The Foundation Review
a publication of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University

Volume 16
Issue 2 *Democracy, Equity, and Power*

10-2024

Advocacy and Bridging Strategies Are Failing on Their Own. Multifaith Nonprofits Embody Six Solutions for a Pluralistic Democracy

Allison K. Ralph
Cohesion Strategy LLC

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr

Part of the Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons, Public Administration Commons, Public Affairs Commons, and the Public Policy Commons

Recommended Citation

Ralph, A. K. (2024). Advocacy and Bridging Strategies Are Failing on Their Own. Multifaith Nonprofits Embody Six Solutions for a Pluralistic Democracy. *The Foundation Review, 16*(2). https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1714

Copyright © 2024 Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. The Foundation Review is reproduced electronically by ScholarWorks@GVSU. https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr

doi: 10.9707/1944-5660.1714

Advocacy and Bridging Strategies Are Failing on Their Own. Multifaith Nonprofits Embody Six Solutions for a Pluralistic Democracy

Allison K. Ralph, Ph.D., Cohesion Strategy LLC

Keywords: *Pluralism, multifaith, intergroup contact theory, activism, polarization*

Introduction

Amid ongoing social and environmental crises and rising political polarization, nonprofits and their funders seeking social and cultural change in a diverse democracy can feel forced into narrow, and ultimately insufficient, strategies for change.

In spring 2023, the Statement on Philanthropic Pluralism and the reaction to it threw the dilemma of nonprofit actors into sharp relief (Dill et al., 2023). The statement's calls for civility and bridging were met with frustration about its "erroneous premise" (Le, 2023, para. 6), and the argument that "politeness has never served the cause of social justice" (Villanueva, 2023, para. 5).

It appeared that grantmakers supporting social change had just two, mutually exclusive options:

1. Make friends and forgive grievances.

2. Get no justice, give no peace.

In fact, those phrases epitomize the two most common strategies for social and cultural change:

1. Intergroup contact strategies aim to reduce bias and violence via human connection and influence wider bridging and collaboration projects.

2. Activism and advocacy strategies aim to change institutions and policies by organizing people.

Key Points

- This article clarifies a strategic dilemma between bridging difference or advocacy strategies for funders and their grantees seeking social change in the context of polarization, putting it in conversation with social science research on intergroup contact theory, on which bridging strategies are based, and advocacy. Based on a set of interviews and surveys, this article explores how multifaith organizations embody strategies that navigate the contact/advocacy divide.
- This article posits that multifaith organizations — those intentionally formed of people or institutions with different faith identities — embody six practices that avoid the false dichotomy of bridging and advocacy strategies: "dual identity" contact, tolerating disagreement, shattering typical binaries, managing shifting constellations of partners, developing local relationships, and possessing extensive reach. In short, they are a micromodel of our society, weathering the hardest of differences, showing the way toward reduced animosity and real improvement in our politics.
- Without attention to long-term bridging strategies, the creative ideas produced by activists are unlikely to find their way into acceptance across political divides. Multifaith organizations offer a way out of this dilemma as both models and potential partners for funders. The article offers recommendations for how funders can better support these organizations to promote a pluralistic democracy.

Each set of strategies is insufficient to create lasting change in a diverse democracy. Contact interventions can change bias levels, but they can also damage social justice movements (Saguy et al., 2017). Meanwhile, activism and advocacy can force policy change, but prioritizing short-term wins over long-term culture shifts stokes backlash, overwhelming initial gains (Braunstein, 2021; Idriss & Kleinfeld, 2023). High levels of affective polarization create the feeling that the strategies are mutually exclusive, leading strategists to double down on their approach and increasing the risk of failure. Policy swings risk democratic breakdown. Real progress stalls. Both nonprofits and philanthropy perpetuate these cycles (Kleinfeld, 2018; Masters, 2022).

To cultivate lasting change in a peaceful, just, and diverse democracy, grantmakers need to promote both creative activism and bridging movements where new ideas can be integrated across divides and democratic practices of negotiation maintained. Multifaith organizations provide successful models for social change while avoiding polarization. They can also be strong partners for grantmakers, other nonprofits, and governments working on everything from climate change to hate crime reduction. They are intentionally comprised of, partner with, and convene institutions and individuals that differ in their theologies, traditions, and cultures.[1] Multifaith organizations often contain some level of ideological diversity within their membership as well.

Internal diversity encourages MFOs to live out six solutions to the failures of contact and advocacy strategies. They practice "dual identity" contact, tolerate disagreement, shatter typical binaries, manage shifting constellations of partners, develop local relationships, and have extensive reach. In short, MFOs are a micromodel of our society, weathering the hardest of our political and identitarian differences, showing the way toward reduced animosity and real improvement in our politics. These ways of being make them both great models for other nonprofit organizations seeking lasting change and excellent partners for funders where goals align.

> *In short, MFOs are a micromodel of our society, weathering the hardest of our political and identitarian differences, showing the way toward reduced animosity and real To cultivate lasting change in a peaceful, just, and diverse democracy, grantmakers need to promote both creative activism and bridging movements where new ideas can be integrated across divides and democratic practices of negotiation maintained. Multifaith organizations provide successful models for social change while avoiding polarization. improvement in our politics.*

At the moment, there is some evidence to suggest that funders underutilize faith-based partners across the nonprofit sector (Eckhart

---

[1] Multifaith organizations use a variety of terms for their work, including multifaith, interfaith, interreligious, ecumenical, bridge-building, broad-based, and open to all. For ease, this article includes in this designation organizations that are explicitly monofaith but ecumenical within that — many traditions are split among a diverse array of denominations. Work across these divides can be just as hard as work across religious lines.

