



An Interfaith Methodology for Social Change^{*}



An Analysis and Strategy for an Integrated Approach to Religious Pluralism and Civil Society for Social Change in New York City

^{*} The Interfaith Center of New York's methodology has been developed by ICNY program staff: Matthew Weiner, Timur Yuskaev, and Moise Waltner. Essential guidance was provided by The Very Reverend James Parks Morton, Lorraine Mai, Rev. Alfonso Wyatt, and Colin Greer. For more information, please visit www.interfaithcenter.org or contact Matthew Weiner at: gotoku@aol.com.

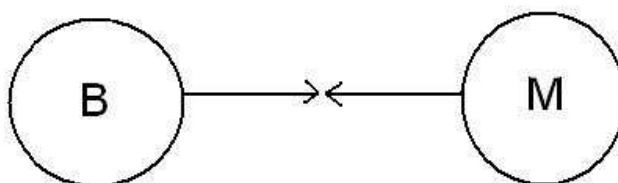
An Interfaith Methodology for Social Change*

Background

The following article describes the Interfaith Center of New York's (IFCNY) methodology for social change. The methodology has been developed through an ongoing process of building programs with the help of the network of religious leaders who serve, and are served, by the programs. We define interfaith as the positive awareness of religious diversity, and the intention or actual practice of engaging people of different faiths for the betterment of society as a whole. For our purposes social change is defined as the integrated effect of changing attitudes and social patterns towards other religious communities while at the same time improving the social well being of ones own community and the community at large. What follows is both a description of how process works, as well as description of key elements of the methodology. Each section represents either a stage or an aspect of the methodology that builds on what came before it. It moves from the most simple configuration to the most complex. The methodology manifests itself differently, and in various forms, in the Interfaith Centers' programs.

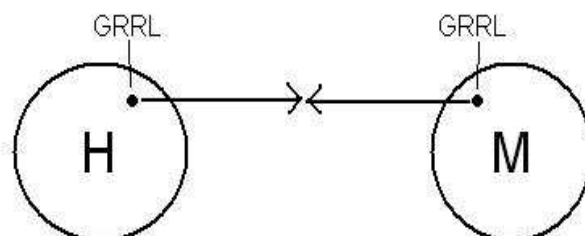
1. Religious Communities Meet One Another

At its most basic, the Interfaith Center's methodology is founded on a simple objective: to find ways for religious communities to meet one another, learn about each other, and eventually partner on shared projects. The circles below represent religious communities.



2. The Role of Grassroots Religious Leaders

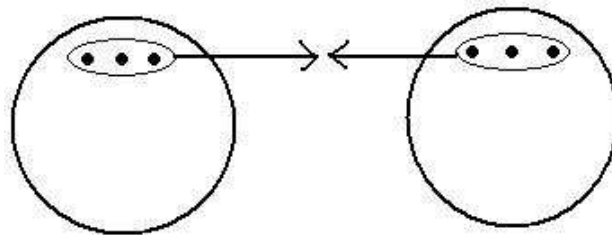
IFCNY's primary way of engaging religious communities is through grass roots religious leaders who lead, reflect, mobilize, or educate their communities. IFCNY works with some 1,000 grassroots religious leaders (GRRLs) from every religious tradition in the City, including Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Shinto's, African Based Faiths, and Native Americans. These individuals are often clergy (i.e. a rabbi, imam, priest) but they can also be laypeople, such as the president of a temple, a domestic violence counselor, a school teacher, or an elder. We create programs in which these individuals interact with each other.



