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## Chapter 4

# How to Choose an Interfaith Project

### THE TASK'S THE THING



It's too early to begin celebrating merely because you have assembled a diverse group. As it is with the members of any other working group, the participants in an interfaith dialogue need to know why they have been called together, and the ground rules under which they will be operating. This will be especially important if you wish to retain Worker types. Without some clear idea of specific objectives, the group will retain only All-Believers, Inductors, and Intellectuals. This, of course, means it will be difficult to accomplish specific tasks.

**So then, why are you meeting?** Why have you formed a multifaith group? How do you measure success? Some may consider the very act of getting diverse faiths together in one place as an indicator of success. I don't agree. My experience with numerous multifaith organizations tells me that if you do not state specific, measurable and attainable goals, the group will either degenerate into a debating society or will eventually cease meeting altogether. Don't get me wrong: there's nothing wrong with civilized academic discussion. However, by virtue of its exclusive language and approach, the academic loop is a closed one. Interfaith groups that are run by Intellectual types rarely extend themselves outward to the public and are not usually regarded as influential by the rank and file in most faith communities. They have little impact outside their own group.

Interfaith dialogue, I believe, needs to be about fostering greater understanding and mutual acceptance among the many adherents of religion – not just a handful of leaders or acolytes. If the meetings are simply about discourse, you will not achieve so lofty an objective. I'm saying that interfaith dialogue – if it is to succeed in creating understanding between the religions – cannot

begin and end in words and the discussion of abstruse intellectual points. Most of all, it needs to avoid becoming a self-congratulatory 'feel-good' group.

If you have agreed that your dialogue is about much more than simply a closed circle of people speaking to each other, then you need objectives and tasks. To spur into action faith communities and their representatives, you need to show what benefits will accrue from participation. Lest you think that showing a benefit is too self-serving or materialist and commercial, remember that to sustain human activity you need motivation, incentives and goals. If you approach the entire concept with the idea that you are doing something virtuous and that virtue is its own reward, you will be undermining the longevity of the group. Gradually your group will grind to a halt.

The most successful voluntary and not-for-profit groups all have one thing in common: they are focused on the communities they serve *more than* they are focused on the service they are performing. In other words, their focus is generally directed outward to the external world and not inward to their membership and its needs.

Just look at the interfaith organizations that have the greatest longevity and most far-reaching impact on their respective communities. The long-standing Chicago Sunday Evening Club, Toronto's Horizon, the United Kingdom's International Interfaith Committee, and CRIC (Capital Region Interfaith Congress) in Ottawa, Canada all have things in common.

- Each is task-oriented, is focused on serving a clearly defined community, has concisely defined work, and moves from project to project.
- Each of these groups can be identified by the harmony, respect and cooperation among its respective members. Some people of faith say that the best way to get to know someone is to work with them.

These successful multifaith groups prove that point. So, forget about standing around hobnobbing and philosophizing -- GET DOWN TO WORK!

## HOW TO CHOOSE A SUITABLE PROJECT

The challenge then becomes one of finding what type of project will mesh with the goals the various faith communities hope to achieve from involvement with an interfaith dialogue. What are the benefits or triggers that will motivate them? Once you listen for or discover these invisible levers, you will have a handle on what are suitable projects.

For example, my work affords me many opportunities to speak to Jews and Muslims about why they need to be represented on television in North America. It's critical that I understand the hopes and fears of each group. It would be very easy to say to these faith communities:

“Look, you’ll have your own show. Won’t that make you proud?” In my experience, that type of pitch has never produced a single TV program. An appeal to simple pride just doesn’t work. But when I speak to the genuine hopes and fears of these communities, people begin to sit up and take notice. So then, I remind them that television can be an excellent method for educating the young about their heritage and engendering in them a sense of self-esteem. Television can reach the isolated adherents living in far-flung regions of the nation, cut off from the centers of influence and without local houses of worship. I point out that television can act as an anti-defamation tool, showing the rest of the world that the faith community is not alien or strange, while familiarizing the mainstream with the faith’s basic tenets. And one can make a case that all of the above will help prevent the assimilation of a faith culture into the dominant Western cultural mainstream. These are real benefits for these communities; benefits that address the real issues the respective communities are facing. Those who would start and run any interfaith dialogue group should take heed and take the time to explore the genuine needs of participant faith communities.

**Why your group doesn’t “rank”.** You must be constantly aware that your interfaith dialogue group is not the center of creation. Every faith community has numerous pressing responsibilities and undertakings: overseas missions; consolidation of their memberships; propagation of their respective faiths; maintenance of houses of worship and corporate responsibilities; media relations; publishing; youth programs; and much more.

Realistically, interfaith dialogue does not rank high on any faith community's list of priorities. That's because on the face of it there appears to be no percentage in dialogue. It doesn't help recruit more believers. It doesn't help with the consolidation of any given faith community's membership. And it doesn't increase revenues.

