

**Promising Practices Concept Paper**  
**June 2016**

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## Introduction

Scholars and practitioners of interreligious dialogue activities continue to discuss the contours of a global “interfaith movement” (or “movements”), highlighting the fact that interfaith efforts, wherever and however they happen, do not happen in a vacuum. Interreligious dialogue activities take place within particular local, regional, national, and international contexts. In an increasingly globalized world, the relationships between these different levels are becoming more visible and dynamic, ever changing as information is shared and networks expand. At the same time, there is much to be gained from examining local, city-based interreligious dialogue activities, an exercise that underscores the nuances, challenges, and successes of this work today.

The promising practice profiles presented here foreground interreligious dialogue activities that happen at a local level and are both driven by that context and yet are potentially replicable.<sup>1</sup> These promising practices, by taking a closer look at the local, are an invitation to better understand the context out of which a particular interfaith program or organization developed. This is important not only for understanding impact but also potential. In addition to looking to the local for a project or initiative’s genesis, promising practices also look farther afield to see how a particular idea has spread and been adapted in other cities, sometimes halfway around the world.

This paper outlines the development and manifestation of the concept of a “promising practice” as it pertains to interreligious dialogue activities and gives an overview of the initial findings from the work of both the Pluralism Project at Harvard University and the KAICIID Dialogue Centre. This paper and database of promising practices is the result of a research partnership between these two organizations that began in 2014. The research focus of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University is primarily the United States while the KAICIID Dialogue Centre’s reach is global in scope. In drawing from both, this paper seeks to explore both the depth and breadth of interreligious activities that indeed may be seen as “promising” both in their local context and beyond.

## What is a promising practice?

Promising practices are both context-driven and potentially replicable. Interfaith initiatives and/or organizations often emerge out of a perceived need within the local community. While location and history ensure those needs are unique, similarities also emerge. Identifying an

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<sup>1</sup> The term “interreligious dialogue activities” is used throughout this report for consistency but may be in reference to phenomena described elsewhere as “interfaith initiatives” or “interfaith activities.” “Dialogue,” as it is used here goes beyond a popular conception of the term implying “a conversation” and instead may refer to a wide range of activities that promote engagement across and with religious difference.

initiative or project as “promising” is to do so in its own right, not as it compares to other organizations.<sup>2</sup> Rather, a “promising practice” designation is recognition that:

- organizers themselves have deemed an initiative or project unique and/or a potential model for others; and
- this initiative or project has been or could be replicated in other places to respond to a pressing need or issue.

It is also important to note that the identification of a particular interreligious dialogue activity as a “promising practice” does not mean that a project or initiative is immune to the challenges of its context, a theme revisited in a later portion of this paper.

When analyzing promising practices, researchers also took into account the local and organizational context out of which it developed. With this in mind, attention was paid to the constituencies the project or initiatives sought to serve as well as the demographics of those who were leading the initiative or project. This additional information contributes to our understanding of any challenges to and/or discrepancies between the stated goals of a particular initiative or project and the reality. Documenting the role of women, youth, and religious minorities was also critical to furthering our understanding of the demographics of interfaith leadership. For instance, results from the Pluralism Project’s initial pilot study survey found that Christians, Jews, and Muslims were most likely to be involved in the leadership of interfaith initiatives and that one-third of organizational respondents noted the involvement of individuals who identified with “Atheist/Humanist/Non-religious philosophies.”<sup>3</sup> Further analysis of promising practices and interreligious dialogue activities around the world would likely yield further insight into which individuals and communities are engaged in interreligious dialogue activities.

Identifying promising practices internationally provides an opportunity to explore how and why initiatives and programs begin and take hold in certain places and how interfaith networks grow. Analysis as to how the religious demographics and relations within a particular city or country impact local interfaith infrastructure is warranted. The next section explains how cataloguing and comparing both forms of action and areas of action further these aims.

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<sup>2</sup> “Pilot Report.” America’s Interfaith Infrastructure: An Emerging Landscape. <http://pluralism.org/interfaith/report/>. Accessed April 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

*The Pluralism Project and the KAICIID Dialogue Centre*

This paper is the result of a partnership between the Pluralism Project at Harvard University and the KAICIID Dialogue Centre. Founded and directed by Dr. Diana Eck, the Pluralism Project at Harvard University has, for over twenty-five years, studied the interfaith initiatives in the United States with the goal of documenting the changing post-1965 religious landscape of America.<sup>4</sup> In 2011, the Pluralism Project began a pilot study to map and document interfaith initiatives in twenty U.S. cities. In addition to collecting geographic and demographic data through Internet searches and surveys, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders of interfaith initiatives in each respective city. Data collected from select interviews was used to create promising practice profiles highlighting a specific aspect of an organization or initiative’s work or mission. As of 2016, the Pluralism Project profiled over 40 different promising practices in nearly 25 cities.<sup>5</sup>

