



Constructive Interfaith Dialogue

A Post-Dialogue Report by the
Frank Zeidler Center for Public Discussion
Written by Simon Eichinger

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DIALOGUE

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Introduction

The Zeidler Center was contacted by John Hobbins, a professor of Religion at UW Oshkosh about holding a dialogue between the students of the Mar Elias HS of Ibillin Israel visiting the US and members of Milwaukee's Muslim, Christian, Jewish communities. The purpose of the dialogue was to discuss experiences and positive strategies of interfaith dialogue taking place in the US and specifically in Milwaukee.

The following report documents our interfaith discussion topics and participants responses. Zeidler Center facilitators worked with small groups, recording participant responses anonymously and non-attributably to the best of their ability. The following questions were used during the structured portion of the dialogue:

Round 1: "Could you tell a story from your personal life experience that would help other people better understand your views and concerns about interfaith relations?"

Round 2: What is at the heart of the matter for you, when you think about interfaith relations?
OR What is the core issue for you, when you think about interfaith relations?"

The Zeidler Center is grateful for the opportunity to serve the public in partnership with the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee and the Pilgrims of Ibillin from the Mar Elias HS of Ibillin Israel in order to promote interfaith awareness and develop positive relationships between different faiths through facilitated dialogue. The Zeidler Center welcomes future collaboration and continued dialogues on the topic of interfaith relationships and other related issues with community partners.

Questions about the Zeidler Center's facilitation and writing of this report should be directed to:

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Method

Reflective Structured Dialogue, the dialogue method used to facilitate this discussion, utilizes small circles of diverse individuals (5-7 people) discussing personal experiences, values, and uncertainties in structured and facilitated conversations. The specific goal is to encourage greater trust, and create a platform for mutual understanding and less demonization. Participants experience both structured and unstructured portions of dialogue. During the structured portion, each participant is given the same amount of time to speak, without interruption. After each speaker, there is a short pause of silence so that all may reflect upon the speaker's response.

In this method, facilitators are not participants in the dialogue, but work to create spaces for others to have dialogue. The three main roles of the facilitator are as follows: 1) take notes on participant responses, 2) keep time to ensure all participants have an equal amount of time to share, and 3) remind participants of their communication agreements if/when necessary.

The following communication agreements were used to facilitate the small group discussion:

Regarding the spirit of our speaking and listening:

- We will speak for ourselves and from our own experience.
- We will not criticize the views of other participants or attempt to convince them.
- We will listen with resilience when we hear something that is hard to hear.

Regarding the form of our speaking and listening:

- We will participate within the time frames and share speaking time.
- We will not interrupt except to indicate that we cannot hear a speaker.
- We will "pass" if we do not wish to speak.

Regarding confidentiality:

- Following the dialogue, we will speak about what happened in ways that do not allow other speakers to be identified and will honor any specific request from a speaker.

General Themes

Misinformation: Participants largely agreed that there is a disconnect between the way the media portrays interfaith relationships and the way individuals experience interfaith relationships.

Stereotypes can be damaging and hindering to relationships. Many shared stories of what they thought beforehand about people of different faiths and how those perspectives changed after developing a relationship.

Teachers: Teachers and religious leaders are a major catalyst and can help or hinder peace between different religions and cultures.

Parents play a major role in how aware and accepting their children will be of others.

Concern for safety: When close-mindedness passionately separates people, the result is fear and even justification for doing harm to others. Finding shared values helps avoid this spiral into violence.

Participant Responses

The following are summaries of participant responses to the dialogue questions, organized in the order questions were asked in and recorded to the best of the ability of the facilitators.

Question 1— “Could you tell a story from your personal life experience that would help other people better understand your views and concerns about interfaith relations?”

- Worship and cultural different must be overcome to better understand what we have in common as human beings.
- Cultural learning can build relationship, and new beginnings.
- (There was two culture in conflict one Muslim and the other Christian. To make peace they each agree to a name exchange. The first born child would be from each culture would be given a name from the conflicting culture. That stops the killing and conflict.)
- Key to overcoming misinformation is better communication and dialogue between people of different faiths.
- I was in a dance group. I sat opposite one other person, of a different cultural background.

We engaged one another's gaze and sat in silence for fifteen minutes. It was the most amazing experience. When it came to discussion we had observed and absorbed the other in ways talking could not do. It put us on a more level plane of experience.

- I find that distance is overcome between people when we stop complaining and stop blaming. Then we can be whole again.
- When I'm with people different than myself I think of how two things that don't look like they would mix, do mix and make something new and delicious—like caramel and apples. Others bring a different perspective to my world.
- Most of my friends (I'm Christian) are Muslim. We get along well. I don't identify with the media representation that makes it sound like we hate each other. People need to learn to look more closely at what is happening in our communities on a very basic level, not only from the perspective of observers of our lives.
- In my travels around the world, I know that seeing what's happening first hand puts a different face on the struggle. In my own family (my mother who is very 'religious'), religion has closed their minds rather than opened them. I increasingly want 'religion' out of the conversation because it intensifies the divisions.
- A pastor would open the church up for dialogue and conversation and sharing with others after the church worship service. That was really helpful and it helped us understand
- I grew up in the Catholic Church and there I learned a lot about the different religions each week. I enjoyed that
- Took a trip to Palestine, and to the specific holy land points, I loved going to the Dome and holy place. But I had never gone in but I have always dreamed to. Some friends encouraged me to ask the leader or keepers about what it would take to enter. Finally had the chance to go in. It was breath taking. However it was ironic to see beauty and war at the same time. Outside of the holy palace there was a violent riot but inside it was completely different and beautiful.
- I am a professor at the university of Haifa. And one day my students encouraged me to take a break during finals and to pray. The majority of the students requested the prayer of the sunset at this particular time. That Was a big joy during exams. Afterwards the students brought a big box of sweets for thanks in letting me let them pray.
- I had made a friend at school and she was very nice to me, but one day at lunch she asked me about god and I responded that I was Muslim and she responded that she was Christian and that she wasn't aware that I was Muslim and she was nice but quickly stopped trying to be friends with me.
- 3 years ago I started out in high school and met a guy named Mohammed. I thought he was a

bad guy. He was Muslim and he had different beliefs. Most people don't get along between Muslim and Christian. But we took the time and studied for exams together. He's a nice guy!

