

Fighting HIV/AIDS and Transforming Communities through Interfaith Partnerships: Why and
How Christians and Muslims Must Collaborate

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Abstract

Interfaith partnerships are the key to combatting a global, complex problem like HIV and AIDS. Since globalization has turned all of humanity into neighbors, partnerships that build social capital, foster reconciliation, and strengthen collaboration as means to end HIV/AIDS are a necessity. Previous negative experiences, current prejudices, and apathetic or partial interpretations of scripture have hindered many opportunities for Muslim-Christian partnerships, but it is time that these relationships are restored so that healthy partnerships can address HIV/AIDS in an effective and holistic way. This paper will attempt to succinctly address the complex issue of HIV and AIDS and why interfaith action is necessary, the major challenges and benefits of said partnerships, and how and why such communication and collaboration can occur. Through case studies, examples of effective Muslim and Christian partnerships for the sake of HIV/AIDS and community development around the world will be explored. To finish, general principles of interfaith partnerships will be drawn out and applied in an attempt to answer the question: How does one work with people who are dissimilar to themselves?

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In an increasingly globalized and connected world, the HIV and AIDS epidemic is no longer merely a health issue, it is a global threat. Since its first recognition in the 1980s, many interventions, programs, and organizations have been created in an attempt to adequately address, prevent, and treat the infection, yet it continues to invade and devastate entire populations. Interventions implemented at the individual level are effective on a small scale, but in order to make a significant impact on HIV and AIDS, larger issues such as a commitment to social justice and building social capital must be focused on first. Fortunately, many communities have a strong thread of social justice and charity already present within their existing faith institutions. Christianity and Islam are currently the top two global faiths as far as number of adherents—2 billion and 1.2 billion, respectively (“Top Dozen Religions”, n.d.)—which means that the potential for partnerships to be created and used as catalysts for positive change has never been greater. Christians have been called to “love your neighbor as yourself,” and to take care of the poor, widowed, orphaned, and needy in society; likewise, Muslims also have been commanded to take care of one another and to accept people of all races, backgrounds, and faith traditions. Why then does it seem impossible that these two prominent, global faiths could work together? By capitalizing on the resources and power that these faith institutions hold and connecting them to each other and to individuals through strategic partnerships, the issue of HIV and AIDS can be fought in both a culturally sensitive and effective manner.

In addition, engaging in intentional interfaith dialogue and partnerships has the power to reconcile and transform communities that may be suffering from division and segregation.

Studies and examples of current interfaith organizations have shown that interfaith partnerships

are an effective way to build respect, tolerance, and unity within a community, as well as a strategic and reasonable way to tackle larger issues shared by all community members. Interfaith dialogue is no longer avoidable because everyday, conversations and interactions in the grocery store, at school, and in the workplace occur between people of all different cultures and faiths. In urban environments especially, diversity and pluralism is unparalleled. Intentional interfaith dialogue, however, is too rare, and interfaith partnerships are rarer still. Since dialoguing is the act of talking together in an effort to openly exchange ideas and understand another's viewpoint, intentional interfaith dialogue is the strategic act of bringing bearers of different faiths together for the same purposes. Interfaith dialogue has the purpose of increasing understanding so as to promote respect and hospitality for all of the different beliefs and traditions. Partnership, as defined by Phill Butler (2005), is two or more people, organizations, ministries, etc., who agree to work together to accomplish a common vision or goal (p. 2). There are many challenges to effective interfaith partnerships—fear, prejudices, interpretations of faith that lead to isolation rather than unity—but the benefits always outweigh the barriers. Bonding, bridging, and linking people to each other, and to the power structures that affect them within a community, ultimately ends up transforming every aspect of society. Children, families, and social structures are strengthened and improved as a result. Therefore, interfaith partnerships that strategically capitalize on shared values and resources are necessary to holistically and effectively combat HIV and AIDS due to their ability to increase social capital, foster respect and reconciliation, and transform communities.

Information on HIV and AIDS

While there have been great strides taken in regards to preventing and treating HIV since it was first recognized in 1981, it remains a disease of global proportions. HIV (which stands for

Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus much like any other except for the fact that it only affects humans, and that for some unknown reason, the human immune system cannot get rid of it. The virus attacks a person's immune system and weakens it, destroying important CD4 cells that are designed to fight infection and protect the body. HIV attacks these healthy fighter cells and invades them, making more copies of itself, and ultimately destroys the immune system. Over time this process leaves the body unable to fight disease and infection, which can then lead to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011), HIV is primarily spread: through having unprotected sex with someone who is HIV positive, having multiple sexual partners, when there is the presence of other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), sharing needles, syringes, or other equipment for injections, and through an HIV-infected mother passing it to her child through pregnancy, birth, or breast-feeding (para. 12).

AIDS is the final stage of HIV infection. Thankfully, due to medications that were introduced in the 1990s, people with HIV can live for a long time before they develop AIDS—some even decades. According to AIDS.gov (2011), people who have AIDS have severely damaged immune systems, putting them at risk for “opportunistic infections (OIs),” which are infections that take advantage of a weakened immune system and can cause deadly illnesses. Common examples of opportunistic infections are certain cancers, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. These infections are often the most common cause of death for people living with HIV/AIDS.