FIGURE 1 Participating Multifaith Organizations

1. DOCC: Downtown Outreach Churches' Collegium (Pat Stromsta)
2. Interfaith Action of SW Michigan (Vicki Schroeder)
3. Interfaith Clergy Association of Greater Lansing (Betsy Aho)
4. Interfaith Photovoice (Roman Williams)
5. Interfaith Round Table of Washtenaw County (Tasneem Sultan)
6. International Campus Ministry at Western Michigan University (Laura Osborne)
7. ISAAC: Interfaith Strategy for Advocacy & Action in the Community (Pat Stromsta)
8. Kaufman Interfaith Institute (Douglas Kindschi and Kyle Kooyers)
9. Michigan Interfaith Power & Light (Leah Wiste)
10. Michigan Religious Leaders for Justice (Vicki Schroeder)
11. Momentum Center (Barbara Lee VanHorssen)
12. Mother's Trust Mother's Place (Sandra Bier)
13. My Oasis Center (Doug Mantha)
14. Northern Michigan Interfaith Common Ground (Doug Mantha)
15. Reformed Church in America (Laura Osborne)
16. Together West Michigan (Allison McCulley)

Queenan et al., 2021). Of funding that does go to religion-related grantees, MFOs get about a sixth of those funds. A study of 33 funders that were known to fund in religion-related areas gave at least $10.8 million in 2018 and 2019 of the at least $67.8 million that went toward a set of religion-related funding areas (Inclusive America Project et al., 2020; Ralph, 2021). Interviews with funders who do partner with MFOs to discover best practices for working with this class of organization lie outside the scope of this article. However, this area of inquiry would be an excellent target for additional fieldwork.

Methods and Data

This study analyzes 16 multifaith organizations[2] represented by 13 staff members working in local contexts in Michigan. (See Figure 1.) These organizations appear in this study because they attended a convening[3] held by the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University on Aug. 28–29, 2023; they are not a random sample. In preparation for the convening, which was held to harvest learnings on best practices and explore potential partnerships, the organizations were required to fill out an online survey. (See Appendix 1.) In addition, they were asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the author. (See Appendix 2.) Because most participants were invited due to their connection with a particular organization, four additional connections to separate organizations were discovered later: in one case during the survey and in three cases during the interview process. One organization had two interviewees. Thirteen of 16 organizations completed the survey. Leaders of all 16 organizations were interviewed.

Using 12 interviews conducted over July and August 2023, results of the online survey, additional internet searching, and conversations during a convening, this article explores how

---

[2] All the participating organizations are nonprofits except for Interfaith Photovoice, whose foci include environmental protection and climate policy, gun violence reduction, health and human services, mental health, public transportation, interfaith dialogue, and interfaith worship.

[3] The convening took place at and was funded by the Fetzer Institute. The author served as a consultant to the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University in contributing to the agenda for and co-facilitating the convening of participants, and in producing this article as a result. Other than approving their own quotations, the Kaufman Interfaith Institute did not control the content of this article.

MFOs embody strategies that navigate the contact/advocacy divide. As data collection took place with the promise of anonymity, all quotations have been approved by the interviewees or anonymized. The data are not otherwise available due to ethical concerns.

Partnership Data

An initial hypothesis for this study was that explicitly multifaith organizations would have formal members or partners. The findings were somewhat more complex.

Every organization was invited to share lists of members or partners, however they defined these terms. Definitions varied widely: Some organizations had formal, paid members; others listed only board members and their affiliations as "partners." Some had partner lists comprised of organizations that had signed on to a pledge, regularly collaborated on programming, or sat on advising councils.

Ten of the 16 organizations submitted a membership or partner list. Others reported that although many folks from their communities participated in programming, their organization did not have any formal partnership, membership, or collaboration with them. One organization declined to share a partner list because they considered their partners more like clients for certain types of services.

Shared Themes

The author reviewed all the data collected prior to the convening, marking shared themes that were then categorized as

- whether and how to tackle the deepest divisions internally or externally,
- challenges specific to working across lines of race and ethnicity,
- best practices for relationship building, and
- issues of organizational structure and strategy.

These four themes were then filtered through the active discussion of the convening itself, which was shaped by the additional context of research on nonprofit contact and advocacy strategies. The resulting five solutions plus the findings of the organizations' reach constitute the six solutions presented here.

Intergroup Contact Theory

Intergroup contact theory grounds bridging and dialogue strategies to address polarization, bias, and incidence of violence on the basis that "contact between individuals who belong to different groups can foster the development of more positive out-group attitudes" (Vezzali & Stathi, 2017, p. 1).

Contact interventions include formal one-to-one dialogues, public lectures about minorities, or shared meals and can be used in combination to address racial (Be the Bridge, 2023); religious (Multi-Faith Neighbors Network, 2024); or political divides (Braver Angels, 2024). Some strategies have secondary aims to incite participants to support policy changes. All contact strategies work by creating a sense of "in-groupness," which can be developed by common-identity programs that emphasize a single superordinate identity, or by dual-identity programs that encourage participants to maintain subgroup identities.

Intergroup contact shows mixed results. Positive contact in real-life and lab settings has reduced bias and violence on the part of advantaged community members toward the disadvantaged and increased willingness of the advantaged to use their resources for the benefit of the disadvantaged. But degrees of change in bias are dismally small (Saguy et al., 2017). A metastudy of 418 contact interventions found a long-term change in feeling "five times smaller than the positive shift in feelings from cool to warm observed toward gay individuals in the United States in the past two decades" (Paluck et al., 2021, p. 554). Worse, common-identity programming can be harmful through the "Irony of Harmony" effect, by undermining collective action, and by fostering the "principle-implementation gap."

- *"Irony of Harmony"* is an effect where disadvantaged people come to under-perceive bias against themselves, reducing their willingness to protest. One study showed that Black South Africans who had more positive contact with whites were less supportive of reparative policies (Saguy et al., 2017).

- *Collective action* requires a strong sense of subgroup identity and strict group boundaries (Saguy et al., 2017). The boundary-blurring effects of common-identity contact also reduce attachment to subgroups, thus actively undermining social justice organizing.