That's why it isn't good enough to put your interfaith dialogue group in the shop window and believe that the world will beat a path to your door. You can't buy your groceries with your good intentions.

**Choose your benefit.** So it's critical that you discover and then demonstrate why and how participation will benefit each respective faith community. For example, many see dialogue as a method for contributing to world peace and understanding. Good for them. Others are looking for the respectability that comes from being cheek-by-jowl with the well established world religions. Some are looking to find new adherents, though they've come to the wrong place. Some are looking to carry forward a commitment to tolerance and understanding. Some merely want their stories told accurately to the other faiths, and the world.

**Simply put, projects work.** I submit that the only way you will satisfy such a broad constituency is to make your organization project-driven. The historical record shows that the most successful interfaith collaborations have been centered on such landmark projects as:

- The Parliament of the World's Religions
- The International Interfaith Center
- The Multifaith Calendar
- The launch and ongoing viability of interfaith religious TV, if I do say so myself.

On the flip side you'll find interfaith dialogue groups that drift along with no clear vision or task in front of them. They gather simply because it *seems* like a *good thing* to do. They can carry on for up to 25 years and often include the same participants as when they first started. I can think of about five groups where about three to ten people have been getting together each month for years to listen to lectures on various aspects of religion. They have had no impact on their respective communities and municipalities.

When Muslims in their communities were denied the right to swear on the Holy Qur'an in court testimony and when Sikhs demanded the right to wear kirpans (ceremonial daggers) to school; when the local synagogues

were desecrated; and when the high schools called out for presenters on World Religion; these interfaith groups remained strangely silent. Now, as laudable as their dialogues may be, there is little if any evidence that any one of these formations has had an impact beyond its own inner sanctum. Where were they during their respective communities' hours of need? Why weren't they in the forefront or on the barricades defending others? Quite frankly, it never even crossed their minds because their focuses were inward. They were too busy having afternoon tea and engaging in polite polemics. They change nothing. They stand for nothing. They do little. If a tree falls in the forest...

**Putting the “seven types” to work.** This is why it is so important to understand the seven types of interfaith participants. Each type brings something that will keep the group going. At the same time, a preponderance of any one type can also cause problems.

For example, you need the Intellectual type to ensure that the reasoning and underlying premises of your working group are sound. However, the Intellectual type may be quite content to sit and talk and publish documents that have little importance or influence outside of the group. It may be enough for these people to just stand on the sidelines and take notes while the Sikhs in the community struggle for the right to wear a turban with a police uniform or the Jewish Community contends with a Holocaust denier spreading his or her filth in a local high school.

However, the Workers will ask (perhaps demand) that a project is undertaken, and then they will do the jobs associated with it. Yet, the Workers, because of their single-minded task-orientation, may lose touch with the underlying vision of the project. Enter the All-Believers and Groupies who are all about the vision thing and continually remind the others of the objectives, yet they are not strong on organization. Finally, the Pious Prophets, Inductors and Intolerants will make sure that the finest details of organization are given due consideration. Put all these types together in appropriate measures and you have a workable model; a project driven by a big vision, with people eager to make it happen and others just as eager to make sure that all the i's are dotted and t's are crossed.

You need to select a project that utilizes the talents of all involved. This will create and sustain momentum. This will permit you to achieve your stated objectives and tasks as well as the implied goal of creating greater understanding and unity between members of different faith groups.

## SUITABLE PROJECTS FOR INTERFAITH DIALOGUE GROUPS

The first step in identifying a suitable project is to survey the membership. Acquaint yourselves with the strengths and talents of the other members. Next consult to see if you have ideas about a task you would like to undertake. Sometimes, it is best to approach them with a few proposed ideas to get things started. A blank slate may be discouraging to many.

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### ***A tale of one city...and two approaches***

*Let me tell you a story of what happened in one North American city. In the mid-1970s, an ecumenical dialogue group decided to open up and include other faiths. Now, in many cities, ecumenical inter-ministerial dialogue usually means a monthly meeting of Christian pastors, ministers and priests to discuss who's on chaplaincy duty at the hospital and who will conduct funerals for those who die without family, etc. Fairly routine undertakings.*

*What happened when they enlarged to include other faiths was, well, nothing. They sat around and talked about wonderfully altruistic matters. They tut-tutted the awful apartheid regime in South Africa. They lamented the state of the nation's aboriginal peoples. They even paid lip service to the need for more women's rights. Nearly three decades later they are still meeting and talking and writing the occasional letter to the editor or appropriate government official. Sometimes they even produce papers for each other. But they were nowhere to be found when the real challenges presented themselves in their community of 1 million inhabitants.*

*Now, across town a different type of interfaith dialogue group met. It was determined to make a difference in the lives of everyone living in the community. It was action- and task-oriented. So the members went to the civil authorities in the community (read: city council) and asked, 'What can we do for you?' Surprisingly, the city council didn't give them a thankless job like cleaning the city streets for free. No. City council saw the interfaith dialogue group as an ideal vehicle to remove a long-term monkey from its back. You see, people were beginning to ask why city hall had such a glorious Christmas display but did nothing for Diwali or Eid or Naw Ruz or even Hanukkah. Of course, in most cities where this takes place, the first reaction is to kill all outwardly religious signs on public buildings. You know, lop off the arm to cure a hangnail. No more nativity scenes. No more opening prayers, etc. Separate church and state.*