The Global Threat

HIV/AIDS is a global issue that deeply and negatively affects individuals, communities, and long-term development. Currently, there are 34 million people living with HIV/AIDS, and 3.4 million of those are children aged 15 or under (UNAIDS, 2011). The disease has reached

epic proportions and is no longer merely a health crisis as it is robbing children of their parents, hurting the workforce, and devastating economies. HIV often renders children unable to attend school, either because they are sick or because they have to provide care for the sick. According to World Vision, Inc. (2012), one in every six AIDS-related deaths, and one in every seven new HIV infections are children under the age of fifteen (para. 3). An unfortunate occurrence in areas hardest hit by AIDS is the generation gap that is created: Grandparents are often left to provide care for sometimes large amounts of kin since mothers and fathers are frequently taken by the disease. Worse perhaps is when a young child is left to take care of their siblings, a phenomenon that has been labeled by the international organization World Vision Inc. as “child headed households.” The amount of children orphaned as a result of AIDS-related deaths is predicted by UNICEF to reach 20 million by the end of this year (as cited by World Vision Inc., 2012). In addition to the dying family units and the effect that has on human development, World Vision has noted that with the loss of so many adults, family income and food production have fallen dramatically. HIV is killing off the most productive members of developing communities— the doctors, the teachers, and the farmers— rendering communities less able to achieve long-term development.

While the disease does not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, orientation, or faith tradition, a significant number of infected people are living in the world’s poorest countries. Poverty perpetuates the struggle as people lose their jobs and income due to sickness, medical services are scant or are unreasonably expensive, and a lack of basic necessities such as food and clean drinking water make daily survival a challenge in and of itself. HIV/AIDS has hit nearly every area of the world, with sub-Saharan Africa being affected the worst—71 percent of all people newly infected with HIV were in this region as of 2008 (World Vision, Inc., 2012).

Though HIV and AIDS may seem like a disease that only affects developing countries and people in foreign lands, globalization has made the disease and its devastating consequences everyone's issue. Its widespread scope has forced populations of all sizes to come up with appropriate and aggressive ways to address the nature of AIDS in a variety of terms. As Barz and Cohen (2011) contend, "populations have engaged in long-term struggles to find meaningful modes of action within globalized systems of relationships, knowledge, and health discourse" (p. 4). The increase in function and availability of technology, the ease of travel and the instantaneous ability to know current events all over the world has brought the term "neighbor" into an unprecedented context. Globalization, with all of its pros and cons, ultimately brings people closer to one another and places humanity's inter-connectedness front and center. Culture and faith largely shape how this inter-connectedness is perceived in various parts of the world, but whether one sees globalization as positive or negative, it is nevertheless an inescapable reality and an evolving part of human society. Robert J. Schreiter (1997) defines globalization as "the increasingly interconnected character of the political, economic and social life of the peoples of this planet" (as cited in Groody, 2009, p. 13). Thomas Friedman, a foreign affairs columnist for the New York Times, described globalization as an entire system based upon integration. He wrote, "The world has become an increasingly interwoven place, and today, whether you are a company or a country, your threats and opportunities increasingly derive from who you are connected to" (*The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 2000, p. 8). The issue of HIV/AIDS is certainly a threat that affects the globalized world, as it undermines entire economies and rips apart familial and community structures the world over. In short, your neighbor is no longer simply the person who lives next to you; your neighbor is also the orphaned child in Burundi, the HIV infected woman in Boston, and the grandfather who is left to raise his eight grandchildren in

Angola. Because of this interconnectedness, one person's actions and inactions have the ability to affect someone across town, across the country, across the world—to live an autonomous life is no longer possible. Regardless of HIV/AIDS status, cultural background, faith tradition, or geographical location, everyone has become a global citizen.

Basis for Interfaith Collaboration

The need to act justly and seek the welfare of others is imminent in this day and age. Perhaps surprisingly, the Islamic faith and Christian faith actually share many of the same beliefs in regards to the increasing connectedness of humanity and people's responsibilities as global citizens. It is important to note, however, that globalization is not the same as "westernization," which according to Merriam-Webster (2012) is not the connecting and bringing together of people, but rather the conversion to or adoption of western ideas, traditions, or techniques. Both Islamic and Christian faith traditions oppose the side of globalization that includes unbridled freedom for the purpose of self-gain and personal wealth, a concept that has been referred to as "money-theism" (Groody, 2009, p. 22) or the worship of money and materialism as God. The opportunities that globalization creates, however—such as interconnectedness that leads to increased opportunity and need for social justice—aligns itself nicely with the core values of both Christianity and Islam.

Social justice is the act of turning away from money-theism and turning towards one's neighbors, especially those who are oppressed by injustices such as disease and poverty. Social justice becomes increasingly important as the current forces of globalization create greater inequalities and disparities in every area of human life: political, social, economic, and cultural. Jenell Paris (2009) explained that:

Social justice involves acts of charity: by our actions we show how the poor, excluded, forgotten, or oppressed should be treated in light of God's justice and love. But it must also go beyond acts of charity to addressing the systemic inequities that make people vulnerable and put them in need...[then] we can create unprecedented conversations about justice across doctrinal and denominational boundaries, and we can form unexpected new partnership in the practice of justice, opening unexplored new potential. (p. 52)

Bringing people together and connecting them for the purpose of social justice and the sake of community is of high priority in each faith tradition. Justice, as described in Christian and Islamic scriptures, has to do largely with reconciliation—of God to men, and of men to one another. Daniel Groody (2009) wrote that for Christianity, “Globalization offers a new hope for human solidarity and interconnectedness...in contrast to Western society’s emphasis on the autonomous individual, Christianity sees each human life as profoundly interconnected with others in a series of overlapping relationships” (p. 21, 24). At the same time, Islamic beliefs hold that human beings are connected to each other, to the earth and all its resources. Ali Ameer (2003) and David Loy (2004) explained that contrary to popular belief, Muslims are not anti-globalization, but rather are “against the Western secularization that propagates materialism, greed, and selfishness and undermines values that are important to Islam, such as benevolence, justice, moderation, humility, honesty, and forgiveness” (as cited in Groody, 2009, p. 126). In fact, Muslims are bound in duty to support any organization, groups, or even other religion that promotes these values. Since both Christians and Muslims value building community and the stewardship of resources for the greater good, partnerships that are created for the purpose of social justice have the potential to serve both as a way to live out peoples’ responsibilities as global citizens, and to live out the faiths of both traditions.

