Interfaith Dinner Dialogues:
Increasing Positive Peace through Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

While Fargo, North Dakota, is predominately Christian and Caucasian, it is also home to many religious and ethnic minorities. Over the last five years the Center for Interfaith Projects (CIP) has been attempting to build bridges between the diverse belief and cultural systems found within the wider community through organizing programs and events intended to highlight diverse thoughts and beliefs on various subjects through panel discussions or speaker presentation. In an attempt to develop a program that provides space for participants to engage with one another, CIP and I have developed and carried out an initial phase of Interfaith Dinner Dialogues (IDDs)—mindful, spiritual dialogues intended to provide safe space for people of various faith traditions to explore key beliefs about specific topics.

This report will outline the demographic and background information regarding Fargo, the research drawn from when developing the IDDs, and the results of the endeavor. Preliminary results from a two-month pilot of this program indicate that both religious literacy and interfaith engagement increase as a result of interfaith dialogue. What’s more, results also indicate that interfaith dialogue is a method of building positive peace in a community experiencing negative peace.

In moving forward, it will be helpful for further research to be done to study the long-term implications of such a program with regard to religious literacy and positive peace, and whether such a program would achieve similar results in communities with different demographics.
Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Background and Purpose

A community experiencing negative peace runs the risk of eventually becoming a place where tensions give rise to violent conflicts if it does not identify and carry out a process of peacebuilding to transition to positive peace. With growing religious and ethnic diversity due to migration, Fargo, North Dakota, is one such community experiencing negative peace—an absence of direct violence, isolated communities, structural oppression such as poverty, application of curative measures to social problems, etc. In an effort to address this growing challenge, the Center for Interfaith Projects (CIP) and I designed and implemented an initial phase of a process intended 1) to increase religious literacy and improve interfaith relations among the greater Fargo community—ultimately beginning a process of transitioning from negative to positive peace and 2) to support CIP in developing its capacity to identify and carry out increasingly complex processes intended to advance positive peace in the wider community.

Design Selected

CIP and I designed and implemented a series of Interfaith Dinner Dialogues (IDDs)—a space where representation from twelve different religious communities (including members of refugee communities and Atheists/Humanists) could come together for two evenings of conversation, hospitality, and fellowship to explore their own personal and spiritual journey, as well as their conception and vision of peace and their role in advancing such a vision. This initial phase of the process spanned two months, giving rise to insights that then contributed to the next phase of the endeavor. Data from the first phase of the process was collected through qualitative and quantitative analysis using questionnaires and interviews.

Results

At the conclusion of this initial phase the data suggested that 1) religious literacy and interfaith relations improved after only two evenings of interfaith dialogue, indicating that interfaith dialogue is a positive peacebuilding technique (a preventative tool) and 2) CIP was able to build its appreciation and capacity for systematic action with regard to carrying out increasingly complex processes intended to advance positive peace in the wider community.
Further Research

For anyone who attempts to replicate this process, it will be important to consider the demographics (religious and ethnic), current level of interfaith engagement, and what, if any, organizations are already working to support interfaith collaboration in the locality of interest. Furthermore, additional research is needed to indicate the long-term implications of the process of interfaith dialogue as a positive peacebuilding technique, as well as what models of interfaith dialogue are the most effective at advancing the peacebuilding process.
Chapter I: Introduction

Identify the Issue

There are various violent conflicts taking place throughout the world, many of which include some aspect of religious motivation.¹ While such conflicts are an important area of action and research, this paper will explore the implications of interfaith dialogue in areas of moderate ethnic and religious diversity, experiencing negative peace—an absence of direct violence, isolated communities, structural oppression such as poverty, application of curative measures to social problems, etc.² Fargo, North Dakota, is one such community in the Upper Midwest of the United States. At first glance it is a fairly homogenous community—largely Caucasian and Christian. While it is true that greater than nine out of ten people in the state of North Dakota identify as Christian, there is religious diversity found in the margins of society—specifically among the immigrant and refugee communities.³

The various religious groups within the Fargo area tend to be isolated—exhibiting negative peace—living in relatively closed communities. The negative peace found in Fargo is heightened by a lack of religious literacy. Religious literacy is commonly understood as a capacity to understand the basic principles, symbols, narratives, key terms, and characters of diverse religious traditions.⁴ While it is nearly impossible to become literate in every religion, it is possible to increase our understanding of multiple religious traditions to the point where one does not feel threatened, but rather feels connected to adherents of religions different from one’s own.⁵ A collective increase in a community’s ability to comprehend the general aspects of diverse traditions contributes to positive peace—societal integration, application of preventative

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⁵ Ibid., 12.
measures toward social problems, etc—improving the quality of relationships found in a given environment—whether a neighborhood, village, city, or nation.6

**Importance of the Project**

While some may not see negative peace as a pressing issue worthy of research, this paper posits that if a community experiencing negative peace does not identify and carry out a process of peacebuilding to transition to positive peace it runs the risk of eventually becoming a place where tensions give rise to violent conflicts.7 Furthermore, negative peace breeds conflict and positive peace breeds peace, thus positive peace is the best protection with regard to the potential threat of violent conflicts.8

There are various ways in which to work toward positive peace. This paper will explore the role of interfaith engagement, specifically dialogue, in doing so. Interfaith relations are swiftly becoming a recognized factor in maintaining peaceful societies.9 As this paper will illustrate, it is clear that increased engagement between religious groups (including Atheists and Humanists) is important if isolated faith-based communities are to give rise to a unified community, capable of addressing the challenges of our time. In an attempt to begin to transcend perceived boundaries between diverse ethnic and religious groups, the Center for Interfaith Projects (CIP) and I developed, coordinated, and carried out a pilot phase of Interfaith Dinner Dialogues (IDD)—mindful, spiritual dialogues intended to provide safe space for people of various faith traditions to explore key beliefs about specific topics.

The aim of this endeavor is to build trust and foster meaningful relationships across perceived boundaries so that greater interfaith collaboration is possible. This process will span two months, giving rise to insights which will then contribute to the next phase of the endeavor—which will extend beyond the scope of this Capstone Project. This is important because as the world continues to become smaller—as in Fargo, North Dakota, where various immigrant and refugee communities continue to settle—the challenges the world collectively

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7 Grewal, “John Galtung,” 5.
8 Ibid.
faces will become more and more apparent and unavoidable. Working together to address such challenges is a necessity if sustainable progress is to occur at the level of the community.

Project Purpose or Goal

The purpose of this endeavor is two-fold. It is 1) to increase religious literacy and improve interfaith relations among the greater Fargo community—ultimately beginning a process of transitioning from negative to positive peace and 2) to support the Center for Interfaith Projects (CIP) in developing its capacity to identify and carry out increasingly complex process intended to advance positive peace in the wider community. By engaging in interfaith dialogue individuals, who ordinarily would rarely encounter each other, are able to learn from each other’s religious experiences and traditions. Such engagement increases the likelihood that both religious literacy and interfaith relations improve over time, thus contributing to the shift from negative to positive peace. Furthermore, through organizing and engaging in this process CIP will gain experience in and capacity for carrying out a short-term process intended to continue on after the duration of this Capstone Project.

10 Office of Refugee Resettlement, Fiscal Year 2014.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

In designing the Interfaith Dinner Dialogues for Fargo, North Dakota, it was crucial to have a clear understanding of the current research on religious literacy, interfaith dialogue, and peacebuilding, as well as any research regarding interfaith dialogue case studies. While there are some case studies regarding interfaith dialogue as a peacebuilding endeavor in parts of Africa, there is little, if any, research available regarding interfaith dialogues in the U.S.

To begin, this paper will briefly explore the role of religion in civic engagement at the international and grassroots levels of society. This will lead into the importance of religious literacy in civic engagement and a review of the religious landscape of the U.S. and of Fargo, North Dakota. Next, this paper will explore the literature on dialogue and interfaith dialogue, and then review the literature on peacebuilding, focusing specifically on grassroots level initiatives related to interfaith dialogue as a peacebuilding endeavor. This paper will close with a review of two case studies related to interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding in Africa, as well as a review of one model of interfaith dialogue that originated in the United States.

Civic Engagement

Many Americans rely on religious reason and belief when engaging in public and political issues. As such, the “naked public square” as become “clothed with religion”. Prothero argues that in order for citizens to be active participants in civic life—social, political, and economic spheres—then religion must be accepted as not only important to have a general understanding of, but deeply relevant in all strata of social engagement. Banchoff and Suwarno argue that not only is it important to have a general understanding of religion to engage in the public sphere, but it is vital that such an understanding be derived from active engagement with diverse religious traditions. Furthermore, the United States Institute for Peace (USIP) concluded that respect for religious diversity and religious freedom are essential elements of a

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14 Prothero, Religious Literacy, 6.
15 Ibid., 7.
16 Ibid., 17.
successful democracy, stating that those who feel respected “are more likely to have a stake in the success of their country and their society”.

When people from different belief systems engage with each other—specifically in dialogue—they generally seek to build understanding through sharing differences and commonalities between them. However, this exchange is not the type of political exchange the public sphere is use to—that of pursuing interests, building networks, and struggling to get ahead. What’s more, interreligious or interfaith dialogue is becoming a significant aspect of not only local and grassroots engagement, but also of national and international affairs—although it is often overlooked as a major contributor to the resolution of conflicts at a national and international level, not to mention at the local level of society. The reason for the lack of attention to the importance of religion in the public sphere is that most people are unaware that the public sphere has become an extension of the (religiously) dominate group’s private life; thus, it is imperative that interfaith dialogue become an increasingly significant aspect of the public sphere so that space is continually made for people of diverse belief systems to engage with one another contributing to grassroots peacebuilding efforts—even where conflict is not necessarily visible to the masses.

**Religious Literacy**

Prothero claims that in order to be “truly educated” one must know something about the world’s religions. Essentially, in order to be able to actually discuss the world’s religious traditions to any degree, it is important to have some basic, shared vocabulary—to be religiously literate. Religious literacy, generally speaking, refers to one’s ability to comprehend and use in daily life—both public and private—the basic concepts found in diverse religious traditions—including key terms, images, symbols, doctrines, teachings, practices, sayings, characters, heroes, themes, metaphors, narratives, and stories. Regarding the importance of religious

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20 Ibid., 208.
23 Ibid., 5.
literacy, the USIP determined that it is important for interfaith literacy programs to be developed so that, collectively, US citizens can deepen their understanding of each other.25 Diving a bit deeper, Abu-Nimer states that as religious values, behaviors, and norms become a conscious component of the interactions between people and groups, those religious traditions help to shape a common world view and value system—thus contributing to more peaceful relations among citizens.26

It is important to note that religious literacy is not merely memorizing and regurgitating religious dogma or traditions; rather, it is the laying of a foundation for interfaith engagement that both respects and upholds the diversity of belief and practice found within one’s community and world.27 Further, while one cannot be completely literate in every religion, it is possible to develop interreligious literacy.28 It is interreligious literacy that this paper is most concerned with. To better understand what such an endeavor would entail in the United States, it is important to first explore the religious landscape of the United States.