- *The "principle-implementation gap"* describes the failure of positive feelings to spur positive action. In one study, post-contact observation showed that advantaged group members had positive feelings about their disadvantaged counterparts but still behaved unfairly. Another study showed that advantaged participants perceived less bias and were less willing to stand up against it (Saguy et al., 2017). Common-identity programming made the resulting participant community less equitable, not more.

It is not all bad news. Contact programs that encourage participants to maintain strong subgroup and common identities — dual-identity contact — have more positive and fewer negative effects. One of the studies just mentioned also showed that dual-identity contact led the advantaged to perceive and try to correct bias against the disadvantaged (Saguy et al., 2017). Research in the tradition of embedded intergroup relations — that is, how identitarian subgroups function within organizations — supports these findings (van Knippenberg, 2008).

Still, the research on intergroup contact theory validates activists' distrust about bridging and pluralism projects; Edgar Villanueva (2023) is right in his pushback against the Statement on Philanthropic Pluralism: "If philanthropy chooses to prioritize pluralism to the detriment of equity, it aids and abets the oppression of those who have always struggled to be heard" (para. 11).

Advocacy and Activism Theory

Advocacy and activism serve as hubs for incredible creativity in shaping public discourse and concepts of community and politics even when unsuccessful at policy change (Atkinson, 2017). Even though they are different tactics, the terms activism and advocacy are used together in this article because they share similar goals. Both strategies are creatively transformative, empowering individuals to challenge existing norms and introduce new ideas or ways of coexisting (Harrebye, 2016). The fringes of social networks, where actors are less bound to traditional norms, hold substantial potential for driving social change more effectively than top-down policy (Centola, 2021).

For clarity, advocacy and activism are:

- democratizing strategies connecting large numbers of people to civic engagement and ways to disrupt existing concepts of community and politics (this article uses the shorthand "institutions and policies");

- necessary mediators of popular experience, knowledge, and ideas into other cultural discourses and politics;

- protected by the First Amendment rights of free speech, press, petition for redress of grievances, and assembly; and

- used by liberal, conservative, and libertarian movements (see, e.g., Braunstein, 2017).

Activist and advocacy organizations are often grounded in the prophetic tradition epitomized by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He emphasized that every person is made in the image of God and placed himself in the tradition of Old Testament prophets crying out against injustice. King's prophetic imagery still inspires members of nondominant groups, including people of color, women, the LGBTQIA+ community, and other marginalized peoples to "embrace a prophetic stance in order to sustain confidence in their humanity and right to be heard" (Braunstein, 2019, p. 7).

Unfortunately, progressive social change tends to spark conservative backlash. Famously coined to describe the white response to the civil rights movement, the concept has become "a constraint on modern liberalism," quashing new ideas for fear of the response (Glickman, 2020, para. 22). Yet backlash can also be studied as a measurable social response to change, which sociologist Ruth Braunstein (2021) has recently done based on reactions to the religious right's "brand of politicized conservative religion" (p. 2). The religious right spearheaded a hugely successful movement to maintain institutional and legal structures during historically significant demographic change. By the year 2000, it "was the most powerful interest group in the GOP" (Williams, 2010, p. 3).

Braunstein teases out two unintended outcomes — backlash — against the religious right's strategies. First, she names the mass disaffiliation from institutional religion as "broad" backlash. A second, "counter" backlash followed because

> the experience of being the object of political backlash appears to be … leading to purification processes that push weak adherents out and strengthen commitment to the ingroup among those who remain, as well as fewer internal checks on radical ideas. (Braunstein, 2021, pp. 21–22)

The result is a dramatically smaller and more radical religious right movement that has abandoned many of the theologically conservative values with which it began — hardly the success the movement at first envisioned (Bass, 2021; Nadeem, 2022).

Braunstein's work shifts "backlash" out of its typical context and attending value judgment. She shows that the dynamics of purification, strengthening in-group commitment, and resulting broad and narrow backlash have long-term, unintended effects worth attending to if long-term change is the goal. Progressive social movements, including those for abortion rights, norming LGBTQIA+ identities, and racial equity, are now having to once again contest policies and norms they thought had been settled (see, e.g., Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2023; Cox, 2022; Zaremberg et al., 2021). It is not a stretch to suggest that the recent losses and increasing stridency on the left are markers of similar backlash and counter-backlash effects.

The lesson for strategists of long-term success is not that prophetic voices should be silenced. On the contrary, a functioning democracy needs the creative ferment and multiple channels for engagement in politics and civil society that activism provides.

The lesson for strategists of long-term success is not that prophetic voices should be silenced. On the contrary, a functioning democracy needs the creative ferment and multiple channels for engagement in politics and civil society that activism provides. Building movements from the people up; designing with, not for; and centering marginalized voices are imperative to successful change (e.g., brown, 2017; Brown & Wyatt, 2010; Duong et al., 2023). The lesson is that successful movements for social change are almost certainly going to be accompanied by unintended social backlash effects, wherever they originate on the political spectrum. So, there must also be bridging movements, where creative ideas can be iterated and integrated across divides, relationships strengthened, and the practices of democratic negotiation and community maintained (Kleinfeld, 2023). That is where MFOs can lead.

Results and Discussion: Six Solutions From Multifaith Organizations

Multifaith organizations can join the best of both strategies and avoid their pitfalls. They are

Because their internal diversity is their strength, MFOs are less likely to be pulled into cycles of purification and radicalization that lead to backlash and reverses in policies. They are constantly navigating the deepest social divisions, practicing the skills and competencies of real democratic engagement in a pluralistic society.

intentionally internally diverse in theology, tradition, culture, and — often — political stance.