Interfaith partnerships are also an effective way to build social capital, which is necessary for holistic community development and for fighting a complex and devastating disease like AIDS. Social capital, as defined by Grootaert (1998), is the “set of norms, networks, and organizations through which people gain access to power and resources, and through which decision making and policy formulation occur” (p. 2). Bonding, bridging, and linking are important components of social capital. Connecting people across cultures, across faiths, and to the institutions that make up their communities allows for more voices to be heard, for greater collaboration on shared issues, and for a stronger, more engaged population of citizens. Interfaith partnerships specifically help the bridging component, and occur when strategic relationships are created cross-culturally. Social capital in a community setting is defined by Zubrick, Williams, Silburn & Vimpani (2000) in “Indicators of Social and Family Functioning” as:

The specific processes among people and organisations, working collaboratively in an atmosphere of trust, that lead to accomplishing a goal of *mutual social benefit*. Social capital does not refer to individuals, the means of production or to the physical infrastructure. Instead it is a relational term that connotes interactions among people through systems that enhance and support that interaction. (p. 30)

The four constructs that make up social capital—trust, civic involvement, social engagement, and reciprocity—all promote positive beliefs, attitudes, and interactions with other community members and groups. Engaging in and encouraging interfaith partnerships helps to create and strengthen all four of the constructs of social capital, which means that not only will new, strategic relationships be created, but the existing institutions, organizations, and people dedicated to fighting HIV/AIDS within a community will be strengthened and better supported.

An interesting point was made by Zubrick, Williams, Silburn & Vimpani (2000) when they wrote that as the complexity and development of community increases, social capital tends to decrease due to fear and mistrust. This decrease in social capital then hinders how effectively the community is able to handle new problems, or how effectively they can continue to address existing problems. The authors claimed that:

[Community members] may feel that somehow, they are missing something; that they cannot trust and rely on others as much as they did in the past ... A price cannot be put upon the rich networks, social cohesion and expanded opportunities that strategic partnerships create. (p. 1)

Increased development causes urban environments to flourish and encourages diversity. Without intentional partnerships to encourage trust and break down barriers, misconceptions and prejudices will weaken social cohesion and social capital. People fear the unknown. With strategic interfaith partnerships we can eliminate the unknown and promote respect, understanding, and ultimately increase the social capital within a community, enabling members to effectively fight issues that negatively affect them.

Christian Scriptural Basis

The concept of partnership is a strong theme in Christian theology and is often connected with reconciliation, justice, and unity. Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 clearly stated his desire and ideal for the Church: That they should be as one as he and his Father were one (New International Version). Since Christians believe that God the Father and Jesus Christ were two separate beings but divinely connected along with the Holy Spirit to make up the Trinity, this scripture is a beautiful illustration of how reconciliation between both God and mankind, and mankind to one another can look. However, even within the Christian community there exists

mistrust and division; Pride and fear— instead of humility and acceptance— often keeps the Church from practicing reconciliation among themselves and extending it outward into the community. John Perkins (2007), a long time advocate of and tireless worker for reconciliation, claimed that:

Before we can do the work of God, we must be the people of God—the believing fellowship, the Body of Christ. We cannot achieve Christ’s mission working alone; we must work as a body, with each person exercising his or her spiritual gifts as a part of the whole. To do the work of reconciliation, then, we must begin by being a reconciled fellowship by being the Body of Christ. We must model the kind of relationship into which we want to invite others. (p. 2)

Living in a reconciled state is a humbling, never-ending process, but the more we embrace the need for humility and perseverance, the easier it will be to embrace partnerships. Though the ultimate and final messianic reconciliation is not within our control, Volf (1996) stated that in its absence, reconciliation is possible because communication and connection is possible, since we are all social beings inhabiting the same world (p. 109-110). This message is one of hope, with the warning that it will not be easy and we will never reach full reconciliation and unity until Christ’s return, but that we can reach a place of peace and understanding in the mean time.

Engaging in interfaith partnerships within a community will lead to tensions and many misunderstandings if the partnering faith traditions are unclear about how to define and live out key aspects of their faith. Concepts such as worship, evangelism, and service all have different meanings and consequences in each major tradition. Consider, for example, the danger of an urban Christian church embracing interfaith partnership for the sole purpose of proselytizing

everyone. It is important therefore that the Church community looks critically at how it approaches worship, evangelism, and service, and embraces only the definitions that are supported by scripture. Many Christian churches embrace the calling found in Matthew 28:19, to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (English Standard Version) as the Church’s purpose and focus. According to the apostle Paul, worship is the entire purpose of the Church, not mission. Rather, the evangelism will come through planting churches that exude and live in God’s glory. Churches, by Paul’s standards, do not mean buildings made of brick and wood. To plant a church is to plant a community of believers that are outward-focused, dedicated to living and serving the greater community. Frost & Hirsh (2003) differentiate between Paul’s definition of church, described as “incarnational” and “messianic,” where the body of Christ seeps into the cracks of a community and adopts a Christ-like perspective of seeing the world in a holistic way, and the Greco-Roman’s practices of church, which are “attractional” and “dualistic” so as to draw people in to the smaller church sphere and separates the world as either religious or profane. They wrote that:

