Exploring Symbol and Ritual in a Women’s Interfaith Discussion Group

A Capstone Action Project

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Abstract

After meeting for almost a year, an interfaith group of nine women motivated by the mutually held values of diversity and inclusion sought a more structured format for the next year that would allow the group to make progress on three specific objectives. Group members believed achieving positive change in these objectives would enable them to work toward their long-term group goal of being better-equipped to address biases encountered at home, work, and in social environments. Participants incorporated the three objectives into the research question that initiated this project, “How would exploring symbol and ritual in an interfaith women’s group increase religious literacy, encourage meaningful dialogue, and strengthen interreligious relationships?” This paper details the participatory action research project beginning with the planning, covering the ten weeks of the plan for change implementation, and including the participants’ assessment of measured progress. The participants met as a large group for three planned sessions focused on Christian symbols and rituals. As a group, they evaluated the progress made on the stated objectives based on four measures. In evaluating the measurement of results, the participants identified positive change demonstrated in each of the three objectives. The interfaith group decided to repeat this process with one of the other faith traditions represented in the group. There are recommendations for adjustments for the next iteration of the project as well as for those who might seek to replicate the process included.

Keywords: interfaith, religious literacy, interfaith dialogue, interreligious relationships, symbol, ritual, appreciative inquiry
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CHAPTER 1 - Introduction to Project

Guiding Values and Project Significance

With controversies over policies on immigration, an apparent rise in racial tension, and a frequent fear-based “us against them” rhetoric so often in the news in recent years, I have felt an increasing desire to be more vocal in defense of the values of diversity and inclusion. The most recent FBI hate crime statistics report shows an increase in hate crimes, with the number of attacks on Muslim-Americans up sixty-seven percent (FBI, 2016). The Anti-Defamation League (2017) reports the number of anti-Semitic incidents rose 57 percent the following year. This was the largest yearly increase since ADL began tracking in 1979 (ADL, 2017). According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the incidents against American Muslims increased an additional 15 percent in 2017 (CAIR, 2018).

I have a strong intellectual appreciation for diversity from a compassion-based ideal of the equality of all people. However, I realized to be more effective in defending the importance of this value, I had to increase my direct experience and interaction with others who are different from me. The Pluralism Project of Harvard University describes the greater Richmond area of Virginia as “simultaneously a symbol of old Southern charm and a city with new religious diversity,” largely Christian but also home to eight mosques, six Buddhist temples, two Sikh gurdwaras, three Pagan communities and three Hindu temples (The Pluralism Project, n.d.). Despite the increasingly diverse population of Richmond, when I sought a way to build friendships across differences, I was frustrated at the lack of ongoing interfaith engagement opportunities available. My solution was to form a women’s interfaith discussion group. I hoped that by creating a safe environment for authentic engagement and honest dialogue, participants
WOMEN’S INTERFAITH GROUP

would connect within and across religious traditions and build personal narratives that support and encourage an appreciation for diversity and inclusion which they would then be able to share in their circles of influence. Forming the group was one way I sought to embody the sentiments of a favorite quote often attributed to Mother Teresa, “I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.”

I gathered the group by written invitations sent to a variety of different local religious centers and houses of worship, personal invitations extended at events and festivals, and announcements made by representatives from the Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond to their different congregations. Although invitations went to many different faith groups, those who responded and eventually joined the group are all from the three major Abrahamic traditions—Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. They describe their religious identity in their own words as Muslim, Follower of Islam, Muslim, Jewish, Reform Judaism, Catholic, Baptist, Episcopalian, and Methodist converted to Catholic. They are all married and range in age from mid-thirties to mid-seventies. These nine women, who would later become the stakeholder group for the action research project, have met monthly in homes for about a year with a different member hosting each time.

**Purpose and Scope**

As we evolved as a group, appreciated the positive environment that had been created, and evaluated the pace of our development, the members recognized a readiness to move into deeper and more structured discussions. The women indicated that they wanted to have a better understanding of the traditions and values of the representative religions and believed that this would help them to identify their own perspectives which might be based on stereotypes, as well as speak to the biases held by others they encounter. Meetings had been devoted to members
WOMEN’S INTERFAITH GROUP

sharing aspects of their faith, but the group needed a more specific framework from which to proceed for the coming year. It is from this context that this action research project was formed.

After collaborating, the group members and I decided to focus the ten-week period on exploring symbol and ritual from a single faith tradition. Our objectives were to increase religious literacy, encourage more and deeper dialogue across differences, and strengthen interreligious relationships among members of the interfaith group. Group members wanted to feel better-equipped to address biases encountered at home, work, and in social environments. After the initial ten-week action research project, including the evaluation of how well the group’s objectives are met, the group will decide whether to continue with the same framework for the other faith traditions as the basis for the ongoing year-long plan or to move forward in a new way.

Limitations

The project is specific to the context of this interfaith women’s group. The group is small. The members came together around specific goals and sought a framework around which to base the upcoming year. This makes it difficult to generalize findings to a larger group or one with different purposes.

However, the greatest limitation regarded time. At the inception of the group, the regular meeting frequency of once a month had been based on the availability of members, many of whom work full-time and have schedules that reflect the demands of busy, active families. The stakeholders agreed to adjust the meeting calendar to accommodate the ten-week limitation of the university term. In order to have the three sessions planned to explore the chosen faith tradition, this meant adding a meeting to the regular schedule and meeting on other than the usual Monday evenings. These calendar changes, along with unexpected work and family
conflicts, had an impact on member attendance. To accommodate those not able to attend, sessions were video-recorded so that although they could not fully participate in real time, members could at least watch at a later time. Another factor impacting outcomes was Participant 8 decided to take a seasonal leave of absence from the group as she started the first term of her graduate school program.

Definitions of Terms

**Religious Literacy** as used in this paper is explained by Stephen Prothero as “the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life” (Prothero, 2007). It is not, however, a mere accumulation of facts. It requires both knowledge of doctrine and understanding the narrative or story of the faith. To be religiously literate is to be able to fully participate in the social and political life of a world in which religion is an important part (Prothero, 2007).

**A Symbol** is a visible representation of the invisible or unrepresentable. Religious symbols can represent and make present to those in this world, the transcendental or other-worldly (Beyers, 2013, pp. 7-9).

**A Ritual** is a physical act that uses symbolic actions which communicate primarily through symbols, senses, and emotions rather than words or rational thoughts to communicate a forming or transforming message in a unique social space (Schirch, 2005).
CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review and Initial Stakeholder Dialogue

The Constitution of the United States protects religious liberty. Americans are free to believe and practice any religion or no religion at all, and the government is prohibited from advancing or inhibiting religion by financial support or policy. This separation of religion and state is a building block of the strong democracy and diverse society the United States has become. However, the attitudes and practices of individual Americans do not always reflect appreciation or even understanding of the religious freedom the Constitution provides. Victor Davis Hanson (2017) of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University states:

A diverse America requires constant reminders of *e Pluribus Unum* and the need for assimilation and integration . . . Unfortunately, there are increasing signs that our political, religious, ethnic, and racial diversity is overwhelming our shared but fragile notion of national unity.

Religious diversity is a reality in America, with all the richness and the struggle that come along with that. How then, to bridge these gaps between individuals and the other, between religious traditions and the religious other? The literature shows that while religion can contribute to discord, separation, and conflict, interfaith engagement can be a powerful tool to bring awareness to biases and to promote peace and social justice, and this positive change begins at the individual level.

In January of 2018, I began a review of the current literature that might support the plan to use this interfaith group platform to become better equipped to meet the challenges of today’s diverse reality. Motivated by the common goals expressed by the group members, I began by
searching for evidence that interfaith engagement around the themes of symbol and ritual might:

- Increase participants’ religious literacy.
- Encourage meaningful dialogue to nurture understanding and respect among those of different religions, backgrounds, and cultures.
- Strengthen relationships by increasing appreciative knowledge of others and positive attitudes of trust and cooperation.

