



KARUNA CENTER FOR  
PEACEBUILDING  
and  
CRITICAL CONNECTIONS  
*Building Inclusive Communities*



**The Role of Faith Leaders**

December 8, 2017, at Holyoke Community College  
Summary and Key Takeaways

**Part I: Striving For Inclusion – Looking Inward**

*The Challenge:* Most communities of faith strive to be welcoming places. But there are many who feel excluded from their faith communities due to experiences with or fears of encountering racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, differences in political ideology, or other forms of alienation.

*Guiding Question:*

How do we overcome barriers to building inclusion and diversity within faith communities?

Panelists:

Rabbi Amy Katz - Temple Beth El, Springfield/Longmeadow  
Imam Rasul Seifullah - Al-Baqi Mosque, Springfield  
Father Warren Savage - Diocese of Springfield

Moderator:

Rev. Marisa Brown Ludwig

Summary

The overarching themes that emerged in Part 1 were importance for faith leaders to model welcoming behaviors, actively reach out to newcomers and members of marginalized groups, and use their roles as educators to help others create welcoming spaces. Clergy have a very significant role in setting the tone for their communities: as Imam Seifullah pointed out, communities take on the character of the pastor, imam, or rabbi. So if the leader is not all-embracing, others will not be, either. When someone shows up, be welcoming. Smile, introduce yourselves, be engaging. Faith leaders need to condition their followers to do this. They can start by emphasizing how much we all have in common, while also pointing out that the diversity in the world that we do see is created by God – we are not meant to all be the same, and we all have something of value to give to the benefit of humanity. Father Savage concurred, adding that inclusivity begins with saying good morning to everyone you pass, whether or not they respond. He reiterated the need to “model a lifestyle that is compassionate,

welcoming, nonjudgmental, and affirming of others.” He also emphasized the need to encourage people to firmly believe in their hearts that everyone has intrinsic dignity.

Rabbi Katz noted that most members of her congregation would say that they are an inclusive community and would say that of course they want all people to feel comfortable in the synagogue, but she pointed out that there is sometimes a discrepancy between theory and practice. She recalled an incident in which a gay couple felt uncomfortable in a class she taught even though it did not seem like anyone was being outwardly rude. But members of marginalized communities may need more than just the absence of hostility in order to feel truly included, she stressed. This is where education can come in. As all three panelists suggested, it is important to take concrete steps to make sure that people feel welcome. The leaders cannot do it all themselves; they must educate others in their communities and convince them to join these efforts.

In small group discussions, the term “radical hospitality” was brought up to describe what must happen to make people feel included<sup>1</sup>. Another group brought up how much joy there can be in finding that you are an “insider” when you step into a new faith community. Making this happen, as several other groups discussed, requires strong leadership and a lot of work, as well as explicit conversations.

We need to ask questions to challenge our usual ways of thinking and working.

Part 1: Key questions that emerged from small group discussions/Q & A session:

- Who is being given the “microphone?” I.e., whose voices do we hear? Do we let marginalized people in our communities speak for themselves, or do the more privileged try to speak for them?
- When a community is resistant to being inclusive, what is the nature of that resistance?
- How can we help people to feel part of a tradition if they are not literate in that tradition? It is important for people to have a solid core sense of who they are. How do we educate people about their own faiths as well as others?
- How do we balance the needs of a few against the needs of many? For example, if there is a congregant whose needs are taking up a lot of time, how do we make that person feel welcome while also establishing healthy boundaries?
- How can we embrace a diversity of political beliefs?

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<sup>1</sup> “Radical hospitality” has been defined differently by different faith leaders and congregations, but generally implies going beyond just greeting newcomers. Many sources are available online with suggestions and examples.

- How can we embrace neurodiversity<sup>2</sup>? Is that a different type of inclusivity? What about ableism? (tip: always use a microphone to include people with hearing difficulties).
  - Where are the opportunities to break out of a “one size fits all” approach to religious practices? For example, can Bar Mitzvah rituals be adjusted to meet specific needs of individuals or their families? Or can a more liberal and inclusive Muslim space be created outside the mosque to embrace LGBTQ Muslims without coming into conflict with religious laws?
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## Part II: Striving For Inclusion – Looking Outward

*The Challenge:* Prejudice due to racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia and transphobia is pervasive and exists within faith communities and also in the broader community.

### *Guiding Question*

What is the responsibility of faith leaders in reducing intolerance and bigotry, whether that means addressing hateful views held by members of your own faith community or responding to bias-related incidents and troubling trends in the broader community?