Many of the ways the missional church is emerging around the world look messy, chaotic, and dynamic. They don’t always meet in the same room on a Sunday for church services, but they are worshipping God, building Christian community, and serving their world. They meet the biblical criteria for a church, but they don’t often look like church as we are used to thinking of it. (p. 12-13)

Conn & Ortiz (2001) paralleled this view when they wrote that the “Christian community draws the world to its fellowship of mercy, service and justice and becomes itself the path to joint worship” (p. 154). In addition, White (2006) stated that evangelism takes the shape of good

works as a result of biblical repentance, which is a simultaneous inward response and outward action (p. 51). In this way, we see that evangelism does not exist apart from worship and service, and is not achieved through verbal persuasion or threats. Rather, living out kingdom partnerships and embracing community and unity as means of glorifying God should be the driving forces behind engaging in interfaith dialogue and relationships.

Islamic Scriptural Basis

The Arabic word Islam simply means “submission” and derives from a word meaning “peace,” similar to the Hebrew “shalom.” In a religious context it means complete submission to the will of God, with the special connotation of soundness and wholesomeness (Majid, 2004, para.6). In addition to submitting to God’s will, the root word “salam,” (peace), also means to Muslims that they should strive to live in peace with the Creator, within one’s self, with other people, and with the environment. According to the website “Alim” (2010), this calling for Muslims to live in peace and harmony with all of these segments creates a “total system of living”:

For a fifth of the world's population, Islam is both a religion and a complete way of life. Muslims follow a religion of peace, mercy, and forgiveness, and the majority have nothing to do with the extremely grave events which have come to be associated with their faith. (“Islam and Muslims”, para. 1)

Islam, along with both Christianity and Judaism, is considered one of the three Abrahamic faiths. This means that like the other two faith traditions its origin can be traced back to the patriarch Abraham, and that Islam’s three prophets—Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad— are believed to be his direct descendants. The fact that these three faith traditions share the same

history and have a common base allows them to already have grounds for understanding and collaboration.

Besides Abraham being the common ancestor and respected by prophets in both faith traditions, Christians and Muslims both believe in an omnipotent (almighty, supreme) God who created everything and everyone. They share the belief that God is the creator of the universe and the life-giver of humanity, that heaven and hell exists along with angels, and that other prophets such as Noah, Joseph, and David—as read about in the Torah and gospels—were sent from God. In the Qu’ran it instructs Muslims to say to the “people of the book,” meaning Jews and Christians:

And argue not with the People of the Scripture unless it be in (a way) that is better, save with such of them as do wrong; and say: We believe in that which hath been revealed unto us and revealed unto you; our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender. (29:46)

Of course the difference that will not be agreed upon is the person and ultimate position of Jesus Christ. Christians maintain that Jesus Christ is Lord and is equally God as part of the holy trinity; Islam claims that Jesus— though a remarkable and influential prophet who was sent from God— was purely a man, and that God remains a separate and higher entity. As Professor Abdul Majid (2004) confirmed however, like Christians, Muslims also believe in Jesus’ miracles, noble morality, his ascension, and his ultimate return to earth in order to save humanity (para. 27).

In addition to the common beliefs found in both faith traditions that lend themselves well to the topic of interfaith dialogue and partnership, the Muslim faith also promotes the respect of Jewish and Christian places of worship, monasteries, churches, and synagogues (Majid, 2004,

para. 32). This concept of tolerance, respect, and even unity, with Christians shows that many of the perceived barriers to interfaith relationships are most often misconceptions or fears. Since Muslims also strongly value the idea of community and have a strong thread of social justice woven throughout their faith, it is both reasonable and fruitful to capitalize on the commonalities shared by these faith traditions for the sake of these common topics.

Potential Challenges

Stigma of HIV/AIDS

Often one of the largest barriers to people receiving proper treatment for illness and disease—HIV and AIDS especially—is the stigmatization that accompanies the testing and treatment. The conservative nature of both the Christian and Muslim faith traditions have long held them as either silent or condemning players when it comes to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. According to Hartwig, Kissioki, and Hartwig (2011), a lack of knowledge about the true causes and nature of the disease lead many to make assumptions, a common one being that since HIV is transmitted sexually, the people who are infected must have engaged in immoral behavior or broken acceptable sexual norms (p. 493). In addition, many faith-based organizations that exist to fight HIV and AIDS enter as outsiders and bring their own ideas of religion, medicine, and morals attached to the disease. As a result they are able to play a supportive and alleviating role, but they also end up perpetuating the stigma.

