

EVANGELICALS AND INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT:

ASSESSING EVANGELICAL RESOURCES,
MOTIVATIONS, HESITANCIES AND
HOPES

By Michael Wear and Melissa Wear

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not be possible without the support and input of many individuals. Thank you first to Mary Ellen Giess and Megan Johnson of IFYC who commissioned this report, and to The Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and The Pew Charitable Trusts for their generous support. We are grateful to IFYC, and especially Eboo Patel, for his long, steady and gracious leadership in civic life. It has been an honor to partner with IFYC in this work.

Thank you to the leaders who participated in and/or hosted listening sessions: Dr. Ed Stetzer, Executive Director of the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center and Dean of the School of Mission, Ministry, and Leadership; Andrew Hansen, Program Director at Anselm House; Travis Pickell, Associate Director of University Engagement at Anselm House; Dr. Mark DeYmaz, Founder and Directional Leader at Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas and Co-Founder, President and CEO of the Mosaix Global Network; Sharon Hodde Miller, Teaching Pastor at Bright City Church in Durham, NC; Dr. Steve Bezner, Senior Pastor of Houston Northwest Church; and Micah Fries, Director of Engagement at [Glocal.net](#) and the Director of Programs at the [Multi-Faith Neighbor's Network](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Wear is a leading strategist, speaker and practitioner at the intersection of faith, politics and public life. He has advised a president, as well as some of the nation's leading foundations, non-profits and public leaders, on some of the thorniest issues and exciting opportunities that define American life today.

As one of President Obama's "ambassadors to America's believers" (Buzzfeed), Michael directed faith outreach for President Obama's historic 2012 re-election campaign. Michael was also one of the youngest White House staffers in modern American history: he served in the White House faith-based initiative during President Obama's first term, where he led evangelical outreach and helped manage The White House's engagement on religious and values issues, including adoption and anti-human trafficking efforts.

Michael is the author of [Reclaiming Hope: Lessons Learned in the Obama White House About the Future of Faith in America](#). In 2020, Michael was the co-author, alongside Professor Amy Black, of a major report on "Christianity, Pluralism and Public Life in the United States" that was supported by Democracy Fund. He also writes for The Atlantic, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Catapult Magazine, Christianity Today and other publications on faith, politics and culture. Michael is a Senior Fellow at The Trinity Forum, and he holds an honorary position at the University of Birmingham's Cadbury Center for the Public Understanding of Religion.

Melissa Wear joined Public Square Strategies as its Principal Consultant in November 2019. She brings with her over a decade of experience working in international settings on organizational strategy, program design and strategy, communications, business development, and relationship building. An expert in European Affairs and transatlantic relations, Melissa's work on global issues such as religion and belief, violent extremism, international development, soft power, and arts and culture is broadly respected on both sides of the Atlantic. In her role for Public Square Strategies, she helps clients on designing their strategy and programs, developing strategic messaging, planning external communications, conducting research, strengthening networks, relationship building and leading in matters of global concern. She was previously Head of the Society Programs at the British Council USA for six years, managing their Thought Leadership portfolio, an area of work concerning the intersection of cultural and international relations. Previously, she spent five years at the Department of State working on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). She holds an MA in European Politics and a BA in International Studies from American University.



Introduction

In an increasingly pluralistic nation, sustained cooperation across difference is essential. In 2020, the Democracy Fund supported a report I co-authored (along with Professor Amy Black) on “Christianity, Pluralism and Public Life in the United States.” That report was based on more than fifty interviews with a diverse array of Christian leaders across the country, and it explored many of the ways Christians encounter, navigate, and in some ways represent and embody themselves, pluralism in America. We found that Christianity has many resources not just to stave off antagonistic division, but to support community, service and understanding between diverse people. We argued that those resources should be recognized and welcomed.

In this report for Interfaith Youth Core, the focus is more particular: evangelicals and interfaith engagement. This report draws on three listening sessions: one with students affiliated with the Anselm House at the University of Minnesota; a listening session with members of a Southern Baptist Church in Texas; and a listening session with evangelical pastors and leaders.¹

Our Key Takeaways, Which Will Be Explored Further in This Report, Include:

