

# Forty Years of Interfaith Experience in the Greater Toronto Area\*

Helene Ijaz

## P R E C I S

*This essay provides an overview of the past forty years of the interfaith movement in Greater Toronto. Four areas of interfaith activities are addressed: building trust through interfaith relationships, learning about other faith traditions, collaborating on social-justice projects, and sharing in the wisdom traditions of other faiths. Toronto's interfaith movement became a unifying force among diverse faith communities, and for many it contributed to a shift in the way religion is understood and experienced. Obstacles encountered include lack of infrastructure, funding, and skilled professionals, and the erroneous assumption by some leaders of mainstream religious bodies that interfaith activities dilute or corrupt the faith experience of the individual or of the faith community.*



## I. Demographics and Historical Background

**W**ith a population of 2,800,000 people, Toronto is Canada's largest city and the fourth largest in North America. The Greater Toronto

---

\*This essay is based on a presentation made by a delegation from Toronto's interfaith community at the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions in Salt Lake City, UT, on October 18, 2015, titled "Lessons Learned and Best Practices from Forty Years of Interfaith Experience in Greater Toronto: An Emerging Role Model for Pluralism." The history of Toronto's interfaith movement outlined herein is based on the document, *Interfaith History and Directory of Groups, Greater Toronto Area*, compiled by Leslie Gabriel Mezei, and available at <http://www.scarboromissions.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Toronto-Interfaith-History-and-Directory.pdf>. The author appreciates input from Paul McKenna and Leslie Gabriel Mezei.

Area is home to more than 6,418,000 people.<sup>1</sup> Toronto is one of the most diverse cities in the world. Its residents represent over 230 different ethnic groups and speak approximately 200 different languages.<sup>2</sup> Canada's original inhabitants were Indigenous people. They have lived in Canada for more than 12,000 years, but today less than one percent of Toronto's population identify as Aboriginal. According to the 2011 Statistics Canada Census,<sup>3</sup> about half of Toronto's current residents were born outside of Canada. Seventy-six percent of Torontonians reported a religious affiliation. Fifty-four percent of these identified as Christian, and fifty-two percent of these as Catholic. Eight percent of Torontonians identified as Muslim, six percent as Hindu, four percent as Sikh, and two percent respectively as Buddhist and Jewish. There are about 2,000 places of worship in the Greater Toronto Area.

The early immigrants to Canada came mainly from Europe, beginning about 500 years ago. As European settlements became established in Canada, the Christian churches were eager to convert the Aboriginal peoples to Christianity. Over time, as non-Christian immigration to Canada grew, the new groups that came were also encouraged to join local churches. However, in the last half of the twentieth century, the attitudes of many belonging to the Christian majority population toward those of other faiths and cultures began to change.

This change was related partially to changes in mainstream Christian theology in the 1960's and partly to changes in Canadian government policy. In 1965, Pope Paul VI proclaimed the "Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra aetate*), which recognized the legitimacy and sincerity of faiths other than Roman Catholic. The World Council of Churches began a similar analysis of relationship between Protestant and Orthodox Christianity and other world faiths. In the political realm, an official Multiculturalism Policy was introduced by the Canadian Government in 1971 and enacted as law in 1988. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act allows all citizens to practice their religion and to keep

---

<sup>1</sup> See Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey; available at <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/index-eng.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> The City of Toronto has a higher share of immigrants than the rest of the Greater Toronto Area.

<sup>3</sup> The demographics reported here refer to the City of Toronto.

their ethnocultural identity without fear of persecution, and it promotes mutual respect between people of different religious and cultural backgrounds. Canada was the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy.

Religious and cultural diversity can be a source of division between people, or it can be one of social harmony and mutual enrichment. Differences in religious beliefs, practices, and rules, especially when compounded by cultural differences, can produce misunderstanding, mistrust, tensions, and conflict among individuals, communities, and nations, even leading to wars. Religious and ethnocultural biases and prejudices can be deep-rooted. They often derive from fear of otherness and/or a history of hostile relations between religious and ethnic groups and can be difficult to overturn. However, religious diversity in a community can promote mutual understanding and respect by members of different faiths, awareness of their shared humanity, interconnectedness and interdependency, and a shared commitment to the common good.

