
MAPPING INTERFAITH LEADERSHIP IN RICHMOND, VA

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Abstract

This article analyzes the current state of interfaith leadership in a mid-sized U.S. metropolitan area, drawing upon twenty semi-structured interviews with congregational and non-profit leaders.¹ It presents the historical and contemporary religious contexts of Richmond; offers a typology of interfaith leadership, considering both congregation-based and non-profit agencies; delineates those aspects of interfaith leadership that are functioning well in Richmond; provides an analysis of current challenges; and presents a constructive model for strengthening the organizational framework for interfaith leadership. This model has implications for understanding interfaith efforts in various metropolitan areas.

Introduction

A mid-sized metropolitan region in the United States, Richmond, Virginia includes communities from every major faith tradition and many smaller ones. Since the post-1965 wave of immigration, religious diversity of this breadth has been highly visible in major American cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and

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Washington.² But smaller cities have had a slower, and quieter, transition—particularly those communities in which Christian expression of faith has had an influential public role.

Our interviews with twenty interfaith leaders from across the metro area indicate that the demographic and civic landscape of Richmond has shifted dramatically in recent decades. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in the summer of 2011; of the twenty interviewees, ten were leaders of religious congregations—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist—and ten more were leaders of not-for-profit organizations with either an explicit interfaith purpose or with strong ties to religious communities. Some of these twenty interviewees had leadership roles in a combination of congregations and organizations.

In addition to longstanding—and more recently formed—Christian and Jewish congregations, religious congregations representing Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism have established themselves over the past four decades. During this same period, Richmond has become home to many Latin American immigrants, who come from Catholic, Pentecostal, and other Christian backgrounds.

This remarkably broad diversity raises key questions about the interfaith and civic fabric of the Richmond region. How do the members of these religious communities view each other, and how do they interact? To what extent do these individuals and communities view themselves as full participants in Richmond's civic life? In what ways have leaders from various faith communities attempted to join together—and connect with “secular” leaders—to strive for civic collaboration? This research project is the first sustained research effort to answer these questions in Richmond. Implications from our findings have significance not only for

² Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, Revised ed. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2002).

interfaith leadership in this locality, but for metropolitan areas across the United States and beyond.

This article proceeds in the following way. Section II presents the historical and contemporary religious contexts of Richmond, providing a background narrative for understanding the rise of interfaith challenges and efforts. Section III offers a typology of interfaith leadership, evidenced in Richmond but applicable to other metropolitan areas as well. The distinctions among approaches employed by congregations and non-profits add both complexity and precision to analyses of interfaith leadership. Section IV delineates those aspects of interfaith leadership that are functioning well in metropolitan Richmond, whereas Section V provides an analysis of challenges facing Richmond's current situation. The concluding part, Section VI, presents a constructive model for strengthening the organizational framework for interfaith leadership. This model should have implications for understanding and contributing to interfaith efforts in various metropolitan areas beyond Richmond itself.

Richmond, Virginia: Historical and Contemporary Contexts

Richmond stands as one of the most historic cities in the United States. It dates to 1609, when colonists from Jamestown sailed up the James River to settle the area. Permanently founded in 1637, it was an important town in the Colony of Virginia and became the state capital in 1780. Notably, Richmond holds a prominent place in the history of religious freedom, having been the site of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson, lobbied for by James Madison, and passed by the Virginia General Assembly in 1786. This law marks the first instance of legislated, comprehensive religious freedom in the world. It paved the way for religious freedom and non-establishment clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom was framed with a broad purview. Jefferson criticized those

delegates who had sought to tack on a preamble that would have constrained the act within a Christian frame—an amendment, he noted, that had been easily voted down. Jefferson maintained that the Statute “meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mohometan, the Hindoo, and Infidel of every denomination.”³ The labels may be dated, but this vision of a broadly inclusive Virginia—and America—was articulated and first given a legal foundation in Richmond.

To be sure, Richmond’s history is far more checkered than this one event alone conveys. This river city became a major site of the slave trade—it grew to become the largest slave market in the Americas. Richmond also served as the capital of the Confederacy; its iron works—which supported a munitions industry—and its river and geographical location gave it this prominent and, indeed, infamous role. Across the twentieth century, racial discrimination against African Americans continued. In response to the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision that made segregation illegal, Virginia leaders’ “Massive Resistance” against desegregation framed two decades of high-profile racial struggle, culminating in a Richmond busing case that reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1973.⁴ This legacy has made race a perennial stumbling block for accomplishing any sort of community leadership in metropolitan Richmond.