Hope remains, however: In some African nations, there have been exciting examples of coalitions of Muslim and Christian community leaders partnering together to address the topic in a creative and culturally relevant way through music and performances that promote faith, hope, and healing. As Barz and Cohen (2011) reason, it makes sense to design health messages

through combining religion and medicine, since in so many cultures across the globe the two are already closely intertwined (p. 10). This asset-based method of educating people on HIV/AIDS works well because it uses the unique strengths and resources of the existing culture strategically so that people can better relate to the messages and experiences they hear, which will allow for better absorption and retention. Another success story of faith institutions fighting HIV/AIDS and stigma is described in the documentary of Philly Lutaaya, a man who was once Uganda's favorite pop star, and "the first prominent African to publicly announce that he had AIDS" (Zaritsky, 1990). The documentary follows Lutaaya throughout his last years spent educating fellow Ugandans and raising awareness for HIV/AIDS, and captures his experiences in bringing both the Catholic and Muslim faith communities into the fight. In Uganda at the time of Lutaaya's efforts, ninety-two percent of the population regularly attended places of worship. Naturally, this meant that the country's churches and mosques were going to be a crucial partner to any HIV/AIDS intervention; unfortunately, as previously discussed, the faith institutions were hesitant to acknowledge the issue of HIV/AIDS within their community due to the nature of the disease and how it is contracted and spread. As Zaritsky (1990) documented, after a period of time one of the mosques invited Lutaaya, a non-Muslim, to come speak, and in his address Lutaaya was able to find shared commonalities—polygamy and national pride—in order to encourage the Muslims to educate their youth on safe sex practices. Lutaaya also had success in appearing in the country's largest cathedral, where he was able to worship with and perform for the extremely conservative crowd (p. 51).

Fear of Compromising Beliefs

A common concern when discussing the topic of interfaith partnerships with people of faith is that lines will be blurred and their unique traditions and beliefs will be compromised. As

one person voiced when asked about Christian-Muslim partnerships: “It’s a nice idea, but I don’t think that it’s technically possible. Maybe it would only work if you were only kind of Christian and they were only kind of Muslim... You’d have to compartmentalize it...” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 2, 2012). To address this concern and avoid an integration of faiths and loss of culture, it is recommended that each partnering faith tradition have a previously established definition of terms to resort to and abide by as the first and foremost step to interfaith partnership. When all parties enter a partnership with an agreed upon set of expectations and boundaries, collaboration is much easier to attain. For this reason, defining the term dialogue is important. A succinct definition of dialogue, the key to interfaith partnerships, not only will help to dispel fears but also to measure the effects of interfaith partnerships on a community over time. Robert B. Sheard defined it thusly:

Dialogue by its very nature involves a respect for the beliefs of others and a willingness to let the other remain in his or her faith. Dialogue is seen as an encounter between those who are committed to their respective faiths. (as cited in Pedersen, 2004, p. 5)

Along the same lines, another important point to remember is that interfaith dialogue does not require a meshing of beliefs, but rather a mutual respect and a desire to understand and collaborate with the different traditions. Combining faith traditions is not the goal of interfaith partnerships, and this paper will not argue for unification or a merging of faith cultures. The religious movement Unification has a “World Scripture” that is a compilation of beliefs and scriptures concerning shared concerns and topics from 268 sacred texts and 55 oral traditions. As Andrew Wilson (1991) clarified in *World Scripture, A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, the guiding principle behind Unification and the World Scripture “is that all religions are connected to the same Ultimate Reality and lead people toward a common goal... a universal

religious perspective, embracing the truths of all religions, that will become the basis for a God-centered, pluralistic society, nation, and world” (para 8). Interfaith partnerships do not need participants to dilute their beliefs or compromise their traditions; the creation of a new religion everyone can share and agree upon is not the goal of interfaith dialogue and collaboration. Strengthening relationships and building assets within a community for the purpose of holistic transformation is the goal. Daniel Groody (2009) suggested that finding common ground between the major faith traditions and collaborating together is the key to reconciling a world that has been both brought together and divided by globalization. He referenced the Parliament of the World’s Religions, which claimed that the major faith traditions of the world are central to creating a new global ethic. The ethic would be shaped by these common commitments: “A culture of nonviolence and respect for life... a culture of solidarity and a just economic order... a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness, and... a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women (Groody, 2009, p.146-147). Respect and hospitality towards differing beliefs, rather than mere tolerance for, is the ultimate goal of interfaith partnerships.

Interfaith Prejudices and Misconceptions

A colorful history of extremist movements and wars are to blame for many of the prejudices and misconceptions that exist between Islam and Christianity. In one instance, when the topic of Muslim-Christian partnerships was brought into a discussion, one person stated, “All that comes to mind is the Crusades...” (Anonymous, personal communication, February 17, 2012). Lindy Backues (2009) wrote that some of the anti-Christian bias has been created by the Christian community themselves; more specifically, “the way the Christian community over the years has tied itself to colonialism and inequitable power structures” (p. 70). Instances of religious violence and oppression often stem from religious insecurities. A lack of knowledge

and apathy towards— or in some cases, fear of— differing beliefs makes for rough roads to cooperation and peace. Chrys McVey, a theologian, was interviewed about truth from the vantage points of difference. His response was that ultimately God cannot be adequately known, understood, or represented by imperfect human beings, yet in this day and age both sides claim to know that without a doubt, God is on their side. These absolute claims and intolerances are what lead to major conflicts. Beliefs that do not allow space for exploration or tolerance are morally dangerous. In contrast to this type of blind belief is a new kind of belief, one that allows for uncertainties and fosters respect for one another's differences. According to McVey (2010), the Qu'ran itself addresses this issue: "To everyone one [*sic*] of you have we appointed a different law and way of life and if God had so willed he could surely have made you all one single community, but he willed it otherwise in order to test you." In the same spirit, the apostle Paul directly told the Corinthians: "Do you really think that you are the source of the word of God or that you are the only people to whom it has come?" (as cited in Coffey, para. 22).