## II. Toronto's Interfaith Movement over the Past Forty Years

The key to fostering positive relations among members of different faith communities is to build successful interfaith relationships. Over the past forty years, there has been a sustained effort by people from different religious and spiritual traditions in the Greater Toronto Area to come together to explore approaches to mutual understanding and cooperation, with the goal of producing social harmony and peace. Such efforts have focused on the following four major areas.

### *A. Building Trust through Interfaith Relationships*

The roots of the interfaith movement in Toronto go back to the 1930's. The United Church of Canada promoted mutual respect for people with different religions as early as 1936, and the Metropolitan United Church, the largest church in downtown Toronto, began to do broad outreach to people of any faith in the late 1930's. As early as 1938, the Rev. Dr. Peter Bryce of Metropolitan led an interfaith march in Toronto to protest the persecution of Jews in Germany.

Some forty years later (1978), a national meeting was held at a rural retreat in Quebec featuring representatives from different faith communities, which provided the impetus for the development of the interfaith movement in Toronto. Fredelle Brief, who was part of that group, wrote: “We were initially uncertain of each other . . . Some of us belonged to faiths that actively sought converts and others belonged to faiths that felt preyed upon by other faiths . . . [Also], at the beginning, each of us was regarded with some suspicion by other members of our own faith groups. We were the first local members of our faiths who presented interfaith dialogue as a bridge to understanding and acceptance.”<sup>4</sup>

In the first several years of Toronto’s interfaith movement, relationships were built between individual members of various faith groups. Over time, other members of their faith communities joined the dialogue, and eventually more formalized intergroup relations arose. Bilateral groups initially involved Christians and Jews, but gradually other groups evolved as well—Jews and Muslims, Muslims and Catholics, Hindus and Catholics, and others. Aside from building relationships with members of other faith traditions, some groups made a concerted effort to foster a deeper understanding of their own religion and of the issues impacting their communities.

To extend relationships between individuals successfully to relationships between faith communities, there must be buy-in and commitment by persons in leadership positions. This occurred in some, but not all, cases. Some religious authorities perceived interfaith relations as a threat to their religious identity. Also, the notion held by some religions that they represent the exclusive path to God and to eternal salvation sometimes conflicted with the emphasis in interreligious dialogue on the equitable treatment of all religions and on mutual respect. To promote the interfaith agenda, a faith community must actively engage its members in interreligious conversations, educate them about other religions, and seek to help them to overcome their mistrust and fear of religious otherness.

Some interfaith programs in the Greater Toronto Area began in places of worship with the formation of MOSAIC Interfaith in Thornhill, a suburb of Toronto, in 1980. The group encouraged dialogue with members of other faiths and later began to hold an annual “From Abraham Three

---

<sup>4</sup>Fredelle Brief, personal communication.

Faiths” interactive lecture and a Peace Meal. One summer, a youth bus visited First Nations communities across Canada and various faith groups in Montreal, Toronto, Barrie, Edmonton, and Vancouver.

In the mid-1980’s, The Anglican Church of Canada emphasized the need not just for dialogue with people of other faiths but also for genuine relationships with them. It began to pursue formal dialogue with people of other Christian churches and people of other faiths. In a similar vein, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto established an Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Affairs in 1987 to promote Christian unity as well as interfaith understanding and cooperation through prayer, dialogue, and teaching. In the early 1990’s, Scarboro Missions, a Canadian society of Catholic priests and laity, began to engage in interfaith work.

Building successful interfaith relationships entails becoming aware of and responding to the needs of all parties involved, as well as advocating for each other and for shared concerns with larger organizations, institutions, and government bodies at the municipal, regional, national, and international levels. In 1985, the University of Toronto Campus Chaplain’s Association started to offer spiritual support to students, staff, and faculty of different religious backgrounds and to facilitate related rites of passage, such as weddings, funerals, memorial services, and so forth. In 1990, the Canadian Council of Imams became a full member of the Inter-Faith Committee of Federal and Provincial Governments, as well as of a municipal one. The Canadian National Muslim-Christian Liaison Committee, established in 1995, brought together representatives from Muslim and Christian national organizations to discuss areas of sensitivity or conflict and other issues of common interest. From the late 1990’s onward, a growing number of organizations in and around Toronto began to promote an appreciation of religious diversity, the sharing of knowledge and wisdom, and dialogue and cooperation.