The City of Richmond is in fact quite small—just over 200,000—but what locals refer to as the Greater Richmond area incorporates the surrounding counties of Henrico, Chesterfield, and Hanover, raising the metro population to nearly one million people. (The even-larger

³ Thomas Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1790*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005 [1914]), 71.

⁴ Robert A. Pratt, *The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond, Virginia 1954-89* (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 1992); James E. Ryan, *Five Miles Away, A World Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

Metropolitan Statistical Area of Richmond, which includes the City of Petersburg and some twenty jurisdictions, includes some 1.3 million people.) Racial diversity is central to Richmond's identity. According to U.S. Census data, within the city limits of Richmond, 50.6% of the population is African-American, 40.8% is white, 6.3% is Hispanic or Latino, and 2.3% is Asian-American.

Growth in Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, and Buddhist communities has accompanied an increase in immigrant populations; according to one of the leaders at the Hindu Center of Virginia, located in Richmond suburbs, the Hindu population in Richmond has grown seven-fold in the past decade, today estimated at around 25,000 people. Large religious centers, such as the Islamic Center of Virginia, the Sikh Gurdwara, and the Hindu Center of Virginia, with its recently built temple, diversify the landscape of Richmond, historically dominated by Christian populations along with a small but influential Jewish community.

Another aspect of ethnic and religious diversity that is significant for providing a picture of Richmond today is the growing Hispanic community, much of which is located in the South side of the metro region. Official estimates of Latinos/as in the Richmond area now fall in the range of 50,000—with unofficial estimates significantly higher. Within this key minority exist many religious communities, with representatives from most major Christian sects and many minor ones as well. Though the numbers are difficult to specify, there are approximately 100 Latino churches in the area, according to the DJ of an influential Hispanic Christian radio station, Radio Poder, and that number is growing. A prominent clergy leader among Latinos in Richmond concurs with this estimate of Latino congregations, referring to her own list of over fifty clergy colleagues in the area.

With such a rich and diverse religious landscape, interfaith work in Richmond takes on many different faces and names. Two longstanding organizations, the

Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP) and the Interfaith Center of Greater Richmond (ICGR), play very different roles in the community. For example the ICGR, founded in 1924 and the oldest interfaith group in Richmond, emphasizes its educational work in the community, especially among and across people of differing religious identities. In contrast, the VICPP lives up to the public-policy component of its name in drawing from an interfaith constituency to push politically and legislatively for a host of issues, from reforming environmental law to combating childhood obesity.

Many other smaller organizations also fill in this complex interfaith network, some that can easily be labeled as interfaith, others that remain more difficult to define. For example, the Virginia Muslim Coalition for Public Affairs (VMCPA) is an organization formed in reaction to post-9/11 anti-Muslim sentiments whose purpose is to unite the Muslim community and connect it with the greater public sphere through service and relationships. Another example is the Virginia Council of Churches (VCC), which is a key player in the interfaith network as well, yet (as the name implies) is composed of Christian religious bodies. Other organizations, such as the Richmond Peace Education Center (RPEC) and the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities (VCIC), incorporate interfaith components while not solely dealing with interfaith issues. Finally, key efforts such as *Richmonders Involved in Strengthening our Communities* (RISC) and the *Interfaith Dialogues* that take place in Bon Air, a suburb of Richmond, are congregationally based initiatives—one with a community-organizing, social-change model, and the other with an educational and relationship-building approach. As this brief overview suggests, the interfaith network in Richmond is comprised of multiple organizations and initiatives, varied in their structure and interpretations of the practical implications of interfaith work. See Table 1—Selected Non-Profit Organizations.

