Beloved Community Center

An Interfaith Social Justice Community

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly diverse and pluralistic US, encounters across lines of religious difference, among others, occur more often than before. Though interfaith organizing efforts seek to bring people together for the common good, few such organizations effectively enact the social justice action for which they strive. Through an ethnographic project at the Beloved Community Center, interfaith organization in Greensboro affiliated with Interfaith Worker Justice, this paper identifies three strategies for interfaith organizing. Effective approaches were evaluated based off of a pragmatic theory lens of social justice. The strategies that emerged include Christian rhetoric, a balanced emphasis on community and the dignity of the individual, and flexible networked organizational structure. More research is needed to understand how context influences strategies and the relationship between local and national organizing levels.

Introduction and Review of Relevant Scholarship

This project is situated within social ethics, therefore critical theory shapes my research. Critical theory is an expanding field that considers various complex layers of both dominant and marginalized groups in order to study societies and their unjust systems more holistically. One important aspect of critical theory includes understanding the ways the present is shaped by history.[1] Therefore, in order to responsibly assess interfaith organizing and social justice within the United States, I begin with an historical account of the experience of pluralism.

Although many cite the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 as the beginning of the modern interfaith movement and pluralism in the US, the history of this country has been one of encounter with the culturally, ethnically, and religiously other since its beginning.[2] These original encounters of difference, though, were controlled and suppressed by the power of white Protestants. For example, instead of engaging with the cultures and religions of Native Americans, after pursuing a near complete genocide, the US government placed Native American children in boarding schools where they could not contact their families, speak their language, or practice their religion. Similarly, African slaves were prohibited from having their own religious services and forced to attend church services where white preachers would teach

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[1] Other relevant and important aspects include understanding the politics behind knowledge production, the relationship between socialization and social stratification, and the inequitable resource and power distribution between dominant and marginalized groups. Özlem. Sensoy and Robin J. DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education*, Multicultural Education Series; Multicultural Education Series (New York, N.Y.) (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012).

[2] Derek Michaud, "World Parliament of Religions, 1893," Online Encyclopedia, Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology, accessed February 6, 2018, http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/bce/worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm.

them Bible lessons of obedience and servitude.[3] Despite the fact that many white Protestants were fleeing intolerance and persecution in coming to the American colonies, many used their power to attempt to strip other ethnic groups of their religious traditions and to teach a Christianity that served their own purposes.

In 1893, though, white Protestants invited religious leaders and scholars of ten prominent world religions to engage in dialogue. Notably, neither Native Americans nor African Americans were invited. The legacy of the Parliament was pluralism, but a pluralism in which progressive Christians condescendingly decided for all that religious differences are ultimately insignificant.[4] Their opinion was that each religion worships the same God (thinly veiled and described in largely Christian theological ways), only with various cultural approaches.

Increasingly, scholars like Diana Eck, founder of the Pluralism Project identify the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, as the turning point in the US for growth in diversity as well as modern pluralism.[5] Eck describes diversity as a demographic fact, tolerance as acceptance of the presence of others, and relativism as a sort of apathy towards real differences, but she explains modern pluralism as engagement across lines of difference.[6] In the last fifty years, modern pluralism has grown in the US because increasing amounts of immigrant and other minoritized communities preserve and share their own cultures instead of assimilating into the dominant culture.

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[3] Peter Randolph, "Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett, 2nd ed. (63-68: Duke University Press, 1999).
[4] Michaud, "World Parliament of Religions, 1893."
[5] Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, 1st ed. ([San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 22.
[6] Eck, 22.

The demographic shifts of the last fifty years have served as scapegoats for the recent

socio-economic and political crises in the US. The collapse of dominant narratives has led to a

loss of social trust in communities, which politicians exploit.[7] First, Rebecca Todd Peters

interprets the end of the hegemonic power of white Protestants as a result of the inability for

Christians- both conservative and liberal- to remain morally relevant in a country where people

increasingly reject organized religion.[8] This decrease of social influence causes a sense of loss

and mourning among many white Christians.[9] Additionally, the failures of neoliberal capitalism

compound the sense of loss for many US Americans as the job market transitions from an

industrial to a service and technology economy, leaving behind the factory jobs that built the

post-war middle-class. During his presidency, Ronald Reagan endorsed a policy that cut taxes

for the wealthy in hopes that they would reinvest the extra capital into the local economy,

ultimately benefiting the working class. This policy, though, has simply increased economic

inequality.[10] Decisions by large businesses in a globalizing economy to cut "middle-men" and

outsource jobs or eliminate them via technological advances in order to maximize profit has also

re-distributed wealth to the wealthy. Thus, the inequality gap increases, social mobility

decreases, and working class white US Americans face real hardships. Politicians correlate these

hardships with changing demographics, pitting communities against each other by exacerbating

fault lines in societies. Efforts to regain a sense of economic stability and social influence

associated with a previous era manifest themselves in urgently fought battles over LGBT rights,