The Toronto interfaith movement took a major leap forward with the formation of the Toronto Area Interfaith Council (TAIC) in 2004. Its aim was to initiate a dialogue among leaders of city government and of faith communities to foster mutual understanding, cooperation, and partnership. The Council has representatives from more than forty faith communities and interfaith organizations. TAIC is dedicated to affirming the importance of ethics, spirituality, and faith in daily life and to the promotion of mutual respect, acceptance, and harmony among the faith

communities of the Toronto area. It organizes discussions and events, including breakfasts with the Toronto Mayor and Council, and supports events organized by other groups.

By 2010, various neighborhood communities in Toronto began to conduct their own interfaith activities. The Danforth Interfaith Community organized an annual walk from mosque to church to synagogue. The following year, different faith groups in the Thorncliffe Park, Flemingdon Park, and Surrounding Communities began to discuss shared community concerns. Gatherings were held in places of worship in Etobicoke to discuss issues such as housing, protection of rental units, revitalization in the community, and matters pertaining to the local detention center. Multi-faith worship services were organized in different parts of the city, as were interfaith concerts, dinners, retreats, student essay competitions, and annual celebrations of World Religions Day and of World Interfaith Harmony Week.

World Interfaith Harmony Week, held annually in Toronto since 2013, entails a variety of interfaith activities that take place worldwide during the first week of February. Participants seek to create a world of peace, social justice, and a sustainable environment by cooperating with interfaith efforts around the world. The eight Toronto 2015 activities won third prize out of over ninety submissions globally, and two representatives from Toronto received the award from King Abdullah of Jordan, the founder of World Interfaith Harmony Week.

Forming relationships with members of other faiths builds trust, but building trust through interfaith relationships can take years. It is modelled by interfaith couples, as illustrated by the *Interlove Project*, a documentary photography and interview series by award-winning Toronto photographer Colin Boyd Shafer and his team, which explores how people of different faiths come together in love and mutual respect.

### ***B. Learning about Other Faith Traditions***

Building positive relationships among diverse individuals and groups entails openness to learning about each other and respecting the differences of others. Learning about another religion can reduce the discomfort and mistrust a person may feel with respect to the other faith tradition, clarify misconceptions, and eliminate negative stereotypes and

prejudices. It enables the individual to enter more deeply into the way of thinking and experiencing the world by members of the other religion, and it creates awareness of similarities and differences between their own and the other faith.

Over the years, a host of educational interfaith activities have taken place in Toronto, including lectures, conferences, training programs, television programs, and specific activities involving youth and women. As early as 1978, the Horizon Interfaith Council produced TV programs that presented the beliefs and traditions of Toronto's diverse faith community. Vision TV, which went on the air in 1988, was the first multifaith national TV network in the world. Based in Toronto, it broadcast programs from over seventy faith groups. When it was sold in 2012, funds from its sale supported the creation of the Inspirit Foundation, which funds projects that promote engagement and exchange among young people aged eighteen to thirty of various spiritual, religious, and secular backgrounds.

Until its closure in 2017, after more than twenty years of operation, Scarborough Missions organized a multitude of interfaith lectures, panels, and dialogues. Annually, 5,000 high school students went through its day-long interfaith retreat program. Using the Golden Rule as expressed in many religions as a reference point, it sought to engender character education in young people using play, creativity, meditation, and the arts, exposing students to the transformational wisdom of various religions.<sup>5</sup> This educational model has been adapted for use with various youth and intergenerational audiences in the larger community and worldwide.

The Encounter World Religions Centre, in place since 1998, offers a range of classes and programs for a variety of participants in the Greater Toronto area. More than 70,000 people throughout North America have heard, seen, and experienced these programs. Encounter's carefully designed visits to houses of worship and their use of sacred objects, ethnographic icons, and religious symbols as pedagogical tools provide a unique introduction to, and experience of, faith traditions, their heritage, and their people. Kids for Peace, formed in 2004, seeks to promote interreligious peace and harmony by annually bringing four Jewish, four Christian, and four Muslim eleven-year-olds from Israel to a summer camp in Canada, together with an equal number and composition of Canadian children.