In 2014, the KAICIID Dialogue Centre began identifying promising practices from countries around the world. A rubric was developed by KAICIID Dialogue Centre staff to assist in cataloguing and cross-referencing these profiles. In contrast to the Pluralism Project’s initial promising practice profiles that focused a program or initiative in one city, the online resource developed by KAICIID presents promising practices first in abstract form, followed by different manifestations of that practice from various cities. For instance, an interfaith walk for peace is described in generic terms and then specific field data examples given of how this promising practice has been utilized in the United States, Europe, and Africa. Additional information about the “areas of action” and “forms of action” was included to facilitate comparative analysis (see Appendix I, Promising Practices Template).

## Promising Practices Goals

The goals of promising practices are as diverse as the practices themselves and as varied as the contexts in which they take place. The Pluralism Project’s initial pilot study revealed that “relationship-building,” “education,” and “dialogue” were among the top three responses to

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<sup>4</sup> In 1965 landmark shifts in immigration policies led to increased immigration to the United States from nearly every continent. The Pluralism Project aims to “engage Americans with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources.” For more information, visit [www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org).

<sup>5</sup> The initial pilot study of interfaith initiatives was made possible by a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. Subsequent research, beyond the initial pilot cities, was made possible by a research partnership between the Pluralism Project and the KAICIID Dialogue Centre, of which this report is a component.

questions about organizational purpose.<sup>6</sup> In this database, these top responses are integrated into other “areas of action” identified by KAICIID researchers from around the globe. In doing so, the database offer a unique look at the depth and breadth of interfaith activities across cities and towns in numerous countries. Read more about these areas of action below.

In presenting promising practices side by side, activities can be compared by context and by purpose to see how different approaches may have similar aims or, conversely, how similar approaches may have divergent goals. This research also presents opportunities for further analysis as to the reasons why interreligious dialogue is used as a means of engagement and/or whether dialogue is seen as an end unto itself. A comparative look is also useful for examining the challenges faced by organizers of interreligious dialogue activities and for better understanding the ways in which the broader social factors—local, regional, national—impact the formation and perceived success of interreligious dialogue activities.

## Approaches to Promising Practices

Analysis of promising practices from around the world point to a great diversity in both forms and areas of action and highlight the uniqueness of each context’s challenges and opportunities. At the same time, a few common sites and common means did emerge. When looked at in the aggregate, distilling these sites and means provides a unique glimpse into the ways interreligious actors and institutions—religious, interreligious, and civic—engage one another and highlight the ways in which a specific context may shape the development, goals, challenges, and even the possibility of a promising practice.

### Common Sites

As part of understanding the contexts in which promising practices take place, it is important to note the range of “sites” that become locations for these activities. For instance, the **public square** is a common site, as with the Ramadan Tent interfaith *iftar*, which takes place in the city centers of London, Manchester, and Plymouth in the United Kingdom as well as in Istanbul, Turkey, and Ndola, Zambia. Also taking place in the public square is a community mural project called Building Bridges that transformed the underpass of a highway in Cleveland, Ohio (United States) into a vibrant place for demonstrating both creativity and community connections across religious difference. Some promising practices use the public square as a place of communal gathering for remembrance, as with the annual Srebrenica (Bosnia Herzegovina) Memorial March for Peace that happens over three days. Others may impact the physical landscape of public

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<sup>6</sup> “Pilot Report.” America’s Interfaith Infrastructure: An Emerging Landscape. <http://pluralism.org/interfaith/report/>. Accessed April 2016.

square, like the two schools—one Catholic and one Islamic—that worked together to rebuild a playground in their neighborhood in Beirut, Lebanon.

Promising practices may also happen in one or several **houses of worship**. For instance, after the death of Pope John Paul II, the Great Rabbi of Poland organized an interfaith memorial service at his synagogue. Others invite their neighbors to attend their tradition’s ceremonies and celebrations; the Interfaith Spiritual Fellowship Cooperation Circle in Malaysia (a member of the United Religions Initiative), does this in Malaysia. Since 2009, the General Direction of Worship of Buenos Aires in Argentina, established as liaison between the government and the community, has engaged more than 3,000 people in visiting over 200 houses of worship. In Berlin, Germany, the Long Night of Religion includes 100 houses of worship opening their doors to the public to encourage greater understanding about different religions. In some cases, the theme of “interfaith travel” has helped to frame these place-based explorations. The Interfaith Community Initiative in Atlanta, Georgia (United States) does a local weekend “trips” to houses of worship across the city; they also plan the World Pilgrims’ Program and have taken participants to nearly ten countries since the program’s founding.