Table 1: Selected Not-for-Profit Organizations

Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond
Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy
Virginia Muslim Coalition for Public Affairs
Virginia Council of Churches
Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities
Center for Interfaith Reconciliation
Richmond Peace Education Center
University of Richmond Chaplaincy
Hispanic Liaison Office of the City of Richmond
Radio Poder

Mapping Interfaith Leadership by Type or Function

Interfaith leadership is an extremely fluid concept. While abstract in nature, in day-to-day workings it is manifested, or made real and practical, in multiple functions. One of the standard interview questions posed to each local leader was to ask what he or she meant when using the term *interfaith*, and what forms it took in his or her work in the greater Richmond area. Not only did interviewees express different definitions of the term, but they reported enacting this concept in multiple ways in their individual efforts and through their organizations and programs. Below are four approximate functions or “types” of interfaith leadership, a typology that provides one means of distinguishing the organizations and programs. This typology is quite broad, and many organizations undertake work that fits within two, or even three, functions. Yet listing organizations by their principal function reveals the multifaceted nature of interfaith work, as well as the potential value and the limitations associated with each function. Table 2 lists twelve not-for-profit organizations by Dialogue, Education, Service, or Advocacy. It should be noted that religious congregations could also be understood according to such a categorization of activity(ies) or function(s), though the challenges of identifying a congregation’s principal emphasis would be, arguably, at least as difficult as classifying non-profits.

**Table 2: Selected Richmond Organizations,
by Key Approach to Interfaith Leadership**

Dialogue	Education	Service	Advocacy
Interfaith Dialogues at Bon Air	Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond	Virginia Muslim Coalition for Public Affairs	Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy
Virginia Council of Churches	Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities	Hispanic Liaison Office	Richmond Peace Education Center
Center for Interfaith Reconciliation	University of Richmond Chaplaincy	Radio Poder	Richmonders Involved in Strengthening our Communities

The first and most common type is *Dialogue*. In Richmond, interfaith dialogue groups abound, spanning from groups solely involving clergy, to those involving congregants, to those with a mixture of clergy and lay. Dialogue has occupied one of the major positions in interactions between faiths over the past fifty years, in particular Jewish-Christian dialogue. However, the events surrounding September 11, 2001, catapulted Muslim groups into interfaith dialogues in the attempt to create bonds between these “Abrahamic” traditions—in order both to deal with the rash of anti-Islamic expression in the U.S. and to prevent further crisis if another attack were to take place. Thus, one of the dialogue groups that exists in Richmond was initially created, in the words of a prominent Christian clergy leader: “to build and nurture relationships so if anything was to happen again like a 9/11 we would have already begun the discussion, we would have already known each other; we would be able to help mitigate the outcome of any future kind of event.” While many dialogue groups exist within the greater Richmond area, many leaders question whether these dialogues that discuss theological differences and similarities are simply “a mile wide and an inch deep,”

not truly creating engagement and real relationships between groups.

The second type of interfaith work taking place in Richmond takes the form of *Education*. Richmond's oldest interfaith group, the Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond (ICGR), takes this approach to interfaith work, holding workshops and talks around the city to educate a primarily Christian, but increasingly diversifying, constituency about other faiths. As voiced by the current president of the ICGR, this approach attempts to create "an understanding of different faith traditions in the general populace." Yet, as with the other approaches, education isolated from other interfaith activities has its drawbacks. For example, one key rabbi in the area commented that most interfaith work that involves non-Abrahamic faiths, such as Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, etc., "are generally meant to be educational about each others' faiths," and thus these groups are often relegated to a merely educational grouping and not included in more engaged activity. Additionally, as with interfaith dialogue, there is a question of how much substantial engagement an educational approach creates. Stated more positively, how can and do interfaith educational efforts connect with other activities?

A third grouping of interfaith activity centers upon *Service*. One key organization in Richmond which promotes interfaith service is the Virginia Muslim Coalition for Public Affairs (VMCPA). While this organization is comprised of members of the Muslim community in and around Richmond, its purpose is to connect the Islamic community to other faiths and the greater Richmond community through acts of service. This interpretation emphasizes engagement as the key aspect of interfaith leadership. As the president and founder of the VMCPA, Dr. Imad Damaj, explains, "we kept this tradition of service because our guiding idea is that we have to be engaged in society. The only way we are going to be able to tell our story is to be a part of the story." The Interfaith Dialogues at Bon Air have also incorporated a component of service for at least three

consecutive years in order to bolster and complement their community-building efforts that are grounded first in dialogue or, in this case, triologue. Other organizations serving the Hispanic community—one supported by the City of Richmond and another a for-profit radio station—provide a service to their diverse constituents and, just as important, are liaisons connecting their constituents both to service opportunities and to social services available to them.