---

<sup>5</sup> These workshops are being continued at Mary Ward Center.

The University of Toronto's Multi-Faith Centre, established in 2007, encourages interfaith dialogue and spiritual development as part of the learning experience for all students. It accommodates a variety of spiritual and faith-based practices, with more than seventy groups running programs there, and it also welcomes interfaith activities by outside groups. Its Religious Diversity Youth Leadership Project offers a Religious Diversity Dialogue Certificate Training Program. In 2013, the annual conference of NAIN, the North American Interfaith Network, a coalition of interfaith organizations functioning in Canada, the United States, and Mexico, held at the Multi-Faith Centre, attracted interfaith activists from throughout North America.

Since 1980, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama' at Canada, in cooperation with several cities, academic institutions, faith-based associations, and other groups, has organized an annual World Religions Conference. The Noor Cultural Centre, in existence since 2003, provides a variety of educational programs on Islam and Islamic culture, as well as activities related to cultural and religious diversity, interfaith relations, and social justice. Major interfaith events have been held there. For example, Noor has participated since 2008 in the Twinning of Mosques and Synagogues program, initiated by the Canadian Association of Jews and Muslims. The program matches mosques and synagogues in the Toronto area and arranges visits to each other's houses of worship and various joint activities.

Women's Interfaith Dialogue, a coalition of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women, produced a variety of multifaith education programs between 1989 and 2001, including a Women's Interfaith Seder, a speaker series with multifaith panels, and comparative scripture study sessions. Similar scripture studies have been offered since 2004 for Jewish and Muslim women by a group called Shema and Iqra. This group has also instituted a Jewish-Muslim planting project for youth and an art exhibit that explores texts and contexts in the work of Jewish and Muslim artists.

The Intercultural Dialogue Institute, founded in Toronto in 2005 by persons of Turkish Muslim descent, is now a Canada-wide organization. Seeking to promote respect and mutual understanding of all cultures and faiths through partnership with other communities and with cultural, religious, and interreligious organizations, it organizes educational and cultural seminars, conferences, discussion panels, luncheons, interfaith family visits, and dinners, as well as cultural exchange trips.

There are interfaith or multifaith youth groups that promote friendship, dialogue, interfaith education, and social-justice activities. They include, among others, the Muslim-Catholic Student Dialogue, founded in 2010; Ummah United, an Islamic outreach group formed in 2015; and Faith House Toronto, an intentional community of the Student Christian Movement of Canada that was established in 2015.

Several Toronto organizations have developed a variety of interfaith resources. Scarboro Missions has compiled an impressive electronic collection of interfaith educational resources for schools, youth groups, and adult groups, along with an extensive compilation of curriculum and other interfaith materials from all over the world. Its Golden Rule Poster has gained international renown as an educational and interfaith resource. The poster features the Golden Rule—Do to others as you want others to do to you—symbolically and scripturally, in thirteen religions. It has been translated into numerous languages and is on permanent display at the Vatican and the United Nations. Scarboro Missions' *Toronto Interfaith Youth Directory* provides a comprehensive listing of interfaith youth groups and activities.

A historical directory of Toronto interfaith activity has been compiled, listing more than eighty interfaith groups and events with a brief description of their objective and contact information. Available online on the Scarboro Missions website, it is constantly updated.<sup>6</sup> Modeled on the Golden Rule Poster, Faith in the Common Good has developed a Green Rule Poster that draws upon the ecological wisdom of fourteen faith traditions. Its Greening Sacred Spaces program provides practical assistance to faith communities with both the educational and the spiritual dimensions of greening, as well as the “how to” side of audits and retrofits involved in reducing a faith community’s ecological footprint. It is supported by government funding.

The United Church of Canada has a long-standing commitment to interfaith work. In 1986, it apologized to Indigenous Peoples for its part in colonization and, in 1998, specifically for its role in Indian residential schools. The church has produced in-depth documents on whole-world ecumenism and United Church dialogue with the Jewish, Muslim, and

---

<sup>6</sup> See note 1, above; the web resources continue to be available despite the closure of Scarboro Missions.