Because their internal diversity is their strength, MFOs are less likely to be pulled into cycles of purification and radicalization that lead to backlash and reverses in policies. They are constantly navigating the deepest social divisions, practicing the skills and competencies of real democratic engagement in a pluralistic society. They embody the five principles of social cohesion laid out in *A Funder's Guide to Building Social Cohesion* (Democracy Funders Network, 2022).

Multifaith organizations are themselves very diverse, their programs ranging from contact interventions to activism and advocacy. Many mix or marry these strategies in creative ways or serve different roles in a mutually beneficial ecosystem. Different types of MFOs reach across different types of differences, offering a variety of solutions. They model six solutions for a peaceful, just, and diverse democracy:

1. *Dual-Identity Contact:* Participants or partners are invited to maintain separate religious or cultural identities and to form a new common identity.

2. *Tolerating Disagreement:* Diverse viewpoints among partners are held in tension, allowing divergence on some issues to reach consensus on others.

3. *Shifting Constellations:* Partnerships can change flexibly issue by issue.

4. *Shattering Binaries:* Organizations with diverse members can abandon left/right binaries to create unique solutions.

5. *Local Organizations/Local Relationships:* Local relationships and cultural competencies are indispensable for change.

6. *Reach:* Organizations that partner with congregations have extensive numerical reach for their size and can cut across multiple types of diversity.

Dual-Identity Contact

Interfaith dialogue organizations typically work on the premise that participants should maintain their unique religious and cultural identities. Eboo Patel (2022), founder of Interfaith America and one of the best-recognized multifaith leaders, speaks about this as the pluralistic interfaith "potluck" where everyone brings their own, unique contribution. Importantly, he says, this is not a melting pot. Rather, religious believers are encouraged to maintain their own exclusive truth claims while they learn about and connect with people of other traditions. This is textbook dual-identity contact (Frisch et al., 2023; Saguy et al., 2017).

Seven of the 16 organizations interviewed for this article focused their efforts on contact more than advocacy.[4] Five of these volunteered that their programming encourages participants to maintain their established identities, rather than emphasizing superordinate ones. And Roman Williams, founder of Interfaith Photovoice, said his organization strives to create environments where "there is a plurality of views in the room. So, for example, a Muslim person showing a photo of prayer might lead to interesting conversations and learning across difference."

---

[4] Private discussions with the author: Barbara Lee VanHorssen, Momentum Center; Kyle Kooyers and Doug Kindschi, Kaufman Interfaith Institute; Betsy Aho, Interfaith Clergy Association of Greater Lansing; Tasneem Sultan, Interfaith Round Table of Washtenaw County; Sandra Bier, Mother's Trust Mother's Place; and Doug Mantha, My Oasis Center and Northern Michigan Interfaith Common Ground.

Although multifaith activist and advocacy organizations rarely provide programming for contact itself, contact is part of their very existence. Their strength is drawn from the diversity of voices they can gather, not their sheer numbers.

Tolerating Disagreement

Different faith communities align idiosyncratically around different issues. Further, minority faith communities do not necessarily align with progressive political positions. For example, the membership of an advocacy organization might include an Ismaili Muslim mosque, a Southern Baptist church, an AME church, a Reform synagogue, and a Jain temple. The theologies of this imagined group would align in different constellations around different social issues of gender, reproductive rights, racial justice, and so on, so this organization would have to constantly practice the democratic skills of listening, negotiation, and deliberation. This dynamic is a particular challenge for these organizations, but it is also by far their greatest strength and results in two solutions to the dilemma laid out above: skills to tolerate disagreement and manage shifting constellations of partners.

> *[T]he membership of an advocacy organization might include an Ismaili Muslim mosque, a Southern Baptist church, an AME church, a Reform synagogue, and a Jain temple. The theologies of this imagined group would align in different constellations around different social issues of gender, reproductive rights, racial justice, and so on, so this organization would have to constantly practice the democratic skills of listening, negotiation, and deliberation.*

The social dynamics of purification in left- and right-leaning movements for change push out in-group moderates and tie disparate policy positions together in all-or-nothing stances. On the left, for example, the all-or-nothing dynamic can be seen in how "tolerating difference" has come to signify unacceptably tolerating injustice. This drives purification in the movement by pushing out those who disagree on some issues. In contrast, MFOs necessitate some level of toleration of diversity of theology, community practices, and ideological stances. The strength of these organizations lies in their ability to muster divergent opinions toward a single position, demonstrating broad support for it. They differ in how far they lean into those tensions.

Broad-based organizations explicitly avoid taking positions on some of the most divisive issues, building actions on more universal concerns. Together West Michigan connects communities for policy change in mental health care, child care, housing, and immigrant/refugee well-being. This organization acknowledges there are issues they will never work on because, they say, "that would break apart the organization" and "there are things that we can do together that are important."[5] The avoidance of hot-button issues creates a level of tension within their

---

[5] Several organizations noted it was not domestic political issues that were most likely to break the cooperative work; instead, it was geopolitical disagreements over such issues as Israel and Palestine.

[T]hose organizations that explicitly acknowledge irreconcilable differences among their constituents can clearly identify those areas where they can empower collaboration for the common good, maintain broader support for their goals, and ensure longer-term success.

membership, but that tension is not seen as a negative. "We strive purposefully to occupy the both/and of policy and relationships," as TWM's lead organizer, Allison McCulley, put it. "There is tension when you work with real people who have real differences," she said. "But that's democracy at its best. And really, most of life happens in the middle — in the tension."

There is plenty of tension. Eight organizations interviewed volunteered that they get pulled toward bolder policy positions and programming by community partners or members.[6] This pull signifies levels of affective polarization in the community. As one interviewee stated simply: "As we've gotten more political in our messaging with a clearer power analysis, we've gotten a higher level of engagement."

Such tensions could contribute to the purification and radicalization of nonprofits and their movements. That in turn would narrow their power base, and though it might lead to greater short-term success, it would also be harder to maintain those wins over time. On the other hand, those organizations that explicitly acknowledge irreconcilable differences among their constituents can clearly identify those areas where they can empower collaboration for the common good, maintain broader support for their goals, and ensure longer-term success.