Advocacy is the final category of interfaith leadership within this typology. What is distinctive about this kind of work is that different faith communities together become a constituency that can be mobilized to support common causes and better their own communities. Similar to service-oriented groups, this approach requires highly-focused engagement with the community. However, what sets it apart is the instrumental understanding of religious communities. Thus organizations such as the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy view interfaith connection as a tool that can be used to advocate for issues such as environmental responsibility and children's health. In this way organizations focused on advocacy "try to use people of faith particularly as well-motivated and mobilized actors in the public square." As another example, Richmonders Involved to Strengthen our Communities, comprised of about fourteen Christian and Jewish congregations in the metro area, seeks to hold public officials accountable for working for justice on issues such as education, public safety, and affordable housing by mobilizing mass meetings that express the political clout of the interfaith community.

All four types present different aspects of interfaith leadership, each approach bringing something important to the table. While each has strengths and weaknesses, they all value interfaith work as important to the interactions between faith communities and other communities in the United States. As the imam of the Islamic Center of Virginia remarked, "The fact is that interfaith can be all kinds of things, that's not what's

important. The important thing is that it exists.” At the same time, what is sometimes lacking is strategic and sustained coordination of the groups that focus on these different approaches to interfaith leadership.

Interfaith Leadership in Richmond: What Works

Efforts to communicate with and share common work across religious congregations and traditions are widespread in Richmond. Local leaders of religious communities and of interfaith organizations generally express a positive regard for the “state of interfaith relations” in metro Richmond. Unlike other cities that may have experienced crises—such as hate crimes, violence, or some other polarizing public event—Richmond has experienced a relatively event-free climate. There is broad-based sentiment that interfaith leadership holds a great deal of potential to be realized within the distinctive context of Richmond. One interfaith leader commented, “I see more and more that there’s an opportunity in Richmond that is as great as anywhere in the country—in some ways greater because interfaith diversity is a newer phenomenon here, and because, to my delight, most of what I have experienced is some people in strategic roles who are very interested in this.”

This is not to say, of course, that there are not significant, if isolated, events and tensions. These have included hateful graffiti painted on a gas station owned by Sikhs; public debate and a legal fight over whether a Wiccan would be permitted to perform the invocation for a county supervisors’ meeting; controversy about a teacher’s descriptions of Islam and subsequent training sessions for teachers in a local school system; and, most recently, a fight over zoning of a future mosque and Islamic Center. Yet, as one prominent Muslim leader stated, “There’s nothing that is urgent, in the sense that there’s no urgent negative faith relationship...you know that some cities do have these kinds of problems...we have avoided that.”

Indeed, the leaders of minority religious communities that we interviewed emphasized the positive aspects of

relating with neighbors. Here is one typical comment: "With all our neighbors we have very good neighborhood relations. We invite them to whenever we have festivals and stuff, and we also go and tell them if we have some late night service or something." The interviewees are, of course, individuals recognized for their ability to build bridges, and thus their own comments may reflect their own positive attitudes as well as a diplomatic framing of current realities.

Leaders of both congregations and interfaith organizations convey the good intentions of a cadre of local clergy and other prominent figures within religious communities and various organizations. This common description of the interfaith community should be highlighted. One non-profit leader stated: "So I think there are a lot of very, very well-intentioned and hard-working people who have individual programs or projects." A clergyperson stated: "You know, we have to thank God for peace-loving, open-minded people."

Connected to this sentiment of general goodwill is the often-repeated description of Richmond's culture as "polite," "genteel," and "conflict-avoiding." Seen one way, the politeness has discouraged the public manifestation of disagreements or disapproval—say, through hateful statements or actions against minority groups. Many leaders in Richmond, whatever their political or theological positions, would vigorously oppose any actions that overtly attack a religious minority.

Yet, this approach does not imply that discrimination does not persist on a less overt level. As one example, a recent hearing of the board of supervisors in Henrico County ultimately resulted in the board voting unanimously to re-zone a tract of land on metro Richmond's northside for an Islamic Center. During the hearing, a resident against the Center began to make an anti-Islamic comment. The chair of the meeting cut off the resident, declaring that there would be no anti-

religious comments made at the hearing.⁵ Yet this “polite” and even respectful ground rule disguised the reality that, for three years, the board of supervisors had rejected the re-zoning and thus blocked the Islamic Center by couching their argument in claims about noise and traffic. Progress was not made until the U.S. Department of Justice weighed in with guidance about nondiscrimination against religious communities, particularly minority ones.⁶ On a positive note, support for the proposed Islamic center—including vocal presence at the final hearing—came from neighbors of an affiliated local Islamic congregation (in Bon Air), which had established strong relationships with its neighboring residents and faith communities as well as from local Christian clergy near the proposed site in the Lakeside area of Henrico County.

