

Running Towards Difference: The Role of Interfaith in Social Justice

*Note: What I'm sharing today is part of a 3 year research project that I've been working on throughout my undergraduate career. This research will culminate in a major research paper that will be submitted as my Honors thesis at Elon University. I am sharing a part of that work with you today.

Background Information

In the summer of 2018, I conducted participant-observation with an organization called Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), which is a national interfaith organization in the United States with 60 affiliates around the country that focuses specifically on advocating for worker justice. Affiliates are either interfaith coalitions, which try to tap into the local faith communities and use their influence for advocacy or education, or they are worker centers, which aim to organize and educate low wage workers. It is from my work with this organization that my research developed. Additionally, please note that when I speak of people of faith and faith communities, I speak as an insider and inclusively, including myself and my communities among those who should be aware of and responsive to the arguments that I make.

Outlining Context

If you think this is political, if I'm rooting my message in Jesus, who he is, what he said, what he preached, how he lived... if you're telling me that's too political for your Sunday morning, you ain't trying to come to church... There's a reason why Jesus got crucified.

~A quote from Rev Darrell Hamilton, one of my informants

Faith communities have a long history of engaging in the work of social justice. Many Christians, like Reverend Hamilton, tie their own practices of engaging in politics and social justice to the example of Jesus. They tie it to the teachings of Jesus, like the first time he read the Torah in the synagogue, choosing to read a passage from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” More importantly, these Christians tie it to the practices of Jesus, who they understand as challenging the dominant cultural and religious narratives of his time and upsetting political leaders to the extent that they had him killed. They see Jesus as a prominent religious leader who publicly engaged in politics for social change.

Throughout the history of the United States, Christian leaders have followed Jesus’s example by engaging in and leading movements for social transformation in the US. From the abolition movement, to the social gospel movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the Civil Rights Movement in the late 20th century, Christians have played prominent roles in movements for social change. While Christian leaders and congregations have been involved in the various social movements throughout the history of the US, the ways in which these faith communities have engaged in social action and the characterization of the issues with which they are concerned has always been influenced by specific social, political, and theological contexts.

The 21st century marks yet another era of religious involvement in social justice action. However, the dramatically changed religious landscape of the United States means that Christian leaders must rethink their organizing strategies in the midst of a religiously plural country. Diana Eck, founder of the Pluralism Project, identifies the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 as

the turning point in the US for growth in diversity and modern pluralism.¹ The Act of 1965 removed the quota restrictions on immigration, opening up the US to immigrants from around the world, many of whom brought with them a variety of religious traditions including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and other faith traditions. While these traditions were hardly new to American soil, the increased flow of immigrants swelled the ranks of “minority” religious traditions in ways previously unexperienced in the US. Like many new waves of immigrants, people formed communities with others who originated from similar places around the globe rather than assimilating with the dominant US culture. The influx of immigrants from non-European countries created significant growth of diversity and encounter with difference.

Coinciding with this increase in immigration was the Civil Rights movement, which advocated for the equal rights of black people and their culture in the US. Both immigrant communities and black communities fought to preserve and share their own cultures instead of assimilating into the dominant culture.

In addition to the growing religious and cultural diversity, Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), identifies significant growth in religious disaffiliation, or people dropping away from organized religion.² According to surveys done by PRRI, the percentage of people in the US who are religiously unaffiliated has grown from 7% in the 1970s to almost 25% in 2016.³ In the last 50 years, there has been a shift in US culture and demographic landscape from one of white Christian hegemony to diversity.

While many white Christians blame the shifting demographics for the current socio-economic and political crises in the US, social ethicist Rebecca Todd Peters shifts the focus to

¹ 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: Harper, 2001), 22.

² Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 77.

³ “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” *PRRI* (blog), accessed October 28, 2018, <https://www.ppri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

the failures of neoliberalism. Peters argues that the failures of neoliberal capitalism occurred alongside, though not because of, changing religious and racial demographics of the US. During his presidency in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan endorsed a policy of “trickle-down economics,” which held that cutting taxes for the wealthy would lead to investment of the extra capital into the economy, which would eventually benefit the working class. Reagan’s tax cuts, however, led to greater wealth accumulation among the owners of capital and increased economic inequality.⁴ In a neoliberal global economy focused on maximizing profits, manufacturing businesses, once the life-blood of the US economy, have moved production facilities to low wage countries and replaced jobs with technological advances. This has transformed the labor market in the US and further increased the wealth gap. As inequality increases, social mobility decreases and working class people face real hardships. Rather than recognizing the political and economic failures of neoliberalism as Peters describes, many correlate these hardships with the shifting demographics of the US, due to simultaneity.

