

A Preliminary Overview of Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ)

Five years after organizing the Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues, Kim Bobo decided to take the initiative to a national scale. She started to work through her already established network to pull together leaders who believed in the purpose of the new organization and committed to helping it flourish, on their own dime.¹ Though some leaders in faith-labor organizing had their doubts, when they realized that Bobo was intending to support the grassroots initiatives instead of implementing a top-down organizational structure, they agreed to join the board.² Thus, on March 31, 1996 the first national board meeting of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice was called into session.³ The name would later be changed to Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ). The board consisted of both faith leaders and leaders of the labor movement from around the country.

The purpose of this organization is to utilize faith congregations to support the labor movement and justice for workers. When asked about the complications of interfaith work and working with faith congregations, Kim Bobo states that people's personal beliefs aren't that significant to her or to the functionality of the organization. She explains the importance of faith communities in the labor movement as threefold; 1) Faith matters to workers. The community gives them courage. 2) Faith matters to employers. These communities provide an influence that can push for change. 3) Faith matters for the public perception of the movement. It gives the movement legitimacy in the eyes of the public.⁴ Bobo recognizes the frustrations many people have with religious communities and acknowledges the ways religious communities have hurt

¹ Joseph A. McCartin, "Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement: Kim Bobo's Story," *Labor* 6, no. 1 (March 20, 2009): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-2008-046>.

² McCartin, 95.

³ McCartin, 96.

⁴ McCartin, 98.

people, but nevertheless stands by their importance as politically powerful. For IWJ, religion is pragmatic, though not perfect. McCarthy, Pederson, and Knitter use different terms, but each identifies three similar purposes for interfaith work concerning truth, shared life, and action. IWJ concerns itself with the last of these purposes: as a mechanism for religious communities to unite together for social justice and transformation.

Over the last 22 years, IWJ built a national network to support the labor movement. Their work focuses on five different partnerships for five different purposes. IWJ builds partnerships with the labor movement, with religious communities, and with the Department of labor. Each of these partnerships works to change public perceptions and national legislation concerning workers at the systematic level.⁵ Additionally, they partner with workers through worker centers that address the symptoms of injustice and help workers leverage the power they do have. Finally, IWJ partners with seminary students to build future leadership for the labor movement.⁶ In their mission statement, they describe the five purposes of their organizing: just wages, safe working conditions, collective bargaining rights, equal protection, and responsible participation in a global economy.⁷ Though the particulars of each religion might be different, IWJ believes that all religions have the values to support their mission.

Today IWJ has over 60 affiliates around the country of worker centers, interfaith groups, and hybrids of both. In 2015, Kim Bobo stepped down as the Executive Director and IWJ is now making some changes.⁸ Their goals are to create a more sustainable model and an affiliate membership process, increase conversations with Congress about legislation, and add avenues to

⁵ McCartin, 99.

⁶ McCartin, 99.

⁷ "Mission & Values," Interfaith Worker Justice, accessed May 7, 2018, <http://www.iwj.org/about/mission-values>.

⁸ "Insist on Love, Resist All Hate, Persist in Hope," Annual Review (Interfaith Worker Justice, 2016), <http://files.iwj2017.gethifi.com/about/16AnnualReviewlo.pdf>.

regularly bring together interfaith leaders. Though the organization has been a leader in the labor movement, the changes in leadership have been difficult for the organization.⁹ The staff at the national level has almost halved, turn-around time for new staff is quick, and they currently have no Executive Director.

Even among the challenges that they currently face, IWJ has a tremendous impact on the faith-labor movement in identifiable ways. One outcome is downloadable resources available on their website to explain the significance of labor justice to specific faiths, including various denominations of Protestantism, Catholicism, Quakerism, Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, Unitarian Universalism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, with a variety of scriptural references, famous teachings, or essays by people of faith.¹⁰ Even more significantly for those involved in IWJ, the organization has made an impact on the labor movement. The organization has helped workers receive due compensation, trained community leaders, and educated workers on their rights and how to ensure their safety at work.¹¹ They have also helped groups to win the right for organizing, pass legislation to raise the minimum wage, and raise national awareness of injustices enacted by large chain companies, such as Wal-mart.

In her work, Catherine Cornille identifies necessary characteristics for interfaith dialogue, yet IWJ contains almost none of these characteristics. She identifies humility, hospitality, and empathy.¹² Cornille's understanding of such dialogue is that the individuals may change their understanding of faith based on encounter with other faiths and then bring these altered understandings to impact their own faith community. Such an understanding contradicts how

⁹ "Insist on Love, Resist All Hate, Persist in Hope."

¹⁰ "Resource Center," Interfaith Worker Justice, accessed May 7, 2018, <http://www.iwj.org/resources>.

¹¹ "Insist on Love, Resist All Hate, Persist in Hope."

¹² Catherine Cornille, "Conditions for Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion for Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 20–33.