The relationships that created at least some support for the proposed Islamic center are reflective of a strength of interfaith leadership in Richmond. The metro region is small enough that a group of roughly two dozen clergy and other leaders know each other and work together relatively well. When a national controversy and debate was generated in the summer of 2010 over a proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York City, Imad Damaj, of the VMCPA, reached out to his network of “likely candidates” to stand together in solidarity with the Islamic community of Richmond. On a few days’ notice, a group of clergy stood together, barefoot, in the Islamic Center of Virginia, behind a bishop, a rabbi, and an imam who made statements concerning religious freedom and the need for peaceful disagreement. It is this personal network of key leaders that drives interfaith work in Richmond.⁷

⁵ Jeremy Slayton, “Henrico Supervisors Pave Way for Mosque,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 10, 2011.

⁶ Bill McKelway, “Mosque Approval in Henrico Followed Federal Intervention,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, September 7, 2001.

⁷ Staff editorial, “RELIGIOUS LEADERS: Tolerance,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, September 4, 2010.

The Challenges of Individual, Personality-based Leadership

Notably, there is no Richmond-area clergy association. A number of interviewees observed this fact with some concern. Although there are various organizations, each with significant missions and activities, these tend to draw the individuals and groups that have a predisposition to interfaith activities. The wider universe of religious people and communities are not a part of these inter-religious groups. Stated differently, a few dozen leaders in Richmond stay in occasional or regular contact across religious boundaries. But the vast majority of religious clergy and other leaders tend to stay within their religious communities or denominations. This finding is consistent with national studies showing that clergy and their parishioners place relatively low value on community work as compared to pastoral work or worship leadership within the congregation.⁸

Within the interfaith community, or overlapping network of congregations and organizations interested in this work, the structure is very loose. Coordination is highly dependent upon individual figures, and not necessarily organizations. One leader (from among this group of movers) commented, “I would like to believe that some of these organizations can step forward, but frankly when movement occurs it’s because certain individuals get together, and oh by the way they also happen to be connected to one or another of these organizations.” The leader of a prominent interfaith organization described how he created an interfaith discussion at the request of a Catholic leader whom he respected; a clergy figure stated that he would do anything in interfaith work that a particular Muslim colleague requested he do. Leadership always depends to some extent upon the initiative taken by individuals to

⁸ Jack Carroll, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

accomplish certain outcomes, such as increased understanding or common action. But leadership is properly understood as a combination of individual initiative and effective structures not dependent upon any particular individual.

One prominent clergy member captured the significance of another leader—who happens to come from a different tradition—for Richmond. “A number of things that go on between the three Abrahamic traditions are because...of him. He is just such a kind of endless spring of energy and ideas. And I would think that he’s really the reason there are Jewish-Christian-Muslim things happening more than anything. Because he’s made the determined effort to make that happen.” This evaluation is a tribute to the interfaith colleague’s efforts, and it reflects the strength of the interfaith relationships that a small group of people have developed.

Yet this individual-leader-centered state of affairs also raises significant potential problems. What happens when this leader leaves Richmond or retires from this work? More cynically, what happens to interfaith leadership in Richmond if one of the critical figures in town somehow—however unjustifiably—has his or her credibility undermined? A healthy, longtime approach to interfaith leadership must have the structures in place to be able to work around the loss of any particular leaders.

Another challenge of this limited number of “likely candidates” is that it is not fully clear how deep is the pool of individuals who are involved in or committed to interfaith work within their congregations. As one example, the Bon Air Trialogues—a collaboration among neighboring Muslim, Jewish, and Christian congregations—started through clergy conversations and friendships. The annual meetings and service projects are considered highly successful, and the Trialogues contributed to the formation of at least one book club, at which women from these communities read and meet together. Yet, the depth of these Trialogue conversations within these respective congregations is still unclear. One of the clergy leaders, although holding an overall hopeful

perspective, expressed his concern: “So it’s really not so much filtering out into the larger congregations...My sense is that you have a dedicated core. I think the reality is that the congregation, the particular congregation that hosts one of these dialogues, tends to have more of its people at that point.”