I consulted books authored by those recognized as scholars and experts in the field of interfaith experience. Search terms used at both Claremont Lincoln University’s elibrary and Virginia Commonwealth University included “interfaith engagement,” “interreligious dialogue,” “religious literacy,” “pluralism, symbol,” “ritual, and diversity.” I reviewed academic essays, journal articles, and case studies from each of the courses in Claremont Lincoln University’s Masters in Interfaith Action degree program and queried professors from the program for their suggestions on other resources pertinent to this topic.

In this chapter, perspectives were chronologically organized. In the section on current perspectives, I also included the three areas in which the group seeks to measure a change. These objectives form the three sides of what the group would come to identify as our own interfaith triangle. In addition to reviewing the past, present, and future perspectives on interfaith engagement, I consulted the literature on the topics on which the group has chosen to focus the engagement, symbol and ritual, to look for support that they would contribute to strengthening the sides of the interfaith triangle. Finally, I included the perspectives of the women of the interfaith group who are the participants in this project.
Past Perspectives

What have been the past perspectives on interfaith or interreligious engagement and dialogue? Marianne Moyaert writes that for centuries adherents of different traditions “ignored one another at best—and have fought one another at worst” (Cheetham, Pratt, & Thomas, eds., 2013, p. 192). The spark that lit the fire of the interfaith movement was the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions. Leaders of Eastern and Western religions, with an audience, came together to learn about their respective religions for global unity. Dialogue was not the focus, but soon after this event, ecumenical dialogue between Christian denominations became another positive demonstration that constructive interaction was possible between those who thought differently (Cheetham, 2013).

From the 1970s on, the number of opportunities and organizations for interreligious engagement and dialogue grew quickly. Initiatives such as dialogue groups, encounter centers, interfaith organizations, journals, and academic programs became a reality. Laypeople, religious leaders, political leaders, and theologians took part, and the structures ranged from local to international. Themes for engagement included everyday life, ethics, spiritual experiences, doctrinal issues, diplomacy and more. Encounters included those designed around service, scriptural reasoning discussions, faith and value sharing, and range from highly planned seminars, workshops, and retreats to spontaneous dialogue between people living in the same neighborhood. “Narrowing the concept of interfaith dialogue to one type of encounter or identifying it with only one of its forms” is a mistake according to Thomas Michel (2001, p. 342) as that would “limit the richness of what can be hoped for and actually achieved in such encounters.” Interfaith engagement and education became a morally and socially essential

**Current Perspectives**

Today’s perspective is that increasing interfaith engagement is a valid way to bring people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, and religions together to expand religious literacy, build acceptance and mutual understanding, all of which protect religious liberty in the United States. Social Scientists evaluate the condition of America’s religious diversity through attitudes, relationships, and knowledge. Eboo Patel found that these three are mutually reinforcing. When people have more meaningful encounters with religious others and are exposed to programs to help them gain appreciative knowledge of other traditions, their attitudes toward other traditions and willingness to engage improve. As their attitudes improve, interfaith relationships seem more likely, and their religious literacy grows. As each side of this interfaith triangle builds upon the other, connections or bridges between people with different identities and backgrounds are created, working to build social capital and prevent social conflict (Patel, 2012). This was encouraging for the project participants as we envisioned the possibilities of developing our own interfaith triangle:

Figure 1. Interfaith Triangle of Mutually Reinforcing Elements to Cultivate Diversity
**Increasing religious literacy.** When people of different faiths and cultures commit to meeting and engaging with the other in, “relational modesty rather than confident bravado,” they may move away from their own foundations to join together in a new space, a third space between the two (Cheetham, et al., 2103, p. 202). This does not erase differences or change the original essence of the individual beliefs, but instead recognizes the differences with the aim of building a mutual ground of respect (Cheetham et al., 2103). The goal is not to create religious homogeneity, but rather to increase appreciation and understanding across differences. There is a way for religious others to engage without the purpose of distilling what they believe into neutral ground. Strong differences should be welcomed in an environment in which consensus is not the goal, but wisdom is (Cheetham, et al., 2013). This third space is descriptive of the one the stakeholders envisioned for jointly cultivating the values of diversity and inclusion. It is in this environment of mutual respect that the first leg of our triangle, interfaith literacy, can be nurtured.

Patel (2012) spoke of how interfaith engagement offers time and space for the development of an appreciative knowledge of other traditions through learning about the richness of rituals and symbols. By engagement and the increase of interfaith literacy, participants will also develop and strengthen their own beliefs as they examine and participate in sharing their story. Each of these steps to build an interfaith knowledge base cultivates active pluralism and contributes to peace and justice in the community (Patel, 2012).

**Encouraging deeper and more meaningful dialogue.** Moyaert found that learning from religious others and developing that religious literacy enables people to relate sensitively to each other across differences (2018). This sensitivity is essential for the dialogue-based pluralism that Diana Eck named “Active Pluralism” and envisioned as an “energetic engagement” between
different traditions and a positive response to the challenge of religious diversity. Active Pluralism is not mere tolerance, but the intentional seeking of understanding across lines of difference (Moyaert, 2018). This is the kind of engagement the stakeholder group sought.

This kind of interfaith engagement provides opportunities for authentic dialogue. Moyaert (2018) says the positive, constructive interactions of authentic dialogue occur when individuals seek more than just an exchange of information. In looking for something deeper, they learn from one another by collaborating with openness and humility (Moyaert, 2018). Dr. Leonard Swidler, a respected American scholar in the field of interfaith dialogue, has published a set of ten interreligious principals to guide this kind of dialogue. His “Dialogue Decalogue” indicates that when interfaith engagement involves dialogue with an emphasis on equality of participants, mutual trust, and a willingness to learn about oneself and the religious other, literacy expands and positive change can occur (Dialogue Principles, n.d.). This is in agreement with the Interfaith Peacemaking Curriculum that stated compassionate listening that does not seek to change the other and is open to hearing the other’s stories can result in mutual understanding and is a way to build strong connections across difference (Kujawa-Holbrook, Bluman & Hasan, 2012).

Interfaith dialogue can take different forms. In theological dialogue, people can deepen their understanding of religious heritages and come to an appreciation of each other’s spiritual values. Spiritual dialogue is one in which people share their spiritual riches regarding expressions of prayer, contemplation, ritual, and symbol (Cheetham et al., 2013). Eck echoed Patel noting that in this process, one tradition does not give up their commitments or beliefs but works with cooperation to create new ways of thinking and being in relationship with each other (Eck, n.d.).
Building interreligious relationships. According to Patel, in this kind of fruitful engagement, there is a focus on opportunities to explore the mutual values of compassion, mercy, hospitality, and service (2012). Interfaith dialogue can encourage tolerance, trust, and mutual understanding while decreasing prejudice (Why we need religious freedom, 2012). This sharing allows reinforcement and celebration of a shared journey as each witness how the others’ traditions respond to the human challenges experienced by all (Mackenzie, 2012).

Mackenzie et al. refer to Houston Smith’s opinion that when seeing something from a singular angle, one misses the deeper vision made possible by looking at it from multiple perspectives. When people share their faiths more deeply with each other, it can be surprising and enlightening to see the way truths are “expressed through different cultures, with different names, different stories, different characters, and different rituals” (Mackenzie, 2012). Through these deep discussions of their histories, their paths, and their traditions people have the opportunity to discover what it is that they share and to find themselves on common ground (Mackenzie, 2012). This inquiring more deeply and acquiring appreciative understanding is not about gathering facts. It is about getting a feeling for the depth of the relationship between a person and their faith (Mackenzie, 2012). These are the building blocks that lead to the strong relationships the stakeholders expressed the desire to create.

Future Perspectives

A future perspective on interfaith engagement may include going beyond dialogue and increasing the opportunities for interreligious ritual participation. Marianne Moyaert believed that as more people experience religious diversity first-hand, become inspired by interfaith engagement, and are moved by the wisdom of the “other,” they will begin to seek more ways to celebrate with those in other traditions. She sees “the revolution from monologue to dialogue
seems to be continued in the domain of rituality,” and that “inter-riting is an important facet of taking dialogue to a deeper, more affective, and experiential level” (Moyaert & Geldhof, 2015, p. 1).