Proselytizing

To go along with the conviction that one holds absolute truth and the key to salvation is often the need to share that truth with others. As one person has said, "How could you work together, knowing that you have a responsibility to speak the Truth to people?" (Anonymous, personal communication, March 1, 2012). In both religions, there is undoubtedly the belief that all people should come to know and share their faith: The bible explicitly tells Christians to "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (New International Version, Matthew 28:19), and the Islamic prophet Muhammad was driven by the desire to bring people back to the original faith of Abraham, which Islam is believed to be (Majid, 2004, para. 6). The desire or need to evangelize and convert others is a common obstacle in interfaith partnerships and as Lindy

Backues (2009) has claimed, this is one large reason that alternate faiths and world view systems are suspicious and weary of faith-based organizations in particular (p. 70). For interfaith partnerships to effectively collaborate, there needs to be clear boundaries on how dialoguing about faith will be approached. As shown in the following case studies, some interfaith organizations choose to remain completely neutral and do not allow for dialoguing about faith issues, while others may encourage interfaith dialogue for the purpose of learning and understanding, but not for proselytizing. Establishing appropriate terms and boundaries for each partnership and interfaith endeavor within a specific context will help to deter people looking to participate in order to simply make converts.

Measuring Interfaith Partnerships

Reconciliation, healing, and community transformation that occur as a result of increased unity and collaboration within a community can take years or even generations to see, and measuring the outcome of an interfaith endeavor will need to take the challenge of longevity into account. In addition, accurately tracking interfaith work will require a monumental compilation of both data and experiences, versus documenting the cases of new HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths, which is relatively straightforward and quantitative. These challenges, however, should not dissuade the tracking of how interfaith efforts affect a community, nor the acknowledgment and accountability for the consequences that come out of any attempts at collaboration. More harm than good is done when proper evaluation and reflection are not carried out.

Objective, accurate evaluation, however, can be a challenge in and of itself. While there are many studies that have shown faith-based initiatives and interventions to be effective, there is

some discrepancy about the quality and objective nature of these studies. Johnson, Tompkins, and Webb (2002) articulated that often these studies are conducted by religious institutes, and that the samples used are limited, as are the measures of religious belief and private religious practices. These scholars suggest that:

Further evaluation research, both qualitative and quantitative, is desperately needed. In particular, there is a serious need for prospective studies assessing multiple dimensions of religion or being religiously committed. It is only this kind of accumulated research that will ultimately help us to sort out these complex relationships. (p. 22)

As Johnson, Tompkins, and Webb (2002) reasoned, the more accurately and comprehensively interfaith work is measured, the more likely it is that this type of smaller, community-based work can receive federal funding and continue to have a positive impact (p. 22). Unfortunately, studies and outcomes that highlight data alone are unlikely to break down the barriers, prejudices, and misconceptions that hinder interfaith dialogue and collaboration for the purpose of fighting HIV/AIDS and strengthening communities. This is why testimonies and stories of successful interfaith endeavors must come alongside the statistical data and figures, so that the tangible evidence, paired with the songs of healing and transformation, will invade communities and encourage others to engage in interfaith partnership

Case Studies

Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance

There are multiple examples of Christians and Muslims coming together for the purpose of social justice and community development in Africa. One of these interfaith partnerships focused on fighting AIDS is the Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance, which works in the country of

Malawi. Ranking 8th in the world for HIV/AIDS deaths and having only 1.25 physicians for every 100,000 people (The Global AIDS Alliance, n.d.), the need for such a partnership in Malawi is undeniable. Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance (GAIA) is a non-governmental organization that exists to provide basic health care and prevention tools along with support for communities suffering from HIV, AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis. To effectively accomplish this goal, GAIA works to strengthen and support the formal and informal institutions that already exist within the communities, which includes both Christian and Muslim faith institutions. On their website, GAIA answered why they choose to work with religious leaders: “We partner with community and faith-based organizations to reach rural areas where the majority of Malawians live. Religious groups, both Christian and Muslim, are frequently the only providers of desperately needed services like home-based and orphan care” (The Global AIDS, n.d., para. 9). Despite their commitment to work with both Christian and Muslim religious leaders, GAIA is careful to define itself as a neutral, non-religious organization. According to Bill Wrankin, President Emeritus of GAIA:

We also found several years ago that we needed to impose our “no proselytizing” policy particularly when we had training sessions for mixed groups of Christian and Muslim leaders. A few of the Christians needed to hear this. (In Malawi Christians out-number Muslims by an approximate 4:1 ratio, and many Malawi Christians are quite evangelical in their religious beliefs.) Additionally, we of course believe that it is important to respect all religious viewpoints, rather than to privilege one more than others. (B. Wrankin, personal communication, March 13, 2012)

The concept of GAIA works well because the organization has made a commitment to serve as a neutral meeting ground. By not allowing for any proselytizing from either faith, GAIA is able to

fulfill its mission to protect and support communities while fostering an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to all members.