- There is both a generational mandate and a generational opportunity for interfaith engagement today. Younger evangelicals expect and need a faith that holds up in the midst of diversity, a faith robust enough to endure and be strengthened in environments where there is disagreement on religious matters. Evangelicals’ faith can motivate interfaith cooperation, and evangelicals’ faith can be strengthened by interfaith cooperation.
- In an increasingly diverse nation, tools for, and experience with, interfaith cooperation are essential to support a thriving, healthy evangelicalism in America.
- Evangelicals, like those of other confessional, missional faiths, believe their faith is true and that others should share it. Efforts at interfaith cooperation which wish to include evangelicals must not rule out the sharing of one’s faith. However, in line with both evangelical theology about conversion and salvation, as well as the healthy functioning of interfaith efforts, it would be wise to discourage evangelicals from approaching interfaith cooperation with the *expectation* of others’ conversion. That is, to have in mind a motivation and vision of success for interfaith cooperation which does not require “successful” evangelism.
- Organizers of interfaith efforts owe it to participants to be honest about their intentions and goals for the effort as well. Ulterior motives can leave participants, including evangelical participants, feeling manipulated. Organizers should be upfront about what the effort is and what it is not.
- Interfaith bridge-building, like all bridge-building, requires consideration from all parties for all parties.

In the following sections, we will briefly discuss evangelicalism in America, and then explore the way evangelicals think about interfaith cooperation: their motivations for and hesitations about it, and the opportunities greater evangelical involvement in interfaith cooperation present to both the nation and evangelicalism.

Our hope is that this report will be of value to evangelical leaders and the communities they serve, as well as civic and interfaith leaders more broadly. Our futures are tied up together. Let us seek opportunities to cooperate, and flourish, together.

Michael Wear
Founder, Public Square Strategies

Melissa Wear
Principal Consultant, Public Square Strategies

¹ Throughout this report, we will cite quotes from listening session participants by referring to their session. As in, “a member of the church session observed,” or “a participant in our listening session with college students said...” Quotes are not attributed to particular participants in order to promote openness and honesty in the sessions.

WHO ARE EVANGELICALS?

In order to understand evangelicals and interfaith cooperation in America, it is essential to understand the nation's demographics. Although many surveys ask Americans about religion, few include enough questions and large enough samples to identify percentages of many religious subgroups. The most comprehensive such study to date is the Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study, which showed that Christianity remains the dominant religion in the United States, with seven of ten Americans (70.6 percent) identifying as some form of Christian. Evangelicals are the largest Christian group (25.4 percent of the population), followed by Catholics (20.8 percent), mainline Protestant (14.7 percent), and black Protestant (6.5 percent). About 1 in 12 (7.4 percent) Americans identify with other religions, including 1.9 percent Jews, .9 percent Muslims, .7 percent Buddhist and .7 percent Hindu. Although most Americans choose a religious affiliation, 22.8 percent of the respondents in the Pew survey do not. Some of the unaffiliated described themselves as Atheists or Agnostics, but many people (15.8 percent of all respondents) said their religion was "nothing in particular."



These religious demographics show some significant changes over the past decade. Between 2007 and 2014, Pew found that three traditional Christian groups all experienced decline: mainline Protestants decreased by 3.4 percentage points, Catholics decreased by 3.1 points, and evangelicals dipped 0.9 points. Two religious groups grew significantly: non-Christian religions grew from 4.7 percent to 5.9 percent, and the religiously unaffiliated jumped from 16.1 percent to 22.8 percent. More recent data compiled from an aggregate analysis of Pew Center surveys in 2018 and 2019 shows continued declines in percentages of Christians and continued increase in percentages of religiously unaffiliated adults. The numbers of Catholics dipped slightly, falling from 23 percent in 2009 to 20 percent in 2018/2019. The percentage of Americans who describe themselves as "born again or evangelical" also fell three percentage points in the last decade, falling from 28 percent to 25 percent. Even so, "the share of all Protestants who are born-again or evangelical is at least as high today as it was in 2009," suggesting that the sharpest decline in Protestants has been from mainline congregations. The most striking change was the increase in those who are religiously unaffiliated: more than one in four (26 percent) Americans say they are atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular, up seven percentage points since 2009. Given the rate of change in such a short time period, the rise of the religiously unaffiliated is particularly noteworthy. Journalists and some academics often refer to this phenomenon as the "rise of the Nones," as the percentage of the religiously unaffiliated increases and eclipses percentages of most religious subgroups.

As Pew Center researchers summarized: "Despite a decrease in the share of Americans who are Christian, the U.S. is projected to remain the country with the world's largest Christian population, with an estimated 262 million Christians in 2050."