Hindu communities. Its publications include a collection of interfaith stories, *My Neighbour's Faith*.

Learning about faith traditions other than one's own broadens one's perspective. It can deepen one's relationships with members of the other faiths as well as help one gain new insights into and a deeper understanding of one's own faith.

### *C. Collaborating on Social-Justice Projects*

As people from different faith communities came together in Toronto, it became clear that a major goal of interfaith activities was to affirm the equal dignity of all human beings and their right to be respected as who they are, including in the practice of their faith. There was a growing recognition that justice, compassion, peace, and service are values shared by all faith traditions, along with a commitment to human rights and human responsibilities. Over time, interfaith and multifaith groups were established to address social-justice issues. Some of their projects sought to combat prejudice, discrimination, and racism, while others focused on the provision of equitable social services for members of marginalized groups.

With the increasing number of immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean to Canada in the 1990's, issues of racism came to the forefront, especially between Christians and Muslims. Christian-Muslim dialogue groups developed, and some interfaith projects intended as anti-racism programs were sponsored by different levels of government. Faith-centered symposia and discussion groups were organized on issues related to human rights, religious freedom, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. During the Pan American Games in Toronto in 2015, an interfaith prayer service was held to address human trafficking.

The tragedy of the attacks of September 11, 2001, inspired much interfaith activity in Toronto. Spontaneously, people of different faiths came together, and many multifaith worship services were held. At the same time, fear and mistrust of political motives of some faith groups increased and became the theme of public conversations. This produced a new effort by a number of faith communities to focus on common values and to actualize them for the common good.

The Ontario Multifaith Council, recently renamed the Canadian Multifaith Federation, has been providing chaplaincy services for people in

hospitals, prisons, and long-term-care homes since the 1940's. First Nations elders have been serving as chaplains since the early 1980's. Over time, interfaith and multifaith groups began to address issues of poverty, hunger, and homelessness by members of marginalized groups. The Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC), a provincial network of faith groups formed in 1986, took this agenda to provincial legislators by working with leaders from all political parties. In 1998, the Mosaic Interfaith Out of the Cold Program was born, a coalition of over fifty faith and interfaith communities, which coordinates shelters for the homeless in York Region. In the same vein, the MultiFaith Alliance to End Homelessness was formed in Toronto in 2007 to advocate for decent, affordable housing for people in need, and it is partnering with others to do so. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, multifaith chaplaincy services have been provided at many airports in Canada, as well as in hospitals and correctional facilities, and many food banks in Toronto have become cooperative interfaith efforts. There have been special interfaith projects centered on youth, Aboriginal people, women, and the LGBT community.

Faith in the Common Good, established in 2000, emphasizes the sacredness of natural resources and clearly defines resource conservation and sustainability as social-justice issues. Closely associated with Faith in the Common Good is Fossil Free Faith, established in 2014, a multifaith consortium made up of volunteers supporting and engaging one another and various faith institutions on issues of climate justice, fossil fuel divestment, and clean energy reinvestment. A conference held in Toronto in 2015 highlighted the importance of faith-based action in enhancing community-based resilience to extreme weather impacts.

In recent years, the "Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream" symposium of the Pachamama Alliance was conducted in a number of faith and interfaith settings. This is a transformative educational workshop aimed at bringing about a human presence on earth that is environmentally sustainable, socially just, and spiritually fulfilling.

Faith in the City, established in 2013, provides a forum for faith leaders, lay people of various faith traditions, and concerned city Councillors to identify and address social-justice issues and to encourage people of faith and their organizations to work together in service and advocacy. The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), an ecumenical

organization based in Toronto since 2006, has been working locally and internationally with project partners to implement communication initiatives aimed at advancing social justice, gender equality, and interfaith dialogue.

While many social-justice activities were organized by interfaith groups, these groups often operated in isolation from each other, without much coordination among them.

