

## Common Cause in Social Action

*Summary: Motivated by shared values of peace and justice, members of different religious backgrounds have created organizations dedicated to promoting social action for the common good. Whether opposing gun violence, promoting labor rights, or creating dialogue on college campuses, these groups draw support for their activism from various religious foundations.*

The principle that we should not do separately what we can do together has launched many ecumenical and interreligious initiatives in the United States and, indeed, throughout the world. Common concern for common problems motivates people of different religious traditions to join forces.

Worldwide, the last half of the 20th century saw the rise of many new forms of cooperation among people of different religious traditions. While violence and war have fractured nations and regions along religious lines, they have also created new interfaith alliances for peace. The environmental crisis has made clear that the nations and religious communities of the world are interdependent in an ecosystem that does not regard human boundaries. New waves of migration and immigration have made people of all religious traditions next-door neighbors, affected by the same civic decisions. Today, going it alone has become impossible in communities in which neighbors worship in varied postures, base their judgments on differing authorities, recognize sometimes divergent revelations, and speak of the divine in a multitude of ways. Various forms of interfaith cooperation attempt to build the relationships of understanding that will sustain this shrinking, interdependent world with its many multireligious societies.

For 25 years the Peace Abbey in Sherborn, Massachusetts sought to promote peace education and social action for the common good. The Peace Abbey grew out of the efforts of the Life Experience School, a group of disabled and terminally ill young people who commit themselves to serving the world as peacemakers. In 2011, the Peace Abbey was incorporated into the Center and Archives for Peace, Social Action, Public Policy, and the Arts at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Meanwhile, atop a hill in Leverett, Massachusetts sits a Buddhist *stupa*, or *pagoda*, an ancient structure “conceived as a prayer for peace, a tangible structure that manifests the dedication of our lives to justice and peace.” The Peace Pagoda’s well-known Peace Walks are interfaith actions undertaken to tackle issues of the day, such as protesting nuclear proliferation or supporting local environmental initiatives.

Recently, interfaith movements have often focused on caring for and ministering to immigrants, particularly those who face material hardship and social marginalization. The Interfaith Immigration Coalition is a partnership of dozens of faith-based organizations committed to immigration reform and the humane treatment of migrants. Clergy, in acts like Reverend William Barber's "Moral Monday" protest in July 2019, have marched near America's southern border and attempted to minister to detained migrants. These marches are often national efforts, bringing together faith-based activists from around the country, often with significant media coverage.

Around the nation, there are many local expressions of common cause for social action. In the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, opposition to urban violence and the promotion of gun control have brought Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus together. The ICMW also annually publishes a guide to emergency food, shelter, and health care services in the Metro area. In 2012, this coalition of faiths made a public response to anti-Muslim advertising in buses and subways around D.C. Many other local interfaith efforts to promote social action for the common good are profiled in the Pluralism Project's pilot study, [\*America's Interfaith Infrastructure\*](#).

Beyond city and regional efforts, national and international organizations have made a significant impact in the movement that understands interfaith engagement as both a social justice issue unto itself and an opportunity for amplifying the efforts of individual communities through collaboration. These include:

- The International Association for Religious Freedom, an organization now based out of the United Kingdom with chapters in over sixteen countries, grew out of the first World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. Building on the momentum of the parliament, which had been a historic moment in the life of the interfaith movement, a group called the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers convened in Boston in 1900. In subsequent years it came to include a few Muslims, Jews, Catholics, and reformist Hindus; its international congresses addressed tackled topics such as justice for women and the expansion of nationalism to include a wider view of human loyalty. Eventually, these efforts coalesced into the IARF.
- Religions for Peace is a national and international interfaith network committed to peace building with nearly 100 affiliates globally. The US chapter of Religions for Peace includes

representatives from over fifty religious communities and convenes educational opportunities and policy conferences for religious leaders.

- The National Conference for Community and Justice, originally an interfaith alliance between Christians and Jews, has now expanded to include people of other faiths at both local and national levels. NCCJ especially addresses ethnic, religious, and racial prejudice through programs like “Bridges,” a two-day anti-bullying and prejudice reduction conference for middle school and high school students.
- The Interfaith Alliance is a Washington lobby to bring different communities of faith together on issues such as immigration reform, marriage equality, and the protection of religious freedom.
- The North American Interfaith Network brings interfaith organizations and religious groups together online and in person with its annual Connect conference, hosted each year by a different member organization. For over thirty years, NAIN has sought to promote understanding across traditions and promote the work of member organizations.
- Interfaith Worker Justice brings a multi-faith voice to labor-related discussions in the United States. IWJ and its affiliate chapters tackle issues such as fair wage laws, stopping wage theft, and supporting workers who organize for better working conditions.
- Interfaith Youth Core bring together youth and young adults on college campuses across the nation to promote a climate of religious pluralism built through dialogue and service. Eboo Patel, one of the founders and President of the Interfaith Youth Core, served as an advisor to President Barack Obama’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge which in its second year drew in over 250 institutions of higher education across the nation.

Interfaith organizations and networks across the United States continue to be dynamic, rising to meet the challenges presented to local communities and adapting to address issues of national and international concern as they arise. These efforts have come to include atheist and Humanist communities as well. For instance, as a part of the 2012 celebration of World Interfaith Harmony Week, the Harvard Humanist

Community organized “Cards and Scarves,” an interfaith service opportunity in Greater Boston. Chris Stedman, in his 2012 book *Faithist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*, makes the case for why the non-religious ought to engage with the religious. As one of four primary reasons, he cites the opportunity to act on a shared goal of ending “religious extremism and other forms of oppression and suffering.”

While structure and scope vary from context to context, interfaith efforts to create a better world through social action play a vital and increasing role in public life.