Religious Landscape

National and Regional Religious Landscape

2010 Census reports indicate that while the U.S. does not have an official language, English is the official language in 31 of the 50 states.29 English is spoken by 79.2% of the population, Spanish by 12.9% of the population, and other languages by 8% of the population.30 Furthermore, while unemployment rates are at 6.2% nationwide, 15.1% of the population lives below the poverty line—this is a higher rate than countries like Vietnam (11.3%), South Korea (14.6%), Sweden (14%), and Pakistan (12.4%).31

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27 Prothero, Religious Literacy, 17–18.
28 Ibid., 15.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
With an approximate population of 310,232,863,\textsuperscript{32} a life expectancy of 79.6,\textsuperscript{33} and a gross national per capita income of $47,094--$54,600,\textsuperscript{34} the United States is a democratic country that protects the rights of its citizens—including the right to religious freedom. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”.\textsuperscript{36} Thus, citizens of the United States are generally free to practice their religious traditions without government oversight or intervention. While each region of the United States is diverse in climate, annual income, ethnic backgrounds, and religious traditions, the central region of the country is understood to most closely resemble the “overall religious makeup of the general population”.\textsuperscript{37} Furthermore, within the state of North Dakota, the unemployment rate is 2.4%, with 8.4% of the state’s population living below the poverty line; the population is approximately 12,880,580, there is a life expectancy of 79.9, and the average income is $35,584.\textsuperscript{38}

President Barack Obama has stated that “History shows that nations that uphold the rights of their people—including the freedom of religion—are ultimately more just and more peaceful and more successful. Nations that do not uphold these rights sow the bitter seeds of instability and violence and extremism”.\textsuperscript{39} It may be worth noting that the U.S. government monitors the violations of other countries with regard to the exercise of religious freedom.\textsuperscript{40}

There are upwards of 236 diverse faith groups within the United States.\textsuperscript{41} Christianity is the largest religious tradition within the U.S. borders, followed by somewhere between 70.6\%\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Central Intelligence Agency, \emph{The World Factbook}.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
and 80.1%\textsuperscript{43} of the population. Islam is identified as being followed by somewhere between .9%\textsuperscript{44} and 1.3%\textsuperscript{45} of the population, and Judaism is identified as being followed by roughly 1.7% of the population.\textsuperscript{46} Unaffiliated individuals make up 16.4% of the population,\textsuperscript{47} with agnostics at 13.5% and atheists at .4%.\textsuperscript{48} Buddhism is followed by roughly 1.3% and Hinduism by roughly .5% of the population.\textsuperscript{49}

The graphs on the following pages illustrate the religious makeup of the global population, as well as that of the United States. It is clear from the comparison that while the U.S. is religiously diverse, it is not as diverse as the global populace.\textsuperscript{50} Many sources attribute the claim of religious diversity within the U.S. to the multitude of denominations within Christianity, including evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and mainline Protestant.\textsuperscript{51}

The religious makeup of the Midwest—the central region of the United States—most resembles that of the national makeup\textsuperscript{52} with 26% affiliated with evangelical Protestantism, 24% affiliated with Catholicism, 22% affiliated with mainline Protestantism, 16% unaffiliated, and 12% affiliated with other religious traditions.\textsuperscript{53}

Furthermore, while Christianity has the most adherents in each of the 50 states, within each state the second-largest religious traditions are Islam (20 states), Judaism (15 states), Buddhism (13 states), Hinduism (2 states), and the Bahá’í Faith (1 state).\textsuperscript{54}

**Local Religious Landscape**

The population of Fargo, North Dakota, has continued to rapidly increase over the last fifty years. With double digit population growth every decade, Fargo’s growth has been double


\textsuperscript{45}Association of Religious Data Archives, “Adherents”.

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47}Pew Research Center, “Table: Religious Diversity”.

\textsuperscript{48}Association of Religious Data Archives, “Adherents”.

\textsuperscript{49}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50}Prothero, *Religious Literacy*, 16.

\textsuperscript{51}The United States of America Embassy, “The Demographics of Faith”; Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”.

\textsuperscript{52}The United States of America Embassy, “The Demographics of Faith”.

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54}Reboot Illinois, “What Are the Most Common Religions”.

the national rate between 1980 and 2000—jumping from 61,383 in 1980 to 90,599 in 2000.\textsuperscript{55} Adults, age 20–24, make up the largest age group in Fargo, with a population of 13,500 in 2000.\textsuperscript{56} As of 2000 17.5\% of the population was enrolled at University (13,086 people). One in three Fargo residents has a bachelor’s degree, increasing to 34.4\% in 2000 from 30.2\% in 1990.\textsuperscript{57}

Within Fargo itself it is difficult to identify the specific religious groups and their adherents as the City of Fargo does not keep statistics on religious affiliation.\textsuperscript{58} With that said, there are a diversity of Christian denominations—including Mormon, Evangelical, Catholic, and Protestant denominations—as well as Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, Bahá’í, Yazidi, Native American, Jewish, and Humanist communities within the Fargo area. This list is by no means exhaustive. One estimate indicated that there are around 3,000 Muslims, 28 Yazidis, 30 Bahá’ís, 33 Jewish families, and 300 Hindu families.\textsuperscript{59} While there are not clear numbers to indicate the percentages of affiliation with each tradition, there is representation, although somewhat small, from minority traditions.

While this section explores religious diversity within the U.S., the Midwest, and Fargo, North Dakota, it is important to note that there are other identity markers beyond religious tradition that contribute to diversity; the next section will explore such identity markers and their relationship to religion.

\textsuperscript{56} “Age,” City of Fargo, accessed April 29, 2016, https://www.cityoffargo.com/attachments/d2c29b71-bd49-42e8-8584-af112774a7ab/About_Age.pdf.
\textsuperscript{58} Cultural Diversity Resources Representative, email message to author, April 5, 2016.
\textsuperscript{59} Data collected from Questionnaire 3 (Appendix G), as indicated by participants from such affiliated groups.
Data collected from Association of Religious Data Archives, “Adherents”.

Ibid.
Data collected from Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”.

Reboot Illinois, “What Are the Most Common Religions”.

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Interfaith Dinner Dialogues

Christian Affiliation within the United States

- Evangelical Protestant (25.4%)
- Unaffiliated (22.8%)
- Catholic (20.8%)
- Mainline Protestant (14.7%)
- Non-Christian faiths (5.9%)

Largest Non-Christian Group Varies by Region

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Ethnicity and Religion

Since 2009 nearly 5,000 refugees from 40 countries—including Bosnia (36%), Vietnam (15%), Sudan (9%), Kurdistan (region of Iraq) (8%), and Somalia (7%)—have resettled in Fargo. Immigrant communities, not specifically refugee communities—including those from India (8%), China (4%), Germany (4%), Korea (3%), Bangladesh (2%), and Mexico (2%)—have also made Fargo their home. The influx of immigrants—increasing from 1,474 in 1990 to 3,587 in 2000—has accounted for 12% of Fargo’s population growth since 1990. Above, it was indicated that 34.4% of the Fargo population has a bachelor’s degree (as of 2000), of that percentage 61% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 35% are Caucasian, 19% are Hispanic or Latino, 8% are Native American, and 33% are other ethnicities. Furthermore, the poverty rate for non-whites is much higher than for whites—10.6% for whites, 18.8% for Hispanics/Latinos, 21.9% for Asians, 35.8% for Native Americans, 38.9% for Africans/African Americans, and 21.6% for other ethnicities (it should be noted that first generation immigrants make up the majority of Fargo’s African American population). Many of these immigrant communities also practice diverse religious traditions—Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and others—thus contributing to the diversity of Fargo in multiple ways—ethnicity, education, economy, and religious affiliation. What’s more, certain aspects of diversity are also associated with identity. Prothero explains that in the 21st century, religion is “emerging alongside race … and ethnicity as one of the key identity markers”. This is significant because ethnic and religious identities can be conflated, or even reinforce one another, especially in communities with immigrants and refugee populations, such as Fargo, North Dakota. It is often the case that migration populations are vulnerable in many ways—“insecurity, exploitation, joblessness, uprootedness, political uncertainty and humiliating treatment”. Furthermore, levels of

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65 “Education,” City of Fargo.
67 Data collected from Questionnaire 1, 2, and 3 (Appendix E, F, and G), as indicated by participants from such affiliated groups.
68 Prothero, Religious Literacy, 7.
suspicion and tension increase where racial differences are reinforced by religious differences.\textsuperscript{71} When this happens religious identities can become caught up in ethnic conflicts, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{72} Even without overt conflict a relatively peaceful community can experience tension in the form of isolation and structural violence (e.g. poverty, prejudice)—i.e. negative peace.\textsuperscript{73}

Dialogue can be a critical component in dissolving tensions and transcending conflicts as it allows individuals, who may be largely unaware of any privilege they experience—through either ethnic background or religious adherence—to genuinely listen to the experiences of others.\textsuperscript{74} With the number of refugees increasing in the U.S., and specifically within North Dakota as large numbers migrate to Fargo every year,\textsuperscript{75} it is important to recognize that while it may seem that interfaith dialogue may be considerably more difficult given the minority status of the migrant populations, this should not be a deterrent from interfaith dialogue—rather it should indicate the imperative of engaging in such a dialogue.\textsuperscript{76} Furthermore, Phan and Tan indicate that “migration is one of the most informative venues for the study of interfaith dialogue”.\textsuperscript{77}

**Dialogue**

What is dialogue? It can be understood as the search for truth and wisdom which excludes any form of fanaticism; it presupposes the engagement of people who “question the obvious and also allow others to challenge them”.\textsuperscript{78} Dialogue requires an openness and a willingness to grow, as well as mutual respect and an appreciation for other perspectives.\textsuperscript{79} The principle goal of dialogue must be to build and establish trust; this requires the development of empathy through active listening.\textsuperscript{80} Furthermore, dialogue is supported through the support of facilitators who “ask questions, present relevant concepts or information, validate and acknowledge difficulties and challenges … and invite [participants] to explore some of the

\textsuperscript{71} David Smock, “Religious Contributions to Peacemaking: When Religion brings Peace, not War,” United States Institute for Peace, January 2006.

\textsuperscript{72} Phan and Tan, “Interreligious Majority–Minority Dynamics,” 221.

\textsuperscript{73} Grewal, “Johan Galtung;” 1.


\textsuperscript{75} Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Fiscal Year 2014”.

\textsuperscript{76} Phan and Tan, “Interreligious Majority–Minority Dynamics,” 237.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 237–238.

\textsuperscript{78} Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 206.


\textsuperscript{80} Smock, Building Interreligious Trust, 6.
reasons behind their perceptions”. It is important to note that dialogue does not require that the parties agree with each other; on the contrary, dialogue is a forum for exploration and understanding—understanding does not demand agreement, although it does necessitate courtesy.

In order for dialogue to be effective the participants must remain aware of both themselves and those they are engaging with. This type of awareness is commonly referred to as mindfulness. Mindfulness is often discussed as an internal practice of self-awareness and self-reflection. Such internal awareness is vital for the success of any dialogue. Furthermore, through mindful, or heartful, engagement and in practicing “affectionate attention” toward one’s self and others, dialogue participants can begin to experience the benefits of mindfulness in both personal and relational ways. When a person is mindful that person is far more likely to suspend his or her assumptions and not only hear but internalize the thoughts and comments of others.

While mindful dialogue can take many different forms, one form in particular—interfaith dialogue—is the focus of this paper.

**Interfaith Dialogue**

**The Beginning of Interfaith Dialogue**

At the beginning of the 20th century many civilizations and societies were largely homogenous—or were at least dominated by one major religion—this cannot be said for the world today. The globe continues to undergo major shifts as migration increases as never before; the distant ‘other’ is now the neighbor and religious diversity is commonplace.

Interfaith dialogue is generally understood to be a fairly recent development—largely understood to have begun in 1893 at the World’s Parliament of Religions at the World Fair in

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84 Ibid.
This event, commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America, served as an opportunity to bring together various religious representation from around the world for theological, social, and political dialogue. The “ten great religions of the world” were represented at this occasion: “Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam”. The World’s Parliament of Religions was intended to be a space for amicable encounters between people of diverse religious backgrounds and beliefs—the goal was that such encounters would lead to a deeper understanding of “the one truth”.