The Pew data above identifies evangelicals by denominational affiliation, not by belief or self-identification. According to this method of identification, American evangelicals are overwhelmingly White (78%), while Black (6%), Asian (2%) and Latino (11%) make up most of the rest of the evangelical population.²

² Much of this section is taken verbatim from: Wear, M. and Black, Amy E. *Christianity, Pluralism, and Public Life in the United States: Insights from Christian Leaders*. Trinity Forum, (2020, February). <https://www.tff.org/reports/>.

WHAT EVANGELICALS BELIEVE

As with any religious demographic, it's complicated. Evangelical Christian belief has been defined in many ways. The Barna Group, an evangelical polling firm, defines evangelicals as holding to nine beliefs or commitments. By Barna's definition, only six percent of Americans are evangelical.³

Scholar David Bebbington developed Bebbington's Quadrilateral, which defines evangelicals as holding to "conversionism," the belief that people must be "born-again" through a commitment to Jesus Christ; "activism," the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts; "biblicism," a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority; and "crucicentrism," an emphasis on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity.⁴ The Bebbington Quadrilateral addresses global evangelicalism, not American evangelicals; and the definition concerns theological beliefs, not political or cultural ones; but it is helpful to keep in mind the religious commitments that tend to be core to evangelical Christians' faith.



Baylor University historian Thomas Kidd notes that the term "evangelical" has been in use in the United States at least since the early 1800s, although with widely different connotations and without a consensus as to who or what evangelicals are. As Dr. Kidd writes in his book, *Who Is an Evangelical?*, "[T]he word *evangelical* itself is a source of confusion: Scholars, journalists and the public can't seem to decide what it means...trying to pin down evangelicals can be maddening." Dr. Kidd goes on to point out that "some Christians who seem to be evangelicals do not describe themselves as such. Others (especially Whites) who don't necessarily hold evangelical beliefs or regularly attend church nonetheless tell pollsters that they *are* evangelicals."⁵

It is important to keep in mind that many Christians who do not belong to evangelical denominations, or even consider themselves to be evangelical, share relevant beliefs and perspectives in common with evangelicals.⁶ To a lesser extent, this is true for many non-Christians as well. There are lessons regarding evangelicals and interfaith cooperation which will have salience for non-evangelicals.

³ According to Barna, evangelical commitments can include: a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and that when they die, they will go to Heaven. Other beliefs/commitments include: (1) say their faith is very important in their life, (2) believe they have a personal responsibility to share their about their faith with others, (3) believe that Satan exists, (4) believe that Jesus Christ came to earth and lived a sinless life, (5) assert that the Bible is accurate in all of its teachings, (6) believe that salvation comes only through grace, not works, (7) and believe that God is the omniscient, omnipotent, creator of the universe who still rules the world today. This is from: *Survey Explores Who Qualifies As an Evangelical*. Barna Group. (2007, January 18). <https://www.barna.com/research/survey-explores-who-qualifies-as-an-evangelical/>.

⁴ *What is an Evangelical?* National Association of Evangelicals. <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

⁵ Newport, F. *Update: Evangelicals, Trump and the Election*. Gallup. (2020, 16 October). <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/322052/update-evangelicals-trump-election.aspx>

⁶ This report extracts lessons for further research and exploration based on robust, but demographically-limited listening sessions, focused primarily on evangelicals in different settings (the local church, higher education). Further research testing the ideas of this report with various evangelical and evangelical-adjacent populations would be beneficial. For a more comprehensive consideration of American Christianity and pluralism, drawing from interviews with Christian leaders from an array of denominations and backgrounds, see the 2020 report, "[Christianity, Pluralism and Public Life in the United States.](#)"

HOW EVANGELICALS DEFINE INTERFAITH COOPERATION

When Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) uses the term interfaith cooperation, they mean “respect for distinct religious identities, mutually inspiring relationships across diverse religious communities and common action for the common good.” This is a more nuanced understanding of interfaith cooperation than what comes to mind for many evangelicals who might view the concept with skepticism or suspicion. It also runs counter to some popular conceptions of what interfaith cooperation entails held by those who believe they’re promoting interfaith cooperation. In fact, IFYC’s conception of interfaith cooperation is distinguished by some key characteristics that set it apart from interfaith work as commonly practiced and commonly funded.