Shifting Constellations

A related theme is the need to constantly manage shifting constellations of partners. Many multifaith advocacy organizations hold a "partner where you can" outlook, which is a hallmark of the most successful strategies for long-term change. Rather than requiring an all-or-nothing connection, these organizations are flexible, hold disagreements in tension, and seek stable but significant progress.

Interfaith Action of Southwest Michigan holds a center-left platform of environment, migration, dignity and justice, peacemaking, and pluralistic democracy that is broad enough to attract interest from religious communities that do not fall neatly into either political camp, said team member Vicki Schroeder. To maintain those connections, the group allows its partners to opt out of actions that would violate their beliefs. The organization also maintains a board diverse in race and religion, ensuring a rigorous review process. Member congregations uncomfortable with some decisions often come along because their religious or racial identity is represented in the process.

The "partner where you can" attitude was also expressed by Michigan Interfaith Power and Light, which both helps individual congregations become more energy efficient and helps congregations engage in advocacy for affordable clean energy. In recent years, the group has moved toward more statewide advocacy efforts that are less palatable to theologically and socially conservative member congregations, creating some tension with these members. However, executive director Leah Wiste said the organization has maintained these relationships by continuing to support their moves toward energy-efficient buildings.

---

[5] In discussion with the author: Allison McCulley, Together West Michigan; Betsy Aho; Tasneem Sultan; Vicki Schroeder, Interfaith Action of SW Michigan; Leah Wiste, Michigan Interfaith Power & Light; Pat Stromsta, DOCC and ISAAC; and Doug Kindschi and Kyle Kooyers.

As one principle of broad-based community organizing goes, "there are no permanent enemies, and no permanent allies"; and this is exactly the kind of creative, goal-oriented bridge building recommended by polarization and political violence expert Rachel Kleinfeld (2023) as a buttress for democratic processes.

Shattering Binaries

Though demonstrably false, left/right binaries continue to shape common expectations about politics and communities (Montanaro, 2021; Stone, 2023). Many MFOs can join otherwise-unlikely partners in ways that creatively shatter these structures.

Some, for example, connect conservative Muslims and evangelical Christians over shared religious-freedom concerns (e.g., Uddin, 2021). The Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council (n.d.) addresses antisemitism and Islamophobia in the United States. In 2015, Utah's legislature passed an antidiscrimination bill protecting both LGBTQIA+ rights and religious freedom that was supported by a gay rights coalition and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Goodstein, 2015). The Black-led (&) organization connects racially diverse, theologically conservative Christians in efforts like the "whole life" campaign, which ties traditionally conservative anti-abortion rights advocacy with traditionally liberal advocacy on issues particularly relevant to women, such as wages, health care, and child care (AND Campaign, n.d.). All these organizations simply shatter current political binaries.

Cross-racial organizing can be particularly tricky, a point that Michigander interviewees raised repeatedly about their local contexts. Histories of structural racism and oppression and well-meaning white charity directed at Black and Indigenous neighbors have made communities of color wary of any partnerships with white-led or white-majority organizations.[7] Separately, some Black Christian communities also tend to theological conservatism on sex and gender issues. Differences there add an additional element of distrust. An interviewee who sought anonymity invited a contact from a neighboring Black church to a shared action on gun control but was turned down because the action was at a church with a gay pride flag, which made members of the invitee's church uncomfortable. This interviewee emphasized the effort her organization now invests to support action led by the Black community, too — a best practice for centering marginalized voices in organizing work.

Black conservative communities can sometimes partner more easily with other White conservative religious communities. Those partnerships can be fertile ground for building relationships across racial divides — ground that is otherwise hard to find. In the Greater Lansing area, for example, three associations connect local clergy. The Interfaith Clergy Association of Greater Lansing connects to a wider diversity of religious partners in an informal but politically and theologically liberal network, while Christians of Greater Lansing Network (2021) connects racially diverse Christians in a more formalized and more politically and theologically conservative organization. The third, Greater Lansing Clergy Forum, connects Black religious leaders. All three organizations cross different kinds of boundaries, each creating connective tissue across divisions that could pull communities apart.[8]

Local Organizations/Local Relationships

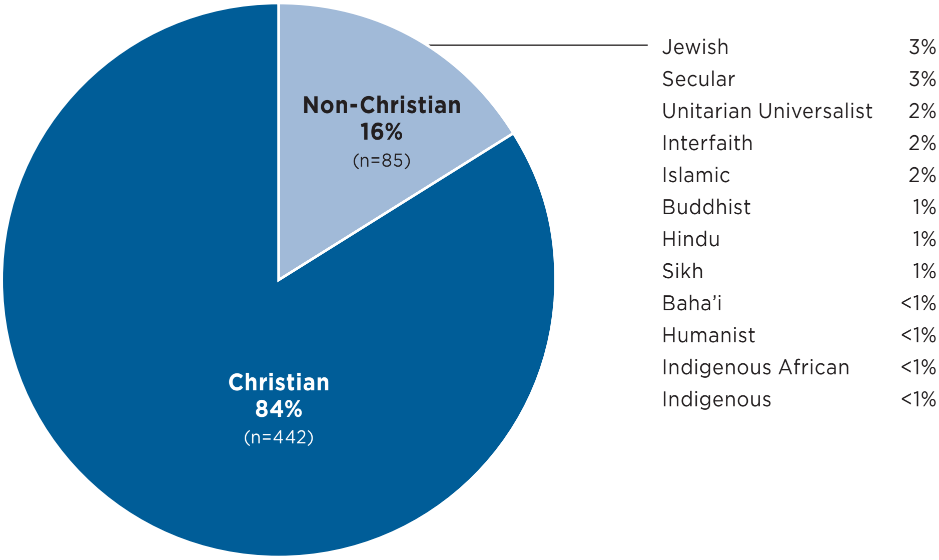
We all know that the most effective solutions to any problem are built by and with the end users, not for them, and that those processes require deep listening and trust (Brown & Wyatt, 2010). Multifaith organizations have extensive networks reaching deep into communities and can serve as the local connection to scale programs or change culture.