The World’s Parliament of Religions serves as a symbolic representation of the blossoming of the interfaith movement—a movement that represents “brotherhood, harmony, respect, and openness”—but is less of an actual catalyst to interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue has come about through a long process of interreligious communicative trial and error, largely at the grassroots level of society. As local communities become more and more heterogeneous, the likelihood of people of diverse belief systems encountering each other increases exponentially. What’s more, this increase in encounters has contributed to a heightened awareness that religious conflict—whether overt or discrete—can best be transformed through actual engagement with the ‘other’—whosoever that other may be.

**Worldviews Related to Interfaith Dialogue**

As interfaith dialogue continues to take its place in society as a viable approach to religious diversity, it is important to consider the various worldviews that shape how people engage with one another. Abu-Nimer has outlined four such worldviews: “denial/defense, minimization, acceptance/adaptation, and integration”. The denial/defense worldview

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 195.
polarizes religious difference—many from this perspective view their religious tradition as the one true path in life. Furthermore, this worldview often leads to violent conflict, as religious difference is given overt credit. Adherents to other religious traditions are viewed with distain and distrust as they are considered to be misinformed, and the ‘us’ verses ‘them’ mentality is forcibly upheld. While interfaith dialogue may be difficult for people with this worldview, it can benefit them greatly as it increases the likelihood that various religious encounters can expand their appreciation for alternative perspectives.96

Those with a minimalist worldview tend to overemphasize commonalities and religious differences are ignored and avoided. Minimalists tend to speak in broad generalizations and abstract ideas. While they tend to be very open to interfaith dialogue, they generally discount the various paths people are on, for they struggle to validate any differences between religious perspectives. Minimalists tend to benefit greatly from interfaith dialogue that focuses on specific concepts, so that a thorough exploration of the various perspectives on a topic can be undertaken.97

Those with an acceptance/adaptation worldview tend to be able to accept other religious perspectives and alter their behavior in light of difference. While some are consecrated to their spiritual tradition, they are able to accept the path that others are on as a distinct yet valid path. Interfaith dialogue benefits from such people in the dialogue as they tend to help others recognize the value in each perspective.98

Those with an integrative worldview tend to flow between religious traditions and may not actually adhere to any particular tradition as they believe there is validity in all traditions. They may have pulled the aspects that resonate with them from various belief systems, making their own spiritual system. Interfaith dialogues organized by those with integrative worldviews tend to struggle with participation as those with other worldviews—generally denial/defense and acceptance/adaptation—generally feel uneasy.99

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 14–15.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 15–16.
Interfaith Dialogue

In many instances, the underlying expression of interfaith dialogue tends to carry with it intercultural undertones, and the process of interfaith dialogue is shaped by these undertones to a greater degree than the religious themes that are explored. With that said, there are various ways of articulating what interfaith dialogue actually is. It can be understood as a conversation of two or more individuals from diverse religious identities striving to relate to one another. Expanding this further it can be understood as a coming together of ‘others’ to form an inclusive identity for the common good of humanity. This coming together can be for more than purely theological pursuits, it is also for cultural, ethical, and political inclusivity—the aim of which is to reduce conflict and to promote mutual understanding and collaboration.

In interfaith dialogue it is important that the participants exhibit tolerance and a willingness to engage with people from backgrounds very different from their own; in doing so, they move from a cognitive understanding of one another to an experiential understanding. Those who engage in interfaith dialogue must see themselves as seeking truth, rather than possessing truth, and they must recognize that while they are in dialogue as themselves, they also represent their belief system. The participants of interfaith dialogue can be religious leaders or laypeople, the scale can be anywhere from local to international, and the themes discussed can be focused on anything from doctrinal issues to everyday challenges. Some scholars conclude that whatever the focus, it is important to include a variety of voices—from religious leaders to laypeople on a local and international scale—for this model encourages cross-community communication and peacebuilding. Through such global efforts an increase in respect for diverse belief systems—those represented and those not represented in the dialogue—begins to take shape and a universal moral consensus results. However, other scholars argue that

103 Banchoff, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 204.
authentic genuine interfaith dialogue must begin at the grassroots level of society, specifically between majority and minority religious groups. Only at the grassroots—through the engagement of neighbors, acquaintances, friends, co-workers, and family—can the cycles of “hate, fear, mistrust, and violence” be transformed through building bridges and promoting goodwill; this is known as a ‘living dialogue’.

The ‘dialogue of spiritualities’ (or ‘spiritual dialogue’) involves members of diverse religious traditions “witnessing” one another’s spiritual experience; with the emphasis on one’s own spiritual experience each person engages in a personal contemplative journey through developing friendships based on different religious experiences. In the ‘dialogue of life’ members of various belief systems explore shared social concerns and collaborate to address such issues. The various forms of interfaith dialogue are not mutually exclusive, they can be utilized in relation to one another. In all instance, interfaith dialogue is a positive and constructive approach to increasing mutual respect and understanding through developing relationships. One of the most profound outcomes of interfaith dialogue is that often people come to recognize that while not all belief systems share some form of divinity, they all share some notion of morality.

While interfaith dialogue is highly regarded in the literature, there are some challenges that participants must be aware of. An overemphasis on talk, while necessary at the onset, can derail any interfaith process as it is through engaging with one another in activities—sharing a meal, engaging in acts of service—that builds deeper trust and understanding. Further, those who readily participate in interfaith dialogue, while from various religious traditions, tend to share similar views on the importance of interfaith engagement. Additionally, when a group consists of both religious leaders and laypeople, the religious leaders have a tendency to dominate the discussion or proselytize. Even if overt proselytizing is not taking place,

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110 Ibid., 239; Brajovic, “The Potential of Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 151.
112 Minnema, “Correlation Between Types of Culture,” 2.
116 Smock, Building Interreligious Trust, 5.
minority groups can feel threatened by the majority representation speaking out of turn or too frequently. At time certain skills and abilities are needed to handle a confrontation or disagreement, if the facilitators are not equipped with such skills the dialogue can end very quickly. Additionally, if not facilitated effectively an interfaith dialogue can quickly turn into a space for discussing all that is “wrong” or “bad” about other religions, especially those not represented in the group.

Whatever the challenges, organizers and participants should not feel dissuaded from engaging in interfaith dialogue, for the act of engagement, even if difficult at times, is a step toward transforming barriers into bridges.

**Barriers/Boundaries**

The central challenge of interfaith dialogue is the tension that exists between “identity and otherness”; the question is how is an individual to find a balance between commitment to one’s own belief system and openness to that of the other. It is important than that interfaith dialogue be a means of preventing religious difference from becoming a “fault line between communities”. These fault lines, or boundaries, can be understood as imaginary constructs that limit the engagement people from diverse background have with each other. While imaginary, boundaries have very real consequences; emerging from the choice to emphasis difference and deriving their strength from the commonalities they deny, becoming almost natural aspects of the religious landscape—hills that divide “us” from “them”. What is interesting about boundaries is that they appear to be constructed for a group’s internal purpose, they have very little to do with the actual “other”. As such, not only is the boundary imaginary, but the picture that is created of the other is also imaginary; thus, encountering the other leads to both a transformation of one’s perspective of the other and a transformation of

118 Phan and Tan, “Interreligious Majority–Minority Dynamics,” 231.
119 Dubois, “Religion and Peacebuilding,” 12.
122 Phan and Tan, “Interreligious Majority–Minority Dynamics,” 221.
124 Ibid., 344, 350.
125 Ibid., 346.
one’s perception of his/her own self. As such, perceived boundaries can also be understood to contribute to negative peace.

Dialogue is an important contributor to the dissolving of boundaries. However, dialogue that is hyper-focused on breaking down boundaries “often leads each party to imagine the other in its own image” and makes it very easy to interpret the stories and teachings of different religious traditions in a way that serves one’s own interests. Thus, it is important to consider that boundaries are “more like mirrors than fences”.

With this in mind it is important to note that a major learning in interfaith dialogue is the importance and impact of self-reflection. Many people are unaware of the prejudices that dictate their thoughts, words, and behaviors; becoming aware of such prejudices takes place when something bumps up against them, interrupting and suspending them. It is easy to believe that one’s own perspective is right or correct, regardless of the validity of such thoughts it is important to examine one’s own position. This requires a certain level of humility, for to become aware of one’s own limitations provides for the possibility of growth—as a person and in one’s faith. However, self-transformation should not be the goal of interfaith dialogue, for if it is the other may continue to serve as a mirror and never be truly seen for who he/she actually is. Participants in interfaith dialogue must be open—willing to be affected by the insights, thoughts, concerns, and experiences of the religious other—and introspective.

**Dialogue across Boundaries**

Clearly, people are becoming aware that they must work together across religious boundaries. Interacting around a common theme requires the development of a discourse, a common language. This shared language has the potential to transform both one’s view of one’s self and one’s view of the other. If this takes place, dialogue partners are no longer encountering

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126 Ibid., 350.
129 Ibid., 356.
130 Ibid., 350.
133 Collins, “Toward a New Vision,” 611.
137 Ibid., 198.
each other across a boundary; rather, they are engaging with each other as human beings—for they are able to identify aspects of their own identity in each other. When this happens, the engagement is genuinely about the other person and not one’s prejudices and expectations of the other—the distorting lens of the boundary is no longer present. Engagement of this kind takes place in sustained interfaith dialogue—people from diverse background come together, bump up against their own prejudices and expectations, reflect on themselves and their beliefs, identify shared aspects of their identities, and begin to genuinely engage with each other. It is not that differences disappear; rather, it is that a more coherent view of one another comes into focus, where similarities and differences can be held simultaneously and valued for what they are. Categories of connection are valued and the diversity of perspective is recognized as an asset to the community, not a hindrance. From this perspective, negative peace (isolation) begins to give way to positive peace (collaboration between people and the integration of society).

Thus, this form of interfaith dialogue has the potential to be a powerful peacebuilding tool, especially at the grassroots of society where the alternative is no contact which perpetuates prejudices (negative peace) that then runs the risk of escalating to violence (conflict).

**Peacebuilding**

In the realm of conflict resolution, there are various types of diplomatic engagement. Efforts to advance a ceasefire or peace agreement during an overt conflict are considered peacemaking efforts. Any efforts to uphold the peace agreement—monitoring compliance, humanitarian relief—are considered peacekeeping efforts. Many peacekeeping efforts, including dialogue, are also recognized as peacebuilding efforts. Peacebuilding efforts are recognized as those efforts aimed at addressing underlying, root causes of conflict. At the lowest level, peacebuilding efforts provide safe and secure environments for citizens.

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139 Moberg, “Experiential Encounters,” 11.
142 Ibid., 2; Moberg, “Experiential Encounters,” 12.
144 Ibid.
working definition of peacebuilding, from the United Nations, includes measure that “reduce the risk of lapsing” into conflict through laying foundations for “sustainable peace and development”. This form of peacebuilding is known as preventative peacebuilding, or creating positive peace, and includes efforts to build capacity in local populations.

Capacity-building programs generally emphasize four values: truth, mercy, justice, and peace. Truth is understood as the ability to honestly look at one’s self—one’s past actions—and recognize the impact of his/her behavior; mercy is understood as the capacity to envision an ideal future and take steps to create such a future; justice is the capacity to hold one’s self accountable; and peace is understood as the goal of the process, it requires a coming together of parties to explore the other three values through dialogue and engagement—engagement often includes sharing a meal together.

Numerous parties, including the UN, have identified that religion is a missing component in the peacebuilding process. As many parts of the world continue to feel the impact of violent conflicts taking place in other parts of the world, interfaith peacebuilding initiatives—such as interfaith dialogue—are seen as a potential “antidote to the impact of global crisis events” for such initiatives draw on interfaith actors as peacebuilders in their local communities.