Evangelicals are wary of manipulation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding when it comes to interfaith cooperation. For some, what comes to mind first is establishing boundaries around what interfaith cooperation is for and what their participation in it would mean. For example, in the pastors listening session, one participant used this metaphor for boundaries:

My wife and I went to counseling years ago, but we got into some marriage stuff, so a counselor said, "What does oneness look like?" He said, "Use your hands," and we did this [clasped hands], and he goes, "No, that's entanglement." He said, "Where do you stop, and where does your wife start?" So he said, "Feel each other's fingertips." So we did this [placed fingertips together]. And he goes, "That's oneness, where you're connected but you're separate." I think about that as the visual... We're so afraid of this [interfaith cooperation]... conversation, but we should be like this [fingertips touching], where we're distinct, we're separate, and of course we believe our messaging, but we can stand in true unity with others, but at this level. We're not them, but we're connected.

For the college students we spoke to, interfaith cooperation is a fact of life. They raised concerns about how religion is misunderstood, in their view, by those in authority. Under the guise of interfaith cooperation and talk about religious inclusion or diversity, one student described a “negative overall culture towards holding strongly to your beliefs.” Another student suggested that when academic officials speak of religion, they really mean “enforced apathy. So everybody gets along by not caring about these certain issues, and if you deign to say, ‘I think these issues matter and are worth discussing,’ it’s very much frowned on.”

A student in the global studies program reflected that “in my discipline, respect is there [for religion and religious people], but it’s a very un-animated respect. There is no sense of a willingness to celebrate... To me, part of respect is to be excited for the people who are celebrating something.” This un-animated respect, the student said, comes across as “suffocating.” It turns “faith into something that is just an idea to be respected, instead of something to be lived.”

Yet another student observed that when people in authority speak of interfaith, “sometimes it’s looking for the thread between things or boiling it down” to some common belief or desire, “distilling it, maybe to a point of a disservice to the distinctness. And I think the intent is good in those cases of...but I think there’s a lack of acknowledging that it’s somewhat disrespectful to say that to a Buddhist, that their faith is essentially the same as Christianity.”

These students, who attend university in one of the most religiously diverse metropolitan areas of the country, are not deciding whether to opt-in to religious diversity. Religious diversity is inherent to their experience at college, and for many, part of their upbringing and childhood. These students are familiar with environments in which they do not dictate the terms of how religion is considered, and they are used to people not understanding their religious commitments. For them, religious diversity has been both inescapable and, as we’ll see, valuable. What they are looking for is a vision of religious inclusion and recognition that includes them, as well as their peers who are deeply committed to their own faith, evangelical or not.

Evangelicals are wary of manipulation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding when it comes to interfaith cooperation.

Through our listening sessions, it became clear that evangelicals resonated with much of IFYC's definition of interfaith cooperation because of how it contrasted with their experiences and understanding of the pitfalls of interfaith work.

Evangelical pastors and many evangelical adults, particularly those in regions of the country with significant evangelical representation, have more control over how they engage across religious lines. The evangelical church members and pastors we spoke to were much more assertive not just in drawing lines around what they were comfortable with personally, but setting out their own terms of the kind of interfaith cooperation that would be acceptable or desirable.

When asked to respond to IFYC's definition of interfaith cooperation, participants in our listening sessions with evangelical pastors and church members identified words or phrases that they thought were unhelpful. Several commented that they preferred "multifaith" to "interfaith" because "interfaith" implied to them a loss of difference and a kind of intermingling. One pastor also noted his view that

evangelicals would prefer the "language of 'respect for individuals' rather than for their 'religious identities.'" Similarly, the term "mutually inspiring" implied to some an approval or total legitimization of alternative religions, which they could not do. But a participant in the pastors session offered a different perspective, saying that "I really like the 'mutually inspiring.' I think that that has been absent from a lot of evangelism and just understanding how we understand people of different faiths, and so I really appreciated that that language is in there."

Through our listening sessions, it became clear that evangelicals resonated with much of IFYC's definition of interfaith cooperation because of how it contrasted with their experiences and understanding of the pitfalls of interfaith work. Participants across our three listening sessions appreciated the inclusion of the word "distinct" when referring to religious identities, a guardrail against a syncretistic view of religion that they associate with interfaith work. Several noted their approval of the focus on "common action for the common good," which provided an outcome related to interfaith cooperation that they could support. Because IFYC's definition includes an explicit identification of the goals of interfaith cooperation, it provides clarity that the purpose of interfaith cooperation is not theological agreement or acquiescence.

