# Interfaith Engagement and Group Dynamics

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After Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge, God looking straight at them, knowing precisely where they were, asks Adam, "*Where* are you?" Situated in place and time with particular knowledge, this, the first question in the Bible, asks: Who are you, Man? You, the one with Eve in the garden -- and not just any garden, the Garden of Eden -- knowing what you now know. 'Who are you' now in *this* circumstance?

Thousands of years later, at the invitation of two local clergy and several community activists, 20 people gather in a church basement for the second in an series of five Christian-Muslim-Jewish open dialogues to help (in their words) "build trust and mutual understanding" in preparation for the opening of an interfaith soup kitchen, in the city of Kalamazoo. Gathered are people in every hue, ranging in age from 18 - 72.

Somewhere between Adam's existential challenge and this gathering, Plato spoke about "the great stage of human life …"; Shakespeare famously said, "All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players." The sociologist Erving Goffman in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life said, "All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify!"

As people arrive, the pastor asks participants to place the hymnbooks in the closet, rearrange the chairs in a circle, and help themselves to cheese and wine. A 3-part antiphonous liturgy of Muslim, Jews, and Christians plays in the background and there are Bibles stacked next to the sign-up sheet for volunteers to serve food at the shelter.

What are the dynamics at play in this scenario? Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, coined the term **Group Dynamics** to refer to how people act and react to variable behaviors and shifting circumstances; but group dynamics are more subtle and complex than its descriptor suggests. Group dynamics **include hidden feelings, connections and disconnection — a web of complex circumstances and relationships.** Lewin wrote in the context of European anti-Semitism of the 1940's, when group fate and literal survival required inter-dependence**.**

Group Dynamics, however, is **neither good nor bad.** It is what as leaders, facilitators, clergy, and activists pay attention to in the course of interfaith engagement. We do not have good dynamics or bad dynamics; we have group dynamics that are useful to examine so that we are **conscious participants** in exploring interfaith relationships**.** From small group processes to building national movements, dynamics are at play. For illustrative purposes here, I refer to the former, where much of interfaith practice takes place in the U.S. today.

As facilitators and participants, **self-reflection** is valuable so that we observe what is happening around us without taking things personally or, too personally, that is. It is helpful to notice the roles we play in the context of the unfolding drama of the group itself. Especially as groups are just forming or when they are intentionally short-term, we tend -- nearly without fail – to end up behaving in ways that mirror the prevailing social, economic, political ethos outside of the group. Dynamics, then, are useful to assess by both **looking at who we are within the group *and* the group itself**, as an entity.

Let us ask about the immediately observable dynamics, in the **first four minutes** of our fictitious group gathering described above, by asking the following questions:

What happens when the facilitator asks to changes around the seating arrangements? Who does the work? What is the mood in the room? What issues of authority arise? Is God in the room? Who are the decision makers? How does that happen?

What is the ambience upon entering the church basement meeting room? How do participants feel about wine on the table? What is the process of setting the goals? Are there icons or pictures on the wall? What effect does this particular music have and on whom? Who is in and who is out? What sort of leadership has emerged leading up to the meeting? Is there a particular ethnic group taking the lead?

Does the group have an identity? Is there a "we" and if so, what is "our" story? What is our theory of interfaith work? Does change happen through relationships? Do we have perceptual and narrative differences? Are interfaith problems best uncovered through institutional analyses of economics, gender, race, inequality, or historical traumas?

Our answers to these questions define what group we are in, in the moment, as well as **what is the group or our emerging organization about?** What is our theory of change? In what conversation are we engaged? All this is at play in the first few minutes of gathering. And again, who are *you* on this stage? In other words, what happened and how do I feel about what happened? What is my story about what happened?

**Stages of a group: Beginning, Middle, and End**:

I find it useful to think of interfaith groups in developmental stages that are not neat and linear, but do follow some patterns. Typically, similar group dynamics show up in a remarkable variety of settings, including groups that gather for interfaith community service, shared learning, open-ended dialogue, and even political negotiations.

At the start, as groups form or each time they meet, participants and leaders can swing **along a continuum of approach and avoidance,** curiosity and fear, connection and detachment. I have noticed this most markedly with groups of adolescents who literally come in and out of a room, sometimes even on skateboards. Adults are generally more subtle so it takes discernment to assess when groups are avoiding conflict or deep engagement. Why do folks appear bored? Are they planting a stake in the game of negotiating interests? Are they acting out indirect hostility and hurt or is the tone so

overly positive, that the conversation is general and syrupy with real progress frustrated. This is where we differentiate dialogue *about* dialogue from genuine **profound engagement**.