Pastor Don Mackenzie, Rabbi Ted Falcon, and Imam Jamal Rahman (2012), collectively known as “The Interfaith Amigos,” shared their belief and practice of inclusive spirituality in *Getting to the Heart of Interfaith*. They wrote, “As we strive to appreciate both the blessings and the griefs of each of our faiths, we dedicate ourselves to envisioning together a world of greater understanding, acceptance, compassion, and love. We dream of a world awakening to the essential Oneness that contains us all” (Mckenzie, 2012, p. 4). They described the interfaith journey as one that relates to a kind of activity or relationship between people of different religions, traditions, and those who are not members of any faith tradition at all, and they identify the steps on that journey as occurring in five stages. Stages one through four center on, “This is me here—what I believe, what my experiences are—and you are there” (Mackenzie, 2012, p. 136). The fifth stage, exploring and experiencing practices from other traditions, is different from the others that share stories and beliefs and face differences. It is characterized by a willingness to cross boundaries and the participants choosing to step into the Other’s shoes to feel what it is like in another’s Way. It gives participants the opportunity to experience new practices of wisdom and compassion grounded in another’s tradition. They believed that participating in each other’s rituals and practices enables people to move beyond the understanding of the mind into an understanding of the heart (Mackenzie, 2012).

Proponents of sharing interreligious services, prayer, and celebration described these experiences as a way to acknowledges the rich diversity of spiritual traditions while finding unity amidst diversity. They offer the opportunity to practice hospitality, develop and nurture
relationships, and move at a level deeper than even dialogue. As more and more people of various faiths want to encounter one another at levels that go beyond verbal dialogue and common action and leaders who have an appreciation for this perspective emerge, this kind of interfaith encounter may become a more common direction in the future.

**Engagement Themes**

In addition to reviewing the past, present, and future perspectives on interfaith engagement and the fruit that may come of it, I consulted the literature on the topics on which the group has chosen to focus the engagement for the initial ten-week period, symbol and ritual. I looked for support that they will contribute to strengthening the legs of the interfaith triangle.

**Symbols** are visible representations of the invisible or unrepresentable. They are contextual in that they differ according to the community within which the symbol originated. Religious symbols have the ability to represent and make present to those in this world the transcendental or other-worldly. They are ambiguous in that they allow for multiple interpretations, and they are understood through their relationships or connection with other things. They are significant in the meaning-making process for people in that they are a way to perceive and understand the environment and attach meaning to experiences. (Beyers, 2013).

**A ritual** is a physical act that uses symbolic actions which communicate primarily through symbols, senses, and emotions rather than words or rational thoughts to communicate a forming or transforming message in a unique social space (Schirch, 2005). Important to identify, it is the communal way that a culture’s beliefs and ideals are communicated to individual members. The repeated action impresses patterns on the mind and body of the participants which directly impact their perception of self and world (Moyaert, 2015). Ritual allows participants to move beyond an understanding of the mind and begin an understanding of the heart. It can be a
much more powerful conduit of deeply rooted beliefs than just words (Mackenzie, 2012). Theologian Tom Driver asserted “life’s greatest moments happen in ritual places and time in churches, temples, state ceremonies, weddings, feasts, and funerals” (Schirch, 2005, p. 15). He believed ritual links our greatest moments with our most primitive tendencies. Where trying to comprehend an explanation of a belief can automatically call up the contrasting viewpoint in the listener, learning by way of experience of ritual and symbol, which do not carry the same verbal dimension, may open up new windows of understanding (Seligman, Wasserfall, & Montgomery, 2015).

**Participant Perspectives**

From January to March, I conducted initial action research interviews using the process of Appreciative Inquiry to encourage stakeholders to explore possibilities (National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, 2010). I used open-ended questions in the interviews conducted face-to-face, by telephone, and by email to engage the stakeholders in uncovering aspirations and actions (Holman, 2014). Each interview varied slightly, but the questions asked included:

- What are your reasons for joining the group?
- What goals do you have as the group moves forward?
- What do you think are the strengths within the group?
- What is working well in the group?
- What have been the most positive relationship-building aspects?
- What ways can we build on this?

This exploration continued as part of each of the monthly meetings, and the research question was adjusted and reshaped as we fine-tuned the goals and narrowed the focus to objectives we might realistically evaluate within an eight to ten-week period. By April, the discussions on how to proceed seemed stuck creatively. The direction of the project was not exactly right, but no one in the large group meetings was able to express why or how it might be improved.
It may be that the group had slipped into a form of groupthink. Irving Janis (1972, p. 9) defines groupthink as, “A mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.” I addressed this possibility in the April and May meetings with individual group members, and just this acknowledgment itself made a difference.

Other questions I asked in these interviews included:

- What values do we as group members share?
- What do we want to accomplish going forward as a group?
- How do those goals reflect our common values?
- What actions might we take to achieve our agreed upon objectives of increasing religious literacy, strengthening our inter-religious relationships, and improving our dialogue?
- How would these suggestion actions help achieve those objectives?
- How would achieving these objectives benefit us as well as the greater community beyond our group?
- How might we evaluate our success in meeting our objectives?

There were some common aspects to what was shared in the individual interviews and group meetings. More than half of the participants expressed initially being either surprised or disappointed that there were “only three” religions represented but that over the last year, they had come to see this as a positive for several reasons. Participant 5 mentioned that she had not realized how similar some of the holidays, celebrations, and core values were in Judaism and Islam. She is finding a new kinship with the Muslim women. Three women indicated they are looking forward to being able to delve deeper into the three traditions in a way that may not be as possible with many religions represented. Participant 2 commented, “I want to learn first-hand about the religious beliefs of the Jewish and Muslim faiths and to really examine and nurture my own personal spiritual development.”
All of the participants voiced that their reasons for joining the group were to meet women with different backgrounds, cultures, religions, and opinions, and to become more knowledgeable about those they perceive as religious “others.” Participant 2 noted that she grew up as a Christian in a predominately-Jewish neighborhood and already had a beginning appreciation for the Jewish culture. She is enjoying making more sense of her childhood memories as she converses as an adult with members of the group. Participant 5 shared loving “the opportunity to hear the real stories everybody has. This is where the truth is…not in a book or hearing second-hand stuff.” Participant 6 appreciated “the diversity of the group and the sensitivity everyone shows when dealing with touchy subjects.” Participant 7 was excited to have “new friends and to be able to explain my experience as a Muslim woman.”

The women indicated wanting to have a deeper understanding of the traditions and values of the three religions and the belief that this will help them to identify their own biases as well as speak to those of others they encounter. Participant 6 expressed a strong desire to be able to “reject stereotypes. I actually catch myself now when I start to rely on old ideas I’ve never even thought to question.” Participant 5 wants the group to continue in the way it has so far, but she is “ready for more. I want specifics. I want to really get – how are we different? How are we the same? What does it all mean to everyone else?”

Several factors influenced the direction the group decided to proceed. Last fall, the husband of Participant 2 passed away. Most of the group members attended the funeral service which included a Catholic Mass. This led to a discussion later about the service, the prayers, and the music at the church. Some in the group also attended a Rosh Hashanah service at the invitation of Participant 5. Four of the women interviewed referred to these experiences and suggested that a deeper exploration of each other’s rituals would be interesting and give new
understanding on topics we have discussed. Participant 1 commented that a good place to start might be with tours of the different houses of worship. She felt visiting other houses of worship and attending interreligious services would strengthen relationships by the sharing of experience and would give “a fuller or broader view of the religion.” Other participants also expressed a desire to attend some services of the other religions, and Participant 3 commented this would be especially beneficial if “we plan it more thoroughly and schedule a specific time for questions and answers after.” Participant 4 said sharing interreligious experiences of prayer and ritual would enable members to “translate the language of the other,” and would “draw us closer to each other.” All of this input led to the shaping of the research question to specifically focus on inter-religious sharing of experiences of prayer, symbol, and ritual. A meeting with the rector of a local Episcopal who expressed an interest in helping with the collaboration as a resource or as a leader in a tour of his parish church which is rich with Christian symbols and local history added the tenth participant to the project.