*When presented with the challenge, the multifaith group developed an ingenious solution. They proposed that each month of the year, one faith group would have the right to place a display in city hall. Naturally, the Christians got December. But everyone else was also included. All the major faiths had a month for their own display. Now talk about your win-win solution! This is interfaith dialogue, consultation and task-orientation at its best.*

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When you choose a task, you may wish to consider how you can work together to reintroduce religion into public life. For example, they took prayer out of the schools because people complained that it imposed other's values on "my child". What's wrong with a rotating system of prayer and meditation? Why remove one religion and leave no one satisfied? With the inclusion of prayers that are not faith-specific or are drawn from all faith traditions, you can satisfy all parties and pay heed to the fact that over 90 percent of the population believe that a spiritual life is important.

There are many projects you can undertake in the public service. You only need ask your local city council or school board to present you with some of these projects. Naturally, you will not want to choose projects that have an overt, political agenda as some faiths eschew any involvement in the political realm. We'll take a look at faith and politics later.

**Why you need Vertical and Horizontal.** I have found that the most successful interfaith collaborative projects have both horizontal and vertical components. In other words, they have an overall or horizontal objective that each faith community can affirm. At the same time, they allow each faith to express its specific point of view or scriptural context for the issue; that's the vertical part. In Canada, we call this a Mosaic. Canadians say that while their neighbors to the south have a "melting pot" that acts as a crucible in which all values and cultures are melded into an evolving homogeneous whole, Canada has a Mosaic. Unity is built on allowing each piece or culture in the Mosaic to retain and reinforce its own identity, which creates a heterogeneous whole. In that, Canada's orientation tends to be quite vertical. However, even in a melting point, you will find individual groups, faiths, and cultures are desirous of holding onto some sense of identity.

So, the ideal projects to undertake will satisfy the horizontal objectives of society at large and your interfaith dialogue working group, as well as the vertical objectives and need for expression of each faith community participating in your group. In the next few paragraphs we'll look at projects that work for all.



### ***Have Faith Passport...Will Travel***

It has been remarked in many quarters that if we could but see others at worship, we would feel much less strange about their faiths. Perhaps we can even learn what we have in common. With this in mind, I had once proposed to an interfaith TV service that it consider producing a TV series called “The Visitor”. In such a series, a baptized Sikh would visit a baptism at a Baptist church or a young Jewish woman would attend the rites of passage of a young Zoroastrian woman. In each case, the program would include the first-person musings and comments of the visitor to show us how one perceives the other. That’s why a faith passport project could be useful.

Imagine if you will, that your organization made passports available to each member of the community and that each participating house of worship would stamp the passport of a guest. Those who attended a different house of worship at least once every two weeks over a four-month period, would get all the imprints and could be eligible for some form of formal recognition. The visits wouldn’t necessarily have to be for worship and liturgy. In each house of worship, the visitors could attend a lecture. You might even approach a community college to have this included in a world religions course or to issue certificates to those who complete the ‘course’.

You can see how this meets the broad objective of creating interfaith understanding. At the same time, it allows each constituent faith community an opportunity to shine and tell its own story. And remember, even though we work together on committees, we often do not know very much about the basic tenets and history of the faiths of our colleagues.

### ***Ethics and Morality in the Workplace and Beyond***

Destined to become the biggest public issue of the ageing baby boom generation, the matter of ethics in the workplace has really not been addressed in any detail by the faith communities. Let’s face it; clerics are not often the most knowledgeable people on the subject matter of situational ethics in a work setting.

If the faiths in your community bond together to present a discussion of ethics in the workplace, you will find there are many secondary spinoff benefits.

- First, you can have a real impact on the way people do business in your community.

- Second, because of your multifaith composition, you may find that corporations will not be shy about becoming involved with and perhaps even financially supporting the undertaking.
- Finally, you may decide to craft a working manifesto regarding ethics in the workplace that makes it easier for people of faith to express themselves in the work world and provides a baseline for organizations grappling with ethical issues.

### ***Multifaith Literacy Is Job #1***

If you talk to the schools and teachers in your community, you will find that they are not completely comfortable teaching world religions. While curricula are now available, there are only a very few textbooks that provide an unbiased and realistic exploration of the world's religions. This is where your group can provide your city or jurisdiction with an invaluable service.

A multifaith literacy project was undertaken in Toronto during 1998. The organizers invited many high school teachers and authorities to attend. Workshops and displays explained the essence of each religion. Teachers were shown that world religion can be taught without bias. Those in society who hold orthodox single-faith viewpoints and atheists alike were made to understand that teaching world religions is as important as teaching geography. After all, when you choose a profession or live in a community, you cannot avoid coming in contact with people of different faiths.