3. Internal Diversity of Religious Communities

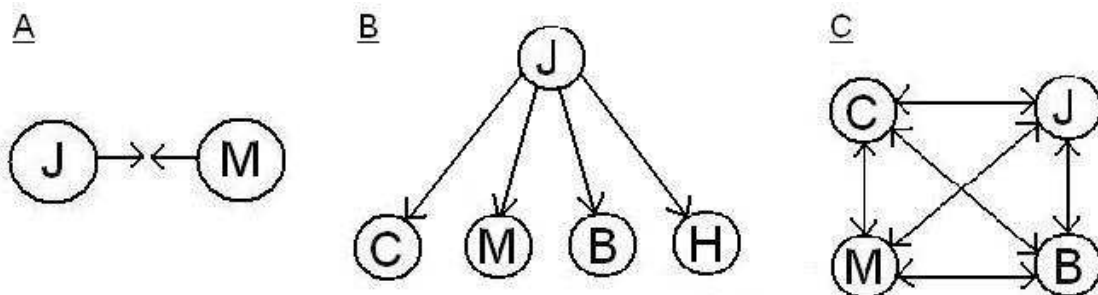
KEY: B = Buddhist, C = Christian, H = Hindu, J = Jewish, M = Muslim, GRRL = Grass Roots Religious Leader, P = Problem

We try to attend to the diversity within the community as well. Every religious community is, in fact, made up of many smaller communities. They come from numerous geographical locations, have many different doctrinal approaches, and numerous political perspectives. For example, there are Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan Buddhists. Likewise, there are Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and evangelical Christians. In any of these and other communities, there is a diversity of political perspectives. Therefore, we work with many religious leaders within each religious tradition on any one project. This helps us to work with a wide range of religious communities within each tradition, as well as to teach each tradition that every other tradition is internally diverse and not monolithic.



4. Interfaith in a Pluralistic Setting

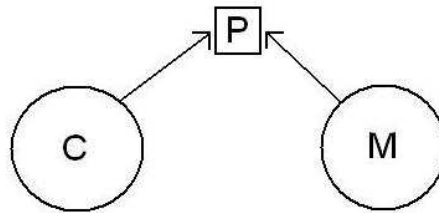
While we sometimes work to educate two communities about one another (A), and other times we educate many religious communities about a particular one (B), primarily we work to bring the religious diversity of New York City together, to demonstrate and reflect the reality that each community exists in (C). This also reduces tension between a particular pair of communities.



5. Focus on Social Issues

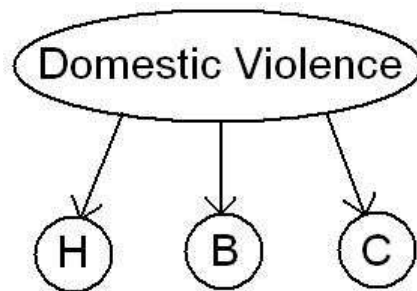
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We usually focus our programs on issues of social concern that run across religious community lines (programs can be focused on something different, such as an art project, but are usually social in nature). Topics may include domestic violence, immigration, health care access, and so on. The idea is to focus on a topic of mutual concern regardless of political, theological or religious persuasion. Many GRRLs who are uninterested in learning about each other's faith, or even working on tolerance, will inherently do so as they work together on social issues. By not limiting the project to a particular political or theological agenda, the programs have a rich range of participants, which left or right leaning organizations do not.



6. Education for Grassroots Religious Leaders

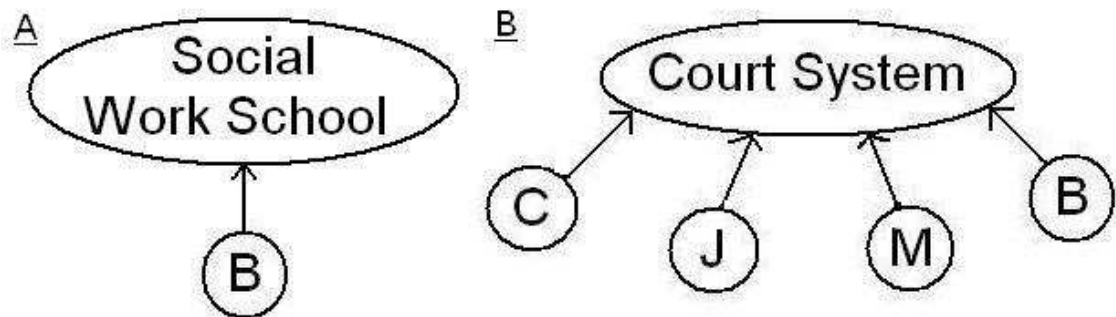
A step in this process (5) is educating GRRLs about a particular social issue, and building their capacity to navigate problems for their community. GRRLs are often the trusted individuals in a community, and are approached for advice on a range of social issues that they are not experts in. In this way we will have secular experts in a particular topic (domestic violence, immigration, health care) provide information and access to GRRLs.