IWJ sees the purpose of interfaith conversations. IWJ deals with practical, worldly concerns where faith congregations already agree. While they do equip leaders to influence their congregations, it is to encourage the congregations to care about the labor movement. The organization doesn't require the humility, hospitality, or empathy that Cornille describes. IWJ doesn't seem to concern itself with what Cornille describes as dialogue.

However, IWJ does contain the characteristics that Brodeur identifies concerning the interfaith movement, although she is specifically addressing the global movement. First, the history of IWJ lies in Chicago: a diverse city that breeds grassroots movements.¹³ Kim Bobo spent years organizing in Chicago and creating a network before she thought of a national faith-labor organization.¹⁴ Another characteristic is the network and technology involved in such organizations.¹⁵ The initial board for IWJ incorporated people from around the country actively involved in grassroots organizing. Even today, national IWJ staff members are based in multiple states, including Washington DC and Texas. Those locations serve to further the network that exists and would not be possible without technology. Another characteristic Brodeur mentions is the importance placed on the “glocal”.¹⁶ From the beginning, Bobo stressed the importance of local grassroots organizations, but desired to create a national organization for a wider impact. The mission of IWJ even emphasizes that the role the US should play in the global economy should be ethical and responsible. Brodeur also establishes certain priorities for interfaith organizations, such as cooperation between international organizations and congregations.¹⁷ Similarly, but on a smaller scale, IWJ emphasizes the power that faith communities play in

¹³ Patrice Brodeur, “The Increasing Relevance of the Global Interfaith Movement by Patrice Brodeur,” *Crosscurrents*, Spring 2005, 42–55.

¹⁴ McCartin, “Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement.”

¹⁵ Brodeur, “The Increasing Relevance of the Global Interfaith Movement by Patrice Brodeur.”

¹⁶ Brodeur.

¹⁷ Brodeur.

advocating for worker justice. Finally, Brodeur mentions the priority for interfaith organizations to jointly develop standards.¹⁸ The first five years of IWJ were mainly organizing meetings among interfaith leaders to discuss the points on which they can all fight as a united voice. They call for the government to enforce the standards for workers upon which all of them and their congregations have already agreed. But they first had to meet and discuss what these standards could be. IWJ clearly fits into Brodeur's understanding of interfaith.

Similarly, though IWJ is not what Eboo Patel would describe as interfaith, the organization does espouse the values of Lucia Hulsether and Paul Knitter. Patel's view of interfaith promotes a type of dialogue that brings to surface and reconciles internal conflict, but IWJ doesn't concern themselves with individual identities, conflicts, and beliefs.¹⁹ Rather than focusing on individualistic values, they consider the communal power of faith congregations. Next, they do not separate good from bad aspect of religion as Patel does.²⁰ The organization identifies injustices in the workplace and mobilizes faith communities to address them. Aspects of religion that Patel might condemn, IWJ simply acknowledges as a reality and then moves forward with their action. While some might problematize how the organization simply finds points of agreement instead of grappling with deep difference, authors like Paul Knitter might point out that the approach is merely strategic to capitalize their influence.²¹ Indeed, Hulsether would applaud the approach for not focusing too much of the religious aspects of the issue, but

¹⁸ Brodeur.

¹⁹ Eboo Patel, "Why Interfaith Efforts Matter More Than Ever," *The Huffington Post*, April 23, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eboo-patel/3-reasons-interfaith-efforts-matter-more-than-ever_b_3134795.html.

²⁰ Patel.

²¹ Knitter Paul F., "Inter-Religious Dialogue and Social Action," *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Wiley Online Books, April 2, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118529911.ch9>.

rather the economic and political aspects of the issue.²² Third, Patel emphasizes the importance of promoting the US as a welcoming nation.²³ Instead of promoting a nationalistic agenda though, IWJ points out ways that the United States has failed those who it is supposed to serve. While Patel proposes that interfaith efforts are not to serve a political ideology, as Hulsether prefers it to be used, but rather to create a shared civic space, IWJ uses interfaith organizing to address systemic, political issues to create an improved, more just civic space.²⁴ Further, Knitter advocates for interreligious dialogue that supports social action in ways that stand in solidarity to give voice to the oppressed, which is exactly how IWJ understands its purpose of uniting congregations to support workers.²⁵ His explanation of social action requiring interreligious dialogue because the world is diverse and religious fits the IWJ mission.²⁶ In a country that focuses on and promotes pluralism as a virtue, IWJ accepts the reality of pluralism in the US and utilizes its power for social justice advocacy.

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²² Lucia Hulsether, “Can Interfaith Dialogue Cure Religious Violence?,” Religion Dispatches, April 26, 2013, <http://religiondispatches.org/can-interfaith-dialogue-cure-religious-violence/>.

²³ Patel, “Why Interfaith Efforts Matter More Than Ever.”

²⁴ Eboo Patel, “What Is Interfaith Cooperation For?,” Religion Dispatches, May 6, 2013, <http://religiondispatches.org/what-is-interfaith-cooperation-for/>.

²⁵ Knitter Paul F., “Inter-Religious Dialogue and Social Action.”

²⁶ Knitter Paul F.