What better way to get along and contribute to social stability than to have a working knowledge of the beliefs of others? If young people grow up in a cloistered environment where they learn nothing of the faiths and cultures of others, it can be argued that we have limited their opportunities to live amongst and work with diverse people in diverse settings later in life.

### **Youth Projects**

Far too often, our multifaith groups consist of the aged sentinels of society, the senior representatives of established faith communities. However, the greatest challenges and opportunities for interfaith dialogue to do its best work exist among the younger members of society. Here, in youth, is where the long-term patterns of tolerance or bigotry, understanding or hatred are established.

That's why I encourage all interfaith dialogue groups to incorporate youth members in their caucuses. I say "incorporate" because it is insulting to youths, if you ask them to participate and then relegate them to their own "youth caucus". Bring the youths out of the young person's ghetto. Confide in them. Listen to them. And have them lead your group to undertake projects that address the faith concerns of young people. Ask them to help you develop projects that appeal to the young and will help them to identify the pernicious influence of hatred and bigotry. Ask them to come forth and become leaders in the community, exemplars of interfaith understanding.

This serves your group in a variety of ways.

- First, it opens you up to the fount of creativity and enthusiasm that quite naturally resides within the young.
- Second, it gives your organization and its work a youthful, vibrant face that will shatter notions of faith issues being pursued by the elderly and about the elderly.
- Perhaps most importantly, your youth-oriented projects will allow you to create understanding for the long-term. You will be working with tomorrow's leaders and ensuring a better world and the longevity of the good work of your organization.

### **Faith Fair**

The 'faith fair' is usually one of the first projects undertaken by an interfaith group. To promote acceptance and understanding, each faith is given an opportunity to put up a display or booth at the fair. Sounds simple enough...but sometimes problems arise around the theme of the event and who is eligible to participate.

- **Suitable themes.** With regards to theme, choose one that gives everyone an opportunity to participate. For example, one of the more successful faith fairs was called the "Festival of the Family". You can also choose themes like the environment, what the future holds, and human rights. The equality of women is always an interesting topic because every faith will immediately swear that it is completely committed to such an idea, yet few seem to practice it in everyday life.
- **Problem themes.** You'll walk into a wall if you build your faith fair around such themes as: the afterlife; the nature of God; hell and salvation. These themes, by their very natures, will exclude some faith communities from participating as equals.

With the faith fair you may also run up against problems related to whom you allow to participate and what is considered fair comment. This caused great consternation at the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions.

The Sikhs and Kashmiri Muslims used the Parliament to vent some of their frustrations with India. The Hindu groups did not take this well. This is what happens when politics becomes the focal point. The Greek Orthodox Church walked out of the Parliament when it objected to the participation of numerous quasi-religious and fringe groups. These are very serious issues that we will address in the next chapter. For now, be aware that who can participate may prove to be problematic.

### **The Anti-Defamation Network**

A Muslim woman is sent home from her job or school because she is wearing hijab, a traditional modest head covering. This has happened thousands of times in the West. But what would happen if your interfaith working group had prepared itself for just such an eventuality?

Suppose the very next day your group calls a news conference with a real difference. Instead of having a Muslim step up to the podium to defend a Muslim, you ask a Roman Catholic nun with head covered to act as your spokesperson. Can you appreciate the instantaneous impact of such a gesture?

What if the next time a Jewish cemetery was defaced in your community, it was a Muslim or a Christian that came forward to denounce the act? What kind of a message would this send to those who would divide us all? Is there any one in a better position to coordinate this type of response than your interfaith group? No. Think of the impact your group's leadership in such areas can have on the entire community.

This is not a new concept. At one time, the B'nai Brith was a beacon of understanding and anti-defamation, stepping forward to defend the rights of all peoples. When people have challenged the right of a Sikh to wear a turban, the Jewish communities have been in the forefront of support for the Sikhs. Christians and Muslims have made common cause in requesting prayer facilities in public schools.

This type of action can quickly bind together the many members of your group. You can quickly become defenders of religious understanding and tolerance throughout society. However,

you must be keenly aware that the defence of religious liberties must extend to all. Those with a more activist approach to faith or even a ‘fundamentalist’ perspective or a liberal point of view must all be entitled to equal defence by your organization.

### **Broadcasting ...your loudspeaker in the modern marketplace**

If you want to reach the masses today with a message of hope and faith, you have to be in broadcasting and in the business of providing web-based information.

There’s nothing new about the idea of cooperative TV or radio broadcasting amongst faith communities. It’s been done for many years in the Chicago and Toronto areas and nationally in Canada. Cooperative TV broadcasting among various faith communities can be informative and beneficial, if you arrange to have two types of programming – vertical and horizontal. In other words, programs about each faith community and programs where the different faith communities encounter each other face to face.