**Interfaith Dialogue as Peacebuilding**

Religion is becoming an increasingly important contributor to peacebuilding efforts. Interfaith actors are being encouraged to share with each other their understanding and conception of peace. Interfaith dialogue has been identified by some as a peacebuilding tool. Baldwin explains that interfaith dialogue, at the grassroots level of society, provides a

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148 Ibid., 48.
149 Ibid., 49; Coning, “Peace and Peacekeeping,” 20; Grewal, “Johan Galtung,” 2.
151 Ibid., 16–18.
156 Anna Baldwin, “Examining the Role of Interfaith Dialogue Initiatives Towards Peacebuilding: A Case Study of the Community of Sant’Egidio” (Master’s thesis, Massey University, 2015), 108; Dubois,
safe space for curiosities to be explored and fears to be allayed—in this regard interfaith dialogue is understood as an educational and capacity-building initiative, as well as a positive peacebuilding technique.\textsuperscript{157} Furthermore, religion itself is a powerful instrument for peace; through exploring the various conceptions of peace inherent in many belief systems peacebuilding endeavors stand to learn from what has been the missing component of many conflict resolution models.\textsuperscript{158} This is especially powerful when one considers the impact simple, yet profound, day-to-day encounters between members of diverse religious traditions. A Jewish man bringing a Muslim woman a glass of water at an interfaith dialogue is more than a simple act of kindness; it is a “gesture of reconciliation from Judaism to Islam”.\textsuperscript{159}

While interfaith dialogue is not the only peacebuilding tool used around the world, it is being used by religious and interfaith organization, as well as academic and state actors.\textsuperscript{160} In many cases interfaith dialogue is used at the sites of violent and deadly conflicts, though this need not always be the case. As previously stated, peacebuilding efforts are intended to keep communities from lapsing into conflict.\textsuperscript{161} While this largely takes place in areas that are already hostile, peacebuilding endeavors can begin in communities where the threat of conflict has yet to be seen or felt—i.e. communities experiencing negative peace.\textsuperscript{162} Promoting justice, increasing respect, and building unity are capacities that are needed in many communities around the world, not just in conflict zones. Interfaith dialogue provides a non-invasive and powerful method for increasing such capacities—capacities commonly understood to be directly linked to positive peacebuilding.\textsuperscript{163}

What’s more, interfaith dialogue could provide a forum for the exploration and formulation of, as of yet, unexplored peacebuilding means.\textsuperscript{164} If employed at the grassroots of communities sustained interfaith dialogue as a peacebuilding endeavor can become, what Appleby calls, “the saturation mode of peacebuilding”—where the attitudes necessary for

\textsuperscript{157} Baldwin, “Examining the Role,” 110; Grewal, “Johan Galtung,” 3.
\textsuperscript{158} Baldwin, “Examining the Role,” 110; Abu-Nimer, “Conflict Resolution,” 686.
\textsuperscript{159} Abu-Nimer, “Conflict Resolution,” 686.
\textsuperscript{160} Halafoff, “Civic Integration,” 2.
\textsuperscript{161} Coning, “Understanding Peacebuilding,” 48.
\textsuperscript{164} Sahin, “Interfaith Dialogue Organizations,” 695.
peacebuilding become a part of the local culture and the distinction between “expert” and “novice” are transcended.  

**Interfaith Engagement**

In a previous section it was noted that dialogue without some form of engagement—collaboration—is not the ultimate objective, nor is it sufficient as a peacebuilding endeavor. Interfaith dialogue that gives way to collaboration—specifically collaboration that contributes to the wider society—is a natural progression. Such engagement becomes possible as boundaries are transcended and people see connections where they once only saw division. Furthermore, the learning that is generated in the interfaith dialogue is enhanced through experiential engagement—for words and deeds are critical elements of meaning-making. Such engagement need not be elaborate, it can be a sharing of traditions and rituals—praying together, cooking together, and participating in the Holy Days of one another. Thus, there is a need for both ‘spiritual dialogue’ and the ‘dialogue of action’; rather than being mutually exclusive, they form a dialectic relationship—people become acquainted with what motivates each other and also experience how that motivation finds expression in the world.

This dialectic of dialogue and collaboration illustrates that not everyone has to do the exact same thing. Instead, people learn to value and support the various perspectives, commitment, skills, and abilities that everyone has, recognizing that the rich diversity of the group contributes to a greater process of advancing society.

**Case Studies**

Below are three case studies regarding interfaith dialogue as a peacebuilding technique. The first two—Sudan and Egypt—look at interfaith dialogue in areas experiencing direct conflict, while the third—Amazing Faiths in Texas, South Carolina, and Wisconsin—explore interfaith dialogue in areas experiencing negative peace.

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166 Smock, *Building Interreligious Trust*, 5
170 Ibid., 21.
Sudan

In the Sudan interfaith dialogue has been a major factor in the current peacebuilding endeavors of the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) and an organization called Reconcile. Major conflicts have existed between the Christian and Muslim communities since 641. Tensions arose when, in 1983, President Numeiry enacted Sharia law as state law without regard for the non-Muslim population. In 1988 NSCC held a conference in which interfaith dialogue was an integral aspect. Members of diverse religious groups—Christian, Muslim, and tribal traditions—were allowed to share their experiences of ethnic and religious conflict with one another. Afterwards, in collaboration with the New Sudan Islamic Council (NSIC), NSCC initiated a program for interfaith reconciliation. NSCC saw this endeavor as supporting the peace negotiations already underway in the upper levels of society. In 2004 NSCC concluded that interfaith dialogue had reduced ignorance and promoted mutual understanding, and it provided a framework for transforming tension into cooperation.173

Egypt

In 2002 the Archbishop of Canterbury, a Chief Rabbi of Israel, and the dean of the el-Azhar seminary in Cairo developed a foundation for interfaith dialogue at the high levels of religious leadership. While it is evident that conflict is still present in Egypt, moments of conflict have been avoided through the relationships that have developed through the interfaith dialogue process. One such instance occurred when some young Jewish school children posted anti-Muslim drawings around a neighborhood. The local Imams were planning on provoking retaliation at their Friday services; however, before that could happen a well-known Chief Rabbi traveled to meet with the Mufti to assure him that the behavior of the children was not in accordance with Judaism, as well as actually a sin (a shameful act) according to Judaism. The gesture of traveling to the Mufti and the explanation allayed the Mufti and the potential violent retaliation was abated.174

173 Smock, Religious Contributions to Peacemaking, 25–27.
Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues—The United States

In 2007 the Mayor of Houston, Texas, was inspired to find a way to bring about greater tolerance and understanding in the greater Houston area. A partnership was formed between the Mayor’s office, Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, and the Boniuk Center for Study and Advancement of Religious Tolerance at Rice University. From this partnership the Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues were born. Through an online form, individuals signed up to attend a dinner dialogue in someone’s home. These individuals were then assigned a home to ensure the greatest possible religious diversity in each group; the hosts prepared a meal (including a vegetarian option) and a trained moderator lead the participants through the dialogue—open ended questions posed to one individual at a time, such as “Do you think religions share common principles or ideals? If so, can you identify some of these?”; “Do you pray or meditate? What is prayer or meditation like for you? How does it work beneficially in your life?” The initial event included 250 participants in 20 homes. The second event included 750 participants in 75 homes. Today the Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues in Houston are run solely by the Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston and follow a different format, for example each gathering focuses on learning about one religious tradition. However, the original model is still followed today by a number of communities around the United States.

The Amazing Faiths original format has been carried out in South Carolina since 2010. The initiative is volunteer run, which creates challenges when it comes to advertizing, materials, and meals; however, the initiative has been so well received that the organizers have continued to use the same format since that time. They have consistently engaged 100–140 people annually. Each home hosts ten or fewer people, a trained moderator passes around a deck of cards with the questions on them and each participant answers a different question. Everyone is asked to listen but not to comment. After two or three passes of the cards the formal dialogue ends and participants are afforded some time to have dessert and chat casually, perhaps asking questions that arose during the dialogue. Many participants have returned three or more times to the

176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
178 An Original Founder of Amazing Faiths from Rice University, email message to author, May 23, 2016.
dialogues, as they consistently enjoy entering a safe space to learn about the commonalities they share with those of diverse belief systems.\textsuperscript{179}

The initial Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogue has also been followed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin since 2011. In 2012 the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee received a grant which allowed for a part-time, paid organizer for the dinner dialogues. Until 2013 the organizers were able to host 2 to 4 dinner dialogues a year. Since receiving the grant they have tried to systematize their efforts, holding 1 to 2 a month. While the same format has been followed, there have been some changes in the questions—sometimes the questions will be designed based on a theme or a topic—as well as reunion groups to reconnect past participants. The dinner dialogues have become well known in Milwaukee, universities and other organizations have asked the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee to organize interfaith dialogues for them.\textsuperscript{180}

In both Wisconsin and North Carolina some of the major learnings have been to persevere, for through sustained effort individuals from isolated communities have slowly begun to participate, even if sporadically. Furthermore, in both communities interfaith dialogue is understood to build positive peace, even if only on a small scale in a few neighborhoods. The challenge has been to find ways to make it sustainable given the limited funds (or no funds) and the work required to organize the dinners and train the moderators.\textsuperscript{181} While these and other organizations have been carrying out interfaith dialogue, little research has been done to illustrate the effects and impact of such endeavors, specifically as it relates to transitioning from negative to positive peace.\textsuperscript{182}

\textbf{Summary}

Interfaith dialogue is not merely something curious religious persons engage in, it is an act of civic responsibility, for religious conceptions of peace have the potential to contribute immense value to the peacebuilding endeavors already taking place throughout the world. As

\textsuperscript{179} A Member of the Interfaith Forum of Greenville, North Carolina, email message to author, May 10, 2016.
\textsuperscript{180} A Member of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee in discussion with the author, May 18, 2016.
\textsuperscript{181} A Member of the Interfaith Forum of Greenville, North Carolina, email message to author, May 10, 2016; A Member of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee in discussion with the author, May 18, 2016
\textsuperscript{182} Dubois, “Religion and Peacebuilding,” 7; Halafoff, “Civic Integration,” 7; Moberg, “Experiential Encounters,” 5
such, the way in which religious groups engage one another in the coming years will continue to shape world affairs.\textsuperscript{183} Humanity stands at a threshold where the adherents of the world’s religious traditions have the potential to transcend the imaginary boundaries that have long contributed to prejudices, oppression, and violence in favor of a future “marked increasingly by cooperative engagement”.\textsuperscript{184} Not only is such engagement more possible today than ever before, as the religious other lives next door, it is also more vital. As people at the grassroots of society participate in interfaith dialogue a common culture rich in diversity is created—a culture built upon the sharing of all of life, not just aspects and sections of one’s identity.\textsuperscript{185} As such, interfaith dialogue provides a space in which self-reflection, spiritual growth, and community development are all, not only possible, but inevitable—thus providing a solid foundation upon which positive peace can be built.\textsuperscript{186}

\textsuperscript{183} Banchoff, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 212.
\textsuperscript{184} Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue,” 199.
\textsuperscript{185} Phan and Tan, “Interreligious Majority–Minority Dynamics,” 239.
Chapter III: Methods

Introduction to Implementation

Fargo, North Dakota, is home to a wide variety of faith and ethnic groups. This community is largely understood to be a peaceful place; however, it could be said to be experiencing negative peace—as the diverse communities generally exist in isolation from one another. In an attempt to begin a process to shift from negative peace (isolation) to positive peace (collaboration) I have partnered with a task force of four individuals from the Center for Interfaith Projects (CIP) to design and carry out an interfaith dialogue project. The below principles, gleaned from the above research, have guided the development of the endeavor.