---

[7] In discussion with the author: Vicki Schroeder; Kyle Kooyers and Douglas Kindschi; Allison McCulley; Doug Mantha; and Pat Stromsta.

[8] Betsy Aho, in discussion with the author.

FIGURE 2 Pie Chart 1



For example, the coordinator for interreligious relations at the Reformed Church in America confirmed that denominational programs like hers cannot always reach into local congregations without strong local partners with cultural competencies. Her project works closely with churches across the country to connect them to their neighbors, especially ones from a different faith tradition, to build trust and peace. Churches of the same denomination in Iowa and New York, she said, are going to operate differently, so having real local relationships can make a big difference.

Relatedly, two leaders of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University discussed their long-term relationships with some of the more conservative Christian communities as part of their broader work of relationship building in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They believe their work has “kept the temperature down,” which is why Grand Rapids has not had the “pushback against minority communities, for example, against the building of mosques, that so many other conservative communities have had.”[9] On a more personal level, their work has led the congregations of local mosques, churches, and synagogues to build sustained relationships, and they have shown up for one another in moments of crisis when hate crimes have impacted their communities.

Reach

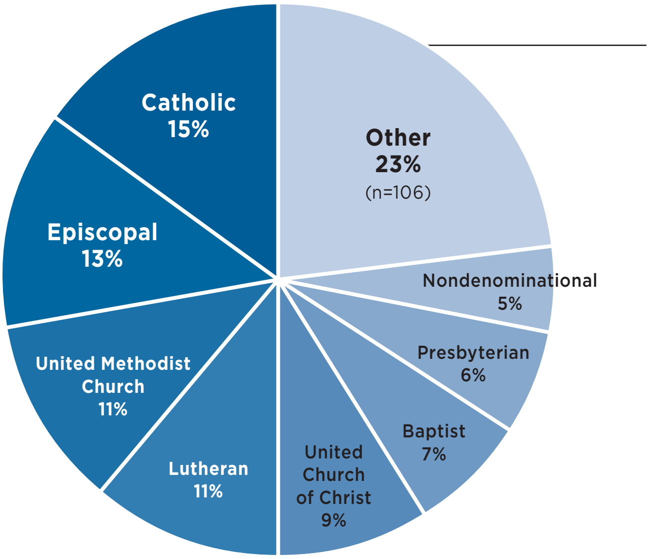
However the participants defined a partnership, multifaith organizations have an extensive reach due to their relationships with congregations and denominational institutions. Ten of the organizations interviewed had a total of 527 institutional partners, 491 of which are congregations, almost all in the state of Michigan. The average size of an American congregation in 2020 was 65, meaning that a rough estimate of numbers reached through partners would be 31,915 people (Earls, 2021). Several of these partner organizations have two or even three relationships with MFOs, making for a total of 574 partner relationships. (See Figure 2.)

These partnerships represent significant diversity across religious and ideological lines. Even

---

[9] Kyle Kooyers and Douglas Kindschi, in discussion with the author.

FIGURE 3 Pie Chart 2



Unknown	4%
Church of God in Christ	3%
Christian Reformed Church of North America	3%
Reformed Church in America	2%
Anabaptist	1%
Interdenominational	1%
Disciples of Christ	1%
Ecumenical	1%
African Methodist Episcopal	1%
Latter-day Saints	1%
Seventh-day Adventist	1%
Church of God	1%
Greek Orthodox	1%
Christian Science	<1%
Wesleyan Church	<1%
Church of Christ	<1%
Unitarian Universalist	<1%
Evangelical Covenant	<1%

though 83.9% of all partner organizations and 86.4% of the congregations are Christian, they are more diverse than the state as a whole. In comparison, 96.52% of congregations in Michigan were Christian in 2020 (Association of Religion Data Archives, 2024). The difference shows how MFOs have a greater depth of diversity than the general population — reaching communities of color, immigrants, and people of minority faiths.

Identifying the majority ethnicity of every partner congregation is outside the scope of this article. However, studies of minority ethnic and racial communities broadly show that they tend to score higher on personal religiosity and to have higher levels of trust in faith-based community organizations (Wood & Fulton, 2015). Faith-based community organizations, therefore, give better opportunities to engage with these populations than secular external organizations.

Multifaith organizations engage with multiple partnerships and their connected populations at once, offering another way to center marginalized communities.

There is also great ideological diversity in this group, best seen by breaking out the Christian organizations by denomination.[10] (See Figure 3.) For example, the Latter-day Saints, Christian Reformed Church in North America, and Church of God in Christ all hold conservative theologies on sex and gender, while denominations like the Episcopal Church and United Church of Christ hold progressive theologies on those issues.

For funders and issue-based community organizations, partnering with MFOs can offer relationships with and insights into an unusually wide swath of society.

---

[10] There are limits here. This article could not identify the subdenominational affiliation of all the Lutheran churches as Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or Missouri Synod, which hold widely divergent views on issues of sex and gender. Terms like "nondenominational" obscure extreme difference as well.

Conclusion

The pushback against the pluralism statement seemed to offer two mutually exclusive alternatives: make friends and forgive grievances, or get no justice, give no peace.

This is a false dichotomy.

Complex social problems require the creative ferment of activist strategies. Forcing creatives whose work is imagining new paradigms to do the bridging work themselves put limits on their creativity. And activists and advocates are for good reason often skeptical of bridging work — participation here actively undermines their success.