S4 Institutions

In contrast to an organization that leaves religion out of the conversation, there is another method for interfaith partnerships that has shown to be effective. In Indonesia, a nonprofit focused on community empowerment in various sectors is designed around what is called a “centered-set” framework. Lindy Backues (2009) described the organizations’ by-laws and primary tenets, ones that guide all their operations, as such: “(1) We committed to focus our attention and programs upon the marginalized and neglected, and (2) we intentionally viewed our attempts at empowerment as acts of worship, ones we discursively appraised together as an intentionally pluralistic community” (p. 75). The two major religious faiths in Indonesia are Christianity and Islam, and this organization explicitly recruited workers that were from both faiths, inviting them all to be open and expressive of their beliefs, while at the same time challenging them to learn and listen to the differing beliefs and opinions expressed by others. This allowed them a larger pool of people to hire from, and the ability to trust that their development workers were acting and working with integrity, since their various faith perspectives were so interwoven into daily work. This then helped to create a holistic and integrated approach to community empowerment. To promote the exploration of the different religious perspectives, the organization held bi-weekly gatherings devoted to teaching and dialoging about topics that commonly come up in their work (e.g. gender issues in development, the nature of participation, etc.). The employees took turns teaching on the topics and sharing from their faith perspectives, allowing for all to learn and understand better how their own

beliefs differ or align in each area. This exercise in particular is part of what makes this organization so unique, and in Backues' (2009) opinion, so successful:

We were able to point to deeply theological reasons we were engaged in this work—points that were received thoughtfully and with serious consideration. We sensed no discomfort or discord, simply honest interest and a desire to understand each other. This was very different compared to the customary atmosphere in Indonesia at those times when Muslims and Christians found themselves discussing differing religious perspectives. (p. 75)

Another reason the S4 institution model works well is because it serves as what sociologist Peter Berger (1979) labeled a “plausibility structure”— a structure that enables small group-style fellowships under the larger umbrellas of community, so that more social involvement can occur without extracting people from the institutions and groups they identify with. Interestingly enough, the interfaith dialogue and partnership not only bridged the division between Christianity and Islam, but it also helped to bridge and connect intra-faith gaps as well. For example, participants from the Ahmadiyya movement—a movement that has historically been regarded by the more orthodox Islamic community as wayward—were welcomed into the organization, and over time the more orthodox Islamic participants were better able to listen to, respect, connect, and communicate with those from within the Ahmadiyya.

Rwandan Interfaith Network & Rwanda Network of Religious Leaders

Yet another example of how interfaith organizations can work is seen in the Rwandan Interfaith Network against HIV/AIDS (RCLS- Rwanda) and the Rwanda Network of Religious Leaders living with or affected by HIV/AIDS (RWANERELA- a national chapter of the Africa

network ANERELA). Both of these organizations do an excellent job effectively working in a pluralistic religious society, so much so that the framework of RCLS and RWANERELA has been used to start similar interfaith organizations in Burundi. Both of these groups are engaged in health and HIV work, but are designed very differently than the two interfaith organizations previously covered in this section. Immaculee Mukampabuka, an aid worker in Rwanda and Burundi, clarified the differences as such:

[RCLS & RWANERELA] do not evangelize rather they (i) use Holy Scriptures (Bible and Qu'ran) to develop and pass health and HIV messages to the congregations leaders and members and (ii) they do a lot of care and support work, including empowerment of HIV positive and affected people. Moreover, (iii) they are actively engaged in networking, advocacy and policy work. (I. Makampabuka, personal communication, March 22, 2012)

Whereas GAIA remained completely neutral and removed themselves from the faith discussion, and Backues' organization welcomed and fostered interfaith dialogue, RCLS and RWANERELA strategically address the faith institutions in the societies where they work, while remaining neutral as an organization. In doing so, they are more able to directly reach both the Christian and Muslim population through their communication and relationships with the leaders and members of each faith. Local people of both faith traditions respect the stance taken by RCLS and RWANERELA and relate to the topics that they cover; issues such as HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health, and orphan care are applicable to people regardless of the faith to which they subscribe.

All three of these case studies show how interfaith partnerships have the ability to address HIV and AIDS in a culturally sensitive and effective manner. Whether the organization is committed to addressing the issue at a local, national, or global level, unlocking the resources and opportunities that interfaith collaboration provides and linking people together ultimately builds social capital and creates space for greater work to be done.

Principles to Move Forward

What all of these case studies have showcased— regardless of their various frameworks and methods of integrating both the Christian and Muslim faith traditions they work with in order to fight HIV/AIDS— is the need for humility and acceptance on all sides, a shared sense of purpose, a recognition of community assets to build upon, and a devotion to serve the greater community. Whether citizens are working to fight injustice at a community or national level, trying to address policies and systems that affect people of every faith and culture, or simply engaging in interfaith dialogue for the purpose of better understanding one another, it is impossible to avoid interacting with people that are dissimilar. In addition, though incredible steps have been made in the fight against HIV/AIDS, there is still no cure for the disease. Therefore, it is crucial that interfaith dialogue and partnerships continue to be encouraged so that all global citizens, regardless of their differences, can come together to strengthen, heal, and transform communities.

Moving forward in humility is the key to creating spaces that foster respect and collaboration. Interfaith relationships and partnerships suffer when they are entered into unequally; that is, when one or both parties believe that they are there to convince or convert the other participants that their faith or their way of life is the one and only way, rather than

engaging in interfaith dialogue to listen, learn, and build bridges. This kind of humility requires more than a mere tolerance for differing beliefs, it means allowing for each religion to express its own creed and tradition and remaining open and accepting of these differences. As Martin Marty stated, “what is needed is not simply religious tolerance but the risk of hospitality toward those who share different belief systems” (as cited in Groody, 2009, p. 147). Hospitality implies warmth, kindness, and generosity—principles that should extend to every global neighbor in the interconnected world. Hospitality and respect do not require a meshing or compromising of beliefs, but rather an acceptance of differences and an assurance of one’s own reasons for collaborating with others and serving the greater community.