Every faith wants to tell its own story and explain its own doctrine. So any undertaking to jointly broadcast must allow each member of the faith consortium with an opportunity to convey its own message unencumbered by other communities. However, if you come together as a group solely so that each of you can have your own solitude, your own broadcast space – then you have accomplished little and defeated the very purpose for interfaith cooperation and understanding. In my experience, the best models allow time for each community to speak to its own adherents and to explain its position to the public at large *as well as* time for real interfaith debate and discussion of current or doctrinal issues.

Many of us have been raised with the all-too-familiar notion of religious broadcasting as messages of fire-and-brimstone and the threat of eternal damnation. But religious broadcasting can be so much more than that. I look at the body of work produced by the members of the World Association for Christian Communication and I am struck by the sheer range of drama, comedy and news features. No, it doesn’t have to be ‘pray TV’ or ‘preachy TV’.

Broadcast and web-based projects are ideally suited to multifaith groupings because they force all parties to work together. I firmly believe that the way we best learn about each other is through action and cooperation. You’ll learn more about others by working with them than you ever will through lengthy theological debates. I have produced numerous interfaith TV programs, and they were all learning experiences in which the parties each came away with a profound respect and new knowledge of the others involved. In one particular community where

large Christian churches predominated, a wise and saintly Hindu pandit and a widowed, elderly Seventh-day Adventist woman emerged as the spiritual and task stars. Who knows who will surprise us and teach us new things!

Admittedly, for some, the notion of a community broadcast project or new website seems daunting. They worry: “We don’t know how to make a broadcast or website”; “Who will head it up?” or “Who would even want to carry our type of programming?” Good questions. Let’s address each one.

**Where do we begin?** In most communities you can get help in making a broadcast from three sources.

- First, find out who there is in each faith community who has experience making TV or radio programs. Some faith communities have excellent resources and people that can be borrowed from their national offices. Some have fantastic national broadcast resource materials and even studios that they make available to local communities.
- Second, bear in mind that most public access TV (cable) and public radio services (campus) are required by their broadcast licences to respond to community groups that want to make programming. With sufficient pressure, station managers will often “loan” you expertise and make a timeslot available to you. Remind station managers that your group represents X% of the population and that you will promote the broadcasts through your own community networks.
- Finally, you can speak to your area community colleges that offer a radio/TV arts or internet web program and ask for assistance from their students in making the programs.

**Who will head it up?** In most of the projects suggested in this chapter you will need one person who is the coordinator of the project. This is especially true where broadcasting or website management is concerned. The coordinator needs to have the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job.

It also helps if the coordinator has the necessary sensitivity to all faiths and thus doesn’t call for a shoot on a Sunday morning or a Saturday or at noon on Friday (times for worship for Christians, Jews, and Muslims respectively).

It is the coordinator who makes sure that the pronunciations of difficult terms aren't mangled in narration. The coordinator makes sure that any scripts or the schedule of appearances by faith communities is equitable.

**Who on Earth is going to carry our programming?** You'd be surprised. Most broadcasters must carry some local community programming. This is especially true of the community access channels of the local cable companies and campus radio stations. These are good places to cut your teeth. The local angle and local leverage will encourage the area broadcasters to put your programs on the air. Sometimes they will even offer you a grant toward the completion of your project.

- **Interesting TV.** However, everyone has seen more than enough 'talking heads'. Only rarely do panel discussions engage and excite viewers. Your best shot at getting established local media interested in a news clip or feature piece or half hour is an event that has sound and color to it. For example, media will be interested in how your faith communities came together and cleaned up a polluted park or sponsored a choirfest with singers from all different faiths or a festival of films with spiritual themes.

*The news directors or directors of programming will want to see something that is new, unusual, colorful, musical and not run of the mill.* Remember, broadcast media thrive on bright images and sounds. You can do this easily if you put your minds to it. You could hold an international day of prayer for peace in a dramatic setting. For example, the TV program could document the planning and the challenges and then the day itself as one interfaith group did around its celebration of Earth Day. The ideas are endless!

- **Radio that sings.** Where radio is concerned there will be interest in anything that has a musical element to it – like the choirfest – or the words of a highly articulate representative of your group and its work. AM Radio may also be interested in the proverbial round-table discussion as long as the issues are of interest. You will need a host who really makes things move and isn't afraid to ask the tough questions. No one wants to hear two ministers, a priest, a rabbi and an imam discuss the meaning of life. And no one says that the clerics make for good radio or TV for that matter. If there is a college radio station in your town, it may be quite willing to dedicate time each week to an interfaith program.