- Perceived religious boundaries, which often reinforce divisive stereotypes, can be transformed through interfaith engagement.

- Such engagement must be sustained over time.

- Dialogue—specifically spiritual dialogue, with its emphasis on exploring one another’s spiritual narrative—is a critical first step in interfaith engagement.

- Interfaith dialogue helps to alleviate tension between religious majorities and minorities and is thus a positive peacebuilding effort.

- Negative peace begets negative peace and conflict, whereas positive peace begets positive peace, thus any attempt to integrate society must draw from positive peace theory.

In light of the above principles, the task force and I have decided to host a pilot phase of two Interfaith Dinner Dialogues. The intention is to have representation of twelve different religious communities (including members of refugee communities and Atheists/Humanists) during two evenings of conversation, hospitality, and fellowship. By providing safe space for the participants to explore their own personal spiritual journeys, as well as their conception and vision of peace and their role in advancing such a vision, the board hopes to learn how to improve subsequent dinner dialogues—thus replacing religious encounters with true engagement, beginning the process of shifting from negative peace to positive peace.

188 Vishanoff, “Boundaries and Encounters”.
189 Zúñiga, “Bridging Differences”.
190 Collins, “Toward a New Vision”; Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue”.
191 Phan and Tan, “Interreligious Majority–Minority Dynamics”.
192 Grewal, “Johan Galtung”.

Stakeholders

The key stakeholders in this endeavor are four of the board members of the Center for Interfaith Projects. The four members all come from different faith traditions and have various motivations for pursuing this project.

Board member 1 (BM1) is a member of the task force, and thus will be one of the four facilitators for the IDDs. She recognizes her various roles as both a board member and as a task force member in carrying forward the IDDs. BM1 indicated that the board decided to carry out the IDDs as the IDDs are one way of fulfilling the mission of CIP. BM1 believes that in order for this to be a successful endeavor we will need to ensure the optimal number of participants (20), and ensure that those participants represent the various beliefs in the Fargo community. She hopes that at least seven groups will be represented at the dinners and that they are all willing to provide constructive feedback to the CIP board for future iterations of this endeavor. Further, BM1 recognizes that the resources available extend beyond financial support to the commitment she and the other board members have to this undertaking, as well as the connections they have in the community that will, hopefully, ensure the wide participation of various religious communities in the area. Ultimately, BM1 finds that interfaith engagement enables her to be “present in the world with greater tenderness, greater empathy, and greater confidence in the goodness of others”, and is, thus, excited about this endeavor.

Board member 2 (BM2) is very excited about this process as he has been longing for a process-oriented approach to interfaith action for a long time. He is very grateful that I came along to partner with CIP for this endeavor as it is helping the board to see what is possible when thinking in terms of a process. BM2 is a board member and a task force member for this endeavor—meaning he is also a facilitator for the dialogues. For BM2 success is possible, as it would mean that things go according to plan—participants represent the major faith communities in the Fargo area and they follow the guidelines of the dialogues by being respectful and open. Further, success involves “participants walking away feeling they have learned something from others and also have had a real opportunity to share their own story and core values.”

BM2 recognizes the venue as a major resource—the NDSU University

193 Board member 1, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2016.
194 Ibid.
195 Board member 2, e-mail message to author, April 13, 2016.
196 Ibid.
Lutheran Center—as we are able to use it for free. BM2 also recognizes me as a valuable human resource for I have been keeping minutes from all of our meetings and providing organization skills that he feels will ensure a successful endeavor.\textsuperscript{197}

Board member 3 (BM3) is also both a board member and a task force member. He sees his role as recruiting potential volunteers, planning and executing the IDDs, preparing discussion questions and invitations, setting up the dinners, facilitating the two dialogues, and cleaning up after the dinners. BM3 believes that we have all of the resources that we need for this endeavor. He believes that for the initial phase of this endeavor to be successful we must have adequate representation from the various faith groups in Fargo, be able to inform them about what to expect during the dinners, and create an atmosphere that is conducive to sharing and learning. So long as the space is there for genuine sharing and listening BM3 believes that others will be encouraged to attend future iterations of this process through what the participants share in their own communities. BM3 sees the active engagement of the task force as a tremendous resource; he feels that so long as we all show up and give our best throughout this process we are all important human resources. Further, the venue is an important resource as well. He believes that all necessary resources are available, especially since the board members will be providing the meals.\textsuperscript{198}

Board member 4 did not provide feedback at the initial stage of the planning process; however, all of the members really believe that the time is ripe for the people of Fargo to engage, not as separate groups divided by religious ideology, but as one cohesive group that is united in its diversity. The hope is that the Interfaith Dinner Dialogues will provide a sustainable format for the board to learn whether the diverse religious groups in the Fargo area are interested in and open to learning from and about each other.

Additional key stakeholders in this process are the participants themselves. An initial list of 40 potential participants from fourteen different traditions—Unitarian Universalist, Evangelical, Catholic, Protestant, Yazidi, Muslim, Jewish, Bahá’í, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Native American, Atheist/Humanist, and Mormon—was created by all members of the CIP board. This list included members from the diverse ethnic groups in the area—including members of

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{198} Board member 3, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2016.
immigrant and refugee communities. With a goal to have 20–24 individuals (two from each tradition) involved in this initial process, we ended up with the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Confirmed guests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unitarian</td>
<td></td>
<td>P1; P2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical</td>
<td></td>
<td>P3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td>P4; P5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td></td>
<td>P6; P7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yazidi</td>
<td></td>
<td>P8; P9; P10; P11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>BM4</td>
<td>P12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>BM2</td>
<td>P13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahá’í</td>
<td>BM3</td>
<td>P14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td></td>
<td>P15; P16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>BM1</td>
<td>P17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td></td>
<td>P18; P19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheist/Humanist</td>
<td></td>
<td>P20; P21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Facilitators and Participants

P9, P12, P17, P18, and P19 were only able to attend the first gathering. P9 was not able to speak English very well and had a new baby, and thus decided to not attend the second gathering. In the place of P9, P11 came to the second gathering. P12, P17, P18, and P19 expressed their desire to attend the second gathering; however, other commitments (that were not foreseen prior to agreeing to attend both gatherings) kept them from attending. P3 was only able to attend the second gathering due to a death in the family. P8, P9, P10, and P11 were representative of a refugee community in the Fargo area—from the Kurdistan region north of Iraq. While a number of the participants were from the US, only two participants were born in Fargo—BM1 and P14. P15 and P16 were both born in India. BM4 was born in Egypt. As P12, P17, P18, and P19 were not in attendance at the second gathering data was not collected regarding where they were born. Nine of the participants were women, providing a balance of gendered voices as well as religious and ethnic voices in the dialogues. Prior to any dialogue many participants indicated that they were interested in interfaith dialogue because it is an enriching experiences, stating that learning about other traditions increases one’s ability to understand one’s self, as well as to foster better relationships with others in their community.\(^{199}\)

\(^{199}\) See Appendix E.
Needs Analysis

Interfaith relations are swiftly becoming a recognized factor in maintaining peaceful societies. Through conversations with members of task force and a review of the relevant literature, it is clear that increased engagement between groups of diverse belief systems (including diversity of gender and ethnicity) is important if isolated faith-based communities are to give rise to a unified community capable of addressing the challenges of our time—specifically peaceful relations among all community members. Having partnered with CIP in Fargo, a short series of Interfaith Dinner Dialogues (IDDs) have been designed to initiate the process of developing relationships across perceived boundaries. This process is intended to span two months, hopefully giving rise to insights that will then contribute to the next phase of the endeavor—which will extend beyond the scope of this Capstone Project.

Literature Contributions to the Interfaith Dinner Dialogues

Vishanoff described limited and needs-based interactions as encounters across boundaries, stating that perceived differences are reinforced when open, honest dialogue is not present because it becomes easier for people to “highlight certain differences while overlooking equally real similarities”. The purpose of dialogue in such a dynamic is to not only transcend the imaginary boundaries between “us” and “them” but also, and perhaps more importantly, to transform one’s understanding of one’s own self. When both goals are achieved through dialogue boundaries disappear and encounters transform into engagement—this does not mean that differences disappear, rather it means that differences are no longer viewed through the distorted lens that imagined boundaries inevitably create, for people recognize a bit of themselves in each other.

Zúñiga posited that intergroup dialogue is beneficial in dissolving boundaries, for such engagement encourages active and sympathetic listening and humble questioning across “lines of difference, which in turn fosters mutual understanding of similar and conflicting needs and

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200 Smock, Religious Contributions to Peacemaking, 25–27.
202 Ibid.
perspectives”. However, such engagement is only beneficial if it is sustained over time so that bonds of trust and friendship can be developed.

Collins agreed that strong inter-religious relationships are best built through consistent engagement and genuine dialogue. Collins concluded that through dialogue people come to value each other’s perspectives and begin to recognize that all perspectives are essential to truly developing a shared vision for the future.

Spiritual dialogue—dialogue which seeks to underscore the religious experience each person has—is becoming increasingly important in building unity and peace between religious groups. By sharing spiritual experiences with each other people come to recognize their similarities, even though their faith traditions themselves may be different.

Phan and Tan stated that interfaith dialogue—especially spiritual dialogue—is necessary in communities with minority religious traditions because such dialogue can help ensure that prejudice and religious (and ethnic) discrimination are prevented. In communities like Fargo, where many religious minorities are also ethnic minorities, the risk is greater that maintaining religious boundaries will lead to discreet prejudice and overt oppression. Thus, Phan and Tan conclude that interfaith dialogue is critical in communities where people of diverse faiths share their lives together—interacting with each other at the grassroots of society. Interfaith dialogue can be a major source of peacebuilding, as it is a tool to “break the cycle of hate, fear, mistrust, and violence”.

Grewal elaborates on the importance of coherence between means and ends, stating that while negative peace approaches to achieving peace—curative methods that may use cultural or structural violence to achieve goals—are only useful in the short term. As such, the long term approach to peacebuilding must involve principles of positive peace—preventative methods to achieving peace commensurate with a broader vision that include societal integration.

In light of such research, and in consultation with the task force, it was determined that engaging two to three individuals from a minimum of twelve diverse faith-based groups will initiate a process of learning what it means to engage in interfaith dialogue. It is hoped that the

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204 Ibid.
205 Collins, “Toward a New Vision”.
206 Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue”.
207 Phan and Tan, “Interreligious Majority–Minority Dynamics”.
208 Ibid., 239.
participants will embark upon a journey that may, over time, increase their religious literacy which will, in turn, foster friendships that transcend the boundaries that have separated religious groups for so long and, thus, begin to transform negative peace to positive peace.\(^{210}\)

**Development of the Interfaith Dinner Dialogues**

Having learned about the concept of Interfaith Dinner Dialogues from another community in the U.S., the task force was initially going to follow the same format—not taking into consideration the variables that are different between Fargo and other communities, as well as the available resources and learnings from other communities engaged in the traditional format—including, but not limited to: the question of participant retention; the question of tailoring prompts to the group; the question of exploring the same prompt or each participant exploring different prompts; the question of sustainability.\(^{211}\) After consulting, the task force members realized the need to think more deeply about how to approach the dinners. Rather than approaching the dinners as events to occur every six months to a year (as the board had originally decided), they began to appreciate that the dialogues can be a part of a larger process that would potentially lead to greater sustainability and community engagement. Furthermore, to ensure greater learnings, the task force decided to include the same participants in both gatherings of the initial phase. Additionally, the task force determined that it would be best to have the same prompt for all participants, to encourage greater depth of dialogue around a given topic. Thus the idea to start off with two dialogues with a shared prompt over a two month period was born.