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[7] Rebecca Todd Peters, "Renewing the Social Contract: Morality and Economic Theory for a Post-Industrial World," in *Laws in Ethics, Ethics in Law* (The Society of Christian Ethics, Portland, OR, 2018), 2.
[8] Peters, 12.
[9] Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).
[10] Peters, "Renewing the Social Contract: Morality and Economic Theory for a Post-Industrial World," 18.

ethno-racial tensions, immigration policies, and gun laws.[11] These are some of the fronts on which the current socio-economic and political crises of the US unfold.

Various theoretical approaches attempt to make sense of and solve the current crises. One theory resembles Robert Nozick's entitlement view. His view of justice advocates for minimal government involvement and fair individual interactions: with free choice and fair exchange, a circumstance is just if the original position was just.[12] As a libertarian, Charles Murray might subscribe to Nozick's theory. According to Murray, the divisive conflicts in the United States are not due to poor distribution of resources or an unjust original position, but rather due to the moral deterioration among the lower socioeconomic classes. Rather than invoke more government action, he calls upon the higher socioeconomic class to revitalize their own religiosity and moral standard in order to set an example for the others.[13] In his eyes, resolving the conflicts is not a concern of justice, but a concern of moral standards.

Reinhold Niebuhr's theory on justice offers a more pragmatic approach. Rather than beginning with an assumption of a just original position, he begins and continues with an emphasis on the sinful nature of humans.[14] Free exchanges are not fair because people try to take advantage of the situation. For Niebuhr, striving towards justice means striving to achieve a balance of power. Even though, due to sin, all structures contain elements of injustice and a perfect balance of power. will never be truly realized on earth, humans should continue to work for closer approximations towards "the harmony of love that is perfect justice."[15] In order to

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[11] Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 42.
[12] Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing Jouse, 1986), 58.
[13] Charles A. Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y.: Crown Forum, 2012).
[14] Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics*, 91.
[15] Lebacqz, 92.

work towards justice in such a way, Dr. Peters advocates a theology of mutuality in which

groups work together across lines of difference with the understanding that their well-being is

interdependent.[16] She argues that such an ethic of solidarity is necessary in order to transform the

structural issues of society that create injustice. Though perfect justice may not be achievable,

working together (solidarity) is the key to the kind of social transformation that helps shape a

more just society.

      With an increasing emphasis on addressing conflicts by bringing people together across

lines of religious difference, the goals of the current and growing interfaith movement in the US

express a desire for social justice and the common good. According to Eboo Patel, founder of

Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), interfaith dialogue is even more significant in the US now as a

response to increasingly common hate crimes, which are often religiously motivated. He writes

that engaging in interfaith dialogue develops internal individual harmony, separates the good and

bad aspects of religion, and provides space for pluralistic cooperation necessary in the United

States.[17] Patel's approach to interfaith organizing, however, has been critiqued for irresponsibly

focusing only on the religious aspects of social problems, promoting polarizing binaries between

good and bad, supporting nationalism, and hiding other aspects of interfaith organizing.[18] Clearly

there is not a consensus on the objectives or role that the interfaith movement should have in the

United States. [19]

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[16] Rebecca Todd. Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 40.

[17] 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.

[18] Lucia Hulsether, "Can Interfaith Dialogue Cure Religious Violence?," Religion Dispatches, April 26, 2013, http://religiondispatches.org/can-interfaith-dialogue-cure-religious-violence/.

[19] In response to Patel's effort to establish an academic field of interfaith studies, a group of professors at Elon University wrote a chapter for his book in which they articulate the

My interest is in examining the role of the interfaith movement in addressing the current

socio-economic and political crises previously identified. In choosing a theoretical framework

around which to situate my research, I assessed both the entitlement view and pragmatic view

described earlier. Since, the entitlement view as explained by Nozick is focused on equality of

opportunity, this view is not consonant with how interfaith organizations approach addressing

injustice in society. Furthermore, Nozick's focus on micro-level interactions is at odds with a

critical theoretical approach that stresses the value of evaluating inequitable structures at the

macro-level. Since Murray doesn't adequately take into consideration non-white people in his

assessment of the nation's situations, nor does he see the crises as ones of injustice, his

framework does not make space for significant aspects of the US interfaith movement essential

to my research. Thus, the entitlement theory of justice does not provide the needed mechanism to

support my research.

