

## STARTING AN INTERFAITH ORGANIZATION

A Personal Confession. I was not a founder of the Interfaith Alliance nationally or locally. It had been functioning for at least six months before we moved back to NC.

An Honest Recognition. There is more than one way to begin, and I cannot say that our way was the best. I can say it is *one* way.

A Suggested Recipe.

### ***Ingredients Needed***

- 3 – 4 committed people who see the need and are willing to work.
- Clearly stated *raison d'être* (lit. a reason for being or existence), that is, a concise, clearly written mission statement. Here in Raleigh and Wake County, our mission statement is:

#### **Our Mission**

**To offer hope by providing a grassroots, non-partisan faith-based organization where all people of goodwill can participate and promote the insight and wisdom of religion as a positive force in life and as a reconciling a unifying influence in our society. Our mission also includes uniting behind shared beliefs of ethical and moral principles and behavior, being an influence in shaping the nature of our society by engaging in public policy discussions, and by promoting harmony, trust, and understanding among all religion, races, groups, and peoples.**

- A board of directors composed of peoples of several faiths, such as, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Jains, Muslims, and Sikhs. Some should be clergy, but not more than a third. These should be recruited one by one and in person, not by telephone.
- An executive committee composed of officers (president, vice-president/s, secretary, treasurer, and committee chairs).
- Legal and tax documents, which include (1) Power of Attorney; (2) Certified Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws; (3) Non-profit Mail Permit; (4) State Tax Exempt status filed with state Department of Revenue; (5) Internal Revenue Service Federal Income Tax exemption or 501-c-3 status filed with the Department of the Treasury. This filing with IRS must include: Form 1023, Application for Recognition of Exemption; Form 8718, User Fee for Tax

Exempt Organization including check for \$150; Form 872-C, Consent Fixing Period of Limitation Upon Assessment of Tax under Section 4940 of IRS Code; Form 2848. Note: You can likely find a sympathetic attorney who will advise and help you complete these documents and file them for you *pro bono* or for a modest fee.

- A brochure to present or introduce your organization We use an 8 ½ x 11" tri-fold, printed on both sides that provides basic information, such as Why an Interfaith Council or Alliance; Who We Are; What We Do or Want to Do; How We Do It; and a membership application. We use a three-panel fold format which on one side has our name, logo, and motto; a statement of our purpose or mission; the date of founding and the kind of people we invite to join, namely, people of good will, who have respect for others, who are concerned about unity, justice, and building understanding; and our address, phone number, and e-mail address. On the other side are the answers to the questions of Why, Who We Are, What We Do, How We Do It, and the membership application blank. (You will need to decide on membership fee, length of membership by fiscal or calendar year, and other information you may want or need about members.)
- A proposed budget that should be approved by the board. This will have to be provisional and indicative. You do not need a lot of money to begin, but you need some. This can be raised from memberships, contributions from board members, and soliciting from specific congregations, namely those represented on your board and those who send someone to the opening event(s).
- Some working committees, such as public policy, community building, program, nominating, finances and development. (We have four internal committees—executive, finance, membership, and development—and four external committees—human concerns, institute for religious studies, community building, and ethics in public life.) Other ad hoc committees are: diversity training, a book discussion group, et al.
- A kick-off event or events, such as, a public forum, a breakfast or lunch to introduce yourselves and attract members. Can be followed up by fund raising breakfast or lunch within two or three months.
- A schedule of future programs and events. (Examples of activities which we have done are:
  - Breakfast for clergy and community leaders with Bishop Joseph Gossman, Raleigh Diocese, to introduce his pastoral letter on poverty in NC.
  - Institute of Religious Studies series of five presentations by academics and experts in the five major religions in Wake County and the Research Triangle.
  - Partnered early in our history with two Christian congregations in conducting Vigils Against Violence for every homicide victim in Raleigh, with Hospice in public forums on death and dying, and with organizations providing programs for singles and senior citizens.

- Partnered with several other organizations in one-time events, such as, an interfaith memorial service for the victims of 9/11/01 as well as a second Interfaith Service of Remembrance on Sept 11, 2002.
- Diversity exposure programs for government agencies, congregations, civic clubs, and other organizations such as "Singles Together in Raleigh" and the Shepherd's Center for senior citizens.
- Interfaith Festivals of Music and Dance
- Regular forums on topics of general interest, such as, death and dying (theological and practical issues), violence in our society, the concept of a just war, poverty in NC and what to do about it,
- A Newsletter with an editor and lay-out or design person.
- Identified partners, such as the local faith judicatories (Council of Churches, Diocese, Presbytery, Conferences, Associations, Jewish Federation, and Sikh *gurdwaras*), ministers' conferences, Hospice, Interfaith Food Network, specific congregations (e.g., Vigils Against Violence and interfaith services of prayer for peace), Church World Service (CROP WALK), Stop Hunger Now, Homeless Shelters and the Interfaith Hospitality Network, and other entities.
- A willingness to work and work hard. This is not easy because until September 11, 2001, interfaith relations were not high on many peoples' agendas, including clergy. Even now as the memory of the 9/11 tragedy recedes, there is a diminishing of interest. This can and should change, and I think we can make it happen.

### **Mixing the Ingredients**

1. Understand that you need all these in the mix and more. (See our future goals.) But you cannot secure or develop them in a day. It will take weeks, months, and years.
2. Know that people will "sign on" with different expectations and needs, and some of these will not work or they will drop out for various reasons. Do not be discouraged when this happens. Know that some who drop out or do not work at first will later re-engage and do something. Also, some who drop out will come back.
3. Formally thank those who work. We write letters to everyone who makes a contribution whether it is financial or in kind. We give a certificate of appreciation in special cases and we recognize at our annual meetings everyone who has worked on any project during the year.
4. Make a checklist and decide on the initial, indispensable priorities of "ingredients needed" and begin the processing of mixing the components.