- My experience began when entering high school and I was always alone. I Went to a new school and I had to make new friends. I had no friends at the new school but met some after 1 year or so. They had so many stereotypes about what Christians thought about Muslims. But made new friends with more Muslims after a while and learned what they really thought and was enlightened.

Question 2— “What is at the heart of the matter for you, when you think about interfaith relations? OR What is the core issue for you, when you think about interfaith relations?”

- “One of the things I have learned in traveling to different nations is – people are the same. The common ground is us.”
- Discover what we have in common, I better understand myself, religion, and our differences
- The heart of the matter is building respect, building value (finding the core value of life share in common), and building relationship but not silence. If injustices take place we must be allowed to speak out.
- We must learn to live together.
- If people are racist the laws of the land will protect us!
- I have friends who go to an all Muslim school and I worry for them because they are not getting the full education that I am getting, simply by interacting with people from other religions.
- Each of us seems to be trapped in our own narrative. We need a new narrative that speaks about what we have in common as human beings.
- Only in exposing yourself to other peoples’ cultures and religions will you find ways to live in peace with each other.
- Misunderstandings are based on assumptions. We close off others by putting them in a box. When things change it comes through a willingness to share a meal and experience. We need to engage each other in settings of sharing, like this today.
- People need to know that there are people all over the world that are born into and taught different religions and you don't really have a choice of what you are learning until you are older, but by then it can be really hard to change and see things differently.
- The stereotypes that are spread by the media and popular culture often prevent us from coming together and seeing the person that is not the stereotype.
- We need to take a break and walk in the shoes of the other.
- We need more opportunities to listen to each other, then to make intentional connections after that.

Questions of Genuine Interest— “What did someone in the group share that sparked your curiosity? What question would you like to ask them? What would you like them to speak about more?”

- Many questions were asked about the ‘dance meditation’ where people sat in silence, in one another’s gaze. The curiosity was about technique, purpose and ongoing effect.
- Other questions concerned the relative value of participation in religion, both because it is important to those who practice it, but sometimes oppressive to those who practice in another form.
- I think that the largest problem we are facing today is stereotypes, particularly Muslims as terrorists. We are not sitting down talking to people and getting to know them and who they really are. We spend so much money "protecting" ourselves but not making the effort to get to know the other race. I am also amazed that most people here in America is Christian. We need to get an understanding; that's my biggest hope.
- My first thought is the fear of dialogue with people who feel differently about my beliefs. It often expects to have conflicts most times usually. We just should be opening our hearts with those who don't have agreements...it just may be there.
- Interfaith is a crucial part of it. I learned a lot and put it into words. We can easily live life in a superficial way without knowing what each other think. Live fully. It’s a free gift from God!
- Having debates, conversations like this help. Mixing the other faiths; we have to know what each other believes.
- “As foreigners from Islam in the United states, what scares you and what do you do about it?” Yeah, it is scary knowing that people might be scared of you or want to harm you because they think you are something you are not
- We should find things that more common in than just differences. And we should respect that. Find things that are more like us than not like us.
- "How long did it take to get comfortable with other students?" - it took a while for me. It was hard. Then I started to trust them and other Christians. For me it took exactly 1 year. It was a good experience though. I had a 10 minute conversation with them and then we began sitting with each other at lunch and things.

Facilitator Responses

- The participants expressed a desire to learn more about the religion of other cultures. Muslim and Islamic were specifically mentioned.
- Most thought that the world's view of a culture that is different from our own is very narrow.
- Participants wanted to know the difference between "Christianity" and "Catholicism."
- Some participants expressed certain views about their own faith that might be different from the faith of others. The Islamic faith does not allow marriage outside of the faith.
- Several participants expressed that they liked the pause time before starting the go-round.
- As a facilitator, I recognize that all participants might not want or need the time allowed for them to speak.
- A number of the students used the pass option and wouldn't respond even when asked later.
- When the students more hesitant to share would finally feel comfortable sharing it would be something relatively vague, for example "It's important to have interfaith relationships so we can all get along." Which would seem almost manufactured and recited rather than sharing actual experiences or feelings about those experiences, which I am sure they all have.
- Many participants expressed appreciation for the pass agreement and used it at their discretion.
- It was the consensus of the group that they were open to establishing relations outside their own culture/religion.
- Most agreed that one's religion would not be a factor in establishing a meaningful relationship as a friend.
- Several wanted to continue this type of dialogue at home and among their friends.
- This type of discussion was new to many in the group, and it took some time for individuals to openly share their view.
- I was asked if I have any fears of Muslims based on what I have seen on the news. The discussion that followed centered around the idea that there are people of all religions of all cultures or walks of life that have done major and minor harm to others and contrarily people from every religion or culture who have been peace makers and contributed in positive ways to the world as well, so it's not the religion that matters, it's the person.

Further Resources

Mar Elias HS of Ibillin links:

https://www.facebook.com/search/str/john%20hobbins%20ibillin/keywords_top

<https://ibcibillin.wordpress.com/>

Pilgrims of Ibillin Organization

<http://www.pilgrimsofibillin.org/>

Official video of the Mar Elias school:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eoQ9stT7HU>

Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee

<http://www.interfaithconference.org/>