#### *D. Sharing in the Wisdom Traditions of Other Faiths*

In the early stages of Toronto's interfaith movement, the emphasis was on achieving religious and cultural harmony through interpersonal and intergroup communication and mutual understanding. Over time, a shift in focus occurred. An increasing awareness of our shared humanity, shared human values and principles, and shared responsibility for creating a world in which every individual is treated fairly and with dignity and respect eventually led to multifaith activities to promote social justice. With a growing focus on shared goals and collaboration across religious boundaries, religious differences were emphasized less, and deeper similarities were highlighted—but a further evolution occurred in the interfaith movement.

There has been an increasing recognition that religion has to do with more than religion-specific beliefs, rituals, and laws. Its essence is spirituality, and its key objective is to help us to become better human beings so as to transform the world. Spirituality has to do with our inner self, our experience of the Transcendent, of Spirit, of God, and living from the awareness drawn from that experience. Spirituality engages us in a journey of inner growth and transformation and prompts us to become aware of the sanctity, interconnectedness, and unity of all being.

Throughout the interfaith movement in the Greater Toronto Area, there has been a stream of experiential activities focused on spirituality and the wisdom traditions of various faiths. This has been reflected in the formation of certain groups and in the development of particular activities and events. In the early 1980's, the Roman Catholic Focolare movement emphasized a spirituality of communion, a way of life based on mutual love as a route to building a society where peace and harmony are fostered through loving relationships. The Brama Kumaris World Spiritual Organization, present in Toronto since 1987, conceived of itself as a family gather-

ing of inwardly directed individuals from different parts of the world and from many religious backgrounds who care about people and who are intensely interested in cultivating their connection with the Divine. Soul of the Mother, an Indigenous spiritual community at Six Nations Grand River Territory south of Toronto, has been offering healing to transform the lives of individuals and to inspire communities since 1994. Kahontakwas, Diane Longboat and a team of Spiritual Warriors of Peace conduct ceremonies for the revitalization of First Nations and for the spiritual renewal of people of all faith traditions who are seeking to understand the essence of spirit. The Natural Laws of Mother Earth and the Spiritual Laws of the Creator are seen as paramount to building a new humanity. Soul of the Mother has attracted many nonindigenous members and is often asked to begin interfaith events with its ceremonies.

In the Universal Worship Service, initiated in Toronto in 1995, people light candles to celebrate the greatness of the world's religions and their attempts to remove darkness from daily life. Readings from the holy books of different religions promote reflection and meditation. Devotion is expressed through chanting sacred songs from different traditions and reciting prayers to God and the Prophets. There is an opportunity to be silent, to allow the learnings and blessings created by the service to penetrate the participants.

The Centre for Spirituality at Work, founded in 1999, is a network of about 800 people, employed, unemployed, self-employed and volunteers, who seek to deepen their spiritual understanding, experience, and connection; to draw upon a deeper wisdom within and around themselves; to work consciously toward achieving real results in their work and to help others to do the same. The Centre has organized a number of major conferences in Toronto and currently operates primarily through the internet.

The Institute of Traditional Medicine (ITM) began its interfaith activities in 2004 with a Prayer Festival of representatives from different faith and spiritual traditions who shared their teachings and ceremonies. ITM promotes the integration of the world's traditional medicines and wisdom traditions with conventional and modern healthcare approaches.

Sacred Journeys into Silence have been practiced in Toronto since 2006, on or around Canada Day, July 1st. There have been five gatherings so far of Interfaith Elders who share a certain essence in the contemplative

path, leading to silence and inner peace through prayer and spiritual practices across a number of traditions. Hosted by the Chinmaya Mission Toronto and the University of Toronto's Multi-Faith Centre, the programs open with a consecration ceremony performed by Elders of one of the Native traditions of Canada. Then, Elders from other faith traditions describe their respective pathways into silence. Presentations on topics such as the nature of spiritual awakening and the power of solitude and stillness are interspersed by contemplative walks and participation in each other's spiritual practices.

The Spiritual Dialogue Circle, formed in 2009, challenges participants to listen deeply to and learn from others; to share their experience of aligning their personal inner wisdom with their religious, spiritual, or other practices in their daily lives; and to foster peace within themselves and, as a result, in the world.