On the other hand, the pragmatic theory of justice as advocated by Niebuhr and Peters

reflects an equality of outcomes approach that seeks to ensure structural equality and equity in

social relationships. This perspective provides my research with the necessary mechanisms to

analyze interfaith organizations in the United States that are trying to enact change. The

interfaith movement within the US theoretically starts from a point of recognizing the need to

come together across lines of difference to benefit the common good. Like Niebuhr, many

interfaith organizations state that they desire to address injustices that have been caused by the

imbalance of power between social groups. Similarly to Peters, they recognize a needed ethic of

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responsibility of such an academic field. Analogous to the role of sociology in poverty alleviation programs might, the role of interreligious studies is to critically understand and critique the interfaith movement so that it may develop more effectively. Amy Allocco, Geoffrey Claussen, and Brian Pennington, "Constructing Interreligious Studies: Thinking Critically about Interfaith Studies and the Interfaith Movement," in *Towards a Field of Interfaith Studies*, ed. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Peace, and Noah Silverman (Beacon Press, 2018).

cooperation and solidarity across lines of difference to produce transformative action. Since the goals align within such a framework, these pragmatic theories provide the mechanisms necessary to evaluate the structures of the interfaith organizations involved, the majority of which do not currently produce the political actions they desire.

Instead of critiquing the ineffective structures of many interfaith organizations within the US, and in order to enact a pragmatic approach, I decided to analyze the structures of an effective organization with the goal of identifying effective community organizing strategies that are able to produce meaningful results in specific communities. Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) is an interfaith organization in the US that does indeed produce effective social justice action. Kim Bobo founded the organization in 1996 as a grassroots movement that builds alliances with congregations among affiliates around the country.[20] Its approach to organizing is also what Bobo describes as pragmatic: religious communities are seen as significant to the United States public and therefore they are necessary to supporting social justice movements. The organization pulls local religious communities together to not only address the symptoms of injustice through worker centers, but also to effect change for social justice on the structural level.[21] Since IWJ does effectively enact social justice action at both local and national levels as well as stressing the importance of faith community involvement, it provides the opportunity for me to study how interfaith organizations in the US may support social transformation for justice by bringing people together across lines of religious difference.

Main Goal

In an increasingly interconnected world, even more so in an increasingly pluralistic US,

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[20] Joseph A. McCartin, "Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement: Kim Bobo's Story," *Labor* 6, no. 1 (March 20, 2009): 87–105, https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-2008-046.
[21] McCartin, 95.

religious communities inevitably come in contact with the "other" at a higher frequency than before. Thus, since the majority of people are people of faith, interfaith dialogue and organization is an important civic opportunity necessary for communities to develop healthy ways to live and work together. As the field of Interreligious or Interfaith Studies is currently emerging, research on intentionally focused encounters across lines of difference is lacking. Therefore, the main goal of this project is to explore the possibility for effective cooperation across lines of religious difference. In order to achieve this, I strive to better understand how interfaith organizations effectively work with faith congregations to further social justice. By examining a local affiliate of IWJ, the Beloved Community Center (BCC) in Greensboro, I hope to identify strategies and structural or programmatic approaches that can help more communities engage faith congregations in interfaith work that focuses on a model of building relationships of solidarity that contribute to the common good.

Methods

Within the context of this class, I conducted participant-observation at the Beloved Community Center, an affiliate of IWJ in Greensboro. My partnership with the BCC began in March 2018 and lasted through the beginning of May in 2018. Since my research mentor already has an established relationship with BCC, she set up a meeting to introduce me to the staff members in the beginning of March to brief them on my research and ask when and where I might be able to conduct my participant-observation. At this meeting, I orally presented my research and answered more questions that they had. They explained how their organization works and the work that they have done. Together we determined the possibility of a partnership.

In dialogue with the staff, we decided that I would attend the weekly Wednesday Table meetings, a weekly space open to all community members to come and talk about what is going

on in the community for an hour and a half, and other events as they arise. When possible, I would attend the weekly Healing Tuesday event, this event is held at Government Plaza each week for reflection and healing for 15 minutes and to make a public statement that the community needs healing. While I am at these events, I informally observed and talked with staff and volunteers. This methodology allowed me first-hand access to examining the structures and practices of my partner organization instead of relying solely on written materials by the organization. My goal was to analyze and evaluate this affiliate organization to ascertain their strategies, best practices, or other structural or programmatic emphases that make them an effective interfaith model of social justice organizing in their contexts.