Panelists:

Rabbi Justin David - Congregation B'nai Israel, Northampton

Rev. Corey Sanderson - Second Congregational Church, Greenfield

Tahirah Amatul Wadud - Muslim activist and attorney *\*and now also a candidate for Congress!*

Moderator: Rev. Melissa Carver Zeimer

### Summary

In both the panel and small group discussions, everyone agreed that faith leaders – and ordinary citizens – have a responsibility to respond to intolerance and bigotry. The question, then, is how to do it successfully in an increasingly divided environment.

Rev. Sanderson began the panel discussion by acknowledging the importance of this topic. He noted that we all must be critical in thinking about what we have been taught. In the absence of meaningful interactions with people from different traditions, media and Facebook memes fill the gaps between us with ignorance, stereotypes, and fear. We need to pull together, interact with each other. We shouldn't minimize differences--as noted in the first part of the day, differences are not necessarily bad. We need to increase religious literacy and familiarity with different

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<sup>2</sup> “Neurodiversity” refers to the idea that neurological differences expressed as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, etc, should be recognized and respected as much as other forms of diversity. “Ableism” refers to discrimination in favor of able-bodied people. It is often due to lack of awareness of the needs of others.

traditions. He recalled a story about MLK Jr, who went to hear a speech about “Christian love” that turned out to be about Gandhi. Understanding that a non-Christian such as Gandhi could nevertheless be an example of Christian love popped him out of his Baptist bubble. We need to do the same.

Rabbi David echoed the importance of not minimizing differences. He recalled seeing a commercial as a child, in which a grandfather teaches his grandson that he was prejudiced for referring to a child as his “Jewish friend” rather than just his “friend.” The predominant liberal world view at the time was to ignore differences. But that has changed (for the better). He shared some of his personal stories on the path toward understanding his own place in the power structure as a privileged white male. In his first year as a rabbi, he gave a carefully worded sermon about peace in the Middle East and was complimented on being “deft.” But by now he feels that it is important to be passionate and principled, not just deft. He can use religion and his role as a leader and educator to look outward and make the world a better place.

Ms. Amatul-Wadud brought a different perspective to the conversation, because she doesn’t have a congregation, but she, too, repeated the call to address issues head-on rather than ignoring or minimizing differences. For her, social justice and interfaith work was born out of necessity, in response to anti-Muslim sentiment and issues regarding racism within Muslim community. She didn’t grow up with conversations about race, or any other uncomfortable topics, but she believes that it is very important to have those conversations. With her own children, she decided to start early and often. She and her daughter developed a way to speak with Muslim communities about the universality of the African American Muslim Community. This includes teaching all Muslims about the story of Bilal (a friend of Mohammed and a great muezzin, who was born into slavery and experienced racism), and including in American history classes the fact that 20% of people brought from Africa into slavery were Muslim, so that Muslim Americans know they have a legacy here.

With regard to accountability and risk taking, the general consensus emerged that faith leaders have an obligation to the texts and traditions of their faith—and also to social justice. Rev. Sanderson spoke of the triangular covenant between individual, God, and community. We’re at a place where it’s good to have values, faith, and spirituality, but we also have to do real work to live out those values. He noted that religious communities often have a mindset of needing to be cared for by leaders, so they may be hesitant to have clergy speaking on issues of justice in the larger community. But he believes that it is important to speak out anyway (and if you are fired, it probably meant that it wasn’t a good fit anyway). The others agreed that there may sometimes be risks (including, as Ms. Amatul-Wadud pointed out, emotional vulnerability), but if you believe in justice, there should not be anything holding you back. Rabbi David claimed that the greatest risk is inaction. Faith leaders can tap into people’s spiritual curiosity and use their roles as educators to encourage greater action.

In terms of how to reconcile theological beliefs and secular laws, people often assume that theological beliefs will be more conservative than secular laws. But this is not always the case. As Rev. Sanderson pointed out, liberal Protestants (as well as other faith communities) have long had an open stance toward LGBTQ people; in this case, their religious belief in same-sex marriage was held back by secular laws for a while. Often religious ideals rise above secular laws, and in these cases we can try to influence local policies to be more rooted in compassion and forgiveness. As a positive example, there is a noteworthy restorative justice program in Greenfield that is grounded in the values of forgiveness and reconciliation, rather than just punishment.