Immanent in deep spiritual experience is a sense of unity and solidarity with all human beings, especially those exposed to or suffering from hardship. Within the last ten years, numerous multifaith prayer services and vigils in Toronto have addressed natural disasters, religious persecution, and victims of war. The interfaith community also joined some 10,000 people in the Toronto March for Jobs, Justice, and the Climate in 2015. Before the march, there was an inspirational session of songs and meditations.

Interspirituality—sharing in the wisdom traditions of other faiths and learning from them—helps us to grow as individuals, communities, and global citizens. It emphasizes spirituality as the common basis of all faith traditions, the interconnectedness and interdependency of all human beings, and their shared responsibility to humankind and to all living beings. Interspiritual dialogue challenges us to explore the deeper meaning behind our religion's teachings, to open ourselves to the human and spiritual resources available through other faith traditions, and to grow through them. It encourages us to observe or even participate in the spiritual practices of other traditions, without having to adopt their religious rules and beliefs.

### **III. The Social and Religious Impact of Toronto's Interfaith Movement and Future Directions**

Over the past forty years, the interfaith movement has become a unifying force in the Greater Toronto Area. Bridges have been built and alliances

forged among diverse faith communities, which had lived largely in isolation from each other previously. The interfaith movement has fostered a change in attitude on the part of many individuals toward other faiths. Through personal relationships among members of various faith traditions, many stereotypes, prejudices, and suspicions about other religions have been eliminated, and mutual trust has been built.

Interreligious interaction and dialogue, along with more formal interfaith education, have helped members of different faith communities both to learn about and to respect each other in their commonalities and differences. The multitude and variety of interfaith-education activities held across Greater Toronto has fostered greater mutual understanding by members of various religions. The interfaith movement has also led to a growing awareness of shared spiritual meanings and common values behind diverse religious forms. The recognition of the equal dignity and equal rights of all human beings has produced a wealth of interreligious social-justice activities.

Three of the obstacles to successful interfaith work in North America are lack of infrastructure, lack of funding, and lack of skilled interfaith professionals. Volunteers have done the vast majority of interfaith work in the Greater Toronto Area over the past four decades. This work has largely been driven and sustained by a spirit of goodwill and alliances between individual members of different faith communities. While in many respects, there appears to be an explosion of interfaith activity in Toronto, there has been very little solid ongoing interfaith infrastructure to support all the work and goodwill that have emerged. This creates a kind of boom-and-bust, stop-and-start, “here today and gone to-morrow” dynamic, which implies instability and temporariness. This instability has limited interfaith efforts and the capacity of interfaith to take deep root in Toronto’s faith communities and congregations.

Building a solid interfaith infrastructure has been hampered by the silo nature of many activities, the lack of coordination between them, and the absence of an effective communications mechanism to provide information about ongoing and new interfaith events. A major challenge has been to find volunteers, funds, and leaders to fulfill the many continuing needs of Toronto’s multifaith society. Newsletters and technical resources are needed to disseminate information about the multitude of interfaith activities that are occurring. From 2000 to 2012, a monthly online *Interfaith*

*Unity Newsletter* was distributed by email to over 1,000 people. It listed upcoming interfaith events, news, resources, and work opportunities in Toronto. As of mid-2017, there is no regular publication, website, or social media providing specific information about interfaith events and activities in the Toronto area. The key issue is lack of funding; hence, interfaith activities are conducted almost exclusively by volunteers.

Occasionally, there have been tensions in Toronto's interfaith movement. Religious differences sometimes become distorted and/or compounded by cultural differences and, as in any human relationship, by differences in personality and by competing priorities. In general, interpersonal problems in Toronto's interfaith movement are more like sibling rivalry than conflicts among adversarial groups. Indeed, sometimes, these conflicts are more pronounced among members of the same faith community.

Toronto's interfaith movement is increasingly drawing support from young people, as they search for a sense of identity and a life purpose. Not only have they grown up in the religious and cultural diversity of Toronto and Canada, but a number of them also come from families with multiple religious and cultural backgrounds. Many young people are recognizing that religion is more than a social identity and can represent a powerful source of values that can give meaning and purpose to their lives.