Yet relying only on activist strategies is detrimental in the long run, too. With a nearly 50% split among likely voters and with so many voters having opted out, who and what wins in politics will swing — upsetting even long-established decisions like Roe v. Wade. Without attention to long-term bridging strategies, the creative ideas produced by activists are unlikely to find their way into acceptance across political divides.

Multifaith organizations offer a way out of this dilemma as both models and potential partners for funders. They can embody both creativity and bridging. They can revel in prophetic traditions of justice. They can get out of existing binaries and find productive partnerships that create new ways of being together. They can be strong amplifiers for minoritized voices. They can show how to navigate the beautiful and dangerous edges of the religiously, racially, and culturally diverse society we inhabit. What a gift! In addition to taking up the habits embodied by these organizations, how can grantmakers support them?

- Be willing to partner with multifaith and faith-based organizations where goals align (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, 2023). Religious ideas and communities affect every part of our society. Successful strategists will have to attend to that reality.

- Support both the creative ferment of activist and advocacy strategies and bridging and contact work. These strategies exist together in innately pluralistic organizations. But they can also be at odds between organizations; be prepared to hold them in tension in a portfolio.

- Realize that every nonprofit, and especially multifaith nonprofits embodying diversity, are pulled internally and externally by the dynamics of affective polarization and purification. Do not add to that pressure by pushing for purity in partners and for bold politics not organic to the communities they serve.

- If a multifaith organization is having the impact you seek, trust their relationships with their partners even if some of the partners among the group lie outside your immediate comfort zone. If you have specific concerns, voice them going in to get clear on expectations (Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, 2023; Ralph, 2021).

- Consider the dynamics of affective polarization and the purification of social movements and their potential long-term effects on the outcomes you seek.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Fetzer Institute through a collaboration with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

References

AND Campaign. (n.d.). *About (&)*. Retrieved June 15, 2020, from https://andcampaign.org/

Association of Religion Data Archives. (2024). *Generate a religion demographics report for your zip code*. www.theARDA.com

Atkinson, J. D. (2017). *Journey into social activism: Qualitative approaches*. Fordham University Press.

Bass, D. B. (2021, July 11). America is no longer as evangelical as it was — and here's why. *CNN*. https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/10/opinions/american-evangelicals-protestantism-butler-bass/index.html

Be the Bridge. (2024). *About us*. https://bethebridge.com/about

Braunstein, R. (2017). *Prophets and patriots: Faith in democracy across the political divide*. University of California Press.

Braunstein, R. (2019). Beyond the dogmatic believer: Religious conviction across the American political divide. In R. Braunstein (Ed.), *Religion, humility, and democracy in a divided America* (Vol. 36, pp. 1–22). Emerald.

Braunstein, R. (2021). A theory of political backlash: Assessing the religious right's effects on the religious field. *Sociology of Religion, 83*(3), 293–323. https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srab050

Braver Angels. (2024). *Fed up with today's politics? There is a better way*. https://braverangels.org/

brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.

Brown, T., & Wyatt, J. (2010, Winter). Design thinking for social innovation. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/design_thinking_for_social_innovation

Centola, D. (2021). *Change: The power in the periphery to make big things happen — library edition*. Blackstone.

Christians of Greater Lansing Network. (2021). *Our story*. Retrieved September 18, 2023, from https://www.icogl.com/check-us-out

Cox, A. M. (2022, October 24). Before Roe, faith leaders helped Texans get abortions. Will they again? *Texas Monthly*. https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/faith-leaders-helping-texans-get-abortions/

Democracy Funders Network. (2022). *A funder's guide to building social cohesion*. https://www.democracyfundersnetwork.org/resources/2022/8/23/a-funders-guide-to-building-social-cohesion

Dill, H. T., Enright, K., Gill, S., Hooks, B., Walker, D., & Westhoff, E. (2023, April 13). We disagree on many things, but speak with one voice in support of philanthropic pluralism. *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. https://www.philanthropy.com/article/we-disagree-on-many-things-but-we-speak-with-one-voice-in-support-of-philanthropic-pluralism

Duong, M. T., Mehl, C., & Jany, C. (2023). *Building bridges in the context of inequality*. Constructive Dialogue Institute & Aspen Institute. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/building-bridges-in-the-context-of-inequality/#:~:text=In%20response%20to%20rising%20polarization,dialogue%20across%20lines%20of%20difference

Earls, A. (2021, October 20). *Small churches continue growing — but in number, not size*. Lifeway Research. https://research.lifeway.com/2021/10/20/small-churches-continue-growing-but-in-number-not-size/

Eckhart Queenan, J., Grunert, P., & Murphy, D. (2021). *Elevating the role of faith-inspired impact in the social sector*. Bridgespan Group. https://www.bridgespan.org/insights/library/philanthropy/role-of-faith-inspired-impact-in-the-social-sector

Frisch, L. K., Sebben, S., Liekefett, L., Shnabel, N., Visintin, E. P., Ullrich, J., et al. (2023). Support for social change among members of advantaged groups: The role of a dual identity representation and accepting intergroup contact. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 49*(7), 1000–1013. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672221086380

Glickman, L. (2020, May 21). White backlash is nothing new: How white backlash controls American progress. *Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/white-backlash-nothing-new/611914/

Goodstein, L. (2015, March 12). Utah passes antidiscrimination bill backed by Mormon leaders. *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/12/us/politics/utah-passes-antidiscrimination-bill-backed-by-mormon-leaders.html

Harrebye, S. F. (2016). *Social change and creative activism in the 21st century: The mirror effect*. Springer.

Idriss, S., & Kleinfeld, R. (2023, June 15). No one is right in the debate for and against philanthropic pluralism. *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. https://www.philanthropy.com/article/no-one-is-right-in-the-debate-for-and-against-philanthropic-pluralism

Inclusive America Project, Public Religion Research Institute, & Lake Institute on Faith & Giving. (2020). *Powering pluralism: Analyzing the current philanthropic landscape*. Aspen Institute. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/IAP_Lake_PRRI_Memo_May_2020.pdf

Kleinfeld, R. (2018). *A savage order: How the world's deadliest countries can forge a path to security*. Pantheon.