Thus a key question remains here, not only for the Dialogues, but for interfaith efforts generally in Richmond: Do leaders have buy-in from their congregations/constituencies, or do they really just tend to speak for themselves? An imam stated, “I personally don’t like things where it’s the same cast of characters at every function. And you know, we have to thank God for peace-loving, open-minded, nice people. But if we see those same faces at every function I start wondering if this is going to be a bad thing.” And, for his part, a Hindu leader acknowledged the same challenge: “Maybe it is a weakness that we see only a certain number of people who show up for these events, maybe.”

Organizational scholars David Nadler and Michael Tushman describe the dangers of depending too much on individual leaders and neglecting the significant “instrumental” task of building up strong structures that can guide and even constrain individual leadership. This balance of individuals and structures can help avoid some of the dangers of high-profile leaders, sometimes well described as *charismatic* figures who could create, according to Nadler and Tushman, an excessive reliance on the leader, an unwillingness to express disagreement, and the marginalization of others.⁹

The reality of a group of key individuals who dominate the typical interfaith scene has another important implication. This network is not as inclusive as the demographic breadth of metro Richmond. According to Rabbi Martin Beifield, interfaith work in Richmond made important strides forward in the 1960s and 1970s,

⁹ David A. Nadler and Michael L. Tushman, “Beyond the Charismatic Leader: Leadership and Organizational Change,” *California Management Review* 32 (Winter 1990): 77-97.

particularly in relations between white Protestant and Catholic Christians and Jews, particularly Reform Jews. This movement reflected the national Postwar trend of the Americanization of religion, particularly the *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* connections described in Will Herberg's classic book of that title.¹⁰ As the sociologist Herberg himself noted describing national realities, African Americans were not really included in this engagement.¹¹ In Richmond during this period, African Americans were marginalized from various aspects of social life, and the interfaith movement was no exception. This is not to say, however, that there was no cooperation between white and black churches and especially their leaders on key Civil Rights issues; there was significant cooperation on Civil Rights, but that work remained largely apart from the explicitly interfaith efforts noted by Beifield and others.

In the current moment, African American churches are relatively absent from interfaith efforts, particularly on the educational and dialogue fronts. “[I]nterfaith work is dominated by the white groups; there is not much of African American churches represented there. It’s weird. And like I said, some people are just not interested. But I think a strong effort [could change that]...sometimes you’re used to where you’re at, and you don’t push to change it.”

One notable exception to the relative absence of African-Americans is the work of RISC, an advocacy organization built upon a coalition of local religious congregations. RISC is comprised of a roughly equal number of predominantly African-American churches and predominantly white churches and a synagogue. Yet, according to prominent African-American clergyman—and now a Henrico County supervisor—Tyrone Nelson, black church leaders and congregants remain willing to engage in interfaith relations but continue to be hesitant

¹⁰ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960).

¹¹ Herberg, 114.

to join into structures that have been largely constructed by white mainline Protestants.

A strikingly similar note was struck by leaders of largely immigrant traditions and communities. A Sikh leader noted that his community is open to invitations to take part in interfaith efforts; without such invitations, the Sikh community is not clear on how to engage what has been a Christian-Jewish, and now an Abrahamic, enterprise. “We really have not [engaged] because, it may be more because of lack of knowledge.”

And again, a parallel response from Latino leaders. In response to the question of whether Hispanic pastors would be interested in being connected with other congregations to improve their schools, etc.: “Yes. But you need a liaison, you need someone who speaks their language and tells them why this is important...One thing is sharing it, sitting down and saying this is why this is important, this is why we make changes, this is how to improve this and improve that.” A clergy member stated: “And there’s always that fear of, Will my voice be heard? Am I really...and I guess it really takes a lot of decision and determination to be a part of those groups.”

A related condition for having an inclusive interfaith community would call for a greater presence and participation of conservatives, particularly conservative Christians. An imam stated, “And so if, for example, all the people who participate are really liberal denominations, you’re closing out a lot of people; you need to find ways to include people of a more conservative bent.” To be sure, religious conservatives may be less willing than liberals to engage in dialogues that appear to require participants to check their truth claims at the door in some quest for a least-common-denominator form of truth. Yet, the descriptions of the vast array of interfaith work in Richmond should make it clear that from education and dialogue to service and advocacy, there is no simple way to describe or discount interfaith work as being relativistic. In any case, addressing such perceptions of some religious

conservatives is an essential step for realizing a more inclusive leadership.