7. Educating About the Social Role of Religion

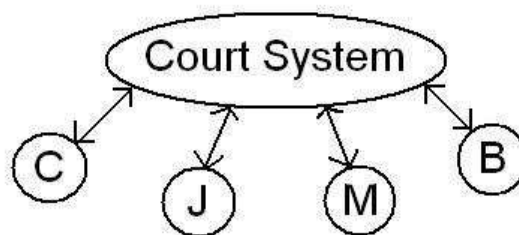
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IFCNY also work to educate civic and social spheres about religious diversity. In this way, the same organizations and individuals who were educating GRRLS are now the ones being educated. The focus is not the religious tradition's theology or doctrine, but rather what social and moral role the religion plays in particular communities that social workers, police, and the court system interact with. The basic premise is that if you are, for example, a social worker and work in a particular community (Chinese Buddhist, south Asian Hindu), having a sense of the social role that religion plays will help your work. Consequently, the social worker will both understand the social role of one or many religious traditions, but also that there are many religions being practiced in different ways. In this way, while we may occasionally hold a program about a particular faith (A), we emphasize educating about the religious diversity itself.



8. The Reciprocal Process

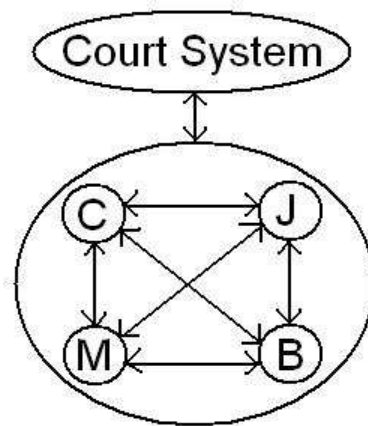
This education process is often also reciprocal, combining steps 6 and 7, either within an individual program, or within a particular project over time. While IFCNY creates programs for religious leaders to explain their community to social workers, for example, IFCNY also provides opportunities for social workers to explain their work back to these religious leaders whose communities may be unfamiliar with the role and tone of their work.



9. Interfaith Education through Social Education

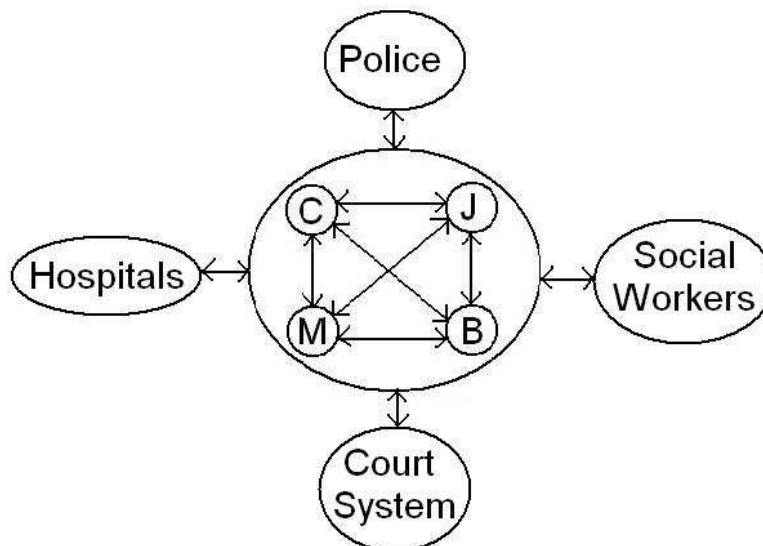
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While there is a reciprocal education process between GRRLs and the civic organizations, the original process of GRRLs learning about one another inherently takes place. Therefore, while GRRLs are not necessarily focused or even interested in learning about each others communities, they do(4B).