To ensure that this process is fruitful, the task force has taken strides to become more systematic in its approach to developing and carrying out this endeavor. While the drive and desire to see change in the community is ever-present, the capacity to think, and act, in terms of a process has yet to fully develop. By becoming more systematic throughout this process, the board will also grow in its capacity to be a force of change in the greater community, and that may be one of the most important learnings from this entire process.

In order to increase capacity for systematic action the task force has agreed to approach this initial phase of the process in terms of cycles of learning—which includes planning and

\(^{210}\) Ibid; Prothero, *Religious Literacy*; Vishanoff, “Boundaries and Encounters”.
carrying out the two IDDs. Thus, the hope is that the task force will see this initial phase as merely the beginning of a much greater process that will unfold through the dialectic of action and reflection, noting the imperative that study and consultation remain a constant throughout the process.

This first phase of this process extended from March 1 to May 28, 2016. The task force identified four stages in this phase—four cycles of activity. Below is a simple breakdown of the cycles of activity:

- **Cycle 1 (March 1–26, 2016)**
  - Objective 1: Conceptualize Interfaith Dinner Dialogue (IDD) format
  - Objective 2: Create content
  - Objective 3: Compile a list of individuals to invite
  - Objective 4: Research other IDD formats

- **Cycle 2 (March 27–April 23, 2016)**
  - Objective 1: Invite and confirm participants to two IDD on April 30 and May 14
  - Objective 2: Organize meal for 1st IDD
  - Objective 3: Create content—guiding principles, prompts, etc.
  - Objective 4: Research other IDD formats

- **Cycle 3 (April 24–May 8, 2016)**
  - Objective 1: Prepare space for event
  - Objective 2: Hold 1st IDD
  - Objective 3: Collect questionnaires and review them
  - Objective 4: Create content for 2nd IDD
  - Objective 5: Organize meal for 2nd IDD

- **Cycle 4 (May 9–28, 2016)**
  - Objective 1: Prepare space for event
  - Objective 2: Hold 2nd IDD
  - Objective 3: Collect questionnaires and review them
  - Objective 4: Identify next steps for future IDDs
  - Objective 5: Plan for next phase of IDD

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212 See Appendix D
For a more in-depth look at the proposed timeline—complete with lines of actions, anticipated dates, and task leaders—please see the attached Gantt chart.\textsuperscript{213}

**The Interfaith Dinner Dialogue Format**

The broad intention is to host two dinners held at one location where the individuals can dine together and then break into four groups of six people of different spiritual backgrounds to engage in meaningful conversation with one another; the small groups will remain the same for both gatherings. Each group will be facilitated by one of the four CIP board members. The board members will provide the guiding principles and general dialogue format\textsuperscript{214}, the prompts for discussion, and ensure that everyone is provided an opportunity to share.

The first dialogue will include the following prompt:

- How have you arrived at where you are now with regard to your beliefs about what gives meaning to your life, and has this changed over time?

By providing the participants the opportunity to share their personal spiritual journey, it is hoped that they will find in one another’s narratives aspects of their own journey.\textsuperscript{215} This will begin the process of relationship building that will be critical in addressing the deeper question that will follow.

The second dialogue will provide a space to begin to explore peace. The following prompt will be provided:

- What would a peaceful community and world look like for you, and how does your tradition inform such a vision?

It is hoped that through the exploration of the various perspectives on peace the participants will further recognize aspects of their own perspectives in one another’s views.

The task force and I decided that beginning this process with sharing personal narratives will provide a solid foundation upon which deeper and more profound concepts can be explored. It has been determined that this is necessary as long-term collaborative interfaith engagement has not taken place within the Fargo community. One-time interfaith projects have happened over the years, but nothing sustainable has ever transpired, for the emphasis has always been on “projects” rather than “process”. Thus, as a first attempt at a “process” the simple, yet profound,

\textsuperscript{213} See Appendix J.

\textsuperscript{214} See Appendix D.

\textsuperscript{215} Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue”.
format of dinner dialogues provides an achievable goal from which any learning will be an important learning. From this perspective, whatever the ultimate outcome, all learnings will greatly contribute to future iterations of the endeavor.

Furthermore, exploring the concept of peace at the second dialogue will provide an opportunity for people to share the wealth of knowledge they possess about how peace is understood from their particular belief system. It was determined that the outcomes from this stage in the process will provide important information about what future topics to address—justice, mercy, service, etc.

All of the task force members believe that the time is ripe for the people of Fargo to engage, not as separate groups divided by religious ideology, but as one cohesive group that is united in its diversity. The Interfaith Dinner Dialogues provide a sustainable format for the CIP board to begin to learn whether the diverse religious groups are interested and open to learn from and about each other. The ultimate goal—which extends far beyond the scope of this Capstone project—is to, through sustained dialogue, explore ways in which the participants can collaborate to be active agents of social change in the greater community.\textsuperscript{216}

**Board Member Reflections**

After determining the format of the IDDs, and developing the cycles, BM1 reflected that she is hopeful that this endeavor will widen the pool of eager and willing interfaith actors in the Fargo community so that future undertakings are more widely publicized and attended.\textsuperscript{217} BM1 hopes that this process will encourage her to be more proactive in reaching out and connecting with the greater community. If this process is fruitful—meaning most confirmed participants attend and provide feedback—BM1 is hopeful that she will be more empowered to reach out to people, beyond her personal circle of like-minded friends and family, to engage in interfaith activities.\textsuperscript{218}

BM2 sees this endeavor as unique in relation to the previous projects CIP has undertaken as it provides an intimate space for people to engage with each other. He hopes to personally learn more about other belief systems in the Fargo area; he also hopes that some of those who

\textsuperscript{216} Moberg, “Experiential Encounters”.
\textsuperscript{217} Board member 1, e-mail message to author, April 3, 2016.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid.
attend take this experience back to their own communities so that more and more interfaith conversations can take place throughout the greater community.\textsuperscript{219}

BM3 really enjoys learning about people’s spiritual journey and he hopes that through this process he will make new friends and meet new interfaith collaborators. He hopes that as a result of this initial process new friendships will form and the participants will come away with a greater appreciation for the diversity of beliefs in the greater community. He also is hopeful that this initial phase will be just the beginning of a much grander process.\textsuperscript{220}

BM4 did not provide feedback at this stage of the process.

\textbf{Evaluation Plan}

\textbf{Challenges}

The task force and I recognize that it will be difficult to assess the sustainability of a long-term process after only two IDDs. With that said, we felt that asking for a commitment of more than two occasions might limit the availability of the potential participants—given certain factors of life in the area (graduation season and the likelihood that many students will be leaving the area for the summer and some people/families “go to their lake cabins” over the weekends). Given the concerns the task force opted to do two dinners ensuring that a greater number of people will be willing and able to participate.

Additionally, it was recognized that two dialogues of one and a half hours each is not a lot of time for the participants to feel comfortable opening up with people they do not know—especially given the concerns around negative peace (isolation). With that said, the board will be providing the potential participants with a letter that explains both the background of the CIP and the Capstone project, as well as what they can expect from the experience.\textsuperscript{221} This was decided to ensure that those who do agree to participate will be people interested in opening up and engaging with others in a collaborative process of interfaith exploration. Hopefully this will mitigate the potential resistance some may experience through this process.

One final challenge concerns participant commitment to two IDDs. The intention is to maintain the same individuals in each group to ensure that any comfort created in the initial gathering is maintained. If people decide, for whatever reason, to not attend the second IDD, this

\textsuperscript{219} Board member 2, e-mail message to author, April 13, 2016.
\textsuperscript{220} Board member 3, e-mail message to author, April 17, 2016.
\textsuperscript{221} See Appendix A.
could hamper the engagement of those who do show up. One way to deal with this is to reach out to those who do not attend the second IDD to identify if there was anything that could have been done differently to ensure their full participation in the process. Moreover, even if the task force is not able to connect with them again, the fact that they did not return for the second IDD contributes to the overall learning process. With that said, an invitation will specify the two dates, so that individuals agreeing to participate are aware up-front what they are committing to.\textsuperscript{222}

The window for this Capstone is narrow enough that sustainability is not an issue. However, sustainability of the long-term process is a concern. In certain respects the learnings from the evaluation process will impact how the endeavor progresses. It is unclear at this time whether the future format of the IDDs will remain at a central location, where all participants gather for a meal and then break into small groups, or perhaps it will be determined that a new format is ideal, where IDDs happen more, or less, regularly in homes around Fargo. The direction the IDDs takes will largely be based on the learnings gathered at the close of the Capstone project. It is believed that through the initial phase of the process the CIP task force will come to understand at greater depths what sustainability looks like in Fargo, North Dakota.

**Qualitative and Quantitative Evaluation**

The evaluation of this endeavor will largely consist of questionnaires. There will be an initial questionnaire to be filled out at the first IDD prior to the dialogue.\textsuperscript{223} The second questionnaire will be filled out at the close of the first IDD, after the dialogue has taken place.\textsuperscript{224} The third and final questionnaire will take place at the close of the second IDD.\textsuperscript{225}

The questionnaires consist of both open-ended questions and a Likert-scale to track any changes regarding certain themes. In addition the first and third questionnaires contain a religious literacy quiz to track any increases in basic religious knowledge that takes place, even though basic religious knowledge is not a direct topic of discussion. The hope is that through listening to one another they may pick up on some of the information explored in the quiz. This will help the board to assess any developments in religious literacy and interfaith engagement.

\textsuperscript{222} See Appendix B.
\textsuperscript{223} See Appendix E.
\textsuperscript{224} See Appendix F.
\textsuperscript{225} See Appendix G.
between the two gatherings. I also will conduct limited follow-up interviews with a random selection of participants, to learn first-hand from the participants about how they felt about the experience in general, as well as how they see interfaith dialogue relating to peacebuilding.226

Artifacts

While there have not been any policies or procedures developed, as it is too soon to do so, a few learnings—particularly in terms of how the task force functions—have been gleaned from this endeavor. A couple of the members of the task force concluded that holding regular planning meetings over a period of time lent itself to organic development, illustrating that thinking in terms of a process actually allows for sustained, organic growth to occur. BM1 concluded:

Perhaps the most important thing I learned about the group process, if I can generalize from this single experience, is how valuable regular planning sessions undertaken over a relatively long period of time are to the ultimate success of the project. I see how enough unpressured contact among the group members allows for plans to evolve somewhat organically, which, in the end, brings about a more viable and satisfying experience. While what happens may have room for improvement, it has nevertheless come about as the result of mutually agreed upon and carefully contemplated decisions. Despite inevitable unforeseeables, what ensues is, thus, a gratifying realization of the group’s vision, a concrete template for further endeavors of a similar nature.227

While new programming has not been developed, some networking occurred during, and outside of, the IDDs related to programs already underway. At the conclusion of the first IDD the participants were invited to an interfaith devotional on May 8, 2016. Six IDD participants attended and participated in the devotional—BM2, P8, P10, P11, P14, and P20. At the conclusion of the second IDD the participants were invited to participate in a celebration of the International Day of Peace held in September. Furthermore, the participants were invited to help the Yazidi community plan and promote a commemorative event in August for their people—a commemoration of the attack on their home in Kurdistan by ISIS. In these two instances many participants arose to offer their services and support. While time will tell how much engagement

226 See Appendix H.
227 Board member 1, e-mail message to author, May 22, 2016.
outside of the IDD space there is between these individuals, it is clear that such engagement would not have naturally occurred without the space the IDDs provided.