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*It takes time...and commitment*

*One of my most successful interfaith TV project took place in Ottawa, Canada's capital city. It really all began with the undying enthusiasm of a Grey Nun who believed that all of the religions could talk together, work together and foster understanding. With a small stipend from my broadcasting organization, Sister Anne organized every faith community in the one million-population area. They all came together without any real idea of what they would accomplish. I threw down the gauntlet and challenged them to get together and come up with an idea for a TV program or series and then I would find the money to make it happen.*

*Well, they worked very hard. The group process that led to deciding upon what type of series to make took almost three years. Group process in these matters is slow but let's not forget that the process is an important part of what's really going on. The TV programs were a product, but through the process of working together and sharing hopes and beliefs, that city's faith communities drew closer to each other until they became a model of interfaith cooperation. The pieces began to fall into place. Intrigued by the project, a world-renowned director from ABC News signed on and so did a crew. A local broadcaster also added money to the pot. Like a reactor, the project built kinetic energy. Finally, a truly uplifting three-part TV series was developed. Then two years later, another series came about. And after another two years, another series. All received excellent press, and very good ratings.*

*All of this took place because of the drive and infectious enthusiasm of one woman and the willing suspension of belief of the partners from many different faith traditions. To this day, the members of the group consider each other as warm friends. When one passed away, members of the group from the many other faiths attended his funeral and shared the grief of his family. That's the kind of unity that interfaith dialogue can and should produce.*

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### **Get your feet wet first**

I'm willing to admit that not every group is ready for big primetime exposure or the pressure of having to produce a full half-hour program from a standing start. That's why the public service announcement (PSA) can be a great leaping off point.



You have seen the wonderful, heart touching PSAs that the Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have used so successfully for years. Why not consider doing a 30- and 60-second PSA for use on local radio and TV? These do not have to cost a lot of money to produce and you have the benefit of the local broadcasters running the spots for free in available openings.

Here's how I would approach such a project.

1. **Identify the issues.** I'd pick a community challenge that unites every faith community. Perhaps you may want to do a PSA that encourages people to think twice about all the lotteries and casinos around them. You might want to do a PSA that urges everyone not to forget the important role of religion in public life. You could tackle such issues as bullying and cyber-violence. In other words, the first step is to brainstorm a message that all parties can agree on; an issue of significance in your community.
2. **Choose your medium.** Next, begin the creative process of how to present such an idea on radio or TV and/or streaming on the internet so that it would really strike people. You'll also want to consider such things as production costs and how you arrange for each faith community to have its own idea on the PSAs when they run. You'll probably have too many member faiths to squeeze into a radio ad or onto the TV screen, so maybe you'll want to rotate the sponsorship of the PSAs. You might even be comfortable with a generic tag: "Something to think about...in the public interest...from the religious communities of Acmetown".
3. **Set a budget.** You could try the "Amnesty International" approach. Amnesty produced a 30-second TV PSA video a few years back that opened with a shot of a fountain pen speeding through a crowded, dusty marketplace, down a stairwell, through a filthy, rat-infested corridor, and finally to a lonely prison cell inhabited by a dejected individual. The pen glided into the lock on the cell door and clicked it open. Neat idea, huh? It won a wheelbarrow full of international awards. How much did it cost to produce? \$0. That's right, nothing. Amnesty went to the leading ad agencies and film production houses in Montreal and asked each to donate its time and services in developing the concept and then shooting and editing the commercial. Who could turn down such a worthy cause (or the possibility of working on a project that might win awards)? Believe me – as a one-time President and Creative Director at an advertising agency, I know – there are ad agency creative directors dying to make ads for something more meaningful than cat food. They might leap at the opportunity to work with your group. You'd be surprised how many others like actors, set decorators, film suppliers, and food services would give their time and services for free to help you complete your project.

By its very nature, your PSA could receive lots of free airplay. Speak to the programmers of your local radio or TV stations and ask them what they are looking for in a PSA.

And after you've succeeded in broadcasting, start talking about a joint website or even a public-service out-of-home ad campaign. (Out-of-home advertising includes billboards, busboards, public transit, transit shelters, in-mall pillars, etc., etc.) Never let the momentum die. Always be ready to move on to the next project.

### ***You might be giants...do it for the Common Weal***

Under the rubric of social benefit and working for the greater good, there are many activities your can undertake that will foster understanding and draw your membership closer together.

- **Public prayer.** For example, who better to resolve the issues surrounding appropriate school prayer? Your group, when representing all of the faith communities, is best equipped to handle questions of protocol regarding public prayer at council meetings.
- **Religious instruction.** Your group can position itself as an advisor to the school boards on the matter of religious instruction. You can become known as the group to contact for information about the laws and tenets and practices of the world religions. A nervous Christian about to attend his first Jewish funeral and interment can call your group for information about what to expect.
- **Community care.** In many communities this is still an area that has not been revisited for many years. This is one arena of public life where your group can certainly play a leading role as advisors and participants in the spiritual and religious care given to the elderly, the infirm, and the imprisoned. You can revive and revitalize the dusty old notion many have of care and chaplaincy by transforming it into 'the work of the heroic spiritual guardians of society'.
- **Public issues, public stands.** You might also consider an examination of Public Gaming. Now that so many jurisdictions are open to gambling, gaming, lotteries, and casinos – the faith communities have been the most vocal opponents of this practice. It is one of the rare issues that unite all faith communities, all beliefs. From those who are deemed conservative to those identified as reformers or liberals – all are united in their opposition to the detrimental effects of government-supported gambling.
- **Advisors.** In a number of jurisdictions, the civil authorities – police, elected representatives, and others – have learned to consult interfaith groups and hold a joint annual meeting for guidance.

