

Partnerships in Social Services and Dialogue

Lessons from Manhattan, Staten Island, and the Bronx

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share our experiences over a three-year period working with local social service groups affiliated with the Muslim community within our city.

Background

First, some background. In late 2009 the GHR Foundation provided some significant funding to the Interfaith Center of New York—a New York City–based community organization that seeks to make New York City and the world safe for religious differences by increasing respect and mutual understanding among peoples of different faiths and by fostering cooperation to solve common social problems. They did so by launching an ambitious effort known as the Catholic-Muslim Social Services Partnership Program. The goal of this program was to partner community-based Muslim social service groups with local projects of the Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York in three of New York City’s five boroughs: Manhattan, Staten Island, and the Bronx. Shared interfaith activities related to community social service provision were to be the focus of these community projects, which included:

- A partnership between a Muslim women’s services organization, focused on hunger relief and the needs of immigrants, and a Catholic parish–based food pantry in the Bronx.
- A partnership concentrating on hunger relief and the needs of immigrants between several mosques—including those serving primarily African American congregants and those serving congregants from the West African immigrant community—and several Catholic parishes in the community of Harlem.

We have now come to the end of our week together for our Buddhist-Christian dialogue on “*Suffering, Liberation and Fraternity*,” where we have heard from our distinguished colleagues about our various faiths’ perspectives on the causes of suffering in this world, the means for liberation from that suffering, and how building and growing fraternity between members of both of our communities can help foster a more just and peace-filled world for everyone. We are now asked to reflect on what particular contribution our own faith community—in my case, the Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New York—could make as we collaborate in addressing social ills in the United States to reduce suffering and increase fraternity. I would like to

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- A partnership concentrating on youth volunteerism and services to the community between an Albanian Islamic Cultural Center and Mosque and the Staten Island Teenage Federation, a program of the Catholic Youth Organization on Staten Island.

Borough Projects

Although all of the borough projects addressed emergency food needs of New Yorkers, each of them developed somewhat organically, based on community input, and thus each took on a different focus:

- **In the Bronx:** Both the local Muslim and Catholic partners were working in the Highbridge area of the Bronx, the poorest congressional district in the United States. Members of the Muslim women's social services organization and the local parish-based food pantry came together and jointly decided to concentrate on several hunger-related initiatives, including:
 - A training, in 2010, for members of both the Muslim women's organization and the parish-based food pantry on the importance of having full client participation in the United States census (which is important for the allocation of appropriate government funding for hunger-relief efforts).
 - A letter-writing campaign to elected officials about issues of hunger and food allocation.
 - A joint Catholic-Muslim visit to a local city councilwoman's office regarding hunger and food allocation.
- In February 2012, Catholic Charities Feeding Our Neighbors Campaign delivered a large supply of food collected from area parishes to the Muslim Women's Institute.
- **In Harlem:** The partnership mainly focused on facilitating conversations between the clergy of both faith groups for the purpose of identifying projects both communities could work on. Among the outcomes of these conversations were the following projects:
 - In January 2011, and continuing to this very day, Muslim leaders in Harlem for the first time participated in an annual Catholic-sponsored Interfaith Prayer Service celebrating the life and ministry of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.
 - In early 2011, women from the primarily African American Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood met with Catholic women, including members of the Harlem-based Catholic Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, to begin monthly interfaith discussion groups.
 - In 2011, Catholic and Muslim clergy held a joint meeting regarding emergency food needs in Harlem, where they shared religious teachings on charity. Following this discussion, members of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood led a food drive to assist a Catholic parish-based food pantry. Members of the mosque also participated in food distribution at the pantry as volunteers.
 - At the request of the local Muslim community, Catholic Charities staff likewise presented a training session on immigrants' rights at the Touba Mosque, a congregation

of primarily Senegalese immigrants. This training was very well received by most of the mosque members in attendance, and additionally showed this immigrant community that despite what they might have heard in their home countries Catholics were not their adversaries and in fact had the resources to offer them assistance.