The opening up of houses of worship is, in many ways, analogous to the welcoming of strangers into one’s own home. Even so, **private homes**, too, can be a site for promising practices. The Dinner Dialogues that began in Houston, Texas (United States), and inspired similar efforts across the country is one example.

Sometimes, a **shared space** is created, either by non-profits, religious communities, and/or the government. One such instance is Collaboration House, a London-based initiative made possible by the Fay Share Foundation that promotes collaboration by offering diverse non-profits office space under one roof. Harmony Center in Singapore was created to educate about Islam as well as other faiths. “Peace centres” have also been established in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali.

The **Internet** is also a site of interreligious engagement and increasingly so as organizers are finding innovative ways to utilize technology. OurVoices is an online petition campaign around environmental issues. Although no longer active, RavelUnravel, an initiative of Project Interfaith in Omaha, Nebraska (United States) invited people to upload their own videos in response to questions about their faith.

## Common Means

Examining the means by which organizers achieve their intended goals is also illustrative, taking us one step beyond the forms of action (detailed below) to understand the kind of religious and cultural resources organizers draw upon to undergird and implement their work.

Some use **historically significant days and/or holidays** as an opportunity to promote interfaith engagement. The Ramadan Tent is an example of a practice that seeks to promote relationships between people of different faiths as well as education about Islam and the month. The interfaith funeral prayer for an important religious leader and the Post-Massacre March for Peace, both mentioned above, are additional examples. Encouraging individuals to attend each other's worship services is also used as a means to create dialogue and educate about different faiths. For some individuals and communities, this particular practice may be less appealing than others since some traditions prohibit members from entering into a house of worship outside their faith and others may prohibit or limit non-members' access to their houses of worship.

Relatedly, **rituals**, whether adapted or novel, are also a means by which interreligious engagement is promoted. Annual events, like the Peace Walk, appear as new rituals that, although not intended to be religious, are shared between people from different traditions. Some, like the hosting of an interfaith *iftar* during the month of Ramadan, seek to expand non-Muslims' knowledge about the Muslim community and forge friendships between the two.

**Art**, be it in the form of drama, music, film, or painting, is another common means used by interfaith organizers. The Building Bridges mural project in Cleveland, Ohio (United States) engages community members, especially young people, in conceptualizing and painting public art pieces. The play *The Hindu and the Cowboy... And Other Kansas City Stories* was created by a playwright in Kansas City, Missouri (United States) and is based on oral histories collected from residents of the city. An interfaith film club formed in Buenos Aires, Argentina, to watch films that can then foster conversations about religious difference.

Many organizers use **topical dialogues** as a means to build relationships across religious difference and to foster deeper understanding of scriptures, traditions, or social issues like Islamophobia, the refugee crisis, or care for creation. Some, like the Muslim Jewish Conference in Austria, organize weekend-long events around these kinds of exchanges.

**Service projects and social justice causes** are perhaps two of the most popular means of interfaith engagement. Service projects can range from beautifying a neighborhood park like the students in Beirut mentioned above to organizing community blood drives as Coexister, a French youth movement, has done in 36 European cities. Social justice causes championed in some of the promising practices include environmental advocacy through organizations like Interfaith Power and Light in the United States, welcoming refugees in Europe, or the work led by Buddhist monks in Laos to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Depending on the context, some of the forms and means of action presented here may prove to be inaccessible for some religious groups or individuals. Some groups, for instance, are prohibited by their faith from visiting houses of worship or participating in religious rituals not their own. Still others may choose not to participate in specific activities because of the topics may seem irrelevant or the causes not aligned with their priorities. These limitations are an area that warrants further study.

## Overlap and Intersection

The attempt at categorizing promising practices into common sites and common means is not intended to imply isolation between sites or means. Read through any number of promising practice profiles and it becomes clear that, like the areas and forms of action discussed below, a promising practice may intersect multiple sites and utilize multiple means. It is also important to recognize that vast array of possible combinations of sites and means. This is evidence of both creativity on the part of organizers and highlights the dynamic relationship between a promising practice and its unique context, both geographically and historically. Even when one factor—a site or a means—is the same, it can look very different depending on local political or social factors.