Key Ideas:

- Evangelicals, like all people, generally-speaking, are well-justified in considering their boundaries and expectations when it comes to interfaith cooperation. This does not mean that they ought to singularly dictate the terms of interfaith environments, but it does mean that any good faith effort that wishes to include evangelicals will show consideration for an evangelical perspective just as it would for people of other faiths and perspectives.
- Evangelicals may prefer the term "multifaith" to the word "interfaith" when getting involved in this kind of work.
- Evangelicals, like those of other confessional, missional faiths, believe their faith is true and that others should share it. Efforts at interfaith cooperation which wish to include evangelicals should not rule out the sharing of one's faith. However, in line with both evangelical theology about conversion and salvation, as well as the healthy functioning of interfaith efforts, it is appropriate and edifying to cast a vision for worthwhile and successful interfaith engagement which does not require "successful" evangelism.
- Young evangelicals are generally more accustomed to religious diversity and, because of this, naturally-occurring interfaith engagement.

HOW EVANGELICALS THINK ABOUT INTERFAITH COOPERATION

Many participants shared stories of their experiences in interfaith environments. There are two kinds of stories which help elucidate the extreme spectrum of possibilities available for evangelicals in interfaith environments as they are perceived and understood by evangelicals themselves. On the one hand, there is a tremendous potential for points of identification, even solidarity, with those of different faiths which affirms evangelicals' own sense of distinctness from the general public and their conception of popular culture. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this is especially relevant when it comes to evangelical-Muslim relations. This is counter-intuitive because in twenty-first century, post-9/11 America, evangelicals have generally had frosty, negative opinions of Islam. Indeed, this is an understatement in some cases. One pastor acknowledged that there is "a particular triggering" regarding Islam among evangelicals, that is not held in the same way for Judaism, for instance, or non-missional faiths (religious traditions in which proselytization and conversation are not central) like Buddhism.



These kinds of stories, shared by at least one participant in each of our listening sessions, are remarkably consistent in both the way they are told as well as the lesson they teach. A Christian is in a pluralistic environment which includes Muslims, and their awareness of the potential for disagreement with their core beliefs is heightened. Something occurs which brings to the surface the particular truth claims of the Christian faith—in some cases, a statement from a third-party which "flattens" the religious diversity in the room; in others, the Christian raises these truth claims themselves—which either prompts a feeling of either vulnerability or isolation for the Christian. Then, a Muslim speaks up to affirm that they believe similarly as the Christian does, affirming the validity of the point of view and protecting against accusations of intolerance or closed-mindedness. This glimpse of commonality, which can be fleeting or reduced to a tactic for deflecting criticism, can also serve as the foundation of profound appreciation, understanding and support. That is to say, there is an opportunity for an Islamophobia which has been cultivated among some evangelicals to give way for empathy and self-recognition.

A participant in the listening session with college students told us this story about an event they attended with a Christian speaker and a Muslim speaker:

The Muslim leader was just so, so good at being so clear in his doctrine, and it was so informative [and] it's like, you're not trying to like make this palatable to me, you're trying to teach me because that's what I'm here to learn. You're not trying to like make it so that we can be friends and it was so helpful, and then the [Christian speaker] talked, and she was so, so careful to not speak a controversial truth that she actually ended up by the end of the night, just not saying really any, much of anything...They would ask her really simple questions of just Christian doctrine and she was afraid to answer in the fullness of what we know to be true, and I was sitting at a table with a bunch of freshmen Muslim girls, and one asked, "Is this actually what you believe?" And I was like, let's just like not pay attention anymore and have a separate conversation because the most fruitful time that night for those girls and me was sitting at a table together, eating food, talking about serious doctrine, but then also just the funny aspects of being young girls in college. I don't know, just kind of relating in that way too, and it was just... That was the fruitful part of the night, like building community centered around interfaith dialogue, but not really paying attention to what was going on up there because it just wasn't as informative as us relating as peers and building community that way.

Yet this kind of recognition is at tension with a common concern of evangelicals that by appearing in interfaith environments their presence might be, actually or by perception, granting legitimacy to or supporting the embrace of beliefs that run counter to their view of what is most true and most good. This is particularly true for evangelical leaders (who feel

responsible for those they lead) and for evangelicals who do not live in areas or hold vocations in which they must regularly navigate religious difference. This is understandable. And from an evangelical perspective, it has real merit and must be taken seriously. If an evangelical is to seriously consider pursuing interfaith cooperation with those who do not share their beliefs about what is most true and most important, they must be assured that they are not betraying their own convictions by doing so. There are theological resources for evangelicals to draw on to answer for themselves whether it is faithful to share space with and support those who do not share their faith. Jesus' life and example is one such resource. The parable of the Good Samaritan is instructive here, too. As is Jeremiah's prophecy to the exiles in Jeremiah 29. But Christians, themselves, must come to terms with how interfaith cooperation is consistent with their convictions and beliefs. Ignoring the matter is not a solution. Those who convene opportunities for interfaith cooperation can certainly help by being clear about the aims of the effort: what participation in the effort says about those who are a part of it, and what it does not say.

