
Faith Through the Lens: Photovoice and Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

As we survey interfaith activity in the United States, particularly between Muslims and Christians, there is no shortage of goodwill and attempts at strengthening the relationship between faiths. However, people still struggle to find the means to build bridges between their communities. This project introduces a new strategy in interfaith encounters, one that opens the possibility for anyone to give voice to their experiences in ways that engage their broader community.

Nawyn (2007) describes how faith-based resettlement organizations employ an "interfaith ethic of refuge" as a tool to mobilize organizational networks, access material and human resources, and create alliances across religious traditions. We wonder if a similar ethic could be cultivated through the use of photovoice in Christian-Muslim interfaith dialogue, especially among immigrants and refugees with Muslim backgrounds. Specifically, we ask how Muslims and Christians could use photovoice to strengthen relationships, bridge cultural divides, encourage mutual advocacy, engage communities, and pursue social justice around questions of faith, diversity, and immigration.

We believe this is an important question for contemporary American society. Until we can find the means to translate goodwill and intentions into meaningful interaction that has broader implications, the possibilities for interfaith engagement remain limited. Additionally, often the stories of personal encounters and change come from those in exceptional or more privileged positions. The question remains as to how to open these possibilities at the grassroots level. This project seeks to address the current limitations in interfaith experiences and explore how a greater impact can be made.

The current political milieu has heightened questions around immigrants and refugees, particularly those with Muslim backgrounds. Many Christians communities are responding as advocates for these populations by offering sanctuary and/or financial support. They seek to stand in solidarity with people of other religions, but they have organized their efforts around political action and social services, often neglecting the lens of faith. This is because it is difficult for people to know how to give expression to their interfaith experiences-if they are even provided the opportunity to process their experiences as dialogical. Participants in this project are Christian and Muslim leaders of communities engaged in advocacy efforts, who

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seek a new means to incorporate the interfaith dimension in their work. Photovoice provides a way to explore how different religious traditions can give expression to their experiences using a technique that has not been systematically tested for use in interfaith dialogue. The Interfaith Photovoice Initiative investigates the use of photovoice in interfaith dialogue through four photovoice projects during 2018 in the United States and Canada. In each local application of photovoice, a group of approximately ten Muslims and ten Christians meet 3–5 times to discuss photographs depicting the role of their respective faiths in everyday life, the challenges they face as people of faith, and concerns about negative socio-political attitudes and behaviors toward immigrants and minorities. This paper presents early findings based on our initial application of photovoice in early 2018.

Keywords: Photovoice, Intergroup Relations, Religion