The literature review on sharing interreligious experiences of symbol and ritual, specifically by attending inter-religious rites or services, seemed to confirm the initial direction of the project which was to focus on participating together by attending the services or rites of the others’ traditions as a positive way to move forward toward our common objectives. Marianne Moyaert, who has written extensively on inter-religious ritual participation and was cited earlier, says “Many people feel that inter-riting is an important facet of taking dialogue to a deeper, more affective, and experiential level” (Moyaert, 2015, p. 1). She adds “…it may penetrate deeper than any other form of religious dialogue. Ritual sharing holds the promise of gaining access to the beating heart of another religion; it may touch people at a deep emotional level” (Moyaert, 2015, p. 1). The potential of experiencing symbol and ritual in interreligious
settings to increase understanding and appreciate common values was repeated in the sources I reviewed.

However, in the later individual interviews, possibly because the phenomenon of groupthink was less likely to be taking place, women expressed a hesitance to the idea of centering the two-month period of our collaboration that is the action project solely on attending interreligious services or celebrations. Stakeholder 3 reiterated concern for both preparation and post-event discussion being limited by time. Stakeholders had questions about scheduling and the feasibility of arranging or finding a variety of interfaith services within a specified ten-week calendar limitation. Several stakeholders were concerned about anyone feeling uncomfortable in an unknown environment. Additionally, many doubted that the depth of knowledge, dialogue, and experience they are seeking could be achieved if we attempted to “cover” all three religions or too many aspects of them in too short of a time. These discussions led to another narrowing of the focus of our next steps to highlight one religion at a time as well as an adjustment to the research question to use only symbol and ritual as the topics for engagement. Additional review of the literature revealed that worshipping together is an experience that goes beyond dialogue. In considering the stakeholders’ views and the discomfort of some with the prospect of it, I was able to see that while it may be included in our exploration over time or may even become an eventual objective, it may be too early in this new group’s evolution for the sole focus to be on interreligious ritual participation. This is consistent with the literature reviewed, particularly of Moyaert (2015) and Mackenzie et al. (2012), that indicated inter-riting, while highly meaningful and worthwhile, is a deeper level of sharing beyond dialogue.
Conclusion

The review of the literature on interreligious engagement supported the group’s plan to increase religious literacy, encourage dialogue across differences, and strengthen interreligious relationships so that the stakeholders can become better equipped to address biases encountered in the home, work, and social environments. It supported implementing this plan to explore the richness of symbol and ritual in the others’ traditions as a viable method to work toward the group's goals. The plan aligned with Patel’s (2012) philosophy of meaningful encounters expanding religious literacy, developing attitudes of acceptance, and building relationships across differences. It was an example of Eck’s (n.d) active pluralism that calls for citizens to build interreligious relationships and participate in dialogue, both of which will enable participants to debunk stereotypes, their own and others’. The group planned to incorporate Swindler’s principles (Dialogue Principles, n.d.) to increase self-reflection and insight into the symbols and rituals which carry meaning beyond words in the other traditions, thereby increasing religious literacy and cross-cultural sensitivity. This expanded literacy has the potential to widen horizons, enable mutual learning, and form meaningful relationships.
CHAPTER 3 - Methods Determined with Participants

Project Goal Determined by Researcher and Participants

The nine women in the interfaith group originally came together to connect within and across religious traditions and build personal narratives that support and encourage an appreciation for diversity. They wanted to be able to share these in their circles of influence. As the group evolved, members expressed a readiness to move on to a more structured framework for the coming year. It is from this context that the action project plan was formed.

Initial action research interviews in January and February demonstrated a consensus in the women’s appreciation for and desire to build on their developing friendships. They indicated they wanted to have a better understanding of the traditions and values of the religions represented in the group. The desire for deeper and more meaningful dialogue was a common theme. The three objectives of the action plan came from these discussions. The plan was to explore prayer, symbol, and ritual of the three representative faiths

- To increase religious literacy
- To encourage meaningful dialogue
- To strengthen interreligious relationships

In March, there was a discussion on the need to narrow the focus to set a realistically achievable goal for an eight to ten-week time limit. Many of the women doubted that the depth of knowledge, dialogue, and experience they were seeking could be achieved if we attempted to “cover” all three religions or too many aspects of them in too short of a time.

Further individual interviews and whole group discussion from April through June helped narrow and clarified the goals of the project to that which each of the group members felt was achievable. The authors of Action Research for Business, Nonprofit, and Public Administration:
A Tool for Complex Times (2012) include a reminder from Toulmin that action research methods must be appropriate to the subject matter and the context and needs of the stakeholders. With each interview, the focus of the project became clearer as participants voiced their priorities, opinions, and concerns. The participants in this project worked collaboratively and enthusiastically to design the proposed plan to focus on exploring symbol and ritual from a single faith tradition for a ten-week period. They anticipated that there would be discussion of the other faith traditions in the form of comparing and contrasting during that time, and this would not be limited, but the spotlight would be on the one highlighted religion. After the initial action project, the group will decide whether to continue in the same way by repeating the cycle with the other two faith traditions or by designing a new way to move forward as a framework for the coming year.

**Project Methods Determined by Researcher and Participants**

The participants decided that the first religion the group would focus on would be Christianity. The next steps required members of the highlighted religion to work together as a subgroup to organize specific presentations and activities. It made sense that I, as the project coordinator, could best contribute to this responsibility in the religious subgroup of which I am an adherent. The Christian members, fully cognizant of the majority position Christianity holds, took great care to be certain that all were in agreement that the intention was to be of service rather than to take the lead because of privilege or out of a wielding power from the position of dominance (Brantley, 2003).

The method of exploring symbol and ritual will take place over three gatherings. In preparation for the first session, each member will receive a journal. All participants will spend
the first week reflecting, gathering data, and recording responses in their journals to the following prompts:

- Reflect on the beliefs, assumptions, and possible biases you hold or have heard regarding Christianity.
- Ask family, friends, and colleagues for their beliefs, assumptions, and biases regarding Christianity.
- Reflect on and list the Christian symbols and rituals with which you are familiar.

Participants 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 will also record any questions they have about Christian symbols or ritual. Responses and questions will be copied and emailed to the project coordinator by the end of week one. The coordinator will compile one master document from the separate lists.

Also during week one, Participants 1, 2, 6, and 9 will reflect further on the Christian symbols and rituals from their faith tradition that are personally significant. They will research the history of these, gather images or representations of the symbols, scripts of the rituals, and any other artifacts for the session one presentation. These participants will meet to plan the first session presentation collaboratively. They will review the questions posed by the non-Christian members as well as the preliminary journal responses on biases. Each will commit to the symbols and rituals they find the most meaningful and would like to share. The presentation will be mapped out, individuals will commit to the part of the presentation each will accept responsibility for, and decisions will be made on any handouts or materials needed for Session 1.

The coordinator will prepare a basic Christian literacy survey sourced from Stephen Prothero’s quiz in *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t*, the “U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz” from the Pew Research Center (U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz, n.d.), and questions contributed by the Christian members.
Session one. The group will gather in the project coordinator’s home for the first session. The meeting will begin with a mindful moment to arrive (How to Lead a Mindful Meeting, n.d.). All participants will take the Christian literacy survey. Should there be any participants not able to attend, the presentation will be recorded, or a Zoom meeting will be initiated to include the absent member. The coordinator will be responsible for the virtual connection or recording and subsequent delivery of the recording to anyone not able to be present. Participants 1, 2, 6, and 9 will lead the presentation they have prepared. Discussion and questions will be welcome during the presentation, and all participants will be encouraged to make notes in their journals. The Session will end with a reflection and journaling opportunity. Suggested prompts will be provided for the reflection and journaling focusing the stakeholders on:

- **Objective focus** - What did you observe or hear that stood out to you?
- **Reflective focus** - How did you feel? Did anything surprise you, frustrate you, anger you excite you? When have you experienced something similar? Were any memories brought up?
- **Interpretive focus** - How do you make meaning of what you saw or heard? What did you learn? Why might it be important? What new insight did you gain?
- **Decisional focus** – What is one thing you might take away from this? How might it affect how you see something in the future? What will you change? (Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, 2018, p. 9)

Before the next session, I will meet with Participant 10, the rector of a local Episcopal Church. He has been the rector of this congregation that was founded in 1911 for the past twelve years. He will lead a tour of the church and give a presentation for session two. I will share
questions from the preliminary gathering of comments from the participants during week one with him. I will answer any questions Participant 10 has.