We must examine anew how the tools of interfaith cooperation apply to cooperation among and between Christians themselves.

While evangelical-Muslim relations are a common focus of discussions on interfaith work, it is important to raise something that is often overlooked, and that seems to be of pressing and growing importance. We must examine anew how the tools of interfaith cooperation apply to cooperation among and between Christians themselves. There is, of course, a long history of disputes among Christians of different denominations, but the rise of what scholars have termed "political sectarianism,"—the particular kind of political polarization we face today—provides a new set of challenges to cooperation among Christians who disagree politically or theologically. It is plausible to most evangelicals that people of different faiths or no faith at all will disagree with them politically or theologically. What can be more difficult to grasp or accept, is that someone who claims the same faith—a person who may belong to the same denomination or even the same church—and draws on the same sources of authority, might vote for a different candidate or hold a contrary view regarding a matter of doctrine. An approach to interfaith cooperation in America which expects Christian unity, or proceeds with an assumption that the inclusion of any Christian person amounts to the representation of all Christian people, is faulty and inadequate to the moment.

Christians, like Americans generally, are also divided along racial lines. This came up in our listening sessions. In our church members' session, it was raised as a cause for caution or deprioritization of interfaith cooperation at all, in light of continued racial division among Christians themselves. They said, "We have not yet tackled dealing with Christians of other other practices well yet, and yet we're talking about working with other religions is almost kind of hypocritical because we haven't mastered working well with each other yet." One participant in the pastors' session quipped, "I do not think evangelicals are ready for religious diversity. We're not even ready for multi-ethnic economic diversity of Christ-centered believers."

It is important to state that it seems clear that openness to racial diversity does not overlap perfectly with openness to religious diversity. A Christian can land among what would popularly be considered the "progressive side" of racial justice questions, while having a considerably "conservative" approach to religious diversity. Openness to racial diversity does not automatically lead to openness to religious diversity. It is best to approach people as they are, rather than make assumptions based on their race, political affiliation or some other characteristic, that they are more or less aligned with a particular approach to religious diversity. In addition to showing respect for the dignity, minds and wills of other people, this will also help mitigate blind spots when pursuing interfaith cooperation which might otherwise confuse and confound such efforts.

Key Ideas:

- Evangelicals can draw on rich theological resources at-hand for doing interfaith engagement.
- With Muslim-Christian relations, there are opportunities to combat Islamophobia with interfaith engagement.
- Divisions among Christians can present challenges to interfaith cooperation. Tools for interfaith engagement might have use in navigating difference among and between Christians as well.

EVANGELICAL MOTIVATIONS FOR INTERFAITH COOPERATION

While the hesitations mentioned above are real and should be acknowledged, they do not have to prevent fruitful interfaith cooperation. Today, evangelicals interact, build relationships and partner with those of different faiths. For many, interfaith cooperation is not an arduous task, but a fact of life—one which is often joyous. It would be a mistake, then, to propose interfaith cooperation as something that is particularly unusual for evangelicals, lest they receive the message that it's not for them. In our listening sessions, we learned of a number of motivations to pursue interfaith cooperation, as well as benefits evangelicals have found through relationship and cooperation with people of different faiths.

For evangelicals, it comes back to their faith. Several students in our listening sessions said that deep faith commitments were a benefit in interfaith environments. In one student's words, "being more secure in what I believed put me in a better spot to go engage with friends and, you know, friends with other beliefs." Another student added that when a person is confident about what they believe, they are less likely to feel "threatened" by the beliefs of others.



Interfaith cooperation can also deepen one's faith further. By learning about how others think about religious matters, one cannot help but more deeply consider one's own faith. "When I pray," an evangelical might ask, "what do I think is happening?" "In the midst of so many different opinions and ways of life, how does Jesus stand apart in and from history?" Diversity need not flatten distinction. Diversity can help us actually identify what we really believe.