Lastly, there was an overwhelming request to continue the IDDs beyond this initial phase. Taking into account that seven participants were not able to attend both gatherings, all comments on the questionnaires, as well as in the phone interviews, indicated that the IDDs were a much needed and welcomed space for people of diverse backgrounds and belief systems to engage in meaningful conversations, learn from each other, and develop relationships across perceived boundaries. Furthermore, after this initial phase, BM2, speaking on behalf of the entire board, shared that the continuation of the IDDs is a given; what is left to determine now is the frequency with which the gatherings occur and the make-up of the participants moving forward—should the participants remain the same for the next cycle of activity (given this cycle’s short duration), or is it timely to invite new participants into this process.

**Results**

In compiling the results of the questionnaires, only those of the participants who were present for and filled out all three questionnaires were considered—eighteen participants (including BM1, BM2, BM3, and BM4) were present for all three questionnaires.

With regard to religious literacy, results from the literacy quiz portions of the first and third questionnaires indicate that even without discussing religious traditions specifically—
noting that participants engaged in interfaith dialogue with only five traditions other than their own—only one participant had a lower score on the second attempt at the literacy quiz than the first. Five participants had scores that remained the same—three of whom had perfect scores to begin with—meaning that twelve participants scored higher on the second attempt at the literacy quiz than on the first. Exploring what provides meaning to one’s life and how one’s vision of peace is conceived within two brief dialogues over a three-week period was enough to increase the basic understanding of religious concepts for at least 67% of the participants. This suggests that interfaith dialogue may, in fact, lead to greater religious literacy both in the short and long-term, regardless of the specific topic of conversation.

There was a 33% increase in the number of participants who believed that there are many paths to truth. Only one individual indicated that there may be some uncertainty with regard to such a concept of truth and the remainder of the participants consistently believed that there are many paths to truth. While the majority of the participants believed that interfaith dialogue
would help them better understand themselves, there was an 11% increase in this belief at the end of the IDDs. Furthermore, there was a 17% increase in the number of participants who felt firm in their beliefs. This indicates that while some participants became more firm in their own faith, they also believed that the traditions of those they were in dialogue with were also paths to truth.

There was a 17% increase in the number of participants who felt that they developed greater acquaintances with people of different faith traditions. 83% already felt that they had at least three acquaintances from different traditions. There was a 44% increase in the number of participants who felt that they had at least three close friends from different belief systems. This is striking given the briefness of the encounters and could indicate that duration of time is not as significant as meaningful connection when it comes to developing relationships. What is more, there was a 17% decrease in the number of participants who felt that they had meaningful encounters with people of different ethnicities. This could indicate that the notion of what is meaningful may have changed during this experience and that what was once thought to have been meaningful may have diminished in significance after engaging in the IDDs.

There was a 22% increase in the number of people who felt that an awareness of diverse belief systems is a civic responsibility. Additionally, there was an 11% increase in the number of participants who believe that collaboration is necessary for social change. There was 28% increase in the number of participants who believed that interfaith dialogue will decrease prejudice, as well as conflict. None of the participants felt that interfaith dialogue would lead to prejudice; however, one individual was unsure as to whether interfaith dialogue would contribute to conflict.

Qualitatively, it was noted that after the first IDD a few participants remained after the conclusion of the evening to engage in further conversation, with everyone departing about 20 minutes later. At the conclusion of the second IDD more than half of the participants remained and engaged in conversation for over 40 minutes. This indicates that fellowship increased and relationships were forming—both of which point to a transition from negative to positive peace on a small scale.

Of all of those interviewed after the closing of the initial phase, 100% agreed that the process of interfaith dialogue was conducive to open-hearted connections. One participant indicated that the people in his group were the sort of people he would like spend more and more
time with. Another participant indicated that a few days after the second IDD she attended a talk by a gentleman about encountering people from a Conservative Christian background. In this talk the gentleman encouraged those present to engage in challenging such individuals in a confrontational manner. She found herself wishing that more people would engage with each other in light of the guiding principles of the IDDs, indicating that seeking to understand rather than criticize is most conducive to peaceful co-existence.

While 100% of the participants agreed that interfaith dialogue is an integral aspect of building more peaceful and unified communities, 67% of the participants concluded that it was not enough—stating that some form of action is also necessary. There was a clear desire among this group of participants to move into the arena of action at some point in later in the process—particularly when exploring concepts involving issues of social justice—yet they all agreed that prolonged and sustained interfaith dialogue was a prerequisite to such action. There was less concern about moving into the arena of action if such action was share in the activities of each other’s traditions—such as a prayer gathering or cultural/religious commemoration.
Chapter IV: Conclusions

Introduction

The intention of this paper has been to explore the ways in which interfaith dialogue may contribute to advancing positive peace in a religiously and ethnically diverse community experiencing negative peace—namely isolation. After a review of available literature—with regard to religious literacy; the religious landscape of the US, as well as the city of Fargo, North Dakota; interfaith dialogue; peacebuilding; and interfaith dialogue as a peacebuilding technique; as well as an exploration of two case studies from Africa and a review of an interfaith dialogue format used in a few communities around the US—the Center for Interfaith Projects (CIP) and I developed and carried out an initial series of Interfaith Dinner Dialogues. At the conclusion of the initial phase data—from questionnaires, interviews, and observations—was collected and reviewed, informing the formation of next phase of this endeavor.

Conclusions

The CIP board and I began this endeavor with a goal of initiating a process of small-scale community transformation—from negative to positive peace—through interfaith dialogue intended to increase religious literacy and improve interfaith relations. Through applying the learnings from available academic literature—perceived religious boundaries (negative peace), particularly between religious and ethnic minorities, transforming into engagement and collaboration (positive peace) through sustained, spiritual dialogue—the CIP task force and I were able to develop the pilot phase of a program to identify interest in interfaith dialogue and explore the implications of interfaith dialogue in a controlled, small-scale pilot program.228 The results generated from this endeavor indicate that 1) there is substantial interest in engaging in interfaith dialogue, 2) there is a general consensus that interfaith dialogue is an effective peacebuilding technique (both in practice and in theory), and 3) religious literacy is increased through interfaith dialogue. These findings reinforce the conclusions drawn from the literature review found in Chapter Two.

Further, the findings from this endeavor indicate that interfaith dialogue is an effective tool for shifting from negative peace to positive peace—i.e. a conflict prevention tool. The

majority of the literature related to interfaith dialogue as peacebuilding tool has focused on areas of conflict in which violence is currently happening or has recently happened.\textsuperscript{229} While indications have been made in such research that interfaith dialogue is an effective curative tool, no mention has been made with regard to its potential as a preventative tool.\textsuperscript{230} In light of the findings from this endeavor, this paper posits that interfaith dialogue is a positive peacebuilding technique (a preventative tool); as such, it is a process through which the means are commensurate with the end.\textsuperscript{231} If sustained over a period of time, it is possible that interfaith dialogue may serve as a gateway for more complex patterns of interfaith engagement—interfaith service projects and community programs—intended to move toward structural peace (in which systems of social order promote the well-being of all of society, not just limited segments of society).\textsuperscript{232} Given the nature of this initiative, such a study is beyond the scope of this Capstone Project.

The second goal of this endeavor has been to support the Center for Interfaith Projects (CIP) in developing its capacity to identify and carry out increasingly complex processes intended to advance interfaith engagement in the wider community. While this goal was secondary to the overall vision of this endeavor, the learnings associated with it are perhaps the most significant in terms of practical application. As indicated in Chapter Three, the task force members developed an increased appreciation for systematic action throughout this process. As such, the next iteration of this process—which extends beyond the scope of this Capstone Project—has already been formulated. A brief description of the second iteration, developed through systematically reflecting on the first iteration, follows:

The task force has decided to continue with a second iteration of the Interfaith Dinner Dialogue (IDD) series. The second iteration will consist of two dinner dialogues over a two month period with the same participants as the first iteration; however, the participants will be in different small groups (four groups of six people from different traditions). After reviewing the data from the first iteration the task force determined that, at this stage in the process, it is important to continue to provide space for the same participants to further develop relationships and learn about each other’s belief systems.

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{231} Grewal, “Johan Galtung.” 5.
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
The long-term vision has also continued to develop; during the second iteration the task force will consult with the participants about their becoming facilitators for these gatherings, so that the process can extend to greater numbers of people. Should there be enough interest (fifteen people) the third and fourth iterations will serve as a training program for the participants to become facilitators of the Interfaith Dinner Dialogue program. At whatever point the newly trained facilitators are ready to host their own IDDs the local news and media will be alerted to this process, to educate the public about this initiative. Further, CIP will look into any grants that may help support this initiative, especially in light of the learnings from the Wisconsin and South Carolina communities with regard to resources—monetary, time, technological, and personnel.233

Thinking about this endeavor as a process, rather than a series of events, has also helped to shape collective vision. Recognizing that interfaith dialogue is not an end in itself, but rather a necessary first step in a larger process of interfaith engagement—dialogue and action as two integral aspects of peacebuilding—has been a critical learning and has contributed to the development of the next phase of this endeavor.234 As such, the task force will further reflect on ways to engage the participants—through invitations to celebrate or commemorate certain events and Holy Days for different traditions, interfaith devotionals, and interfaith service projects.

**Recommendations**

As one of the major learnings from this endeavor has been that interfaith dialogue has the potential to be a conflict prevention and peacebuilding tool in communities experiencing negative peace, this paper posits that research into the long-term impact of interfaith dialogue in communities experiencing negative peace is needed to verify this theory. Furthermore, as there are various ways to engage in interfaith dialogue, additional research is needed to determine what dialogue formats and techniques are most effective at advancing the peacebuilding process. Additionally, as this study focused on a specific community with specific demographics, this particular process should be carried out in diverse environments to determine if the same

233 A Member of the Interfaith Forum of Greenville, North Carolina, email message to author, May 10, 2016; A Member of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee in discussion with the author, May 18, 2016.
234 Weller, “Interreligious Cooperation”; Moberg, “Experiential Encounters”. 
findings are replicable in other areas—of the country and the world—that are experiencing forms of negative peace.

For anyone who attempts to replicate this process, it will be important to consider the demographics (religious and ethnic), current level of interfaith engagement, and what, if any, organizations are already working to support interfaith collaboration in the locality of interest. Fargo, North Dakota, is a relatively small city with moderate religious and ethnic diversity dominated by a Caucasian and Christian majority. While there are a variety of resource centers for ethnic diversity, the Center for Interfaith Project is the only organization currently addressing the religious diversity of the community, and it has only been around for five years. Further, meaningful interfaith engagement has been lacking in this community. All of these factors were considered in developing the IDDs. It will be important to note the impact of IDDs in a variety of other settings.

Limitations and Implications

Duration and Participation

This study was limited by its duration—two months. In order for the theories posited in this paper to be verified a longer study must be undertaken—either in this or another community. Further, representatives from two of the belief systems the task force had hoped to include were not able to be present at either of the IDDs—Native Americans and Mormons. Furthermore, individuals who identify as “spiritual”, Agnostic, or do not identify with any particular system of belief were not included in this initial phase of the process.

Our intention was to include a variety of perspectives; however, due to the short duration of this project and the limited resources—the number of facilitators (four), the CIP board member contacts, and the size of the venue—sacrifices had to be made. We had to keep our numbers relatively small, and, as a part of the control, we wanted to have at least two representatives from each belief system; therefore, not all voices were included in the initial phase of this process.