10. Interfaith and Civil Society Foster One Another

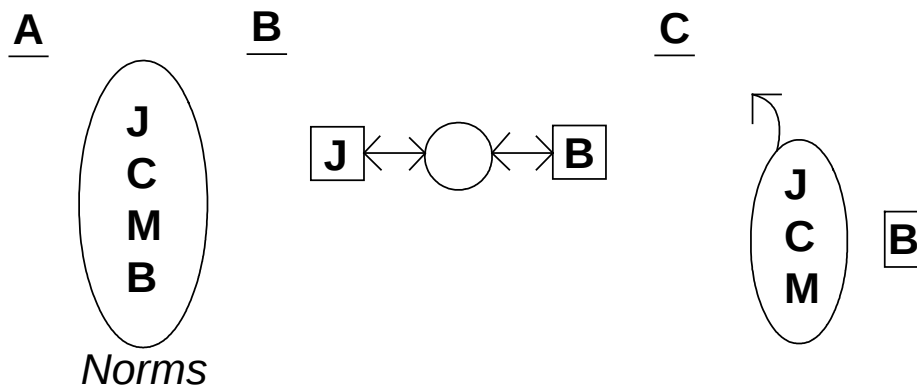
The overarching goal is the integrated process of religious leaders learning about one another as they engage civil society. As they do so, they both learn about various social and civic institutions and issues, as well as educating those very sectors of civil society about their particular communities. In this way, interfaith informs civil society, and civil society informs interfaith.



11. A Framework Model: not for Compromise or Advocacy

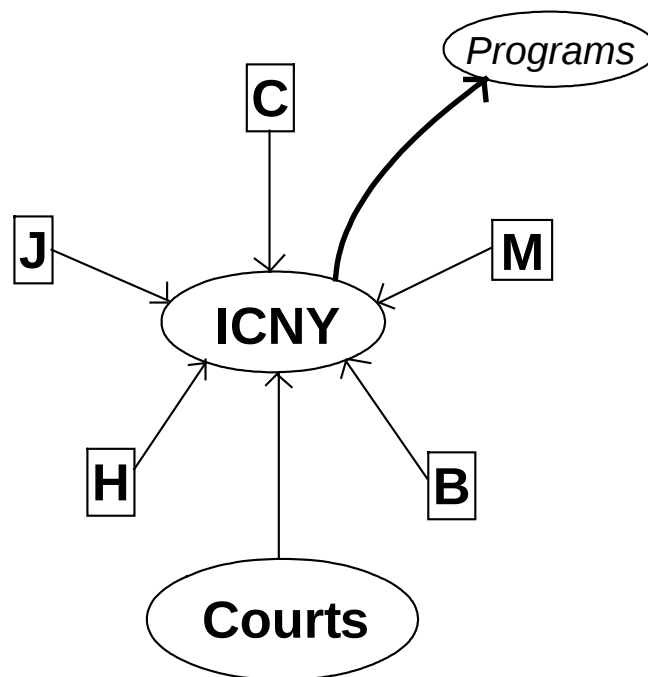
This methodology is focused on developing frameworks or environments in which religious leaders and civic bodies can work with one another to develop relationships and programs that are suitable for them. The methodology does not aim to unify religious

traditions on particular religious, ethical, or theological norms (A). It does not attempt to broker compromise positions (B). Nor is it an advocacy model that attempts to steer communities towards a political agenda, thus leaving some groups out (C). Rather it simply creates frameworks (above) in which a wide range of communities can find organic ways of working with one another for the common good.



12.

As mentioned above, the ICNY's programs are developed in conjunction with the religious leaders and secular organizations that it works with. The shape of the programs, and this methodology, are the result of this ongoing conversation.



Conclusion

The description above is the Interfaith Center's model for social change through interfaith. In summary it emphasizes several key points. First, that interfaith is educational in nature, with the idea of educating communities about one another in a way

that includes more than specifically religious aspects of their communities. Second, that civic participation is central for interfaith interaction. For interfaith to be effective it must happen in the public square, where involvement in the larger society is critical. Third, an integrated social change emerges both from community's social upliftment and from communities building understanding and relationships with one another.

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