

Cultivating Change (A)

Tom Spencer wasn't looking for a job. Busy with a career in public broadcasting and his award-winning website, "Soul of the Garden," Spencer paused when he saw the posting for an executive director position at the Austin Area Interreligious Ministries (AAIM). That day, in October 2007, "The seed was planted."¹ While an untraditional candidate, the Board of AAIM seemed thrilled to have Spencer consider the position: with his stylish glasses, gray trimmed hair, and a choker necklace, Spencer had been the face of public broadcasting in Austin for over twenty years. Perhaps he could raise the visibility – and increase the viability – of the struggling organization. During the hiring process, one board member confided: "Tom, you are getting into a lot—a mess, to put it politely. But you are the man for the job. I know you are going to turn it around, and we are not going to let you down."

Spencer accepted the job offer, complete with a new title: Chief Executive Officer. He would work closely with an existing employee who was elevated to that position following Spencer's hiring. Spencer remembered his first week as an interfaith CEO in early 2008 as "baptism by fire." While he knew the organization was in trouble, he soon realized that AAIM was "in dire straits financially." He recalled, "I was shocked by the state of affairs." Within the first week, he received an email from the bookkeeping service, firing AAIM as a client: the angry email implied wrongdoing. Spencer knew he would need to investigate. The next week, the COO asked for a meeting. AAIM didn't have enough funds available to pay salaries. She asked, "Could we hold your check?" He agreed but was overwhelmed: "I felt like I was falling down the mountainside. And I didn't know what to grab onto."

As his first month wore on, Spencer recognized that the organization faced not just a financial crisis, but that something was "culturally amiss." The organization's bylaws and unwieldy governance structure – which included three boards – were "basically photocopied" from an interfaith organization in the Midwest. Even the organization's name was problematic, Spencer thought. He considered the name to be awkward, confusing, and perhaps unwelcoming. Spencer was often asked, "Are you a Christian organization?" He explained, "The model and structure, the mindset, was archaic." Nowhere was this more evident to him than in the age of those participating in AAIM's events: although Spencer was in his early fifties, he was often the youngest person in the room.

Spencer felt that he inherited an old model of interfaith organization that was no longer viable. He also inherited a predecessor's computer, on which he found a trail of documents that indicated serious, repeated consideration of shutting AAIM down altogether. Spencer thought to himself, "You know what: I'm here. I wanted a challenge. Let's just see what we can do. If I have to bail, I will; but let's see if we can fix it."

Tom Spencer and Austin, Texas

Spencer moved to Texas from the Hudson River Valley as a teenager. He left behind a "magical childhood in the forests and fields" to move to Port Arthur, a declining refinery town in East Texas. Years later, Spencer found his home in Austin. "I think the reason people fall in love with Austin is its 'vibe' which is incredibly welcoming, experimental, energetic, casual to a fault, and quirky." He noted that the "young, vibrant community" is politically progressive, shaped by the university, state government, and a vital creative class involved in film, music, and technology. Since he arrived in 1975, he witnessed the city becoming more

diverse, with rapidly growing Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist communities. He also recognized that Austin was historically divided, with minority communities living in isolation.

When pressed, Spencer identifies himself as a “Metho-Buddhist”: he is a member of a Methodist Church and regularly practices seated meditation. He identifies strongly with many in the younger generation: “They are seekers and they are coming to interfaith experiences because they sense truth in all the great wisdom traditions. They want to see which one most applies, or maybe to harvest from each, and I really relate to that perception.” His own spiritual life is also closely linked to the natural world. Before coming to AAIM, Spencer developed “Soul of the Garden,” a website, radio, and TV series exploring the connection between the natural and spiritual worlds. The Soul of the Garden website features stunning landscape scenes, colorful close-up images of flowers and plants, and Spencer’s deep resonant voice offering reflections and quotations.

Spencer recognizes that he is a “paradox”: his reflective, spiritual side coexists with an intense, engaged demeanor. He speaks and acts confidently, even boldly. Spencer joked, “People often tell me that meeting with me is like drinking from a fire hose.” Through years gardening, and with the help of meditation, Spencer learned an important tool: “Patience.” Yet as he discovered more about the challenges of AAIM, patience became difficult to find.

