



# THE INTERFAITH CENTER OF NEW YORK

## How to Move from Dialogue to Action: Interfaith Social Action Partnerships

Drawing on lessons from the Catholic-Muslim Joint Action Initiative  
2010-2015 Interfaith Center of New York



475 Riverside Drive, Suite 540, New York, NY 10115  
Tel 212-870-3510 • Fax 212-870-3499 • [www.interfaithcenter.org](http://www.interfaithcenter.org)

# How to Move from Dialogue to Action: Interfaith Social Action Partnerships

Drawing on lessons from the  
Catholic-Muslim Joint Action Initiative 2010-2015  
Interfaith Center of New York

## What's this all about? Interfaith dialogue AND action!

The United States is religiously diverse. That is nothing new. Neither is interfaith dialogue, or interfaith advocacy on social issues - for example, immigration reform and environmental justice.

Less common but no less important are interfaith partnerships in the provision of social services. Even the Interfaith Center of New York (ICNY), which is recognized internationally for its work to foster understanding and cooperation among faiths, had given little attention to nurturing such partnerships.

That is, until 2008. That October, a Bronx Muslim-operated halal food pantry serving 5,000 households a month in Highbridge, one of the nation's poorest neighborhoods, got an eviction notice from its Roman Catholic landlord, citing a need for the space.

It was not an interreligious conflict per se. But the pantry's sponsor, the Muslim Women's Institute for Research and Development (MWIRD), was very worried: How would its thousands of clients get enough to eat?

MWIRD contacted ICNY to see if it could approach its Catholic contacts to ameliorate the situation. ICNY was able to arrange a meeting between MWIRD and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York.

The Institute was unable to get the pantry space back from its landlord, but this critical incident germinated ICNY's Catholic-Muslim Joint Action Initiative, which launched in 2010 and continued until 2015 with the support of the GHR Foundation.

The Initiative sought to strengthen the relationship of faith groups in the provision of social services. The projects generated and the learnings acquired far exceeded ICNY's expectations. As partners addressed community needs, they also developed new and sustained relationships with each other.

While the Initiative focused on Catholic-Muslim partnerships in New York City, the learnings are applicable to other combinations of faith groups in other contexts.

As part of the Initiative, neighborhood and citywide partnerships addressed many issues of common concern to New York's religious leaders and faith communities,

including hunger, immigration, prisoner re-entry, addiction and recovery, racism, child welfare and foster care. The range of concerns addressed showed that it is possible to form interfaith social action partnerships on a variety of issues.

Incidentally, MWIRD eventually was able to find a space in a neighborhood church to continue running its pantry, and became a member of the Catholic-Muslim Joint Action Initiative.

This brief how-to guide seeks to offer the essential “who, what, when, where, why and how” of interfaith social action partnerships to address commonly shared concerns. You are encouraged to use this guide in tandem with the full report of the ICNY’s Catholic-Muslim Joint Action Initiative; it is a gold mine of additional information and inspiration.

## **Why do social services together?**

The reasons will emerge for you from your own particular context. For projects in the ICNY’s Catholic-Muslim Joint Action Initiative, reasons included the following:

- Faith-based and secular social service agencies are seeing an increasingly diverse client base. Through interfaith partnerships, they can benefit from each other’s knowledge of and experience with different religious and ethnic populations - including each other’s faith traditions, community needs and responses to those needs.
- Joining forces also helps agencies benefit from economies of scale. They can share facilities, reducing overhead. They can raise funds together; the fact of being an interfaith partnership can attract new funders. Even if they don’t share facilities, they can hold joint programs. They can cross-promote to each other’s clients; for example, a food pantry can promote its partner’s ESL classes to its clients, and vice versa.
- Christians, Muslims, Jews and people of other faiths have rich traditions of social service, community action and interfaith work. Their sacred writings and teachings inform and motivate that work. They have much to learn from each other.
- Joint social service partnerships bridge the gap between “education” and “action.” Interfaith dialogue and interfaith action are complementary; each flows from the other and strengthens the other.
- Partnering a more experienced social services provider with a less experienced provider can raise the level of services to a neighborhood or city.

- Interfaith partnerships can more effectively advocate for public policies that meet the needs of communities.
- Interfaith partnerships offer an alternative approach to religious strife by increasing contact between and among communities; they bring people together and diminish violence and tensions long term.