The list goes on and on. Rest assured though, that because religion has not been a significant part of public life in the West for the last 30 years, those in authority may require some education about your intentions. Let us not forget that during those same years, the numbers of adherents of other world religions have blossomed in our midst. Now with an aging populace actively seeking faith and a significant percentage of the population in the West not familiar with the traditional Judaeo-Christian doctrines and liturgies, you have a whole range of opportunities open.

This is the one time in recent history that you can virtually rest assured that, if your group makes the temporal authorities in government, health care, education and the law aware of your existence, they will indeed call on you. They need your knowledge and your counsel on the issues of the day. In fact, that's what the UN sponsored Millennium Summit of religious leaders was about. Just look at the Bush White House Office of Community and Faith-Based Initiatives which was established in 2001 to solicit the assistance of faith communities. Canada's Parliament hosts an annual interfaith breakfast. Other leaders have quietly been consulting religious leaders and multifaith groups.

The time is at hand when faith communities will again be consulted regarding matters on the public agenda. Know this and position your organization accordingly.

## **BAD IDEAS, BAD PROJECTS YOU CAN AVOID**

Yes, it's possible to choose a bad project for an interfaith dialogue group to undertake. By definition, a bad idea is one that either creates acrimony and disunity among the group members themselves or has little or no public impact, or even worse, a negative public impact.

Take note of these blunders and you can spare your group the pitfalls that others have stumbled into:

### **Images of God**

Organizing an event or publication around this theme is fraught with peril. Most Buddhists and Jains – who are largely not theistic – will walk if you choose this theme. Furthermore, many faith communities believe the representation and portrayal of the Almighty and His prophets and messengers is a sin or distasteful.

## **Faith & Social Justice**

While this theme can work, do not wrong-headedly allow yourself to believe that every faith community buys into a secular humanist social agenda that is critical of the governments of the day. If you do, be prepared to lose everyone except liberal Protestant groups.

## **Current Events**

If you theme your event around something that is highly topical and current like world-wide monetary policies, the quality of political leadership, the Middle East situation, et al., you are looking for conflict. Politics generally spells trouble for interfaith dialogue.

## **LOTS OF WORK... WHO WILL GET IT DONE?**

It would be very easy for each of us to feel overwhelmed and dwarfed by the nature and size of our work. Because we come from faith backgrounds, delegation isn't necessarily our strong suit. Nope. We expect the clerics and/or paid staff to do it all. Wrong!

Let's be honest. Interfaith dialogue is no one's highest priority. Most faith communities are primarily concerned with their own expansion and consolidation activities like holding regular services, keeping their communities active and involved or their work amongst the poor and missions overseas. The benefits of interfaith dialogue are not immediately evident and don't always earn the instant support of congregations and clergy.

- You can count on you. In short, all of this means that you'll have to count on yourself and your colleagues in the dialogue group to get most of the work done – even if you do receive the official blessing of your faith's hierarchy.
- Recruit vigorously. You will likely have to enlist the support of others by inviting them to join with you. Again, do not think that the mere act of forming a group is going to attract huge numbers of people. Yes, the traditional supporters of interfaith groups will all be there: the Intellectuals, Inductors, and Groupies. Your main task will be to locate and recruit Workers who can carry your plans forward into actions.
- Build the skillbase. You will need people with a rich and varied range of skills – not just those who understand religion and diplomacy. You will need people who know: financial reporting and budgeting; promotions; media and publicity; the universities;

computer technology; event planning and coordination; fundraising; and municipal affairs.

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### ***Where have all the Workers gone?***

*So how do you locate the Workers who can help you get the job done? Worker types, by their very natures, will already be involved with some other projects. You need to capture them as one project is finishing and they are looking for a new undertaking through which they can express their faith. Believe me, if they are available and know that they are needed, Worker types will readily volunteer. The key is that a Worker type needs to be needed. A typical Worker will tell you: "Public relations? Yes, I would be pleased to take on the public relations responsibilities. What do you have in mind? What are your terms of reference? What's the nature of the project? When do you expect me to get the job done?" Be prepared to answer all of these questions clearly and succinctly if you want this Worker type on your team.*

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**Fight inertia.** Now that you have recruited 20 or 30 or more eager participants, the challenge is to fight the natural inertia and attrition that bedevils not-for-profit organizations. If you don't find areas of responsibility for each participant, the more capable members will tend to seek elsewhere the uses of their respective potentials and will cease to attend your meetings.

## HOW TO GET THE WORK DONE THROUGH COMMITTEES

As we learned earlier, a large group of more than nine or 11 people can't really get a lot done. We looked at the importance of having an executive group and the necessity of creating committees.

