



## STUDY GUIDE

### *Fremont, U.S.A.: A City's Encounter with Religious Diversity*

For more than a decade, the Pluralism Project ([www.pluralism.org](http://www.pluralism.org)) has studied and documented the new religious landscape of the United States. One of the cities visited in our early research inspired the documentary film *Fremont, USA*.

This film offers a glimpse of religious diversity on the local level: Fremont, California is a city transformed by new immigration. A rajagopuram rises in a tidy suburban neighborhood, announcing the vital presence of the Hindu community. The diversity of the global Buddhist community is also in evidence, as Thai, Chinese, and Burmese temples – and a women's monastic retreat center – dot the landscape. Fremont is home to Peace Terrace, where Muslims and Christians have built side by side, and Gurdwara Road, where a large Sikh community engages in creative forms of outreach.

Through civic engagement and interfaith action, strangers have become neighbors in this American city. Yet Fremont has also faced real challenges, especially after 9/11. When Alia Ansari, a Muslim woman, is murdered on a Fremont street, some wonder if it was a hate crime: Was she killed because of her headscarf? How will the wider community respond?

**Introduction** The mayor, city council members, and police chief offer a brief introduction to the City of Fremont, California as it celebrates its 50th anniversary.

**New Religious Landscape** As Fremont's religious landscape has been transformed, new relationships are being forged in this multireligious city.

**Civic Engagement** The City of Fremont responds to its growing diversity, creating innovative programs for the elderly and responding to hate violence.

**New Challenges After 9/11** Fremont faces new challenges and develops unprecedented outreach and bridge-building efforts.

**Alia Ansari** When a Muslim woman is brutally murdered while walking to school with her young daughter, the Fremont community is called upon to respond.

**Fremont Moves Forward** Amidst challenge and change, citizens in Fremont look ahead to the future.

*Fremont, USA* makes the challenges of pluralism vivid, visible, and accessible for discussion. It was produced and directed by Rachel Antell and Elinor Pierce and is narrated by Diana L. Eck. The total running time of *Fremont, USA* is 57 minutes. For more information, please see: <http://www.pluralism.org/fremontusa>

## **USE OF THIS STUDY GUIDE**

*How should we use this DVD and guide?*

This guide is designed to assist the viewer in relating the story of Fremont to his or her own experiences as a member of a multireligious society. The guide may be consulted after viewing the film in order to facilitate discussion and encourage reflection. The questions are organized according to the film's sections, detailed above.

*Who might find this guide useful?*

The ideas and experiences discussed in this film and guide are appropriate for a general audience, including young adults. The following groups might find this film particularly relevant and thought-provoking:

- Religious/congregational groups
- Interfaith groups
- High school, college, and graduate classes
- Youth groups
- Activist organizations
- Mayors, city council members, and commissioners
- Civic leaders and organizations

*Where can I find more information on the issues discussed here?*

A list of related links is included on the *Fremont, USA* website:

<http://www.pluralism.org/fremontusa>

## **STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS**

The study guide is intended to encourage you to look at the issues presented in *Fremont, USA* in light of your own city or town: how is Fremont emblematic of American communities today? How is it similar to – and different from – where you live? At the same time, these questions will ask you to consider your own responses – civic, religious, or both – as a member of a multireligious society.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In her introductory narration, Dr. Diana L. Eck makes reference to the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act. How do you understand the impact of this Act on Fremont, and on the United States as a whole?

How is -- and isn't -- Fremont representative of the United States? Is anything unique about the diversity of Fremont?

This film is a portrait of the new religious communities of Fremont – Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Muslim -- as they interact with the city and other religious groups. It is, necessarily, a selective portrait. What other groups not featured in the film may also play a role in the religious and civic life of the city?

## **NEW RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE**

The Hindu community was one of the first immigrant religious groups in Fremont to establish a place of worship. How are their experiences similar to, and different from, the communities that came later?

Yogi Chugh mentions that the Hindu community bought a church and transformed it into a temple. He notes, “Over the years, we began to realize that a temple should look like a temple.” Syed Mahmood later describes how Muslim communities would purchase an old church or building, and convert that place into a mosque, although it did not look like one. “And it was a great desire of the community to have a real mosque in this area.” To what degree does *identity* factor into decisions about establishing a place of worship? Why might a “landmark” temple or mosque be important?

After viewing the film, what do you know about the Buddhist community in Fremont? How is Buddhist diversity an asset, and how might it be a liability?

How has the religious landscape of your city or town changed over the last 50 years? Are you aware of the presence of other religious communities nearby? Are there formal or informal interfaith relationships?

Sarabjit mentions that the Gurdwara is “an asset to the Fremont community.” She explains, “We were able to start or implement very many programs from the gurdwara which was not a tradition in India.” Later on, the Venerable mentions that Wat Buddhansorn has supported the local efforts for women’s ordination, which was illegal in Thailand. Are there other examples from Fremont of religious communities adapting or innovating in the American context? Are there notable examples of this in your own city or town?

Ayya, when speaking about Buddhism in America, explains: “All of the Buddhist traditions that we have now started with the Buddha. The monks walked to various countries. So we see that kind of dispersal happening in the world, but here in this area, we’re coming back together.” Can you think of other examples of religious communities coming together in new ways in America?