Due to the increased connectedness of humankind, an unprecedented shared sense of purpose and availability of assets exist within any one community. Since HIV/AIDS permeates the social, cultural, political, and economic spheres of the world and does not discriminate based on faith, race, or region, it will be to the benefit of all to capitalize on existing, prevalent, and influential assets within a community that could be used to create positive change. This holistic and sustainable approach to development is called the “capacity-focused model.” By drawing on all of the unique talents, skills, resources, and relationships within a community, individuals, associations, and institutions are empowered to become producers of change. Kretzman and McKnight (1997) confirmed that “one of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to constantly build and rebuild the relationships between and among local residents, local associations and local institutions” (p. 9). For interfaith endeavors to model this framework of development would be reasonable and beneficial since many faith institutions are already offering resources and support for followers within their own communities, such as providing orphan and home care to their members. Affirming leadership and positive work

already being done in the community is a large part of capacity-focused development. Organizations that are created in an attempt to bridge and bind people at all levels together for one common cause are more likely to succeed in their endeavors because of the strong network of socially-minded people they gather. This will also ease the threat of implementing an outside or “universal” type of approach for combating HIV/AIDS that ends up compromising any efforts, traditions, and beliefs that are important and helpful to each faith group, such as empowering women, strengthening family values, and providing home and orphan care. Finding these assets within a community and linking them together, combining resources and strengths for the ultimate goal of healing and transformation, instead of focusing on the differences and disagreements, is how effective interfaith partnerships are carried out.

Though the common capitalistic understanding of globalization is that it tends to promote individualization and self-gain, at the same time, “we [also] come to realize that what is done to one is done to all: when any are losing, all are affected; when any are deprived, all suffer; and when any are empowered, all benefit” (Groody, 2009, p. 69). This recognition of global responsibility has the power to create and strengthen a devotion to serve the greater community. As Greg Damhorst (2012), an interfaith activist who blogs on the Huffington Post website, wrote recently:

If oppression and genocide are going to end, if starving people are going to eat and sick people are going to receive care, if the disadvantaged are going to face opportunity, then it's going to be because of *partnerships*. This is why the interfaith movement matters. It's teaching tomorrow's leaders the value of partnerships... the relationship between the war-torn, disease-burdened or poverty-stricken community and the Good Samaritan who reaches out to help is exactly the same. It is one person saying to another: “I come from a different

place, a different perspective, a different experience, but you and I can agree on one thing:

We can work together to make things right.” (para. 7)

Working for the greater good is about tearing down walls that segregate and isolate and reaching out to those on the other side. It is about deciding to see differences as opportunities to learn, understand, and look beyond to find commonalities. Whether it is a desire for social justice, a drive to increase and strengthen community, or an imminent threat like HIV/AIDS, there will always be a larger, uniting factor that requires collaboration across faith traditions.

Conclusion

Through inter-faith partnerships, a public language of respect, inclusion, and collaboration is created. It is through this shared language that global citizens can tackle the complex issue of HIV and AIDS, as well as build bridges across cultures and traditions and create spaces for empowerment and transformation. Since one of the largest barriers to adequately addressing, preventing, and treating HIV/AIDS is the stigma that too often goes along with the disease, involving faith institutions and faith leaders in the process of educating their communities is crucial as their power and influence have the ability to discourage stigmas and promote positive behaviors. In addition, intentionally engaging in interfaith dialogue and partnerships has shown to be an effective way to combat cultural tensions and address shared social concerns, such as disease, poverty, and social cohesion. Due to globalization, every individual, community, and culture will have to deal with religious pluralism, which can sometimes lead to fear, segregation, and a decline in social capital, rendering communities unable to address any issues they face. Effective interfaith efforts break down barriers and misconceptions, building relationships and linking people with resources that were previously

unavailable. This increase in social capital allows for greater collaboration when solving shared problems and helps reconciliation and transformation to occur at a local, national, and international level.

Though there will be challenges and differences that will never be agreed upon, people engaging in interfaith partnerships must remember that the goal is collaboration for a specific purpose. The objective is not to mesh, dilute, or compromise beliefs in order to create a universal religion, nor is it to proselytize to participants with different beliefs and opinions. Practicing hospitality for others' opinions and beliefs is necessary, and terms and boundaries must be established beforehand. Having these terms and boundaries made clear from the beginning will lessen people's anxieties and discourage participants who have ulterior motives from participating. According to Conn & Ortiz (2009), when the urban Christian church as described by the apostle Paul found itself in a city divided by social, ethnic, and economical tension, its calling was to demonstrate a new kind of community that transcended all human barriers and modeled prayer, patience, and good works towards their neighbor, regardless of the suffering and differences (p. 146-148). In the same spirit, the prophet Muhammad is instructed in the Qu'ran to "call the People of the Book [Christians and Jews] to come for a word which is common between you and us" (as cited in Majid, 2004, para. 4). Instead of pulling away from the community and disengaging from beneficial interfaith partnerships out of fear, Christians and Muslims must look past differences in order to find commonalities between them. The desire for social justice, the admonishment of self-gain and money-theism, and the concern for one's neighbor are all powerful reasons to work together to fight the human rights issue that is HIV and AIDS.

There is a variety of frameworks to use when designing an interfaith endeavor for the purpose of addressing HIV and AIDS, and each has its benefits and pitfalls. Through the assortment of case studies, the common threads of humility, shared purpose, and devotion to serve the larger community and greater good were clearly seen. As an individual operating in the everyday world amongst those who are dissimilar from themselves, these principles remain true and helpful. As Friedman (2000) asserted, “you cannot be a complete person alone” (p. 70). Whether fighting a global epidemic like HIV/AIDS or simply trying to live as a responsible and engaged global citizen, intentionally dialoguing and partnering across faith traditions is not only possible but has the power to heal, strengthen, and transform communities.

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