Throughout my interviews, people emphasized how difficult engaging in social justice efforts is in the “current political moment.” When asked what the “current political moment” is, they often referenced the current presidential administration and the 2016 presidential election. The election, however, was not the beginning of the current context, but simply a public manifestation of a shift in society that had already been occurring as people struggled to cope with the failures of neoliberalism. Efforts by white Christians to regain the sense of economic stability and social influence associated with the pre-Reagan era manifest themselves in urgently fought battles over LGBTQ rights, ethno-racial tensions, immigration policies, and gun laws.⁵

⁴ 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), 18.

⁵ Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 42.

In the context of growing religious pluralism and the decreasing power of Christianity, my research focused on examining the role of faith in contemporary social justice action. Given these cultural shifts, I specifically chose to look at interfaith organizations, which have the potential to be an effective tool for uniting people across lines of difference in order to address inequality and injustices in society. One question that echoed through my conversations with people involved with the work of faith-based organizing was whether faith communities should continue to be engaged as significant actors in the work of social change. Given the changing demographics and increasing religious disaffiliation, this is a valid question. Additionally, if faith communities are going to continue to act in public spaces, how should this look and what are challenges that organizers must address?

My Argument

In my research, I examine these questions in greater depth. While it is true that the racial and religious demographics of the country are changing, it is also true that the country continues to be made up mostly of people of faith. Indeed 73% of individuals in the US in 2016 were religiously affiliated.⁶ Many of these people of faith see involvement in social justice action as an embodiment of their faith. For many people, this action is seen as just as important to their religious identity and practice as going to church or saying a prayer. They have a sustained commitment to social justice as a theological good beyond involvement in specific political movements. Additionally, across religious traditions, people of faith articulate theological values of relationships and building up a community. The networks built through these religious congregations allow for greater outreach and effectiveness in social justice efforts because there are already relationships and trust. Because this theological motivation for justice and religious

⁶ “America’s Changing Religious Identity.”

communities are sustained independent of specific social justice movements that are grounded in a specific cultural historical moment, like the abolition movement or the Civil Rights movement, partnering with these communities allows social justice efforts to persist even though movements may come and go. Among these points arises the theme that faith communities indeed have a significant role to play in social justice efforts.

While faith communities do have an important place in community organizing, I argue for a shift in the way that they are involved in social justice action as their current modes of involvement are not effective methods. They should consider the current political and social context in which they currently exist and respond accordingly. One of the challenges that faith communities face is the tendency to fall into individual charity or service work because it creates visible results most quickly. This work may help individuals, but the result is not sustainable as the system of injustice remains the same. Also there is a dangerous history of Christian missions, in which people of faith have silenced voices and advocated for oppression. In response to this history and the growing awareness among progressive religious activists that effective, justice-oriented organizing requires partnership with impacted communities, faith communities must struggle against the temptation to silence their own voices to give voice to others. This method is not healthy or productive, as there should be an equal partnership in which both voices are valued.

Two dominant themes play a prominent role in my research. First, that faith communities still have an important role to play in social justice action, and second, that there are some necessary shifts and pitfalls to be avoided in the ways that faith communities currently engage in this work.

Outlining IWJ

In order to responsibly and ethically frame my research, I consider the lived experiences of people involved in interfaith organizing grounded in an historical understanding of pluralism in the United States. Therefore, in addition to participant observation, I paid attention to related literature in ethics, philosophy, and history. I framed my research within the context of the US, careful not to assume that similar understandings of pluralism do or should exist in other countries.

Within the US, there exist many different types of interfaith organizations, from college campus initiatives to dialogue facilitators to community organizers. Most of these organizations state that the reason that interfaith work is important is to advocate for social justice and work for the common good. An analysis of the structures, though, shows that most interfaith organizations in the US focus on education about religions and individual relationships across lines of religious difference. Some groups are also engaged in community service, but rarely are they engaged in action that advocates for the social transformation they desire, according to their mission statements. The goals of interfaith organizations are social justice and the common good, therefore their structures and programs should reflect those desires.

I chose to partner with Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) for my research because they are an interfaith organization that has a long history of social action engagement. They advocate for legislation and have supported the labor movement through their interfaith coalitions and are a part of grassroots organizing efforts through their worker centers. Unlike many other interfaith organizations, their mission for social justice is clear through their structures and programs that actually advocate for social transformation.

IWJ was founded by Kim Bobo in 1996. The idea for the organization, though, started years earlier when she first heard about the Pittston coal miners' strike in Virginia in 1989. Inspired by workers striking for pensioners' healthcare, Bobo immediately thought to ask how the faith community was supporting the effort. Upon hearing that there was little in terms of solidarity between the workers and the faith community, she took it upon herself to create a national committee to support the miners. It was while doing this work that Bobo first realized that the labor movement was not really on the radar of many churches. Thus began her vision of what would become IWJ, a coalition of faith communities offering their support to the labor movement. As she pulled together a board for this new organization, 7 years after the Pittston strike, Bobo strategically chose prominent religious leaders who knew and cared about labor. Admitting that she knew very little about labor, Bobo recruited people who could guide and teach her about the structure and politics of the labor movement.