## Steps to Successful Interfaith Social Action Partnerships

### Step One: Identify Partners

Any number of entities can initiate an interfaith social service partnership: an ecumenical or interfaith association, a local or state council of churches, a church, a mosque, a faith-based social service agency, or an agency with expertise in a particular ethnic community (e.g. West African Christians or South Asian Muslims).

The initiator might be a group like Interfaith Center of New York that does not provide any direct social services itself but sees the potential value of interfaith social service partnerships to address commonly shared concerns in its community. Or, it might be a social services provider seeking strategic partners in its domain.

An organization facilitating partnerships can hold programs and invite diverse religious leaders to attend. It can approach others with an idea for an interfaith program or partnered project. Or it can act as what ICNY calls a “broker-facilitator,” akin to a community organizer.

Broker-facilitators negotiate new relationships and strengthen existing relationships, sometimes in contexts where interfaith work is less well-known or appreciated. Broker-facilitators help partners initiate, execute and evaluate projects.

Being a broker and facilitator is the least centralized way of delivering interfaith programs, and thus places most of the responsibility on the partners. This method is ideal for building sustainable interfaith capacity at the grassroots, but could ultimately slow down achieving large-scale service delivery outcomes in non-disaster situations, when partners are likely to work more slowly. It is possible that brokered-facilitated partnerships would function differently in disaster-response contexts, where organizations are likely to mobilize rapidly and in a coordinated manner.

Partners may include social service agencies, mosques and churches. Participants may include social service staff, clients, youth, clergy and congregants.

Here are some suggested criteria for partners:

- Interest in partnership and its benefits to them and their clients.
- Time and staff to engage in projects.
- Previous interfaith experience and/or interaction is a plus!

## Step Two: Build Community and Mutual Understanding

Initial meetings between the partners should include trust-building activities such as shared meals and sharing of teachings of their respective faiths, especially the teachings that undergird their social service. Partners also should acquaint each other with their groups' mission and programs, then work to identify the social needs they want to address together. Each partner should be able to articulate why working together will be beneficial to their programs and clients.

- *Relationship building takes time.*

Effective partnerships depend upon a basic level of trust and mutual respect. In the ICNY's Muslim-Christian Joint Action Initiative, even organizations that had met each other prior to the Initiative's launch benefited greatly from the at least two or three meetings that focused on learning about one another's communities.

ICNY's focus at the initial stage was to build a dialogue that in turn became the foundation for actionable projects. This dialogue also further strengthened individuals' commitments to their own faith teachings about social justice.

- *Be aware that faith communities engage in interfaith work in different ways, and for different reasons.*

ICNY noticed that Muslims seemed relatively more eager and able to engage in interfaith work than Catholics - even though both shared the imperative of loving God and neighbor. Muslim partners had fewer organizational obstacles, and were quicker to commit personnel and expeditiously return MOUs with signatures.

One possible explanation is that, for Muslims, interfaith work offers social capital, civic cohesion and credibility. This is less the case for Catholic entities, whose credibility, capital and civic connectivity have been long established. On the other hand, Catholic participants saw the value of building neighborly relations via dialogue and of developing culturally competent social services.

- *Allow partners to set their own agenda for their programs and activities.*

For example, in the ICNY's experience, immigration services were of less concern to African American participants but they were essential for African communities. The African community was a ready audience for a presentation by Catholic Charities Immigration Services.

On the other hand, the Initiative's African American partners were more ready to work on the issue of hunger because they were thinking about opening a pantry at their mosque in the future. Thus, allowing the partners to set the agenda for issues important to them meant that more than one concern could be addressed.

### **Step Three: Implement Your Project**

- *Pay attention to and respond to programmatic cues that may stretch the project outside preconceived boundaries, as they may enhance the project at the aggregate level.*

For example, in New York, as a result of the collaboration on immigration, Catholic Charities requested a staff development workshop focused on working with Muslim clients. A Staten Island priest responded to the imam's request to broker a meeting with Cardinal Dolan. An imam's wife had a vision of a women's dialogue group. Each of these new ideas, when implemented, offered the opportunity to forge new relationships and thicken the web of interactions among Catholics and Muslims in New York City.