Below are some of the questions, thoughts, and suggestions that came out in the small group and plenary discussion [note—several of these points were brought up in the first part of the symposium (looking inward) but thematically fit with the second (looking outward) and are therefore added here]:

## Part 2: Key questions that emerged from small group discussions/Q and A session

- Religions often get weaponized--how can this be prevented?
  - We need more religious literacy -- not only of what our own traditions say, but also others. For example, even within the Evangelical world, there's a progressive movement -- not all are fundamentalists like Westboro Baptists. Although the "old guard" is still present, one of the most exciting things happening in American religion now is a rising awareness that texts are not supposed to be used as weapons.
  - In addition: organizing and standing up and showing up are great counterpoints to how religious beliefs are exploited.
- Many people spoke about the importance of forming interfaith relationships. But how can we welcome people of other faiths—especially religious minorities such as Hindus—without making them feel that we're trying to convert them? Several suggestions included:
  - We need to stick by people we invite to our communities, to shepherd them and introduce them around and defend them if necessary.
  - We must be welcoming while not neglecting differences. When visitors come into our communities, we also need to ask them about theirs.
  - College campuses can expand multi-faith components of their programming. For example, Mt. Holyoke has a Hindu prayer room. They also have frequent interfaith luncheons and other opportunities for students to learn about other faiths in non-threatening ways.

- Faith leaders need to make sure that they are teaching children in their congregations to have a solid core identity, especially if they are in a religious minority. If they grow up knowing who they are, and have a strong connection to their own faith, being surrounded by more “mainstream” religious practices or symbols won’t feel as threatening.
- When we invite people into our communities for interfaith events, the focus can be on the common experience, eating food together, sharing traditions, feeling loved.
- With interfaith relationship building: how do we dig deep, beyond one action or one event? What opens us up?
  - One suggestion was to work together on something ongoing and meaningful. For example, in Northampton the Beit Ahava Synagogue and the Florence Congregational Church are now collecting water filters for Puerto Rico (they have raised \$47,000 so far). The two share a building, but in the past they did very little together. Now the minister and rabbi are working together with a new level of engagement. Relationship building has shifted, and feels deeper because it’s based in caring and worrying about others. In a sense it’s political work, not just religious work, because it is filling a gap left by government. That might be scary to some faith communities, but it is important.
  - Rev. Sanderson pointed out that especially with the younger generation, we are seeing a shift from beliefs to values. We can build upon shared values, across religious differences, for long-term engagement.

### **Key Takeaways from the Symposium:**

- It is our responsibility, both as members of faith communities and ordinary citizens, to step up in whatever way we can in the face of injustice, prejudice, and bigotry. Where can we leverage the organizing power of faith communities to rally around advocacy? In the past, some religious communities have been docile, but this past year has been a wake up call to become more engaged.
- Remember that choosing to act or not act is a sign of privilege. Some do not have that choice: they could literally be killed or deported if they act. A related note that is important to address within communities is that we might still be gaining privilege from an injustice even when we act against that injustice.
- To do this work effectively, we must examine and actively respond to internalized biases in our communities. There is a balance between looking inward and looking outward,

different layers of work that we have to do together. Education is key, but so is action. We can't let guilt lead to paralysis.

- When we reach out to others: who are we leaving out, and why? The answer might vary for different communities, but we can all try to expand our reach as we embrace inclusivity. For example, anti-Semitism is often ignored or quickly dismissed. And some people who loudly protested the travel bans -- defending the rights of non-Americans -- have ignored the injustices to their fellow black Americans. Even at this symposium, there was almost no inclusion people of faith with a queer or trans identity. No one should feel invisible. How can we do better?
- Radical love has to come into our theology. Reach out, form unlikely relationships, don't get caught up in a good/bad duality.
- We must commit to interfaith relationship building for the long haul, and go deeper than scattered, disconnected events.
- Never underestimate the importance of community. Many people believe that evil grows out of organized religion, but in general, community building makes us stronger. We need to build communities beyond Abrahamic faith and have more programming that creates opportunities for community.
- We must learn about and learn from history -- and our complicities -- and apply those learnings to the present. For example, Central American immigrants working in our area are being deported by ICE. Our own government is doing divisive things to our society now that have parallels in the past. We must remember what happens when we don't speak up. At the same time, we also need to plan for what happens "after the revolution." As people of faith, and as humans, we need to make sure the oppressed don't become oppressors. Remember that it has happened before.
- We must connect the safety of ourselves and our own groups to the safety of others.
- It is important to structure conversations in ways that don't provoke defensiveness. How do you move people with more privilege to a place of being allies, rather than backing them into a position of being the oppressor?
- In dialogues with others, always ask "is there more?" Instead of sealing off knowledge bases, we need to extend our understanding that we are all in a web. We need to embrace the next level of conversation. Our hearts must be ready to hear.
- We might not always agree on how to move forward. But even though violence is bad, conflict isn't necessarily bad. There is a lot of work to do, both within our faith communities and across wider divides. The time to start is now.