Art and SCIENCE: A Constructive Model for Strengthening Interfaith Leadership

On issues ranging from dialogue to advocacy, it may seem that interfaith leadership is ephemeral and hard to analyze. It might be tempting to say that interfaith leadership is more art than science. But as the economist-philosopher Amartya Sen has stated, it is important to capture complexity with precision, rather than through oversimplification. Thus, in order to emphasize that interfaith leadership—in all its complexity—can be understood and, perhaps, improved, we offer our constructive framework using the acronym SCIENCE, which is a mnemonic device for these key descriptors of strengthened interfaith leadership: structured, continuous, inclusive, expansive, narrative, connective, and efficient.

Structured

The study of leadership has advanced the conception of leadership not as a *person* who holds a high-profile role, but as a *process* that engages various parties—leaders and followers of different kinds—to work together toward some common goal. The interfaith movement in Richmond continues to be dominated by a set of personalities who are tied together by a close personal network. Lacking is a tight, well-designed, sustainable structure that supports dynamic leaders but that goes beyond, and constrains in some ways, their personalities. One religious leader made this point succinctly: “[T]here is no unifying organization that could serve as a vehicle to mobilize people, mobilize congregations. So that’s something I wish there was, whether it was a congregational base or a clergy base.”

We have identified the various ways in which Richmond’s interfaith arena is dominated by a relatively small number of individuals who command a lot of influence. We have pointed to the dangers of such

dependence upon a limited number of persons. There are various initiatives that do bring together congregations into larger bodies—RISC and the Bon Air Dialogues are two distinct examples. Yet, all things considered, there is a very weak structure at present in Richmond's interfaith community, and more coordination and organization would strengthen its leadership. Such coordination could take the form of a metropolitan-wide clergy association, or it could be an umbrella organization of the groups noted above and various other organizations. It might be as simple, at least as a significant initial step, as a website that functioned as a clearinghouse, calendar, and media outlet for the organizations that already exist.

Continuous

Interfaith leadership is too often driven by a short-term, even a crisis, mentality, undertaken in reactive mode after negative events. Whether it is a local, national, or international emergency or tragedy, Richmonders have responded quickly, but after the fact, in face of tragedy or threat. Examples have included an interfaith service after 9/11 and an interfaith leaders' press conference and statement of solidarity with Muslim Americans during the controversy surrounding a proposed Islamic Center near Ground Zero. Locally, leaders from across traditions rallied against the hate-mongering Westboro Baptist Church's demonstration at the Virginia Holocaust Museum, and Christian clergy stood with Muslim leaders to support a rezoning for an Islamic Center in Henrico County. One prominent clergy leader exposes the problems with such an approach: "An issue rises, a coalition forms, and then the issue, I'm not saying necessarily gets resolved, but the reason why everybody gets together dissipates so the coalition then breaks down. I think that's what happens here a lot. I don't think it's because people don't care."

The challenge is to transform people's caring into a sustained movement. The leader of the Center on Interfaith Reconciliation reflects, "[A] candle here, and candle there, and little group here a little group there, a

few people or a group has a trip, gets excited and interested. But how do you gather this up into something that is larger and sustained in terms of interfaith understanding?" Such a shift would require leaders and organizations to take a proactive approach and to communicate a vision of interfaith leadership as an ongoing process that requires continuous participation of leaders and followers.

Inclusive

We have emphasized a key finding of our interviews—that participation in interfaith leadership is not as inclusive as the demographic realities of metro Richmond are. Anglo Christians, Reform Jews, and Muslims from immigrant communities comprise the leadership of interfaith efforts in Richmond. Important groups, including Latino Christians, Conservative and Orthodox Jews, African American Christians and Muslims, and members of non-Abrahamic religious communities tend to be less active in interfaith work. A Muslim leader urges his colleagues to broaden the interfaith tent: "I tell the interfaith community and the civic community: It is your responsibility that this region continues to be inclusive, welcoming, and people feel that they have something on the table." Conservative Christians in the region, who arguably make up a majority of the population, are not proportionately engaged in interfaith leadership.

