

Cultivating Change (B)

When Tom Spencer took the position of CEO, he worried about whether there would be enough funds for his next paycheck and if they would have to close the doors at the Austin Area Interreligious Ministries (AAIM). Two and a half years later, at a dialogue session with 350 people in attendance, Spencer worried if they would have enough room to accommodate all of those who wanted to participate. They found space for everyone: the gray-haired ecumenical veteran and the young person with piercings and tattoos; the woman in *hijab*, and the man in a clerical collar. Spencer recalled, “When I first started [at AAIM] everyone in the room looked like me, but ten years older--very gray, primarily Mainline Protestant with a sprinkling of Jewish folks and Baha’is.”¹ Yet that evening, with at least 20% Muslim participants, the dialogue concluded before sunset for the breaking of the Ramadan fast. And no longer was Spencer the youngest person in the room.

For Spencer, the conversation about purpose represented a “tipping point” for the struggling organization. He recalled: “We had a little breakthrough moment.” Together with the board, they articulated that interfaith work “isn’t something *nice* to do, it is *essential*.” By better understanding their purpose, Spencer felt, they could broaden participation and hone their messaging. This sense of purpose resonated for Spencer personally: “The reason I’m committed here is that this is an essential pressing need.” He added, “I can’t be a gardener if the world is falling to pieces.”

Their message today, Spencer explained, has four key components, which the organization regularly references in conversations with media, blog posts, and outreach: 1) Interreligious conflict poses a threat to our children’s future. 2) Austin is a city of many faiths, so it is critical to build engagement and break down isolation here. 3) Interfaith activity is an effective way to build relationships, encourage collaboration and dispel stereotypes. 4) Nothing will change unless individuals participate in this essential work. Spencer added, “You have to act. Nothing will change unless you get out there. Which is our new acronym: iACT, Interfaith Action of Central Texas.” The mission of iACT now reads: “Interfaith Action of Central Texas cultivates peace and respect through interfaith dialogue, service and celebration.”

Spencer noted, “We all agree that the model we inherited was broken and won’t work in the future.” Accordingly, he said, “We have completely changed everything about the organization, not just the name. We completely redid our by-laws, we redid our mission, reworked the strategic plan twice since I have been on board. And it’s really beginning to gain traction.” When Spencer considered the changes, he noted, “[this] is largely the result of relationships and a fantastic board of directors.” He explained, “With 26 years of contacts in the community, I have been able to go and talk to people and say ‘I need you. I need your talent.’ And our Board has done the same thing – approaching their friends. We have been getting some really energetic, bright young people and, I am blessed by their presence. They have been doing terrific work for us. Now we are thinking about the future.”

Dialogue

Of all the organization’s accomplishments, Spencer seemed proudest of having re-imagined the dialogue program. “Everyone was hungry for dialogue. They were hungry to hear and hungry to share.” In 2009, the organization launched “The Red Bench: Interfaith Conversations that Matter.” Dr. Betty Sue Flowers, a prominent poet, philosopher, and professor – who was also a friend and former colleague – provided the inspiration: “She had this concept that every organization should have a red bench in its lobby. Sitting in the

red bench signified that you were open to a conversation that mattered.” Spencer thought the Red Bench offered “great branding” for the new dialogue series, which engages small groups in facilitated conversation with the help of a trained “host.”

In addition to issue-oriented sessions, such as the emergency meeting in August 2010 on rising anti-Muslim sentiment that drew 350 people, discussions focus on shared religious themes such as “forgiveness.” Gatherings are often held in the basketball court of a downtown church. “And it’s kind of neutral, not churchy.” People arrive, are greeted, and are encouraged to sit with people they don’t know and share food and conversation. After half an hour, the formal program begins, with participants gathering around tables, rather than sitting on a literal red bench. They are “invited to share from their personal experiences and listen with their hearts,” and all comments must be “genuinely respectful and safe.” After these rules are reiterated, Spencer explained, “It is in the hands of the host.” More than 40 hosts have been trained to facilitate dialogue, with frequent new training sessions to “try and add fresh blood.”