One student reflected on his experience in intentional, mutual engagement and friendship with a campus atheist group and its members: "...a lot of really beautiful things arose from that and I walked away two years later being completely transformed in how I pursue truth in a way that they would be very disappointed to hear, but it was... I have grown in unimaginable ways as a person because of that, and so being in dialogue with people who don't share my views that's actually been probably one of the three most

life-changing things in the past five years for me." This

intuition is affirmed by a recent groundbreaking longitudinal study of 3500 nationally representative college students across the country showed that students who took part in activities that intentionally engaged religious diversity simultaneously deepened their commitment to their own religious identity.⁷

In a pluralistic world, for evangelicals to have the experience of holding to their faith in the presence of diversity, even contested by diversity, can have the effect of affirming the viability of one's own faith. It allows a person to reject, for themselves, the idea that they are only evangelical because they have no experience with alternative ways of looking at the world. It allows a person to know for themselves that their faith "holds up" in a new way.

Interfaith cooperation is in some ways better enabled by a deep faith, just as interfaith cooperation has the potential to deepen one's own faith and affirm its viability. Interfaith cooperation is also a way for evangelicals to live out their faith.

⁷ "Best Practices for Interfaith Learning and Development in the First Year of College." Rockenbach, A. N., Mayhew, M. J., Correia-Harker, B. P., Dahl, L., Morin, S., & Associates. (2018). Chicago, IL: Interfaith Youth Core https://www.ifyc.org/sites/default/files/resources/IDEALS_20182.pdf

One important aspect of evangelicals' faith is a commitment to spread the Gospel. The opportunity to help non-Christians better understand Christianity is a common motivation for interfaith cooperation. Several participants in our listening session with church members referred to their experience hosting around thirty members of a local mosque for Easter Sunday service. Following the service, there was a brunch with an opportunity for the church's guests to ask questions. One of the first questions was, a listening session participant paraphrased, "'Hey, we didn't hear anything about the bunny today, so where's the rabbit?'" Another member of that listening session jumped in to build on that story by referring to a visit several church members made to visit that same local mosque for an Iftar dinner:

...as we broke the fast, we were at different tables, and these were not just church leaders, these were normal attendees of their mosque and normal church members sitting at tables and talking about things that...understandings, I guess, of their faith, things that they thought we believed. Misconception that would seem to be common among them and among us, and the ideas of what that meant. And some of those dialogues were just... They were very, very beneficial. You came away enlightened. I know they did. They were very good sessions, so...it was good.

Participants in each listening session spoke movingly about opportunities they had to share their faith with others because of their participation in interfaith efforts. Participants in the pastors and church members listening sessions, especially, emphasized that sharing their faith is what evangelicals do. An interfaith environment in which that was somehow out-of-bounds would be, in some ways, an oxymoron. A participant in the church members listening session put it this way:

Well, it says, the objective as the scriptures say, 'And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.' So when you're engaging with other faiths, that means you're telling them about who Jesus Christ is. The Christian will be carrying out their mandate, Christ said If I be lifted up, I will draw all men. So if it's interfaith engagement and you're truly engaging, you have to engage with who Jesus Christ is...So I think that by just an effective interfaith engagement will lead to the proclamation of the gospel.

Listening session participants generally agreed that evangelism is a critical part of the faith, but there were different perspectives about how central proselytization should be to every interfaith engagement. One student said that the goal of interfaith cooperation should be "to offer and receive support," and disagreed that the main goal should be "evangelization in the hopes of conversion."

Another participant in the church members session reflected on this tension:

I've had the opportunity, now, to speak in a synagogue on Yom Kapoor. I've had the opportunity now to speak in a mosque at an Iftar. I've had the opportunity to talk about who I think that Jesus is. I don't think that people came streaming down the aisles to get baptized or anything like that. At the same time, I got to fulfill that desire that Christians have to witness to who Jesus is. At the same time, that was all made possible because, for many months prior to that, and now, at this point, many years prior to that, people didn't... They knew that I loved them unconditionally, and that they are not seen as a project. And I think that that's one of the things that I would say would be a huge win, would be that, in our church, we would see people as created in the image of God and to love them unconditionally, despite their receptivity to what we believe about Jesus. So we're gonna love people unconditionally because God has commanded us to do so, and if we can live out that sort of love, I genuinely believe that if we can do that, then God will bear fruit. And so that, to me, would be a massive goal, would be the embodiment of the love of Jesus in the local church.



This response addresses the place of evangelism in interfaith cooperation, but it also movingly invokes some of the theological resources that have the potential to motivate evangelical participation in interfaith efforts. Several listening session participants reference Imago Dei, the idea that all human beings are made in the image of God, and that this truth should ground and guide interactions across religious difference. As one pastor offered, this doctrine should lead evangelicals to “value people as individuals, even while disagreeing with their theology, worldview or belief system.”