Digging In

Spencer’s investigation into the finances of AAIM showed no evidence of wrongdoing, but it was clear to him that the financial state of the organization, and its culture, needed to be addressed. “I was a newcomer, coming from a different career. Although I quickly realized what a great staff I had, I was not content with the way things were being run.” One of the first changes he made was related to events. Spencer noted, “When I came on board, we had no programs that really felt like they were dialogue-centric. Everything was event-driven; big splashy showy events that exhausted the staff.” Spencer and the COO had a small “but dedicated” staff, no development officer, no communications person, not even an administrative assistant. He recalled, “In my first month in, I was looking at this calendar of things they were expecting me to produce and I had no back up.” His choice was clear: “I just started cancelling things.”

Spencer cancelled the beloved Interfaith Passport Program first. “Great concept,” he explained. Participants attended services of other faiths and received stamps in their passports. “It was nice. Nice.” Board members, many of whom who had participated in the event, were upset. Yet Spencer looked at the roster of participants and saw that it drew few people beyond the board; more so, the event didn’t provide any opportunities for real dialogue. “There were genuine hurt feelings and anger. I understood that, but I felt that I was making the right decision. I did what I felt I had to do.” Eight months into the role, Spencer cancelled most of AAIM’s events. He explained, “There was a big religious service for women that was again a splashy event, but there was nothing sustained that engaged people for a prolonged period of time.”

Instead, Spencer would focus on fewer events, such as the Abraham Walk and the annual fundraiser, and make them higher in visibility. Spencer still wasn’t sure how to build better dialogue, but he was clear that many of the uncomfortable changes had to be made early. “I had a grace period because I was well-known in the community. Any CEO has a grace period, but I was acutely aware that the clock was ticking.”

Service Programs

Beyond events and dialogue, AAIM also coordinated two service programs: one focused on housing repair, the other on refugee education and cultural orientation. Together, Spencer estimated, they represented 80 percent of the organization's time and resources. The refugee program was completely underwritten and highly professionalized. "There was no interfaith engagement component to it that drew in the larger community, but it was well-funded." Then, there was Hands on Housing, which dated back to the 1980s and brought together interfaith service teams to repair the homes of people in need. "Beautiful program," Spencer noted. "It is focused on senior citizens, who are living in deep poverty, mostly widows living by themselves in isolation." Yet it had no sustained funding and cost AAIM a quarter of a million dollars a year to operate. Spencer recalled, "It was the biggest financial wound I had to deal with right away. I couldn't pay myself. What was I going to do about this?"

Spencer learned that his dilemma was common to interfaith groups involved in service: "Do you have a real interfaith service opportunity or do you have a professional service delivery program? All the funding services want to push you into that second model. It's extremely hard to fund the volunteer side, extremely difficult." More difficult was the pressure he felt to cancel the Hands on Housing program, given that it was "bleeding money." Yet, as they prepared for the first Housing event of his tenure, Spencer learned that none of the current board members had ever participated. "We had 1,000 volunteers showing up to do this. We were repairing 18 homes in a significant way in one day." Spencer insisted that the board show up that day, deliver lunch to the volunteers, and thank them for participating. He would do the same.

When Spencer witnessed the impact of the program on people's lives, he couldn't imagine cancelling it. He recalled sitting with an interfaith team during their lunch break, gathered in a large circle beneath a canopy of pecan trees. As they went around the circle, they provided a moment for reflection. "Why are you here? It's not just about repairing a home. Why are you here?" One by one, each paint-splattered participant spoke from their own tradition. As they concluded, the widow who owned the home came into the center of the circle. Spencer remembered, "She just stood and looked at the circle of humanity surrounding her. 'I've lived in this house for forty years and never in my life have I imagined something so beautiful taking place in my backyard.' And that's what it about. ... That's the power of what happens when you open yourself up. That what's exciting to me. Transformative moments like that."