- **Share the work.** Empowering committees ensures that no one has the entire responsibility for the organization and its work on his or her shoulders.
- **Build a solid structure.** With a sound committee structure in place, your organization can withstand such setbacks as the departure of key members.

- **Share the vision.** By empowering the committees you also protect your group from becoming one person's vision. You will be ensuring that everyone owns the process and its outcome.

### **What a committee needs**

To function properly each committee needs

- **Chair.** An interim chair or coordinator who is either a member of the executive or is charged with the responsibility of keeping the executive informed of the committee's plans and activities. When a committee first meets, it should elect its own chair and secretary.
- **Terms.** Each committee needs its own terms of reference. This will prevent committees from unwittingly duplicating each other's work. It should review or write its own terms of reference for approval by the executive committee.
- **Realistic workload.** It should assess the strengths of each of its members and the realistic number of hours per week or per month that each member can commit to its work. It should ensure that it understands its role in the overall work of the interfaith group and its current project(s). Then, it should set up a realistic meeting schedule that is neither too onerous nor too infrequent to get its work done on time.

### **The eight basic committees...**

In my experience these are some of the useful committees and their areas of responsibility:

#### ***Finance***

Usually the organization's treasurer sits on this committee which is charged with overseeing the financial operations and bookkeeping.

#### ***Fundraising***

Sometimes a sub-committee of Finance, the Fundraising Committee is responsible for developing plans and budgets for coming events and then finding the sources of revenue to realize the projects.

### ***Publicity***

This committee handles all promotion and advertising and media relations for your group and its activities. Without publicity, you will be ‘preaching to the choir’.

### ***Research***

The Research Committee is charged with serving all other committees. It locates the people and information the others need to get their work done. It assembles lists of invitees and guests and literature.

### ***Site Committee***

If you are having an event located in a real space, you need a committee to take responsibility for site coordination and organization. If you plan to have booths from each faith community, it is the Site Committee that draws the floor plan.

### ***Electronic Communication***

In this day and age someone needs to take responsibility for establishing and maintaining a website and responding to e-mail: that’s your Electronic Communication Committee. Chances are, its members will work closely with your Publicity Committee.

### ***Membership Committee***

The bedrock of the organization, the Membership Committee collects dues, maintains membership lists and recruits new members.

### ***Newsletter Committee***

This is another committee that works closely with the Publicity Committee. The work of the Newsletter Committee, unlike that of a typical Publicity Committee, is internal. It is charged with keeping all members informed with ongoing activities. A regularly published newsletter is critical to the continued involvement of all members.

## INDIVIDUALS COUNT, TOO

It would be far too facile to think that everything is collective; that committees and group meetings alone will get all the work done. No one ever said that interfaith activity would be an exercise in Athenian democracy. While responsibility is collective, execution is often individual. That's why you should have Worker types in every group and committee.

### **Why you need strong leadership**

You also need strong yet responsive leaders.

- **Chair.** The chair of your interfaith group needs to be free of bias and responsive to the prevailing sentiments expressed by the general membership.
- **Secretary.** You need a secretary who is a natural communicator and pays attention to detail.
- **Treasurer.** Finally, you need a knowledgeable treasurer. Many of us who work in faith communities and interfaith groups don't have the necessary grasp of financial affairs, prudent stewardship and the requisite government filing regulations. Make sure you appoint or elect a treasurer who has the experience to do the job properly.
- **Project coordinators and executive directors.** Don't assume that your elected officers can do everything. From time to time you may also find it necessary to appoint a project coordinator or office manager. Generally, you will find it beneficial to appoint a project coordinator if that person has specialized expertise in the area being considered, like developing a website. This person must make frequent contact with all of the committees and Workers to make sure they are all working toward the same goal. This can take a lot of pressure off the officers.

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### ***Paid staff?***

*You might even choose to reimburse a coordinator or executive director for his or her services. I've seen such an arrangement work where that person is being paid by a faith community and has been permitted by the faith community to do some of the group's work. This can also work where your group has received a grant from a foundation, organization or branch of government that is designated to pay for the part-time services of a coordinator. This is how my television productions have generally come to fruition.*



*Funds were made available for a coordinator who acted in concert with an elected executive.*

*When you have a coordinator on an honorarium or stipend, you are protecting various other members of your group from burnout. Burnout is a real factor in not-for-profit groups. You don't have to look far to find individuals who will not get involved now because they worked tirelessly for the last project and then didn't get so much as a thank you. The coordinator who is being partially reimbursed doesn't usually have the same problems, because his or her commitment is more than emotional. In short, the coordinator is less likely to suffer from burnout.*

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If you choose to name a coordinator, make sure it is clear to all parties how that person was chosen. Ideally, you want someone who understands faith and has worked in groups previously. You need someone who is warm, genial and receptive to the general membership. Next, make sure that the coordinator has a clearly defined job description and reporting responsibilities. With a coordinator in place, your group can give more attention to themes and ideas, while the coordinator handles the detail work.

Group, committee, and individual. You need all three motivated, inspired, and involved to make your interfaith project succeed.