I conducted formal semi-structured scheduled interviews. Though my plan was to schedule interviews with the 6 staff members and then also with about 3 volunteers, 2 staff members were too busy to schedule interviews, so I was only able to interview 4 staff member. All participants who were interviewed were asked to sign an informed consent form. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. I asked staff members questions concerning vision, goals, structure, and involvement with IWJ headquarters. These interviews also allowed me a formal opportunity to ask about personal faith commitments, specific involvement within the organization, and how they see IWJ interacting with and affecting their community. I interviewed some key staff people at BCC. As I meet and work with volunteers, I identified other individuals to interview during the weekly meetings that I attended. The criteria for these individuals included 1) strong faith and justice commitments; 2) willingness to be interviewed; 3) representative of the range of faith communities that work with each local affiliate. These interviews were conducted at the conference room at the BCC. Since those working at BCC are so busy, conducting the interviews there was convenient for those I was interviewing, even

though it required me to make extra trips out to Greensboro. For this reason, I tried to schedule multiple interviews on the same day or schedule interviews on days when I am already in Greensboro. Also, since the conference room had doors that could be shut, it created the quiet space needed for a focused interview.

I conducted the participant observation part of my research during the meetings. During these meetings, I observed the topics that arose and how people interacted with one another. Unfortunately, since both of these spaces are only community dialogue events, I found it very difficult to observe the actually process of organizing of the staff members. I heard about what they had organized, once it was available to the public, but did not really observe the process. Additionally, because of the nature of the events that I attended, it was hard for me to establish relationships with key consultants. I had to rush out of the meetings in order to make it to class on time. Also, many of the participants do not come every week, so I could not build relationships with them.

Results

The analysis of the research involved both inductive and deductive methods were used. Since the data collected, both the field notes from participant-observation and the transcriptions from the semi-structured interviews, produced textual data, Dedoose provided a useful platform to code and analyze the data. First, preliminary codes were created based off of the literature, my specific research questions, and the interviews that I had completed at the time of coding. Once the data was initially sorted, grounded theory analysis provided an appropriate methods for themes to arise naturally from the data. These preliminary codes included *difference*, *context*, *demographics*, *affiliation*, *impact*, *motivation*, and *structure*, which was further broken down into *mission/vision/goals*, *organizational/leadership*, *programmatic*. Each of these codes connected with different aspects of the research inquiry. The initial codes for *structure* and *affiliation* connect to how the organization operates. *Motivation* and *demographics* connected to the

individuals involved in the organization. Finally, *context* and *impact* related to the reciprocal relationship between the organization and the community in it is located.

There seems to be a connection between *motivation*, *mission/vision/goals*, as well as *programmatic* approaches both across staff members and volunteers. Three themes emerged from all three of these categories: Christian teaching, the dignity of each person, and community. Both staff members and volunteers, whether or not they personally identified as a Christian, used Christian teachings to explain why people should engage in the work of the organization. For example, a staff member who identified himself as Muslim made the following statement, "Some people like faith to make them feel good, but Jesus talked about how you may not have done this or done that, but if you have thought it and you thought it in your heart, you've done it." He went on to explain how Jesus calls people to actually address the system. While the question was about faith, he automatically began using Christian stories to answer. This was a common pattern. A very Christian liturgical structure, including worship songs, and rhetoric, such as emphasis on fellowship, was also employed at larger meetings, such as the initial meeting for the Poor People's Campaign.

Yet, the same interviewee previously mentioned explained how they don't ask about the specific religious identity of individuals, but just ask them how they are. An intern explained it by saying "everybody is valuable in their own way." In fact, I found that the tone of the interviewees changed when I began to ask about specific faith identities in regard to interaction with the organization. They didn't want to categorize people by faith category, but instead perpetuated the mission statement to "the dignity and worth of all." While the organization clearly recognized the group identities of individuals, as they engaged in race conversations and congregational involvement, the rhetoric used promoted ideas of all of the individuals as part of one community, the community of Greensboro and specifically the Beloved Community Center. The idea of community resurfaced repeatedly both in my interviews as well as participant observations. At each meeting staff members explained how the space was for the community to

come together and in the interviews they visualized the organization as a place of community. Clearly the idea of community is not just nominal, but permeates throughout the organization.