Listening to Kim Bobo speak, it is clear that her heart is for faith communities. Bobo speaks with joy of how fun it is to engage faith communities, who do this work from a place of hope and love. She sees that there is a desire from faith communities to be involved, to make things better, to make a difference. Kim Bobo articulates the initial vision of IWJ clearly: "Engage the religious community in supporting workers' rights."

This vision created the initial interfaith coalitions that pull together faith communities to advocate for systemic change. Faith communities are asked to support national campaigns like the Fight for \$15 or Our Walmart, often supported by clergy presence. They also organize actions like strikes, prayer vigils, or publications to raise public awareness of injustices against wage workers. Additionally, they fight for specific legislation to be passed at either the local or

national level. Education activities includes programs to educate both clergy and lay practitioners, and resource generation and distribution.

Early on in the formation of the organization, faith communities would call IWJ asking for help, explaining that they had non-union workers who hadn't gotten paid or who had lost their job due to discrimination. Out of these experiences grew a project to create a workers' rights manual and conduct workers' rights trainings, which eventually developed into the creation of workers' rights centers. These centers aim to train, educate, and organize workers as well as help individual workers regain unpaid wages or fight discrimination.

The mission expanded from faith communities simply partnering with labor unions, to faith communities standing with all workers, including those not represented by unions. In the 23 years since IWJ was originally founded, more states have become Right-to-Work, which means that many states have significantly less labor union activities with which IWJ could partner and less workers are represented by unions. Thus, worker centers to support non-unionized workers have become even more significant.

Methodology, Tensions, Expanding Outward

For my participant-observation, I visited three local affiliates located in Madison, WI, Memphis, TN, and Boston, MA and the national headquarters in Chicago, IL. I also visited and interviewed the founding director, Kim Bobo. In addition to observing daily routines and local actions at each location, I interviewed staff, board members, volunteers, and connected local clergy. In identifying informants for interviews, my criteria included attention to a broad representation of voices and perspectives, including voices that might not be presented in the dominant narrative of the organization. This attention is reflected through the diversity of

demographics of my interviewees, intentionally including informants within a range of roles in the organization, from Board president to staff member to volunteer. While I initially expected racial, gender, and religious diversity to be the most influential factors, as I conducted my interviews, it became clear that socio-economic status also played a significant role in how my informants viewed the goals and direction of the organization. Thus, this research focused not only on the public narrative of the organization, but the lived experiences of all people involved, which are influenced by various demographic factors.

Within my research process, I witnessed IWJ struggle to adapt with internal leadership changes as well as the changing landscape of the US. In 2015, Kim Bobo stepped down after 18 years as the executive director. As most organizations do when a founding director leaves, IWJ has been in a time of transition, reevaluating their mission and structure. One of the greatest points of tension has been if and how workers and worker centers should be integrated in the leadership of IWJ. Under Bobo's leadership, the Board consisted mainly of prominent religious leaders who were involved in labor to some extent and who had valuable national connections. The affiliates, a valuable part of the organization, were mostly not represented at National Board meetings. The current transition is pushing the organization to include wage workers and affiliate organizers to be on the Board. In fact, the bylaws were recently changed so that 40% of the Board members must be affiliates.

Further, the organization was founded in a time when faith communities were stronger and more vibrant and when there was more union organizing. As faith congregations tend towards declining membership, they are less able to fund and support other organizations. Additionally, federal funding for worker rights programs is currently being significantly cut back. IWJ has to deal with the tension of shifting their structure to adapt to a new cultural

landscape. Not only are their traditional sources of funding shifting, but the ways that their traditional partners, labor unions and faith communities, engage in the partnership is also changing. This necessary structural shift of IWJ in their engagement with worker justice addresses a larger question of how interfaith organizations and faith based community organizers have to respond to a shift in how faith communities and individuals of faith in the US imagine their involvement in social justice work. They cannot rely on the same structures they had when they began, but must reevaluate.

An analysis of IWJ is significant because it offers a window into the same questions that other interfaith organizations and faith communities must answer within this current context in the US if they desire to effectively work towards social justice and the common good. While other organizations in the US might not be in the same explicit transition period due to leadership changes or might not have the same questions about the representation of workers due to the decline of the labor movement, they must still address similar questions. Traditional faith congregations are declining in membership. People are becoming more aware of the need for the voices of the most visibly affected minoritized groups in making long-lasting, effective, systemic change. Just as ideas of pluralism and interfaith engagement shifted at the end of the 20th century, the role of faith communities and people of faith within social justice movements must be reconsidered as the country moves again into a notably different political climate. My research aims to identify why and how the faith voice matters in the efforts of social justice organizing and what are the necessary shifts to adapt to this new socio-political context.