Session two. As with the previous gathering, the group will start with mindfulness and proceed with the tour of the Episcopal Church. The rector is eager to tailor the tour to the women in the group and looks forward to highlighting the symbols and rituals meaningful to his congregation. Questions will be encouraged. The session will again be recorded, or a virtual connection made, to accommodate anyone not able to be present. After the presentation, the women will finish with a reflection and journaling period using the previously suggested prompts and then will share a meal at the nearby restaurant.

Session three. The third project gathering will take place in a participant’s home and will, as before, begin with mindfulness. The coordinator will review five essential skills of dialogue: open attitude, listening, speaking, responding, and reflecting (Dent, 2018). Participants will repeat the religious literacy survey taken previously and compare the results to their original answers. There will be time allotted for a question and answer period for anything that had arisen between sessions or that was not addressed.

Participants had previously reflected on and recorded beliefs, assumptions, and possible biases (positive and negative) they held or have heard regarding Christianity. They had asked the same questions of family, friends, and colleagues and recorded their responses. There will be a review of these assumptions initially gathered, and dialogue will include sharing on how assumptions gathered from others on the initial list may be seen and responded to in light of any new understandings. The dialogue will also include sharing from the reflective journals the participants have been keeping to determine if the action process impacted any personal beliefs or attitudes.
Together, the group members will evaluate the impact of exploring symbol and ritual through the experiences of the previous eight weeks on the group’s original objectives, specifically:

- To increase religious literacy
- To encourage meaningful dialogue across differences
- To strengthen interreligious relationships

The group will also discuss participant’s assessments on whether the assumption that working toward these goals in this way will better equip them to address biases within their circles of influence.

**Project Measurements Determined by Researcher and Participants**

During the collaborative planning of the project, the participants worked together and decided to use four measures of progress that will largely be qualitative. The first three will take place at the last session.

1.) Pre- and post-experience Christian surveys the members took will be compared to determine the impact on literacy that exploring symbol and ritual of this one tradition may have had.

2.) Reflective journal entries made at the conclusion of each of the sessions as well as throughout the project will be reviewed.

3.) Participants will be interviewed as a group to collect their words and thoughts on their experience of the dialogue that came as a result of exploring symbol and ritual.

4.) Each participant will complete an individual post-experience questionnaire and return it to the project coordinator to share their perspectives on the value of the sessions in encouraging dialogue and strengthening relationships among participants. This will both
encourage reflection on the project by the participants and give the coordinator more information that may be less influenced by the group dynamics of the group interview (James et al., 2012).

Group members have expressed recognition of and agreement on the fact that all should be involved in making sense of the evaluation of change because the conclusions will weigh heavily in the group’s decision on whether to continue the methods implemented in this project with the other religions in the following months. Bob Dick points out that in action research, “involvement of participants as co-researchers has the potential to provide varied and rich information” (2014). The common desire for beneficial change becomes a common goal toward which to work. Another benefit of action research is the cyclical nature of the process. The participants recognize that their emerging understanding will be tested as they convert their understanding into action with each research cycle (Dick, 2014). In this way, the interfaith group will proceed to the next research cycle based on the evaluation of how the process of exploring Christian symbols and rituals in this project met the original objectives.
CHAPTER 4 - Results: Evidence of Change through Project Implementation

Actions Taken by Researcher and Participants

The dialogue and collaboration that comprised the planning stages of the action project took place throughout the ten months from November 2017 to September 2018. The actions taken during the Capstone class beginning in October 2018 are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Capstone Class Action Log: Weeks 1-8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants Involved</th>
<th>Actions Taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week One</td>
<td>Participants 1-9</td>
<td>Gathered and recorded pre-session data including assumptions/biases regarding Christianity held or heard. See Appendix D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participants 1, 2, 6, 9</td>
<td>Planned presentation one and pre/post-session Christian literacy survey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week Two</td>
<td>Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9</td>
<td>Session one. See agenda - Appendix F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week Three</td>
<td>Participants 9, 10</td>
<td>Plan church tour and presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week Four</td>
<td>Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10</td>
<td>Tour of the Episcopal Church and presentation by the church rector highlighting significant symbols and rituals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week Five</td>
<td>Participants 1, 6</td>
<td>Watch recorded church tour and presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week Seven</td>
<td>Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9</td>
<td>Session three. See agenda - Appendix G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week Eight</td>
<td>Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9</td>
<td>Complete Action Research Project Final Individual Participant Survey and return to project coordinator. See Appendix H</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the start of the implementation of the Capstone project, all participants responded to the journal prompt “Reflect on beliefs, assumptions, and possible biases you hold or have heard regarding Christianity.” They asked family, friends, and colleagues for their responses as well
and recorded all responses in their journals. This data gathered by each of the participants was compiled and organized by theme. It can be found in Appendix D.

Also during this first week, the Christian participants reflected on the Christian symbols and rituals that had personal significance for them. They met and created a pre-session Christian literacy quiz and planned for the first large group session. Each committed to a part of the presentation, researched the history of the topics they would share, and gathered representative images and artifacts.

**Session one.** This first session followed the participants’ plan, and the agenda appears as Appendix F. Participant 8 was not able to attend. She decided to take a seasonal leave of absence from the group due to responsibilities associated with her starting a graduate school program. She planned to return in the spring of 2019. The meeting ran longer than the usual two hours, and group members, both presenters and non-presenters, expressed that they wished another entire session could be devoted to continuing this discussion. Scheduling restraints, both of the participants and by the limitation of the Capstone timeline prevented this, but it will be an adjustment made in the next iteration of the project. The session concluded with time allotted for the participants to record reflections and insights in their journals.

The next week, I met with the Episcopal rector who led the tour of his church for the second session. I updated him with the progress of the project. We reviewed the pre-sessions data on assumptions and biases about Christianity that the participants had gathered and discussed what participants accomplished in session one.

**Session two.** This gathering comprised of the church tour and presentation, took place during the fourth week. Participant 1 was traveling, and Participant 6 was ill and unable to attend. The session was recorded for the absent participants. The original plan had been to share
a meal after the tour. The participants, both the presenter and the group members, were very engaged. The rector encouraged questions, and the rich dialogue that ensued went an hour longer than anticipated. Group members opted to reschedule the dinner in order to stay and enjoy the session.

Session three. This meeting took place during the seventh week of the project. The agenda appears as Appendix G. After the participants took the Christian literacy pre-sessions quiz again, we went over the correct answers, comparing these recent results with participants’ initial quiz answers. Questions about Christianity that had arisen in between sessions or as a result of post-session reflection were discussed. Participants shared insights from the journal entries they made over the course of the project. The group revisited the compiled list of biases gathered in week one and discussed whether their perspectives had been affected and how they might now respond to some of the others’ biases. As with the other two sessions, participants expressed the need for more time to continue this dialogue. They agreed to complete and return the final survey questionnaire to share their individual assessment of the action taken during the three sessions and how the group’s goals were or were not met. This final survey appears as Appendix H.

Measurements of Results

The participants had decided to use four measures of progress made toward the group’s three objectives which were:

- To increase religious literacy
- To encourage meaningful dialogue across differences
- To strengthen interreligious relationships
The results of the first measure of progress, the comparison of the pre- and post-session Christian literacy quiz, are shown in Table 2. The quiz was created by combining the suggested quiz questions from the other Christian participants with the questions sourced from Stephen Prothero’s *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn’t* (2007) and the “U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz” from the Pew Research Center (U.S. Religious Knowledge Quiz, n.d.).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-Session Correct Answers</th>
<th>Post-Session Correct Answers</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>+10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>+11</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>+13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant 8 did not participate in the project. Because I combined the components of the quiz from the three sources, I did not take the quiz. The average increase in correct answers for participants was 10.1.