A church member referenced scripture as well, when asked why evangelicals would take part in interfaith efforts: “Love your neighbor is the command that Jesus gives us. We love because he first loved us, I think, is another command that we've got. And so those things, I think, are things that we're trying to embody.” Another participant in the same session said, “It is the Christ model. You never read in scripture, or I don't, where Christ singled out people he did not want to talk to because of some cultural, religious, ethnic, any type of criteria, Christ did not single people out and exclude them from the conversation as a result.” Others referenced Christian notions of the common good, and a belief in a Christian call to service.

Motivated by their faith, the opportunity to serve is powerful for many evangelicals. Service in community is another way for evangelicals to live out their faith. The following are two examples of service from listening session participants⁸:

I'm part of a group here in the City of Houston that's ongoing with regards to...I guess you would say understanding and relationship and it's part of Multi-Faith Neighbors Network. We're talking about ways to do some of the things that you've alluded to help better the community. It's not as dialogue-based. It would just be more, 'how do we address the hunger problem in the city?' So we've talked about a community garden, and we've talked about different things like that.”

[For] Hurricane Harvey, we've also done a couple of other things where that common action for the common good weighs heavily in inter-faith [work]... We participated in disaster relief, with just listening in for those community needs where that has been a high priority for other faiths that we've engaged with. ...Allowing the community to see that, 'Hey, we're not the bad guys here. We wanna do some good for the community.' And if we anchor in, so to speak on the Christian faith with Christian participants...that will help our cause to publicize our common good.

Key Ideas:

- Evangelicals have several motivations for participating in interfaith cooperation: to deepen one's faith; to share the Gospel; the ability to carry out “love thy neighbor”; and the opportunity to serve.
- Evangelicals generally value sharing one's faith, but there are differences among evangelicals on the appropriate emphasis and approach to sharing one's faith in the context of interfaith engagement and relationships.

⁸ And while the current COVID-19 vaccine roll-out was not mentioned by participants, this public health emergency has been another clear example of people of faith working together from an interfaith perspective. See this story from *Religion News Service* on multi-faith efforts: <https://religionnews.com/2021/02/18/faith-medical-leaders-collaborate-to-get-covid-19-vaccine-in-arms-of-more-people/>

Biggest Opportunities for Interfaith Cooperation

We asked all of our listening session participants what they saw as the biggest opportunity when it came to evangelicals and interfaith cooperation. Several of the opportunities they identified have been discussed already: the opportunity to grow in and live out one's faith, the opportunity to serve and strengthen one's community, and the possibility that through interfaith cooperation, more might come to know Jesus because of it.

A participant in the evangelical leaders listening session summarized these points well: "The vast majority of, in my experience, conservative White evangelicals, are not very engaged missiologically with their neighbors or their communities other than an event once every few months. And so I think one of the biggest opportunities is, to give Christians an opportunity to be salt and light in a pluralistic environment. To help train them to be so, and to train them to share their faith in a way that's relational."

... interfaith cooperation might lead to evangelicals and other religious communities "becoming advocates for one another. I think advocacy is another huge, huge potential outcome of interfaith dialogue. Just advocating on behalf of our neighbors is a huge part of contributing to the common good.

Listening participants also emphasized the value of relationships. One college student said he thought the value of interfaith friendships was a big opportunity. Another student built on that idea and responded that through friendships and interaction, we might "prevent extremism." The student continued, "just realizing that life together is worth preserving and people matter." Because of the student's relationships with those of different backgrounds at his university, "when someone says something extreme, it's like I have a face that comes up and a soul that I care about and value as a friend or a neighbor. So even if it's not evangelical...I think it's super important."

A participant in the church listening session agreed with this goal: "Maybe it's a pipe dream, but it's easy for a person to hate an ideology, a religious group, any type of group, a political party, whatever, it's easy... But it's much harder to hate an individual within that group or ideology, whatever, as you get to know them. So I would think the opportunity, in my mind, would be, the more engagement there is, the more conversation there is, that hatred could come down."

Back in the student listening session, someone added that in addition to preventing extremism, interfaith cooperation might lead to evangelicals and other religious communities "becoming advocates for one another. I think advocacy is another huge, huge potential outcome of interfaith dialogue. Just advocating on behalf of our neighbors is a huge part of contributing to the common good."

Stronger faith. Healthier communities. Less hate, and more mutual advocacy.

This is the future interfaith cooperation can help build. Evangelicals can help build it.