Closely tied to being inclusive—reaching a broad spectrum of the population—is not merely welcoming people to a conversation already in progress, but also of encouraging or allowing newcomers to help shape that very conversation. To shift the image, some interviewees indicated that they did not merely want to be invited to have a seat at another person's table. They wanted to help build, in this image, a table together. This sentiment was articulated by some leaders of the non-Abrahamic traditions that have a significant presence in Richmond.

Expansive

The discussion of various types of interfaith work—in Section III, above—offers one way of understanding the array of components of leadership that are possible. One way to invite in new participants is to maintain or even expand further the variety of activities of interfaith work. Service undertaken together and advocacy through religious congregations for better local schools are things that can be undertaken by members from divergent theological or ideological positions.

Intentional efforts to frame interfaith leadership in expansive directions will avoid simplification and reflect the complexity of society and create a place for all current interfaith work. The integration of the four functions—dialogue, education, service, and advocacy—would go a long way in making interfaith leadership expansive. Of course, the need for structured coordination, mentioned above, is even more critical for such broad-based interfaith leadership. It is easy to lose focus amid a movement that seeks to work on many fronts.

Narrative

The Harvard expert in education and leadership, Howard Gardner, has helped scholars and practitioners alike realize the importance of narrative for effective leadership. For a leader to reach his or her audience, he or she must appeal to the followers' "five-year-old mind."¹² Religious communities have long understood and practiced the sharing of stories. In crossing religious lines, stories are similarly valuable.

The Interfaith Trialogues at Bon Air have focused at times on telling the stories of the respective broad traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as well as the stories of the particular local congregations. Indeed, the narrative of the Trialogue's creation is now a part of the culture of the meetings: In the aftermath of 9/11, a

¹² Howard Gardner, in collaboration with Emma Laskin, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

young girl from the Bon Air Methodist Church was concerned that the Muslims in the Islamic Center of Virginia, just down Buford Road, would face a backlash. She convinced her church to send flowers and a word of support to their Muslim neighbors, and the Islamic Center reciprocated with a gift of appreciation. This story has helped set the tone for the Trialogues.

Connective

Religious difference is closely connected to differences along lines of nationality, ethnicity, culture, race, and language, and connective interfaith leadership would draw no easy lines among these. In response to a question of what the connections the gurdwara has with other faith communities, a Sikh leader affirmed strong ties “with Hinduism and Islam, primarily because a lot of the Sikhs and Hindus and Muslims are from India. And so we interact with them socially, and then we’re able to go to their various places of worship, the Hindu center and occasionally we will go to the mosque.”

And, of course, in Richmond, interfaith relations must be closely connected with constructive work to improve race relations. Speaking of the need for a connective approach to interfaith leadership, a Jewish leader stated, “[T]here can’t be anything broad-based unless it’s interracial. And how much interracial stuff goes on in town? Very little. I mean there’s some, but there’s not a lot.” One organization in Richmond, Hope in the Cities, has done notable work on race relations and, more recently, has incorporated a focus on Christian-Muslim understanding as well. More connective work of this kind will be needed by congregations and organizations focused on interfaith work.

Efficient

The interviews for this project were undertaken in the months preceding the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Many congregational and not-for-profit leaders referred to different events to commemorate this anniversary. Whereas some leaders did not know of other

events, others complained about a lack of coordination—and even competition—within the interfaith community to hold the most prominent commemorative service or meeting. Although there was lip service paid to collective efforts, and some collaboration, the overwhelming sentiment was frustration over the failure to form a unified voice at a moment when unity was a central message.

The need for efficiency, then, is certainly about minimizing the duplication of efforts that many interviewees noted—and lamented. But it is about more than that. It would require attention to organizing the good intentions of interfaith leaders and identifying clear, achievable goals that would promote a healthier community. Various other components discussed above—not the least of which being structure—would help achieve efficiency of interfaith leadership.

Conclusion

This analysis of interfaith leadership, drawing upon twenty in-depth interviews with congregational and organizational leaders, suggests that the interfaith and civic community would benefit from a more intentional, coordinated, and strategic approach aimed at the long term. Leadership, after all, is both about providing vision and helping groups to attain that vision as effectively as possible. Richmond has a lot of good will within and across religious communities, but as a metropolitan area it has more inspirational individual leaders than it has a clear or coordinated structure to maintain those good intentions and transform them into a strong interfaith or civic community. Richmond and other metropolitan communities will be strengthened by focusing on the art as well as the science of interfaith leadership.