5. Have an initial orientation for all board members and repeat this annually. Also, have strategic planning sessions at least every three to four years. Do “in flight” corrections as needed, but do not act precipitously.
6. Plan and conduct at least an Annual Meeting to which you invite all members and potential members, elect new officers and board members, hear from the president or someone about the past year and the plans for the future, the treasurer, and from an informative and stimulating speaker. Also recognize those who have been involved and who are going off the board, moved away, etc.
7. Cultivate the media by personal contacts and “professionally written” news releases. Know that your public image will be helped or hurt by how well you relate to media people.

### **Mistakes to Avoid**

1. Having too broad a focus and goals that are too vague, common (others are already doing what is proposed), modest, ambitious or unreachable in a reasonable amount of time.
2. Depending too much on small cadre of people and/or building the organization around one person or a small group of controlling elite. What about a rotating board?
2. Assuming that you have to have a big budget, a paid staff, and an impressive or expensive office. (We functioned for the first year without a P.O. address, telephone, fax machine, or other office equipment. The second year we rented a P.O. Box. Only in the past *two months* have secured a small office in one of the churches, a permanent telephone number, and an answering machine. We are still an all-volunteer organization.)
3. Expecting wide and strong support from the clergy. In our six years of history, we have had a total of 65 board members, 23 of whom have been ordained or functioning clergy. Only 13 of these, however, served for more than one year. Currently we have six (6) clergy on our board—five Protestants and one Muslim imam, plus two Protestant clergy as ex officio board members.
4. Attempting to do everything that people suggest you do or insist you ought to do. You cannot meet everyone’s need or everyone’s expectation. Thus
  - Decide who you are and what you want to do.
  - Keep your goal(s) in mind and do not attempt projects that do not harmonize with or help you achieve your goal(s). Example of funding

requests each of us receives annually. How many do you receive in person, by mail, and by telephone each year? How do you decide on those to which you give? How often do you “weed” this garden of solicitations? I hope annually.

- Take on as projects only those for which you have the personnel, financial, and energy resources readily available. Work with partners that help you achieve what you are trying to do.

When someone calls and says, “Why are you not doing such and such?” or “Have you thought about doing this and that?” be appreciative but clear and gentle in responding. Some things other groups or organizations are already doing. “We do not compete with them.” Some things people suggest will not fit with your goals. Many are good ideas, but unless you have the resources, you should not attempt them. The most recent example was a call I received two weeks ago about the “Abraham Salons” that are being promoted nationally by the author of *Abraham*, Bruce Feiler and Harper Collins Publishing Company. I said to the caller, “Mary, I am acquainted with these and with the book. Yes, I think it would be splendid idea to start some of the salons. As you know, we are an all-volunteer organization, and there is no one I know whom I can call on to take on this project. Will you take the lead in this?” She said she would. That is the way we have done most things.

6. Not having a clearly stated, formal, and easy way for people to quit. See my essay on “Learning How to Quit.” Too often in volunteer or non-profit organizations we see people slow down, drift away, show a lack of enthusiasm and commitment, and begin their process of dropping out. They feel guilty and sometimes we add to their discomfort or anxiety. Make it a part of the orientation for board members how they can quit and not feel guilty. It will be a liberating experience for them and for the origination.

### **Where Are We Now and Where do We Want to Go in Raleigh and Wake County?**

1. We have a board composed of 30 members from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Native American, and Sikh Universalist-Unitarian communities as well as three who are not formally connected with a faith community.

2. We have done a lot of things, promoted and done an ever-increasing number of projects, and worked with many partners.

3. We have some very ambitious goals for the future which we hold up as goals and dreams, and we are working to achieve them in time, goals such as, at least two paid staff, a web site listing all of the resources available in Wake County for people in need, the publication of the "Ethical Framework," a regularly published and distributed newsletter, and a Interfaith Center for Meditation, Worship, and Dialogue.

4. We have made mistakes, attempted and failed in some things, but overall, we have established a very positive image that results in an increasing amount of good will, a reputation that we *are* the interfaith community with the contacts and relationships needed.

5. Also, we have seen the steady growth in the number of requests for help and information—these come daily--as well as an increase in number of individual members, and institutions of faith and other entities supporting our work. Our base of financial contributors is enlarging. We have, however, received only two grants (\$1,200 from the NC Humanities Society and \$1,000 from National Interfaith Alliance). We are working to improve this.

Our history is brief and the organization as it continues to develop will change. It should.

Sometime before he was killed, Martin Luther King published a book entitled, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* King began by referring to a well-known novelist who had died, and "among his papers was found a list of possible plots for future novels." One was underlined: "A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together."

This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Eastern and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family separated in ideas, cultures and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

We, the Interfaith Alliance of Wake County, are now, this very day, involved in helping build a Habitat house in Cary—the first house Habitat has build here with workers representing the widest spectrum of religions. It is a worthy project and we were pleased to be invited to help.

But we are trying to build a much larger, a much grander house—one like that envisioned by MLK. This "dream house," however, It is not and will not be visible to the naked eye, but some see it and are joining us in the construction, in realizing the dream. They see it because they are people of vision who dream and because they are people with "faith eyes."

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You may also call or write the Interfaith Alliance of Wake County, PO Box 40156, Raleigh, NC 27629-0156. (919) 786-4454. [www.interfaithalliance-nc.org](http://www.interfaithalliance-nc.org)

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