The second measure of progress used the participants’ reflective journal entries that were made at the conclusion of each of the sessions as well as throughout the project. During this last session, participants shared observations, questions, feelings, and insights they had noted in the
journals as well as self-reflection based on reviewing the whole thread of their entries during the project. The significant themes and some supporting quotes from this discussion are organized in the form of classification trees in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Figure 2. Participants’ Reflective Journaling on Exploring Symbol and Ritual

Figure 3: Participants’ Reflective Journaling on Dialogue
The third measure of progress was also analyzed in the final session. Participants were interviewed as a group to collect their thoughts on their experience of the dialogue that came as a result of exploring Christian symbol and ritual. Dialogue had come up as a theme in the sharing and interpreting of journal entries, but this conversation focused more specifically on how the project activities influenced the dialogue that the group had experienced. The group agreed on and listed the following conclusions:
• Exploring symbol and ritual led to meaningful dialogue. Participants noted getting so engaged that many were surprised at the lateness of the hour when the evenings concluded.

• There was a deep appreciation for both being heard and feeling free to ask questions.

• Successful dialogue encourages more dialogue.

• The group improved in their ability to engage in dialogue with each experience.

• Deep and meaningful dialogue inspired a closeness among participants. Openness and trust increased.

• The most common frustration was not having enough time. The desire to continue each engagement was compelling, and the group feels that each topic merits multiple meetings in future iterations.

Finally, the fourth measure was a post-experience survey. The participants completed this and returned it by email. This process encouraged individual reflection on the project and allowed them to respond to me as the facilitator of the action research in a way that may be less influenced by groupthink. Several participants requested an extended time to complete the survey in order to give it their full attention. Results from the surveys received as of the writing of this paper are included as Appendix I.

Communication of Results to Participants

Many months ago, as this interfaith group began to work collaboratively to plan the action research project, it ceased to be “my project” and became “our project.” As such, it was agreed upon early in our work together that all group members should be involved in making sense of and evaluating any change that occurred. The conclusions will heavily influence the group’s decision on whether and how to shape the next iteration of the project. The group will
proceed to the next cycle based on the evaluation of how the process of exploring Christian symbols and rituals met the group’s original objectives.

During the final session, the group members evaluated the first three measurements of progress together:

1. Comparison of the pre- and post-session literacy quizzes were made to determine change in Christian literacy.

2. Reflective journal entries were shared to determine the impact the actions taken had on encouraging meaningful dialogue and strengthening interreligious relationships.

3. Participants were interviewed as a group to collect their thoughts on the experience of the specific dialogue that came as a result of exploring symbol and ritual.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the participants were encouraged by the positive conclusions reached in these initial evaluations.

I analyzed the fourth measurement, the final individual post-experience questionnaire, as the project facilitator by organizing the responses by theme in Appendix I. This, as well as the classification trees in Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 will be shared with the interfaith group at the next monthly meeting as a lead-in to further discussion on planning for the next cycle of the project. Because participants expressed frustration with not enough time being available, the group will also revisit the discussion on how working toward the three objectives in this way will better equip them to address biases within their circles of influence, the group’s long-term goal.

Assessment of Goal Achievement

The interfaith group had agreed upon three objectives for this action research project. Regarding the first objective, to increase religious literacy, the participants found that the comparison of the pre- and post-experience Christian literacy quiz scores demonstrated that
positive change occurred. Participants found it interesting that even the Christian group members’ scores increased. The average increase for this subgroup was 9.3 points. The Christian members’ comments on how valuable the experience had been for them, both in preparing their part of the first session and in listening to the other Christian participant’s points of view, supported this finding. The average increase for the participants of other traditions was 10.75 points.

Participants also found positive change in assessing the achievement of progress in the second objective, to encourage meaningful dialogue. The benefits of the rich dialogue that came from the activities in the project were recognized again and again in the journal entries participants shared. The group interview on the dialogue process and outcomes confirmed this with the unanimous appreciation for dialogue expressed by the participants. The most strongly agreed upon conclusion in the evaluation of the project was that the group wanted more dialogue experiences on symbol and ritual. All participants expressed a desire to repeat the dialogue process around significant symbols and rituals in Judaism and Islam.

The third objective, to strengthen interreligious relationships, is possibly the hardest to measure. The participants assessed that there was a positive change toward this objective demonstrated by the dialogue on their reflective journal entries. This dialogue included comments indicating an increased intimacy and closeness in the group and an expressed appreciation for the value of these developing relationships. The participants’ individual responses on the final questionnaire also confirmed this assessment.
CHAPTER 5 - Final Reflections and Recommendations

Overall Project Summary

After meeting for almost a year, the interfaith group of nine women, motivated by the mutually held values of diversity and inclusion, sought a more structured format for the next year that would allow the group to make progress on three specific objectives. Group members believed achieving positive change in these objectives would enable them to work toward their long-term group goal of being better-equipped to address biases encountered at home, work, and in social environments. The three objectives were incorporated into the research question that initiated this project, “How would exploring symbol and ritual in an interfaith women’s group increase religious literacy, encourage meaningful dialogue, and strengthen interreligious relationships?”

Over a period of ten weeks, the participants met as a large group for three planned sessions focused on Christian symbols and rituals. They recorded insights, feelings, and thoughts at the end of each session and throughout the project in reflective journals. As a group, the participants evaluated the progress made on the stated objectives based on four measures. In evaluating the measurement of results, they identified positive change demonstrated in each of the three objectives. The interfaith group made a preliminary decision to repeat this process again with one of the other religions represented in the group.

Consistency of Guiding Values

As stated in chapter one, the personal values that motivated the initiation of this action research were diversity and inclusion. I had noted a gap between the intellectual appreciation of these values and the embodied presence of them in my life. The desire to increase these values was echoed by the women in the interfaith group. Together we sought a way to create change to
incorporate these values into our community and found that our progress as a group followed the work of C. Otto Scharmer. In *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, Scharmer (2009) explained how a practice that can create profound change is based on five movements. Participants’ behaviors throughout the action research project demonstrated these values of diversity and inclusion that were consistent with Scharmer’s movements including:

- “Co-initiating” or listening to others (Scharmer, 2009, pp. 378-384). Participants did this by finding common ground and communicating respectfully which inspired common intentions for growth.
- “Co-sensing” or going to the places of the most potential with open mind and heart (Scharmer, 2009, pp. 387-389). Participants consistently clarified essential questions, took deep-dives into symbols and rituals to make connections that would be relevant to creating a possible future in which they could address biases they encounter. In dialogue, they tapped collective sense-making and thinking together (Scharmer, 2009, p. 398).
- “Co-presencing” or reflecting and allowing inner knowledge to emerge (Scharmer, 2009, p. 399). I watched the participants do what Scharmer described as necessary for this. They “let go” of resistance by suspending their inner “Voice of Judgement and reversing any “Voice of Fear.” They “let come” by connecting to the others, surrendering to the best future possibilities of being better able to embrace diversity and appreciate inclusion (Scharmer, 2009, pp. 400-401).
- “Co-creating” or sampling something new to explore the future by doing (Scharmer, 2009, p. 414). Participants each expressed their desire to make a difference. Gathering the data on biases and discussing this allowed them to ask the creative tension questions Scharmer suggested: What do I want to create? What does the current reality look like?
Together in dialogue, they noted the tension between the two questions. The group operated with the belief that even a few people working together could create energy that could gain momentum and affect change, specifically in their own and then in others’ assumptions and biases that might impede inclusion.

- “Co-evolving” or seeing and acting from the emerging whole (Scharmer, 2009, p. 426).

As participants increased their religious literacy, engaged in meaningful dialogue, and strengthened their interreligious relationships, they became more able to see and act from this new emerging reality. The group expressed their recognition of this and were excited to recognize that as this capacity increases within each of them, this in turn will strengthen the group as a whole.