Individuals get involved in interfaith activities for various reasons. Some feel attracted to interfaith activities by what they perceive to be exotic aspects of various religious traditions, whereas others enjoy learning about other religions. For many, interfaith dialogue has contributed to a shift in the way they understand and experience religion. Rather than emphasizing religious doctrines and rigid religious laws and prescriptions, interfaith dialogue focuses on relationships: one's relationship with the Transcendent, with other people, and with one's inner self. Interfaith encounter acknowledges the diversity of humankind and a plurality of approaches to the Transcendent. It demonstrates openness to other faith traditions and promotes dialogue with their members. Interfaith dialogue celebrates the diversity of religious and spiritual traditions and draws upon the wealth of its spiritual resources. It emphasizes shared spiritual values across religions, such as compassion, justice, peace, and shared principles for moral behavior. Interfaith encounter encourages interreligious encounters with the goal of realizing the profound unity of all human beings and of members of all religions and spiritual traditions.

The interfaith movement in Greater Toronto has not been wholeheartedly supported by everyone. Its opponents include, among others, some leaders of mainstream religious bodies and their congregations. They fear interfaith encounter because they perceive it as diminishing one's religion by corrupting or diluting the faith experience of the individual and of the faith community. They may consider it a form of syncretism, an effort to create one world religion through "the unreflective blending of religious traditions" (Wayne Teasdale). Or, they may see it as an expression of relativism. They ignore, or are unaware, that interfaith work does not require anyone to abandon or reject their own faith tradition—that, instead, it builds on and aims to respect the integrity and uniqueness of each tradition. Interfaith activities reach out in dialogue to members of other faith traditions with the goal of working cooperatively toward building a more just, caring, and peaceful world. Interfaith dialogue serves as a process of purification rooted in an awareness of both positive and pathological aspects of one's religion and of new developments. Rather than becoming blended, mixed, or the same, interfaith encounter enables religious traditions to become more genuinely and uniquely themselves—just as in the context of healthy human relationships, whereby we do not become somebody else but we become more of ourselves.

Toronto's interfaith community is currently preparing to host the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions.<sup>7</sup> This major international conference will attract more than 10,000 people of various faiths from around the world. Organizing this conference will be a significant challenge for Toronto's interfaith movement that will test its internal strength, cohesion, sense of unity, and resilience. Aside from the necessary funds, hosting the Parliament will require vision, leadership, immense organizational efforts, unrelenting commitment, and close cooperation by a large number of members of many faith and interfaith communities and congregations.

The Parliament of the World's Religions is likely to inject new energy into Toronto's interfaith movement. One hopes it will contribute not only to an increase in the number of faith communities and their congregations that engage in interfaith work but also to better coordination and funding of interfaith activities. The involvement of youth will be critical to the success

---

<sup>7</sup>To be held November 1–7, 2018. For details, see <https://www.parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/2018-toronto/2018-powr>.

of the Parliament as well as to the future of Toronto's interfaith movement. Along with the heightened visibility and exposure of interfaith activities through the Parliament, it will be the deep spiritual energy, idealism, and commitment of the young people who are increasingly driving Toronto's interfaith movement that will shape its future path and the extent of its ability to transform the minds and hearts of people of all faiths.

Helene Ijaz (Roman Catholic) has been a consultant and mediator in the areas of cross-cultural, interracial, and interfaith relations since 2000, after serving as an education officer for the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1991–99, and a supervisor for race and ethnocultural equity for the York Region Catholic District School Board, 1986–91. She previously taught in England, Germany, and Canada, 1965–79, as well as serving as a university instructor at the University of Prince Edward Island and York University (Toronto) in 1990–91. She has teaching certificates from Münster, Germany, and Ontario, a B.A. from London University, an M.A. from York University (Toronto), and a Ph.D. (1985) from the University of Toronto. She is working on a book analyzing Christian-Muslim marriage from an interspiritual perspective (as a partner in such a marriage for 48 years). She has authored or co-authored several book reviews and book chapters or journal articles, as well as being scriptwriter and co-producer of the film, *Can Racial Attitudes Be Changed?* She has presented papers and workshops on interfaith marriage and other interfaith issues for the Parliament of the World's Religions (Melbourne and Salt Lake City) and the North American Interfaith Network, at various interfaith events, and for high school and university students in the Toronto area.