Abraham Walk

Spencer had a vision for the annual Abraham Walk: to make it bigger, better, and attract a broader audience. The event, which in some cities involved walking from one house of worship to another in an "interfaith pilgrimage," was more challenging in Austin. Here, diverse communities didn't live in close proximity, so the walk took place on the Dell Jewish Community Campus. Yet the idea of bringing people together in a safe atmosphere was powerful to Spencer, and he thought a larger and more diverse group of people might participate if they brought in a high-profile speaker. Spencer knew just the right pair, who spoke about forgiveness and reconciliation: Judea Pearl, the father of slain journalist Daniel Pearl, and Akbar Ahmed, a professor of Islam. Some of the event committee members had reservations, but Spencer "bowled over the committee." The budget would only allow for one speaker to come, so Pearl was invited.

Spencer remembered the talk as "well articulated and moving," but, without his Muslim counterpart, rather than communicating reconciliation, Spencer noted, "it seemed a bit confrontational. Pearl spoke of his

interfaith work as his ‘vengeance’ for the death of his son.” While they drew a larger crowd, including many Muslims, some walked out during the talk. “It made some people feel uncomfortable and unwelcome.” Spencer said, “I sold an idea that sounded sexy, and missed the fundamentals.” He later felt the episode illustrated one of his faults: “Sometimes I charge ahead without being sure all the troops are behind me.” After the event, Spencer came together with the board and advisors to debrief. Together, they asked, “What went wrong? What can we do?” But the question that seemed most important to those gathered was, in regard to this event and all of AAIM’s efforts, “How do you build relationships?”

Changing the Structure and Breaking the Bubble

Although Spencer had few staff members, he had three boards: a board of directors, a clergy advisory group, and a delegate assembly. “I had to please the board, herd the clergy, and deal with the assembly.” The delegate assembly, which included representatives from various faith communities, came together each year to approve the budget at the annual meeting. “We had 100 people who would routinely show up and do as we asked them to do. But it didn’t do anything for them or us. So, I polled the delegates to find out why they were engaged with our work.” He asked, plainly: “Why do you come?” Spencer recalled, “And everybody said, ‘Because I want to be around people who are different from me.’ They clearly wanted to be in relationship with people of different faiths, so our challenge was to figure out the best way to do that.”

Spencer and the AAIM board responded to this challenge by reforming the organization’s by-laws. Led by an attorney with expertise in non-profit governance and a few key delegates, the group reworked the organization’s by-laws, dissolving the Assembly and Clergy Advisory Board, and concentrated their efforts on creating a new dialogue program for the former Delegate Assembly. Members of the Clergy Advisory Board were so busy, Spencer thought, surely, they would be relieved to hear that they would have one less responsibility.

Amidst all of the changes taking place at AAIM, a few board members were unhappy about the new direction and what they viewed as Spencer’s “bullish” style. However, many board members responded enthusiastically and proved to be vital partners: they became more engaged, brought their talents to the organization, and began recruiting their friends to join. Spencer described the board as an “outstanding” group, including “a talented Public Relations executive with a national reputation, a popular local musician and activist, leaders from various faith communities, as well as great legal talent, philanthropists, business leaders and just good-hearted folks.” The PR executive recommended bringing in a “Purposologist,” who worked with corporations on their purpose, and how to hone their messaging and re-imagine their businesses. When the “Purposologist” came together with Spencer and the board, she asked them to consider one seemingly simple question: “...to explain in 20 seconds what the organization is about.”

Spencer thought: “Austin Area Interreligious Ministries... it takes twenty seconds just to say our name. That’s my elevator speech right there.” Their mission statement said, “AAIM unites faith and cultural communities to foster mutual respect, partnership and transformation in service of the common good.” As Spencer thought about the organization’s purpose, he knew that he wanted to leave behind more than the name. “There is sort of a tyranny of niceness about this work. People think this is a nice thing to do, but it’s way back on their list of priorities. So how do we break that bubble?”

Endnotes

¹ All quotes from Tom Spencer: Tom Spencer interview by Ellie Pierce, Cambridge, MA, June 6, 2011, and October 19, 2011.