It is important to keep in mind that seeing this study in terms of a process allows for points of reflection so that perceived limitations can be explored in the context of the overall vision—thus limitations are then seen as opportunities for growth and learning. With this in mind, a study is not a failure if it does not include all potential voices in the community; rather, it
is the beginning of a process that intends to include all voices in the community as capacity to do so increases, and as such provides a foundation upon which subsequent studies can build.

With that said, for practitioners thinking about attempting this process, it may be helpful to consider spiritual or agnostic as one of the systems of belief, even though those who identify as such do not necessarily associate their beliefs with those of anyone else in the community. Furthermore, if members of a particular community are not able to attend an initial phase, do not hesitate to continue reaching out to them; invite them to subsequent iterations of the process at whatever time the process is opened to new participants as their perspectives and voices will add valuable insight to the learnings gleaned from this process.

**Interfaith Dialogue Format**

The format an interfaith dialogue follows is also an important factor in executing a study of this kind. As illustrated in Chapter Two, there is a form of interfaith dialogue that has been implemented in a few cities around the United States for a number of years. This format served as a basis for the development of the format used in this study, although it is not identical—we developed our own questions; each participant answered the same question, whereas in the Amazing Faiths format each participant answers a different question; we developed our own guiding principles; etc. As far as I am aware, there are no studies indicating what form of interfaith dialogue is the most effective at building peace. This study posits that interfaith dialogue is conducive to building positive peace; yet, this is based on only one model of interfaith dialogue.

For our purposes, the model developed was designed in light of previous models, the research in Chapter Two, and the social reality of Fargo, North Dakota. A longer, cross-community study may be helpful to compare various forms of interfaith dialogue to determine what, if any, form of interfaith dialogue is most conducive to building positive peace in a community experiencing negative peace. Further, it may also be helpful to explore in subsequent studies if such a form of interfaith dialogue is equally as conducive to building positive peace in a conflict, or post-conflict, zone.

If the findings from this study are in anyway replicable in other regions of the country and the globe, and given the positive feedback about interfaith dialogue in general from participants in Texas, South Carolina, Wisconsin, and North Dakota, the implications for
beginning a systematic process of interfaith dialogue as a way to build religious literacy, prevent conflict, and foster positive peace are promising.\textsuperscript{235} 

\textsuperscript{235} An Original Founder of Amazing Faiths, email message to author, May 23, 2016; A Member of the Interfaith Forum of Greenville, North Carolina, email message to author, May 10, 2016; A Member of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee in discussion with the author, May 18, 2016.
References


Interfaith Dinner Dialogues


Appendix A: Participant Invitation Letter

Dear Friend,

The Center for Interfaith Projects has been part of the Fargo community since 2010. Part of our mission is to educate the community about different faiths and secular world views and to increase understanding and respect among people of diverse belief systems. In support of this mission, and in collaboration with a Master’s student in Interfaith Action, we have decided to sponsor a short, preliminary series of Interfaith Dinner Dialogues. We would like to extend to you an invitation to participate in this series—which is both an action research project and a community-building endeavor.

Participants can expect to come together twice in a two month period for dinner and a small-group discussions about their beliefs with people from various traditions. The initial gathering will focus on “sharing your story”—an exploration into each individual’s personal spiritual journey. The second gathering will provide an opportunity for each individual to explore the concept of peace from the perspective of his/her belief system. In both instances, this experience is an exercise of the heart—an occasion to share in honesty and humility one’s spiritual journey and perspective, as well as an opportunity to actively listen to the spiritual journey and perspective of others.

While this is not an academic exercise, the initial two gatherings will be a part of an action research project that will assist the Master’s student in writing her Capstone Report. By participating in this endeavor you will be asked to fill out three confidential surveys that will not only support your community and the Center for Interfaith Projects in better understanding how to connect people from diverse religious groups, but will also help shape the literature about interfaith dialogue.

Our hope is that the Interfaith Dinner Dialogues will not end with these initial gatherings; rather, we envision that the first two gatherings will serve as the opening of a process anticipated to engage the Fargo/Moorhead community in sustained interfaith dialogue intended to build bonds of fellowship and develop a common vision for the future.

Warmest Regards,

The Center for Interfaith Projects
Appendix B: Participant Invitation

Your Presence is Requested!
Join us for
Interfaith Dinner Dialogues

Saturday, April 30 & May 14
5:30 - 7:30 pm

NDSU Lutheran Center
1201 13th Ave N
Fargo, ND 58102

RSVP by April 17 to
lindsey.lugsch@gmail.com
Appendix C: Participant Privacy Letter

30 April 2016

To Whom It May Concern,

I, Lindsey Lugsch-Tehle, am carrying out an action research project about Interfaith Dialogue, and I am asking you to be a participant in my research.

I will give priority to your interests at all times. To protect your interests in my final report, I promise the following:

- Your identity will be protected at all times in my final report unless you give me specific permission to use your name.
- You are free at any time to withdraw from the research project, whereupon I will destroy all data relating to you. I will report that a participant decided to leave the project, and reflect on ways the project might have been more conducive for all participants.
- I will make a copy of my research report available to you.

Two copies are enclosed. Please sign both. Keep one for your records and return the other to me.

Researcher’s Name: Lindsey Lugsch-Tehle

Date: April 30, 2016

I have read and received a copy of this Privacy Letter from Lindsey Lugsch-Tehle.

Signed ____________________ Date ____________________
Appendix D: Guiding Principles and Process

Interfaith Dialogue

A process of exploring one’s own consciousness and worldview through direct engagement and relationship building with individuals from diverse belief systems and backgrounds.

Guiding Principles for Interfaith Dialogue

Humility
We are modest in the expression of our thoughts, experiences, and views.

Respect
We uphold the dignity of ourselves and each other.

Heartfulness
We engage with self and others from a place of calm and centered awareness; also known as mindfulness.

Fellowship
We engage with one another as equals.

Affectionate Attention
Rather than fault-finding, we engage in the practice of focusing on the strengths of ourselves and each other, listening to learn, not to teach.

Culture of Learning
We recognize that every experience is an opportunity to learn about ourselves and each other.

Community
We recognize that we are all a part of one community, and we are united in this journey together.
The Dialogue Process

Appreciative Inquiry (AI)—“the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen … capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential”. AI assumes that people are rich, untapped sources of constructive change. Engaging with each other in such a manner increases the likelihood that constructive learning and growth—individual and community-wide—will occur.

Each interfaith dialogue will begin with the facilitator sharing a prompt—a question designed to elicit reflective and honest feedback from each participant. You are encouraged to answer through personal examples, stories, and metaphors. An interfaith dialogue is a safe space, as such, the intention is to share when it is your turn and to listen and appreciate the views of all participants, allowing such views to influence us as they may. If you have questions, please hold them until everyone has had a chance to share. The facilitator will indicate when questions are appropriate.

It is important to remember that while each participant is representative of a larger system of belief, the views expressed are their own and do not necessarily represent the entire tradition.

---

237 Ibid.
Appendix E: Questionnaire 1

Please circle the number that indicates how closely the following statements represent your current beliefs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Uncertain</th>
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</tr>
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<td>I frequently engage, in meaningful ways, with people from different ethnicities than my own.</td>
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</table>

I am interested in engaging with people from different belief systems because:

____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________________
Religious Literacy Quiz:
Circle your answer

What are the four Gospels?
- Mark, John, Luke, and Corinthians
- Luke, John, Mark, and Acts
- Timothy, Peter, Mark, and Luke
- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

In which tradition are Vishnu and Shiva central figures?
- Islam
- Hinduism
- Bahá’í Faith
- Buddhism

What is the holy book of Islam?
- Qur’an
- Vedas
- Torah
- Tripitaka

According to rulings by the US Supreme Court, what is a public school teacher permitted to do?
- Lead a class in prayer
- Read from the Bible as an example of literature

Who is the founder of the Bahá’í Faith?
- Vishnu
- Mohammed
- Baha’u’llah
- Rumi
What tradition aims for nirvana, the state of being free from suffering?

Hinduism    Sikhism    Yazidi Religion    Buddhism

What tradition did Joseph Smith found?

Sikhism    Mormon    Native American Traditions    New Atheists

The First Amendment says two things about religion, what are the two religion clauses of the First Amendment?

The Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause

The Separation of Church and State Clause and the Freedom of Choice Clause

To what religion did Guru Nanak belong?

Hinduism    Islam    Sikhism    Yazidi Religion

Which tradition is not an Abrahamic tradition?

Bahá’í Faith    Islam    Judaism    Hinduism

Print your name: ______________________________  _________________________

Print your belief system: ______________________________

Please note that your name will remain confidential.
### Appendix F: Questionnaire 2

Please circle the number that indicates how closely the following statements represent your current beliefs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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I was surprised to learn:

___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
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Would you encourage others to attend an interfaith dialogue? Why?

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What, if anything, would improve your experience of interfaith dialogue?

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Please include any additional comments you may have for us:

Print your name (please note that your name will remain confidential):
### Appendix G: Questionnaire 3

Please circle the number that indicates how closely the following statements represent your current beliefs.

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In what ways have your attitudes toward those you perceive as different from you transformed through this experience?

___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
Religious Literacy Quiz:
Circle your answer

What are the four Gospels?

- Mark, John, Luke, and Corinthians
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In which tradition are Vishnu and Shiva central figures?

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To what religion did Guru Nanak belong?
- Hinduism
- Islam
- Sikhism
- Yazidi Religion

Which tradition is not an Abrahamic tradition?
- Bahá’í Faith
- Islam
- Judaism
- Hinduism
What are the implications of Interfaith Dialogue in your own life?

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

What are the implications of Interfaith Dialogue in your community?

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

What are the implications of Interfaith Dialogue for the world?

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

Do you believe that dialogue is sufficient to effect change in your community? Why or why not?

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________________________
Print your name: ____________________________________________

Please note that your name will remain confidential.

Are you from Fargo/Moorhead originally?  Yes/No
If no, where are you originally from: ____________________________________________

How large is your community of belief in the Fargo/Moorhead area?
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________

Have you engaged with fellow participants outside of the space of the Dinner Dialogues?  If yes, in what capacity?
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________

Please share any additional comments you may have (anything you would like to see in future Interfaith Dinner Dialogues, any additional programming you would like to experience as a part of this process).
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix H: Participant Interview Questions

How was it to explore peace with a group of people with different beliefs/backgrounds than your own?

In what ways, if any, do you think interfaith dialogue is related to peacebuilding?

In what ways, if any, do you feel your knowledge of other traditions increased?

What are some of your general reflections of the process?
Appendix I: Board Member Interview Questions

Please share your personal reflections on the overall process—both about the endeavor and about how you feel you have learned and grown as an individual, as well as as a board member for the Center for Interfaith Projects?
Appendix J: Gantt Chart

Interfaith Dinner Dialogue Change Process
March 1 to May 28, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycles of Activity</th>
<th>Lines of Action</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Lead</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>End</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cycle 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 1: Conceptualize Interfaith Dinner Dialogue (IDD) format</td>
<td>Line of Action 1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Line of Action 1.1.1: Meet twice with board to conceptualize IDD and identify dates</td>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Line of Action 1.1.2: Identify location to host IDD</td>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Line of Action 1.1.3: Book location for agreed upon dates</td>
<td></td>
<td>BM2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 2: Create content</td>
<td>Line of Action 2.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Line of Action 2.1.1: Create letter</td>
<td></td>
<td>BM3</td>
<td>June 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Line of Action 2.1.2: Create invitation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Author</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 3: Compile a list of individuals to invite</td>
<td>Line of Action 3.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Line of Action 3.1.1: Compile a list</td>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>June 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 4: Research other IDD Formats</td>
<td>Line of Action 4.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Line of Action 4.1.1: Research and learn from other formats</td>
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<td>Author</td>
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