

## **Bridge Builders Charlotte: An Interfaith Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

An Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC)-Queens University Initiative

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Religious Pluralism in Civic Spaces

### **What is “religious pluralism”?**

As Harvard’s Diana Eck (founder of The Pluralism Project) puts it, religious diversity is a *fact*, while religious pluralism is an *aspiration*. Our communities are increasingly diverse in religious and worldview representation, but it takes a *concerted effort to build bridges of understanding and cooperation across those differences* if we want that diversity to be an asset. Consider these examples:

- Diversity means that we work alongside a Hindu who doesn’t eat meat. Pluralism means understanding why not, and reflecting on our own relationship to other animate creatures.
- Diversity means that our child’s soccer team includes a Muslim teenager. Pluralism means knowing something about Ramadan and its implications for her participation that month.
- Diversity means that the night shelter where we volunteer serves neighbors from a variety of traditions. Pluralism means planning the menu, the space, and the time to enable their observance of those traditions.

### **When it comes to religious difference, why isn’t tolerance enough?**

Religious pluralism, which grows out of robust interfaith engagement, goes beyond tolerance to bring about deeper understanding and more meaningful human connection as we live together in this diverse world. True, a tolerant view of others’ religious differences is better than a combative one. Yet when “tolerance” means keeping silent, two things happen. First, we adopt by default (often negative) stereotypical views of others. Second, the religious voices raised in public spaces tend to represent a minority, extremist view. To mark religion as “off limits” in the workplace, in public schools, and in other civic spaces robs us of authentic relationships that nurture us on our individual journeys and strengthen our social fabric.

### **What do we gain when we promote religious pluralism through interfaith engagement?**

Social scientists have documented the following rewards that result from interfaith engagement:

- **Spiritual vitality:** Our own spiritual lives thrive when we learn deeply about other traditions.
- **Group cohesion:** Religious or philosophical communities that forge relationships across difference find their own internal bonds strengthened.
- **Equity and justice:** Navigating religious difference effectively in civic spaces exposes core values that can help shape social structures for the benefit of all people.
- **Social fabric:** When religious groups work together across difference, they “bridge” their rich social capital and so strengthen the social fabric to which they belong.

### **How can we foster religious pluralism?**

The kind of interfaith engagement that promotes religious pluralism entails these approaches:

- Listen for understanding. We can foster a spirit of “appreciative inquiry,” which values another’s perspective and experience on her own terms.
- Find common ground. Without reducing your perspectives to the least common denominator, it’s always possible to celebrate the “touch points” of different traditions.

- Better together. Consider how going deeper on difference helps you individually as you consider your particular religious views, and together as you find shared values.