Often, halfway through the life of a group, confidence builds and efforts to understand one another increase. In this stage of development of the group, people are more likely to adhere to the social contract and honor their agreed upon norms. Conflict and intense emotionality, from tears to laughter, can surface in constructive ways. In interfaith groups, this is often the time when salient political or theologically difficult topics emerge, such as Israel and Palestine, supersessionism, or heaven and hell.

In this stage, the group is at a crossroads and group members may dig deeper. The pitfalls of this stage, however, are that group members also take bigger risks that can test the group's cohesion. On the other end of the spectrum, there is also danger of undifferentiated group-think, despite profound differences, in the interest of keeping the group together. As each particular group copes with uncertainty and confusion in its own way, participants tend to stay in the storm and solve problems creatively, in this stage of group development.

Finally, as the group begins to terminate, either by design or circumstances, the **Door Knob stage** comes to life. Someone raises an important and contentious topic with strong feelings, mostly notably of insult and hurt, that participants knowingly or unknowingly ignored the entire life of the group, just as the door is closing. I am reminded of a prominent academic who, at the very last moment of a weeklong intense international gathering of religious leaders, held up a cartoon that he found deeply humiliating and injurious. The challenge is to find the time and the means to attend to these thoughts and feelings.

At the conclusion of a group, participants can feel angry at having to say goodbye and inevitably regret all the work left undone and all the matters left unsaid. Some members leave early; others devalue the experience. Most people, however, consolidate their learning and express gratitude while trying to plan future action. In our example, the question remains whether a critical mass of people would actually **commit to one another** to create and sustain the interfaith soup kitchen. The issue of committing to the work is one challenge and more likely to succeed if group members have a genuine connection with one another. There are many causes for social justice in which activists can participate. Hunger is one such issue and relationships are primarily what will generate sustained commitment, ultimately making all the difference.

**Group Dynamics and the Politics of Identity**

In Violence and Identity, Nobel Laureate in economics, (for the time being, a decidedly secular discipline) Amartya Sen says that singular affiliation is a "classification (that) is cheap; identity is not …" He continues that the dialogue among civilizations has the same effect as the so named clash of civilizations. He claims both are "cultivated theory (that)

can bolster uncomplicated bigotry". When we gather Muslim, Jews and Christians, are we reinforcing narrow group identities?

In BAP, we engage in an exercise of **Affinity groupings** as we divide into as Muslims, Jews, or Christians. Then, we observe what happens when we ask participants to gather in groups of those who enjoy Jazz, liturgical music or classical compositions; then with those who feel at home, in exile, or at home and in exile, at once.

This, along with non-verbal artistic exercises **highlight dimensions of identity that increase awareness of the permeability of boundaries,** and decreases tendency to think in dichotomies and stereotypes. To be sure, honoring firm Muslim, Jewish and Christian boundaries is very important, as we often feel invisible and dishonored if there are attempts to blur, merge, or fudge those boundaries, good intentions notwithstanding.

Paying attention to group dynamics in the context of identity politics is helpful in understanding the complexities of multiple identities in other ways, as well. At times, we think we are in a conversation about faith yet we are really in a dialogue about race, economics, or gender. When do we underscore most forcefully our religious affiliations, our parenthood, our citizenship? What parts of our identities are secure and when? Under conditions of uncertainty, one or another part of our multiple identities is at risk and raises the stakes of literal or imagined threat.

**When 2 groups add another, 1 relationship turns into 7**

When a third group is added to the mix of dyadic interfaith work whether in dialogue, ritual, community service, or the creation of a national interfaith movement, *insha'allah* one relationship then becomes seven. In Building Abrahamic Partnerships and in the Abrahamic Family Reunion project, for example, we are attending to the following relationships:

Jewish - Christian; Jewish - Muslim; Christian - Muslim; Jewish - Christian - Muslim; Jewish - Christian affinity without (and sometimes at the expense of) Muslims; Jewish - Muslim affinity without (and sometimes at the expense of) Christians; Christian - Muslim affinity without (and sometimes at the expense of) Jews.

In these constellations, the **Dynamics of Power** require particular attention. When two affinity groups become three, allegiances can shift, alliances of two against one can form and there is now the potential for one of the groups to become the outsider in the eyes of the other two. Projective identification tends to intensify; that is, the tendency to project what is hated or rejected within us or our own group onto the Other. This is a particularly unconscious potent dynamic and increases the destructiveness of power plays in two against one.

While scapegoating is increasingly probable in threesomes, so are mediating peacemakers and third-siders, a term coined by Bill Ury. On the positive side, triads offer the possibility that one of the more neutral parties have the opportunity to heal

traumatic wounds between the two other parties as well as strengthen critical thinking and empathic connections.

Finally, w**hat does *not* work** in any configuration is: talking heads, email dialogues, and amazing goals like world peace by next Tuesday.