Kleinfeld, R. (2023, September 5). *Polarization, democracy, and political violence in the United States: What the research says.* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/09/05/polarization-democracy-and-political-violence-in-united-states-what-research-says-pub-90457

Le, V. (2023, April 20). No, not all philanthropic views are good, and many don't deserve our respect. *Chronicle of Philanthropy.* https://www.philanthropy.com/article/no-not-all-philanthropic-views-are-good-and-many-dont-deserve-our-respect

Masters, S. B. (2022, March 31). Philanthropy needs to own up to its role in fueling polarization. *Chronicle of Philanthropy.* https://www.philanthropy.com/article/philanthropy-needs-to-own-up-to-its-role-in-fueling-polarization

Montanaro, D. (2021, November 9). Feel like you don't fit in either political party? Here's why. *NPR.* https://www.npr.org/2021/11/09/1053929419/feel-like-you-dont-fit-in-either-political-party-heres-why

Multi-Faith Neighbors Network. (2024). *Building resilient communities: Multi-faith relationships change everything.* https://mfnn.org/

Muslim-Jewish Advisory Council. (n.d.). *What we stand for.* Retrieved December 18, 2023, from https://www.muslimjewishadvocacy.org

Nadeem, R. (2022, September 13). *How U.S. religious composition has changed in recent decades.* Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/

Paluck, E. L., Porat, R., Clark, C. S., & Green, D. P. (2021). Prejudice reduction: Progress and challenges. *Annual Review of Psychology, 72*(1), 533–560. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-071620-030619

Patel, E. (2022, May 6). *"We need to build" excerpt.* Interfaith America. https://www.interfaithamerica.org/article/america-the-peoples-potluck/

Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement. (2023). *A funding guide for faith and democracy.* https://form.jotform.com/PACEproject/faithguide

Ralph, A. K. (2021). *But what if they preach: A guide for funding faith-inspired grantees with boundaries and integrity.* Aspen Institute.

Saguy, T., Shchori-Eyal, N., Hasan-Aslih, S., Sobol, D., & Dovidio, J. F. (2017). The irony of harmony: Past and new developments. In L. Vezzali & S. Stathi (Eds.), *Intergroup contact theory: Recent developments and future directions* (pp. 53–71). Routledge.

Stone, D. F. (2023, April 6). Your political rivals aren't as bad as you think — here's how misunderstandings amplify hostility. *The Conversation.* http://theconversation.com/your-political-rivals-arent-as-bad-as-you-think-heres-how-misunderstandings-amplify-hostility-199574

Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College, 600 U.S. _____ (2023). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf

Uddin, A. T. (2021). *The politics of vulnerability.* Pegasus Books. https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Politics-of-Vulnerability/Asma-T-Uddin/9781643136622

van Knippenberg, D. (2008). Intergroup relations in organizations. In M. A. West, D. Tjosvold, & K. G. Smith (Eds.), *International handbook of organizational teamwork and cooperative working* (pp. 381–400). Wiley.

Vezzali, L., & Stathi, S. (2017). The present and the future of the contact hypothesis, and the need for integrating research fields. In L. Vezzali & S. Stathi (Eds.), *Intergroup contact theory: Recent developments and future directions* (pp. 1–7). Routledge.

Villanueva, E. (2023, April 26). Debunking the myth of philanthropic pluralism. *Chronicle of Philanthropy.* https://www.philanthropy.com/blogs/letters-to-the-editor/debunking-the-myth-of-philanthropic-pluralism

Williams, D. K. (2010). *God's own party: The making of the Christian right.* Oxford University Press. https://justicefunders.org/thought-leadership/just-transition-for-philanthropy/

Wood, R. L., & Fulton, B. R. (2015). *A shared future: Faith-based organizing for racial equity and ethical democracy.* University of Chicago Press.

Zaremberg, G., Tabbush, C., & Friedman, E. J. (2021). Feminism(s) and anti-gender backlash: Lessons from Latin America. *International Feminist Journal of Politics, 23*(4), 527–534. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1956093

Allison K. Ralph. Ph.D., *is founder and principal of Cohesion Strategy LLC. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Allison K. Ralph at allison@cohesionstrategy.com.*

APPENDIX 1 Survey

“Filling out this survey will help us tailor the programming to our participants and more clearly reflect back any shared challenges. Questions with asterisks are required.

1. Organization name *
2. Your Name*
3. Your role*
4. Official Mission Statement (short answer)
5. Official Vision Statement (short answer)
6. Official Values Statement (short answer)
7. Locality or area of operation/concern (short answer) *
8. How does your organization describe its cross-religious work? (check all that apply): *
    a. Interfaith
    b. Multifaith
    c. Bridge-building
    d. Interreligious
    e. Ecumenical
    f. Other (fill in the blank)
9. Number of paid staff? (number field) *
10. Number of volunteers, monthly, on average? (number field)
11. How many organizations show up to your programming, on average? (number field)
12. How many people show up to your programming, on average? (number field)
13. Website *

APPENDIX 2 Interview

Interviews were completed after participants had filled out the survey. One-on-one interviews with the author were semistructured and based on the following question format. For those interviewees who represented more than one organization, questions were repeated for each.

1. Are your organizational mission, vision, or values changing?
2. Are there members/partners your organization that have been unsuccessful in forging alliances?
3. On effectiveness:
    a. What would you say your wins or success stories are?
    b. How do you measure success?
    c. What have you yet to achieve?
4. Relatedly, what are your organization's central challenges?
5. How do you manage (or struggle to manage) any member misalignment on theological and social issues?
6. Does your organization have interest in joining a statewide multifaith organization and, if so, what should its purpose(s) be?