Do you think that the model of a church and a mosque building side-by-side on Peace Terrace is something that could be replicated in other communities? Why would, or wouldn’t, this be valuable to do? Are there other examples of neighboring faiths, or co-location, from your own community?

## **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

How do you define “civic engagement” and what significance does it have for your religious community? Do your religious convictions inform your level of civic engagement? How? On what issues?

How does your city council or town government reflect – and respond to – the religious diversity of your community? What are the intersections between the

city government and religious entities in your town? Do the police have any special training related to religion? Who responds to hate crimes? How?

The Fremont Police Chief describes the need for police departments to learn about the diversity of the city, and adds, "But learning is a two-way street. You have to find a balance between respecting the cultural norms of somebody that's come to the United States balanced with our culture." Do you agree with this statement? What obstacles might religious communities face when interacting with law enforcement?

Chief Steckler, Mayor Wasserman, and Anu Natarajan all mention how important it is to reach out to community members and engage them. In what ways do you see this happening? What forms of engagement exist in your own city or town?

Why do you think that many in the City of Fremont responded angrily to the "Flags Around the World" display in the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade? Why do you think the response was so strong? Do you feel it is appropriate to have flags from other countries in the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade? Why or why not?

The CAPS program for elders is a creative response to the unique challenges faced by immigrant populations. Are there innovative social programs in your own community, related to religion and/or ethnicity? Are there unmet needs?

## **NEW CHALLENGES AFTER 9/11**

Moina noted, "It's our time that we [Muslims] reach out to our non-Muslim friends and teach them about ourselves." What were the range of responses to 9/11 by minority communities, and how effective does it appear that they were? How did the Jewish and Christian communities respond, and in what ways was this response different?

When speaking of the Bridge-Building Ministry, Bruce Green said, "The basic teaching of Jesus was to love our God number one, and right alongside this is to love our neighbors like themselves." In what ways do you see this theology being lived out in Fremont? How does this apply to congregations in your own city or town?

Rev. Busick describes the experience of living on Peace Terrace as "both challenging and rewarding." He notes that, "It takes some discipline actually to stay open to people to really make the effort to understand somebody else before critiquing or judging them." Can you think of times when you have tried to stay open to people in your community?

In what ways did 9/11 impact your community? Were there hate crimes? Did you witness any increase in outreach from religious communities, whether charity work, education, or interfaith action?

How important were pre-existing relationships to the difficulties faced by the Fremont community after 9/11?

Moina explains that, “Charity is something that’s mandatory in Islam.” Sarabjit notes, “There’s a tradition of [the] Sikh religion to feed the poor people.” Yogi Chugh states, “There is no greater cause than helping build a greater community.” Is charity a shared value across traditions? What are the theological or textual sources that inform charity work in various traditions?

What are some of the ways in which new religious communities – and long-established communities – participate in charitable activities in your city or town?

Sarabjit notes that, “We’re enjoying the fruits—all the immigrants. So we need to do our share also.” In doing so, she is issuing a call for greater civic engagement by immigrants. What are some of the barriers that immigrant communities might face? What are some of the advantages to greater involvement in the community?

The Jewish community played a leadership role in the development of the hate crime forum. Why do you think this might be the case?

The testimonies of the high school students were powerful: Homayra noted that, “At this time in our country’s history, I feel more vulnerable than before and more identifiable. And maybe it’s important for you to know how I feel.” Ratanjit added, “I ask you to deeply think about what you can do to make sure our communities are places where everyone feels like they truly belong.” How are such hate crime forums useful to a community? In what ways are they insufficient? What steps can we take, as individuals or as communities, to cultivate a sense of belonging for all members? How does this change during a crisis?

## **ALIA ANSARI**

Do you believe the murder of Alia Ansari was a hate crime? Why or why not? What do you think of Herman’s statement that, “It had the effect of a hate crime”?

Rev. Bruce Green decided to hold a memorial service at a Christian church for a Muslim woman. Do you feel that was appropriate? What do you think of the statement, “We are the neighborhood church...”

Were you surprised by Ahmad Ansari’s decision to move away from Fremont? What do you think informed his choice?

Why do you think the community held a “Wear a Hijab/Turban Day”?

If a person from a religious minority group was murdered in your town, what sort of response might there be? What would *your* response be? Are there other ways that Fremont might have responded to the tragedy?

## **FREMONT MOVES FORWARD**

Steve Cho indicated that, “Fremont is probably representative of what neighborhoods [in the US] are going to become 10, 20, 30 years down the line.” Do you agree with his assessment?

What do you imagine Fremont will be like in the next fifty years? What is your vision, or hope, for the future of your own community?

Both the Mayor and Sarabjit Kaur Cheema place their hopes in the next generation. What changes would you anticipate for the next generation? Would they face any new challenges?

Rev. Busick notes that, “Fremont has so much to offer in... how we move forward in this increasingly shrinking world and how we can respect one another but also be able to share who we are with integrity.” To what extent is Fremont a model city? To what extent is your city a model city?

## **ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS**

Did this introduction to diverse religious communities in an American city surprise you in any way?

What do you learn about the religious communities – Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian – through this film? What would you like to learn more about?

Do you feel that the educational and socio-economic status of Fremont, as a fairly affluent community in the Silicon Valley, has any impact on religious and civic engagement?

Women play a range of leadership roles in Fremont: what impact, if any, do you feel this may have on the community? What forms of women’s leadership are evident in your own city or town?