Other themes that emerged through the category *organizational/leadership* were network, flexibility of projects, and lack of staff members. With the exception of one interviewee, all of the people I interviewed were involved in the community elsewhere. Some are on boards, some are clergy, and some are simply members of other organizations. This pattern stood with participants who I observed during meetings. This provided a network of connections through Beloved Community Center. Indeed, all the events besides the weekly events that I attended were connected with some organization. Additionally, when I witnessed a man come in and tell us that he wanted to paint a mural on his church, community organizers immediately knew of organizations and people within those organizations with which he could connect. Similarly, there was not just a network of people and groups, but a network of projects. Though their website lists 11 different initiatives, both past and present, my research revealed people speaking of many other initiatives that the Beloved Community Center is also involved in or used to be involved in. Many initiatives, such as the Kmart struggle, are no longer ongoing. Even with this broad network, one of the common structural desires that both staff members and volunteers brought up in their interviews was the need for more staff members. While they just brought on a new staff member within the past year and it is debatable whether they could afford another staff member, they admit that they need more staff to be able to accomplish their goals. Staff members express regret at the fact that requests have to be turned down.

The six themes that arose from the data and analysis provide insight related to the research question. Though seen through external realities, the first three themes show how the organization's members relate personally and internally to their work with the organization. The second set of themes reveals how the organization operates externally and with the community.

Discussion

The goal of this research was to discover effective structural and programmatic approaches to interfaith organizing. One conclusion from the results is that the Beloved

Community Center uses Christian rhetoric to promote both the community and the dignity of each individual. Because of the familiarity of Christian rhetoric in society, even among those who do not identify as Christians, this vision resonates easily with people. Community members are quick to understand and become involved, which expands their influence and impact. This point is especially valid due to the geographic location of this particular organization in the Bible Belt as well as their physic connection to Faith Community Church. Significantly, this rhetoric allows them a certain authority with lawmakers in the state, many of whom still rely heavily, if not explicitly, on Christian teachings when passing legislation. Therefore, lawmakers are more likely to heed the BCC's advice since there is a common basis for understanding and communication. Thus, this strategy allows the organization to be more effective at enacting social transformation.

Additionally, there is the contrasting, yet balancing, emphasis on community and individual. While Eboo Patel might agree with the emphasis on the individual, there is a distinct difference between his approach and the approach of the BCC. Patel desires harmony between contrasting or conflicting identities within an individual, whereas the BCC focuses on the physical dignity of the individual as treated by the government. The former approaches the internal individual whereas the latter approaches the external individual. The latter also places significance on the geographical community and all individuals that the area includes. Since policies normally discriminate against certain demographic groups, the organization does acknowledge and address these groups' issues, but they do under the assumption that improving the lives of these groups will improve all those in the community. They operate under an understanding of mutuality: that promoting the dignity of any set of individuals in the community promotes the moral standard and health of the entire community. Since the individual cannot be understood critically removed from their society and since government policies affect groups of people, the balance between external individual dignity and community importance help the BCC to effectively address the imbalance of power within the community and strive towards greater equality.

Another conclusion based on the results is that the broad vision, commitment to the community, and diverse network of participants of the BCC allows them to support different movements as they arise over decades of existence. Social movements come and go, but the base issues of society remain the same. Since the BCC is so firmly committed to the community, they are not restrained to one movement or one social issue. Instead, they have to flexibility to respond to the community and support its members as needed in that moment. Also, because of the incredible network provided by both the staff members and volunteers, the BCC has a wider understanding of the local community and a greater possibility for impact. Thus, as new movements arise, information can be quickly disseminated to a large portion of the community for support. Thus, having an organizational structure that allows for networking and a diverse array of projects helps the organization to cooperate across lines of difference for sustained and impactful social transformation.

Further research should be conducted to expand the research. While these strategies work for this organization, it might be related to its context within the Greensboro community. These strategies are also most likely not the only strategies that work well. Therefore a more extensive research project that assesses a variety of organizations in a variety of contexts would be useful to identify more strategies. Another one of the research questions related to how the national affiliate relates to the local affiliate, but no conclusions could be drawn through this research since most participants of the BCC were not aware of this affiliation. Finally, due to the busy nature of the organizers and limited involvement capabilities due to distance and other commitments, I was only privy to the public events. Thus the research was conducted only from a public lens. Seeing how community organizers utilize their network, strategize, and implement plans would add a deeper lens and show more significant possible approaches.

This study was able to identify three positive strategies or organizational methods to effectively engage the community in social justice work. These approaches include strategic rhetoric, a balance of community and individual emphasis, and flexibility in networking and projects. Using the values of pragmatic social justice theory to analyze the results provided the

lens through which effective and useful strategies could arise. Other community organizers will be able to utilize the tools identified through this research. In conclusion, though more extensive research in a diverse array of contexts is necessary, this research provides three possible strategies for interfaith organizations to consider. The implementation of such strategies will help them to be more effective in advocating for social justice and reaching their stated goals of social transformation for the common good.

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