When Spencer reflected on what has been gained through facilitated dialogue, rather than flashy events, he said, “What we are seeing though is real relationships are developing, and now what we are seeing is that real conversations are now taking place off site. People have taken this model and are doing it on their own, especially the trained hosts.” Spencer continued, “The goal is to try and grow it out so it doesn’t just live in this one thing one day, but ... if people want to do this on their own, they can meet for lunch somewhere. The goal is to make it portable so we don’t own this, so everyone can have a piece of it. We can plant the seeds and just walk away.” Spencer hopes that, in the future, iACT will establish actual red benches in public spaces throughout Austin to encourage broader conversation.

Service and Celebration

Spencer and the board discarded the “old answers” about why interfaith groups should do service projects: because they are “nice” or “do good.” Infused with a sense of purpose, and informed by corporate consultants, Spencer reflected that service work needed to do more than “do good”; they had to be done well. They had to be in alignment with the organization’s mission. And, ever the gardener, Spencer noted, “They have to be sustainable.” Although iACT’s service program remains focused on housing repair and refugee assistance, Spencer reported that Hands on Housing is now fully underwritten, and the refugee program is more closely tied to their mission.

Hands on Housing once represented the biggest financial strain on the organization, but Spencer noted: “It was also our best story.” Now, Spencer explained, “We go out and tell the story individually and have gotten more than \$100,000 from people to support the program.” At the same time, they approached the City of Austin. “They were running a housing repair program that was very expensive, that was very inefficient ... We got our act together and then we went to the city and said, ‘We can do this for you.’” iACT helped develop the Austin Housing Repair Coalition, with its own governance structure and dues-paying members. Spencer elaborated, “...every repair provider in the city is working together, sharing client information, intake, all this stuff, collaborating on most of our projects, and now the city has now rewarded us with over a million dollars of funding.”

Similarly, iACT created a service alliance for refugee work, the Austin Refugee Roundtable. The Roundtable connects faith communities with refugee service providers: “Now we are funneling that good will and compassion from the faith community in a good way into the service community -- so there are no

redundancies, they are not reinventing the wheel.” Today, this service work is tied to mission, as noted on the iACT website: “We believe that all of the great faith traditions call on us to treat the vulnerable with acts of radical hospitality and compassion.”

Before the changes to the service programs, Spencer explained that the organization was “bleeding money.” He recalled, “We had borrowed money just to survive.” The annual gala fundraiser would barely raise enough to cover that debt, through an event in a church hall with a buffet line. Spencer described it as “lovely and positive, but not on the social calendar of the community.” In 2011, iACT raised \$125,000 at their gala event, held in a gracious ballroom at the University of Texas. One attendee commented: “I can’t believe this is the same organization.” Spencer explained, “My board worked their tails off. We packed that room.” He explained that the impact extends well beyond one night of celebration: “We have gone from \$25,000 debt to having our first cash reserve of \$25,000. We have a strategic reserve now that we are hoping to add to every month.”

Still Cultivating

While Spencer expressed pride in iACT’s accomplishments, and the ways in which the board and staff have worked together to stabilize and grow the organization, he cautioned: “We don’t want to come across as if we’ve figured it all out.” He explained that there is still hard work ahead, and still many challenges. For example, when Spencer dissolved the assembly, the organization’s connection to faith communities began to wither. Spencer noted, “It was one less board, but I burned a bridge.” He thought the assembly simply rubber stamped the budget, but didn’t realize that the faith delegates served an important role as interfaith ambassadors, reporting back to their communities about the work of the organization. Now, iACT is now seeking ways to re-engage with the faith communities who once played an integral role. They have initiated a series of high-level focus groups with local faith leaders to enable them to do “deep listening” as well as think strategically about next steps.

For Spencer, service programs also continue to present a challenge. “You have this huge well of compassion with people who want to engage with your work. And you beat the drums and say how wonderful it is. But for every 100 people who want to do it, you have two slots.” He wondered, “How do you tap compassion without creating another service program to raise funds for?” Spencer is now exploring a new concept, Compassion Share, which matches faith volunteers with non-profit needs. Spencer has identified a pilot project, a community garden project at an East Austin church. “It still needs testing on the ground.” Spencer emphasized, “I don’t want to paint too rosy a picture; it is still a struggle. We still have a long way to go. What we do have is a culture of experimentation and confidence that what we do does matter. We have a willingness to try things that haven’t been tried.” Spencer noted there are still difficult days as a CEO when he longs for the respite and reflection of his garden but recalled the words of his sister: “Remember: you’re still cultivating.”

Endnotes

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