**Project Impact on the Researcher**

Throughout this project I have relied on skills and capabilities I have gained by progressing through the “Claremont Core” comprised of mindfulness, dialogue, collaboration, and change to become a more effective change-maker. Changes occurred first from within me and gradually became evidenced in more outward engagements (Claremont Lincoln University, n.d.). With the strengthening of my capacity to practice mindfulness, I was able to identify and articulate my appreciation for the values of diversity and inclusion that became the motivation of the project. I included a mindfulness practice in each of the group sessions to help the participants cultivate present moment awareness and set the stage for the ensuing dialogue. Being mindful of my cognitive and emotional responses allowed me to become a more reflective practitioner using both “reflection in action” during time with the group, or “reflection on action” after a meeting (Meierdick, 2017).
I have used the skills I learned for successful dialogue and collaboration in facilitating the individual interviews and the group meetings that led to the narrowing of the project’s objectives and determining how progress would be measured. In the implementation of the group’s plan, I observed first-hand the truth in Bohm’s (2004) assertion that dialogue is a completely different and creative form of communication from just conversation. One of the primary jobs of leadership is to enhance the individual and group’s capacity to see and to discover the power to see together (Scharmer, 2009, p. 136). As the facilitator of dialogue throughout the project, I tried to keep this in mind as I strived to be an intentional influencer for positive change. I improved over the course of the project in leading the group to utilize storytelling in our exploration of symbol and ritual. Storytelling is essential for understanding and internalizing (Ward, 2014). As we shared our personal faith stories in this group, our understanding of “other” grew in more than just a factual or knowledge-based way. We internalized what we’d learned and constructed new realities that had space for what once had felt different and foreign. I also have developed a real appreciation for collaboration as an effective tool for communities to improve that both requires and builds trust, shared vision, and communication (Mattessich, 2001). Collaboration is key to achieving positive, sustainable change and encouraging maximum growth in any partnership or collective. The value of these concepts that supported my work with the interfaith group have been internalized through this practice.

This project has strengthened my ability to be a reflective practitioner. The regular practice of reflecting on what I was experiencing and how I perceived the group was functioning as a whole has increased my confidence in my ability to lead. This ongoing critical self-assessment has been crucial in developing competency in skills I will use in all facets of my life. Being attentive to not only technical knowledge but experiential knowledge and practices as well
has helped me to internalize what I have learned and be more intentional about my actions (Preceptor Education Program, 2015). As I have reviewed the stages of this project, I have been reminded of James’ (n.d.) reminder to those participating in participatory action research to ask themselves, “Does the work bring me joy?” The group itself was formed out of a strong passion and has continually fulfilled and inspired me. Throughout the last year, each step of the way of the dialogue and collaboration processes with the group have led to a deepening of our relationships and the capacity of the group to work and learn together. So, to the joy question, I answered a resounding, “Yes!”

**Project Impact on the Participants**

With each session of the project, I noticed examples of change in the participants. This was demonstrated by an increase in the length of conversations, an increase in the energy with which they engaged, and an enthusiasm that had not been previously present. The participants commented on this as well. They were most excited by the realization that the capacity of the group as a whole to make progress on their three objectives was increasing as they became more religiously literate, engaged in more and deeper dialogue, and built stronger relationships. Figure 6 depicts the cyclical nature of the change process they envision.
Scharmer (2009, p. 280) noted another positive outcome that results from engaging in “Co-presencing” is that participants can develop unique, deep bonds. Further evidence of change in the group was the continuation of engagement beyond the planned and scheduled sessions. This occurred when pairs and small groups of participants got together on their own outside of regularly scheduled meetings. It also was enabled by the development of a private group Facebook page. Here participants posted questions, thoughts, and links to articles they thought other participants would find interesting.

The participants appreciated the opportunity to be changemakers beyond the immediate group as well. With this project they recognized they could become “tempered radicals,” to work to effect change in localized, diffuse, and possibly quiet but still significant ways (Meyerson,
In working to accomplish their objectives and long-term goal, they were excited by the idea that they could push against prevailing norms and make a difference in small but steady ways, acting as examples for others. This action could lead to an evolutionary adaptation, that is a gentler, incremental shift first within themselves and secondarily in those in their circles of influence. They frequently brought up the fact that this kind of adaptation can create a broad, sustainable change, and the inspiration it provided the women was significant (Meyerson, 2001, p. 39).

**Overall Project Assessment**

The most notable weakness of this project was the underestimation of time required to completely participate in and benefit from each of the three sessions. Feedback from the participants after each session and at the end of the project repeatedly highlighted the frustration of participants wanting more time to spend on dialogue. Two factors contributed to this miscalculation. The first factor was the limitation of the ten-week time restriction for the action research to meet the university term schedule. The second factor was the participants’ inability to anticipate the depth of dialogue that would be possible and their inexperience in determining how much time each dialogue would require.

The participants addressed the first factor by recognizing the problem and deciding to increase the number of engagements for each session and to extend the length of time for the next iteration of the project beyond ten weeks. The next exploration of symbol and ritual will focus on either the Jewish or Islamic tradition. The schedule could include multiple meetings to accomplish the presentation and discussion of this project’s first session, two meetings for the tour of the house of worship and subsequent dialogue, and multiple meetings to accomplish the agenda for session three.
To address the second issue of not allowing for enough time for each ongoing dialogue, the participants have decided to simplify the agenda for each session deliberately and to commit to being flexible with planning. While meeting dates could be scheduled out many months, what will be included in each meeting could be decided on a short-term basis. Before each meeting ends, participants could mindfully reflect on how each is feeling about the dialogue regarding readiness to move on or desire to continue it at the next meeting. With a brief discussion, the decision could be made on how to proceed the following meeting. The participants also acknowledged that their ability to predict the duration of particular dialogue might also improve with increased group experience in dialogue.

The most notable strength of this project is that it empowered the interfaith group to become what Christine Whitney Sanchez called a generative container, a nurturing environment that “holds the stress, the creative tension between the old and the new” (Sanchez, 2016). She stated we cannot create these containers on our own. It requires a collaborative process. The community that becomes a generative container provides the opportunity for relationships, experimentation, learning, and growth (Sanchez, 2016). Working toward the objectives in this project through this collaborative process has resulted in evidence of each of the rewarding opportunities mentioned. The participants have expressed their positive anticipation that these will increase with each iteration of the process.

The current perspective as summarized in the literature review is that interfaith engagement is a valid way to bring people of different religions together to expand religious literacy and build acceptance and mutual understanding. Increasing interfaith literacy in an environment of mutual respect enables people to relate to each other positively with compassion. These kinds of fruitful interactions are the building blocks for connections that can become
relationships. The results of this project confirm that increasing religious literacy, deepening dialogue, and strengthening relationships are three sides of an interfaith triangle that build upon each other.

By exploring symbol and ritual, participants found that, as the literature stated, group members were able to open up new windows of seeing each other. The process helped the participants to cultivate a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences in their faith traditions as they shared the richness of symbols and rituals which are often experienced beyond just the mind’s comprehension in the understanding of the heart. The experiences of the three sessions confirmed the participants’ hope that they could as a group intentionally strengthen the three interdependent sides of the group’s interfaith triangle. Working through this collaborative project took the participants into a deeper knowledge of others, more meaningful dialogue, and stronger relationships. It gave the group a process with which it can move forward in their goal to use what they learn and experience to benefit others in their circles of influence.

**Recommendations for Future Projects**

The timing of the project could not have come at a better time in the evolution of this interfaith group. We had reached the point at which we needed to decide on a framework for moving forward that was in keeping with our individual and group goals. In recognizing the cyclical aspect of participatory action research, upon completion of the project the group members decided to continue the process with one of the other faith traditions represented in the group. In this way, the group has evaluated how to expand the project in the context of this participant community.

Another interfaith group seeking to carry out the actions in a different setting should take into consideration what was learned by these initial participants. For new groups, include
planning to intentionally spend several months becoming acquainted and developing a sense of community and group cohesion. A healthy group climate is necessary for group members to be willing to self-disclose and support one another (University of Waterloo, 2003). For all groups, even those that have been together a while, flexibility in planning is important. The dialogue that is possible through exploring symbol and ritual can be intense, vibrant, and fruitful. The rigidity of an agenda set in stone can lead to frustration and suboptimal dialogue.