## Challenges

Interfaith initiatives, and even promising practices, are not immune to challenges nor do challenges preclude an initiative from being identified as a promising practice. For instance, the Pluralism Project’s 2011 pilot study of interfaith initiatives in twenty U.S. cities found that funding and lack of an adequate number of staff or volunteers top survey respondents’ list of “greatest challenges.”<sup>7</sup> This initial pilot study identified InterACT Cleveland as a promising practice that steered into challenges, rather than away from them:

As ‘one of the main voices’ in the city’s interfaith scene, InterAct Cleveland promotes service and dialogue to meet the ‘challenges and opportunities facing Greater Cleveland, including religious diversity itself.’ Despite its extensive networks, InterAct Cleveland announced in December 2011 that, after twenty years serving the city, it would be closing its doors due to financial uncertainty. The fact that, in an open letter to supporters announcing this news, the InterAct Cleveland Executive Committee gave detailed information about which organizations and individuals would be inheriting its programs—many of which are slated to continue despite the closing—is testament to the strength of these networks.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “America’s Interfaith Infrastructure: An Emerging Landscape.” Pilot Report. The Pluralism Project at Harvard University. <http://pluralism.org/interfaith/report/>. Accessed June 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

The Collaboration House in London, a place where interfaith non-profits are housed under one roof, is one example of a promising practice that actually developed out of the twin challenges of funding and adequate staffing levels.

Depending on the local context, organizers of interfaith activities may face any number of challenges related to participation. These might include under- or over-representation of certain groups. These challenges might also include risks for participation depending on the status of interfaith activities in a particular national or local context. By studying a promising practice in different countries, cities, or regions we can gain a better understanding of how broader social forces may impact its development, adaptation, and sustainability.

Challenges can also be the impetus for an interfaith initiative in the first place. Many of the promising practices highlighted in the database were formed in response to challenges (local, national, and/or global) identified by the organizers as warranting a response. Those challenges might be addressing income inequality, finding ways to welcome refugees, or curbing climate change. As noted above in the discussion of common means, *how* to respond to the same issue may differ from place to place, as might the successes.

## Practical Applications

These promising practices, presented here as part of KAICIID'S Dialogue Knowledge Hub, are intended to be a resource for scholars, practitioners, and civic leaders around the world. Users can customize their search of the database, viewing promising practice profiles that embody specific forms and areas of action. In doing so, we hope that anyone with the desire to know more about the myriad of ways interreligious dialogue is currently practiced will find something of interest. What follows is a brief orientation to the classification of promising practices in the database developed by KAICIID researchers based on findings from initial fieldwork.

### Areas and Forms of Action

Nineteen "areas of action" and ten "forms of action" were identified by KAICIID based on analysis of data gathered from internet searches and interviews with representatives of interfaith organizations. These categories, while discreet, often overlap and a promising practice may include more than one "area" or "form" of action. The result is multidimensional look at interreligious dialogue activities that highlights many points of intersection.

**Areas of action** delineate a promising practice’s purpose and rationale. The nineteen areas of action can be grouped into three categories: social cohesion and active citizenship, interreligious and intercultural exchange, and advocacy.

- **Social Cohesion and Active Citizenship efforts**, including areas of action that seek to promote freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, and/or freedom of movement.
- **Interreligious and intercultural exchange** areas of action include efforts that seek to educate about a particular religion, utilize inter-religious or intra-religious, or intercultural exchange, and/or highlight a shared confessional and/or religious activities.
- **Advocacy areas** of action include efforts that work on behalf of the youth, women, migrants, refugees and IDP’s, and/or promote humanitarian aid.

**Forms of action** highlight the methods used by a particular initiative or program to achieve its aims. The fifteen forms of action can be grouped into four categories: education, outreach, bridge-building, and locale.

- **Educational efforts** include topical programming, information distribution, on behalf of a particular community or communities.
- **Outreach efforts** can take many forms and serve diverse constituencies, including the human security- of individuals or communities, social work and community service, advocacy, diplomacy, and research.
- Forms of action that **promote bridge-building** include individual as well as organizational/community capacity-building, and networking.
- **Locale** refers to the context and format by which a particular promising practice takes place and three of the most popular include a council model, a physical building, and/or a campus-based effort.

As you begin using the database, we invite you to consider: What are you learning? How do these promising practices relate to your own interreligious dialogue work or the work of others that you have encountered? What do you find most valuable about a particular practice? What aspect of the initiative would be the most challenging for your own context? How might it be adapted to meet the needs of your city or town?

This database is a work in progress. We will continue to add promising practices as our research capacity allows. If you would like to suggest a program or initiative as a promising practice, please contact us. If you are currently undertaking interreligious dialogue in a form or area presented here and you would like it considered for addition to our collection of field examples, please be in touch.

## Next Steps and Outlook

The strength and popularity of interreligious dialogue activities continues to grow, taking on new forms and in new places. As we continue to identify promising practices and document these activities, we ask the questions:

- Where are interreligious dialogue activities just beginning and in response to what circumstances?
- How are these efforts taking place and who are they engaging?
- Where are interreligious dialogue activities being challenged? Where are they being encouraged?

We invite you to do the same.

### ***Works Cited***

KAICIID Dialogue Centre. [www.kaiciid.org](http://www.kaiciid.org).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University. [www.pluralism.org/interfaith](http://www.pluralism.org/interfaith).