- **On Staten Island:** The projects undertaken on Staten Island were youth-oriented. A relationship on Staten Island already existed between the youth of the Miraj Islamic School (part of the Albanian Cultural Center) and the Staten Island Catholic Youth Organization. Muslim youth from the Miraj School had been participating in CYO basketball competitions for some years. Building on this initial contact, the following activities were undertaken:
 - In October 2010, youth from the Miraj School and members of the Staten Island Teenage Federation met together and decided, for the purpose of learning more about each other's respective faiths, to visit one another's houses of worship to perform various cleaning activities (raking fallen leaves, vacuuming, etc.). It should be noted that prior to visiting the Albanian Islamic Center, and after expressing reservations about their children's participation in the program, the parents of several Catholic Teenage Federation members accompanied their children to the mosque, where they were welcomed. Many of these parents indicated that they themselves learned lessons via this program. It is worth noting that this piece of the project was planned and conducted around the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, amid increased

community anxiety and fear, particularly on Staten Island, which suffered considerable casualties on that day.

- In early 2011, the students from both groups organized a food drive; they donated food to a local pantry and volunteered in the soup kitchen.
- It was out of these initial interactions that the groundwork was laid for our Cardinal Archbishop, Timothy M. Dolan, to visit the Albanian Cultural Center and the Miraj School on June 19, 2013.

Personal Reflections

At the completion of the project, in 2012, the Interfaith Center of New York contracted with LTG Associates, Inc., to review this new action-oriented partnership between Catholic Charities and Muslim service providers and places of worship and the outcomes of the three borough projects the partnership engendered. LTG produced a report on the program entitled "One God, Two Faiths, Many Voices." The report found that, as a whole, participants were unanimous in their confidence that the program had created and enhanced dialogue, understanding, and collaboration between Catholics and Muslims in the three boroughs. These effects occurred at three levels: between the local Catholic and Muslim communities, between organizational partners and the local community, and between individuals.

Some challenges were also identified. One challenge was finding the time to participate in such partnering; many social services providers are stretched thin due to existing, multiple project commitments. The timing of the program proved germane: It occurred in the context of the run-up to the tenth anniversary of the

September 11 attacks on New York City, when awareness of the need for interfaith dialogue was heightened. Another challenge was extreme or slanted viewpoints about the other faith, both Muslim and Catholic, such viewpoints being exacerbated by negative media portrayal of Muslims. Finally, there were challenges within the respective faith communities themselves: Muslims are diverse in terms of culture and faith, and Catholics share some of those differences.

The question was raised whether “social service” was itself a good mechanism for interfaith collaboration. The LTG report answered that question affirmatively, with a few caveats. The most obvious value to be found in using social services as a mechanism for interfaith collaboration is that simply working together on a project provides an opportunity to become acquainted with another religion’s faith and traditions, as well as with individuals from that faith tradition. The time spent together in meetings and activities allows participants to learn about the teachings, cultures, and worldviews of religions other than their own, in a setting that emphasizes working together toward shared objectives. Additionally, providing concrete services and improving people’s lives infuses interfaith collaboration, a laudable goal in its own right, with deeper meaning in the long run. In the Catholic-Muslim project in particular, it became clear in the provision of social services just how many similarities existed between the two faiths, particularly in the area of service provision to the poor. The common mission to provide social services therefore could serve as a safe and mutually acceptable starting point for interfaith dialogue and collaboration.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, also known as *Nostra Aetate*. Several weeks

ago, in an address at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., the president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, commented on this anniversary, stating that despite over “fifty years of ‘Nostra Aetate,’” Catholics and Muslims still “don’t know one another well enough.”

It is my belief that Cardinal Tauran is correct in this assertion, and I would add that we still don’t know Buddhism as well as we should either. It is my belief that action-oriented projects such as the Catholic-Muslim Social Services Partnership Program provide a model for the “Dialogue of Fraternity” with Buddhists in New York City and elsewhere to address social ills in our cities. By engaging together in the spirit of fraternity the “hands” to relieve suffering, we can ignite the “heart” to embrace one another as brothers and sisters, and hopefully enlighten the “head” to pursue peace as Pope Francis has asked us to do.

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