### **Step Four: Prepare for Hiccups**

Be flexible in implementation and be prepared for systemic changes that have unintended consequences for the partnership.

Building interfaith relationships across individuals and institutions, each in turn embedded in different faith systems, is a complex process. Challenges can be internal or external.

Challenges internal to the ICNY's Initiative included differences in commitment to interfaith work, difficulties gaining buy-in from appropriate stakeholders on each side (such as parents), differences across institutions in their capacity and structure, variances in levels of prior interfaith engagement and coordination of schedules across multiple actors.

ICNY addressed these concerns through explicit discussion with partners about potential obstacles, feasibility of project ideas and strategies to address challenges.

In Staten Island for example, one concern was that Muslims had not been through a "Safe Environment" training that was mandatory for Catholics running youth programs. ICNY worked out that the Initiative's Catholic-Muslim youth programs would be able to proceed as long as there were at least two Catholic individuals who had the training. Thus, partners and the facilitating agency must be able to discuss potential barriers honestly and engage in creative problem solving.

Another internal challenge the Initiative encountered was the closing of organizations and staffing changes mid-way through the partnership.

External factors are harder to address, but ICNY learned to anticipate these kinds of challenges and work proactively to build relationships with more than one person within institutions, and also multiple actors and institutions within each borough.

For example, in the second cycle of the program, ICNY articulated a new prerequisite within the MOU that each agency must assign at least one “understudy” representative to the partnership. This added step also helped in situations when the key partner was temporarily unavailable for an event or a meeting. So, for example, when a religious leader faced an illness or death in the family, the substitute was available.

### **Step Five: Document, Evaluate and Celebrate!**

ICNY employed LTG Associates, Inc., to conduct independent evaluations. The Interfaith Center also held a conference mid-Initiative that brought together Catholic and Muslim leaders to share lessons learned. Documentation from the projects, along with evaluations and reflections through structured sessions, were incorporated into reports.

- *Evaluation is an essential tool in monitoring and developing a project that is responsive to realities on the ground.*

A systematic evaluation of ICNY’s borough-based partnerships and child welfare workshops helped not only to document the range of programmatic activities but also to adjust the program to better match the needs and capacity of partners.

ICNY conducted both a formative and post-program evaluation for borough-based partnerships. In addition, workshop participants filled out pre-test and post-test questionnaires.

By working closely with its evaluation consultants, ICNY developed a capacity to think about interfaith relationship building as measurable. In addition, evaluation helped the Center to assess the program’s development, design and management and to develop recommendations to help those interested in replicating this work.

Further details about the logic models, evaluation design, methodologies and instruments that were developed, along with the evaluation findings, are available directly through three evaluation reports written by LTG consultants, indexed at [www.interfaithcenter.org/catholicmuslimpartnership](http://www.interfaithcenter.org/catholicmuslimpartnership).

The reports are: “Formative Evaluation 2012,” “Final Evaluation of Borough Based Partnerships” and “Evaluation Report on 2014 Workshops to Improve Foster Care Services for Muslim Children.” ICNY hope these reports will be useful for other colleagues in the sector of interfaith social action work.

Finally, along the way, don’t forget to take time to celebrate the relationships you have built, the programs you have launched, the clients you have served and the deeper understanding you have reached of your own and another’s faith and community through joining hands in interfaith social action partnership.

The Interfaith Center of New York would like to hear about your experiences, and also would be glad to assist and advise as you develop your partnership. Here's how to contact the Center:

The Interfaith Center of New York  
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 540  
New York, NY 10115

Tel 212-870-3510 • Fax 212-870-3499  
[www.interfaithcenter.org](http://www.interfaithcenter.org)

## Resources for Your Work

<http://interfaithcenter.org/catholicmuslimpartnership> - Documentation of the ICNY's Christian-Muslim Social Action Initiative, including the full report "From Dialogue to Action: Interfaith Social Action Partnerships" and evaluations by LTG Associates, Inc.

[www.scripturalreasoning.org](http://www.scripturalreasoning.org) - text bundles from Islam, Judaism and Christianity that focus on such themes as Encountering God, Wisdom, Creation/Beginnings, etc.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSBNvZ2WsLc> - a short video clip about Islam, parenting and foster care. It is available as a resource for future initiatives to recruit Muslim foster parents or for other similar cultural sensitivity workshops.