ten religious leaders. The qualitative nature of the research allowed me to examine motivations and perceptions using both sociological insights and theological perspectives. Although past research has led to insight about organizational collaboration, there has not been a prominent focus on the *individuals* who participate in collaboration. Future research should continue to focus on individuals' motivations for participating in interfaith collaboration. For example, research should explore the roles and representatives among participants of interfaith collaboration, as well as the types of interfaith collaboration taking place. In the course of doing my research, questions that emerged were: what interfaith activities are taking place and what influence does this have on the community and in society? I am particularly interested in how the increasing trend of religious "nones" contributes to the emerging necessity of including atheists and religiously unaffiliated individuals in interfaith collaboration. Having a better understanding of why religious leaders participate in interfaith collaboration is important as religion has become an increasing source of conflict and contention—

both in U.S. society and in global settings. Interfaith collaboration is a powerful way to build understanding and acceptance, and to form alliances that contribute significantly to addressing social problems and promoting justice and peace. This research is relevant as it is essential that we understand why an individual embraces interfaith collaboration, as it is apparent that congregations will not become involved without a committed leader. Macro-level trends reflect the conscious, everyday decisions and interactions that people choose to pursue. Diversity is inevitable. If we hope to benefit from diversity and increase social capital and cohesion, it is essential to understand individuals' motivations and decisions so that we can encourage interfaith engagement at the micro-level. My research indicates that interfaith collaboration is an opportunity to engage religious diversity and strengthen social capital.

This research also offers insight into the factors that constrain religious leaders from further engaging in interfaith collaboration. Although this research was limited in generalizability, these results provide initial understandings of motivations for and perceptions of interfaith collaboration. On the basis of these interviews, I suspect that many other religious leaders have similar reasons or motivations for why they participate in interfaith collaboration. I hope this exploratory study has sparked interest in other students and scholars to examine the role of religious diversity in social collaborations and civic organizations, as well to explore the motivations of individuals and religious leaders participating in interfaith collaboration.

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Appendix A: List of Personal Interviews

- Baha'i individual. 2015. Personal Interview. Roseville, MN. August 14.
- Buddhist individual. 2015. Personal Interview. Lino Lakes, MN. August 18.
- Evangelical Christian Pastor. 2016. Personal Interview. Minneapolis, MN. February 10.
- Hindu individual. Personal Interview. 2015. Maple Grove, MN. August 19.
- Jewish Rabbi. Personal Interview. 2016. Minneapolis, MN. January 28.
- Muslim Imam. Personal Interview. 2015. Minneapolis, MN. August 17.
- Muslim individual. Personal Interview. 2015. Bloomington, MN. August 18.
- Pluralistic Rationalist individual. 2016. Personal Interview. Minneapolis, MN. January 27.
- Roman Catholic Priest. 2016. Personal Interview. Minneapolis, MN. February 10.
- Unitarian Universalist Minister. 2015. Personal Interview. Minneapolis, MN. August 14.

## Appendix B.

## Interview Guide for Understanding Religious Leaders' Motivations for and Perceptions of Interfaith Collaboration

To give you some background to this project, I am interested in why religious leaders [and congregations] participate in interfaith collaboration and how they perceive and experience interfaith collaboration.

### Congregation

1. Before we get into that topic, why don't you start by telling me a little about your congregation?
  - a. How long has the congregation been here?
  - b. How many people attend? What are the demographics of the members? Lots of families, older people, etc.?

### Personal Experience

2. Could you please share a bit about your background and previous personal experience with interfaith dialogue or collaboration?
  - a. How did you first get involved in interfaith collaboration? What initially motivated you?
3. How important is participating in interfaith collaboration to you?
  - a. What do you find most interesting or significant about your involvement in interfaith collaboration?
  - b. Tell me about an interfaith collaboration in which you were involved that stands out as especially important or engaging for you.

### Theological Tradition

4. What is the theological stance your religious tradition takes on interfaith collaboration and dialogue?
5. How supportive of interfaith collaboration is your theological tradition?
  - a. Has that always been the case, or was there a particular point in your tradition's history when a significant change occurred? If so, please explain.
6. What kinds of denominational pressures or expectations are there that your congregation does or does not participate in interfaith collaboration?
  - a. How would you rate your particular church/temple/synagogue/mosque to others of your religious tradition in regards to your involvement with interfaith collaboration – example: fairly typical for our tradition, more involved, less involved than most, etc.



### **Congregation Participation**

7. What experience does your congregation have with interfaith collaboration?
8. In the past year, has this congregation personally participated in interfaith collaboration?
  - a. If not, what about within the last three years?
  - b. If not, can you remember any interfaith collaboration experienced by this congregation?
  - c. If so, what kinds of interfaith activities has your congregation been a part of?
9. How would you describe the congregation's relationship to local congregations [especially those of other religious traditions]?
  - a. Does this congregation interact or communicate with other congregations in this neighborhood?
  - b. Does the congregation have many programs or activities that engage the neighborhood or invite other religious communities?
10. Have you hosted interfaith events at your congregation? Briefly describe the event and how the decision was made to host it.

### **Social Implications of Interfaith Collaboration**

11. Is it important that religious congregations and communities foster interfaith collaboration and an opportunity for dialogue? Why?
  - a. What is the best way to promote interfaith collaboration?
  - b. Why should people participate in interfaith collaboration?
12. How do you feel interfaith collaboration serves society?

### **Environmental Factors**

13. What social issues or problems in the local area have stimulated faith communities to work together in trying to solve the problem or improve local conditions?
  - a. Have there been problems you wanted to address but didn't have the resources as an individual church?