Finally, the process of Appreciative Inquiry to define, discover, dream, and design was a great asset in organizing and implementing this project in a way that fit the specific context of this interfaith group (Steenbarger, 2015). Because I was studying and focused on it at the start of the project, the group became familiar with the process and eventually found that we quite naturally fell into it as a matter of course throughout the project. It allowed participants to bring their best selves to the table, sharing their individual gifts while focusing on common goals (Biro, 2017). Groups that would seek to participate in a project similar to this would benefit by becoming familiar with the Appreciative Inquiry concept.
REFERENCES


Hanson, V. (September 13, 2017). Diversity can spell trouble. *Hoover Institutional Journal.* Retrieved from [https://www.hoover.org/research/diversity-can-spell-trouble](https://www.hoover.org/research/diversity-can-spell-trouble)


The Pluralism Project. (n.d.). *Richmond.* Harvard University. Retrieved from

http://pluralism.org/interfaith/richmond/


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxF7bcZcUfQ


https://www.forbes.com/sites/brettsteenbarger/2015/06/21/appreciative-inquiry-leading-by-asking-the-right-questions/3/#32cd2a7c5024


APPENDIX A: Ethical Guidelines

January 20, 2018

To Whom It May Concern,

I am doing an action research project about sharing experiences of prayer, symbol, and ritual, and I am asking you to be a participant in my research.

I will give priority to your interests at all times. To protect your interests in my final report, I promise the following:

- Your identity will be protected at all times in my final report unless you give me specific permission to use your name.
- You are free at any time to withdraw from the research project, whereupon I will destroy all data relating to you. I will report that a participant decided to leave the project and reflect on ways the project might have been more conducive for all participants.
- I will make a copy of my research report available to you.

Two copies are enclosed. Please sign both. Keep one for your records and return the other to me.

Researcher’s Name: Patty Carpenter

Date_____________________

I have received this ethics statement from Patty Carpenter.

Signed ____________________  Date ____________________

NOTE: If at any time you have any questions or concerns about the project, you may contact the Dean of Capstone Studies at Claremont Lincoln University, Dr. Stan Ward. Please contact him by email: sward@claremontlincoln.edu, or call the university: 909-667-4400.
October 1, 2018
To Action Research Project Participants,

In the action research project about exploring symbol and ritual in which you are participating, I am writing the research report and preparing a research poster.

I will give priority to your interests at all times. To protect your interests in my final report and poster, I promise the following:

- I will be using statements that you shared during the planning and the project as direct quotes. With your permission, I may use photographs taken at the project sessions for a research poster. Your identity will be protected at all times in my final report and poster unless you give me specific permission to use your name.
- You are free at any time to withdraw from the research project, whereupon I will destroy all data relating to you.
- I will make a copy of my research report available to you.

Two copies are enclosed. Please sign both. Keep one for your records and return the other to me.

Researcher’s Name: Patty Carpenter

Date____________________

I understand that the action researcher, Patty Carpenter, will be using direct quotations from my participation in the action research project and may use photographs taken at our sessions. I give my permission for her to do so.

Signed ___________________ Date ____________________

NOTE: If at any time you have any questions or concerns about the project, you may contact the Dean of Capstone Studies at Claremont Lincoln University, Dr. Stan Ward. Please contact him by email: sward@claremontlincoln.edu, or call the university: 909-667-4400.
# APPENDIX B: Participant Collaboration Log

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/2017</td>
<td>Participants 1 - 9</td>
<td>Regular monthly meeting. Introduced concept of the capstone and the possibility of working with this interfaith group.</td>
<td>All participants are very open to the idea and will think about the possibilities of what action might be undertaken. Interest expressed in pursuing concepts related to: creating safe spaces, biases, how to engage with others, what part does religious literacy play in prejudice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/18/17</td>
<td>Participants 1-9</td>
<td>Regular monthly meeting. Updated group on research question. Discussed possible concepts to incorporate.</td>
<td>Participants are optimistic about being a part of a research action project. Suggestions to explore included actions that involve: inter-religious art, prayer, holidays and celebrations, or attendance at various religious services.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1/20 through 3/19/2018 | Participants 1-9 | Initial Action Research interviews - face to face, email, and telephone. Appreciative Inquiry, Open-ended questions included:  
- What are your reasons for joining the group?  
- What do you think are the strengths w/in the group?  
- What is “working” in the group?  
- What have been the most positive relationship-building aspects?  
- What ways can we build on this? | Capstone Dialogue Lab Report. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Meeting Details</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2/19/2018</td>
<td>Participants 1-9, visiting guest</td>
<td>Regular monthly meeting. Updated group on current version of research question with changes from last interviews incorporated.</td>
<td>Agreement on current research question with stipulation to think about methods to think about appropriately to narrow focus to achieve goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/19/2018</td>
<td>Participants 3, 5, 6, 9</td>
<td>Discussion on Muslim holiday of Ramadan. Discussed possible ways to experience prayer, symbol, and ritual as a group.</td>
<td>After spending so much time in productive, interesting discussion of <em>one</em> holiday, stakeholders present see a definite need to narrow focus in order to set achievable goal for an 8 to 10-week time limit. Possibilities: Focus just on one of prayer, symbol, ritual; schedule extra meetings; shared videos.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/16/18</td>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Individual interview to clarify goals of action project, clarify methods to achieve goals, and clarify how to measure results to recognize success with stakeholder group.</td>
<td>Interview notes and Collaboration Paper #3. Of special interest: -suggestion to limit to one faith for the 8-10 weeks of the action project. -suggestion for assessment – journaling, “literacy pre-test”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/20/18</td>
<td>Participant 2</td>
<td>Individual interview to clarify goals of action project, clarify methods to achieve goals, and clarify how to measure results to recognize success with stakeholder group.</td>
<td>Interview notes and Collaboration Paper #3. Of special interest: - possibly narrow focus on 2 of the 3 “experiences” taking out prayer but adding it as a group activity separate from research project -possibly choose one type of ritual, e.g. Initiation? -concern to keep assessment simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Activity Description</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/28/18</td>
<td>Participant 6</td>
<td>Individual interview to clarify goals of action project, clarify methods to achieve goals, and clarify how to measure results to recognize success with stakeholder group.</td>
<td>Interview notes and Collaboration Paper #3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/31/18</td>
<td>Participant 3</td>
<td>Individual interview to clarify goals of action project, clarify methods to achieve goals, and clarify how to measure results to recognize success with stakeholder group.</td>
<td>Of special interest: - Definite agreement with one faith at a time, agreement to start with Christianity due to project “leader” organizing/modeling - Appreciation expressed for more structure project will bring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/1/18</td>
<td>Participant 4</td>
<td>Individual interview to clarify goals of action project, clarify methods to achieve goals, and clarify how to measure results to recognize success with stakeholder group.</td>
<td>Interview notes and Collaboration Paper #3. Definite agreement with current evolution of research question and method to achieve goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/6/18</td>
<td>Participant 5</td>
<td>Individual interview to clarify goals of action project, clarify methods to achieve goals, and clarify how to measure results to recognize success with stakeholder group.</td>
<td>Of special interest: - Suggestions for measurement tools – pre and post survey questions, journaling; volunteer to take the lead on this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/6/18</td>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Meeting to discuss his participation in leading the tour of church, presentation of history, highlighting symbols/rituals of Christianity.</td>
<td>He agreed to lead tour and presentation. Very eager to join in. Will contact in August to set up next meeting to work on content ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/15/18</td>
<td>Director Rel. Freedom Ctr, DC</td>
<td>Email requesting suggestions, guidance re: resources and evaluation tools.</td>
<td>Awaiting response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Participants / Action</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/18/18</td>
<td>Participants 1-9</td>
<td>Update on results of last round of individual interviews, current research action question. Discussion of measurement methods to use.</td>
<td>Move forward as planned with setting dates for sessions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/16/18</td>
<td>Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9</td>
<td>Discussion of evaluation methods and current state of project.</td>
<td>Decision to move forward as planned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/13/18</td>
<td>Participants Meeting</td>
<td>Distributed Change Plan, Journals. Discussed next steps.</td>
<td>Set date for meeting of participants who will plan first presentation session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/19/18</td>
<td>Repeat Email Director Rel. Freedom Center</td>
<td>Email requesting suggestions, guidance re: resources and evaluation tools.</td>
<td>Awaiting Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/20/18</td>
<td>Phone call w/Dr. Ward</td>
<td>Check in on Capstone.</td>
<td>Send IRB.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/20/18</td>
<td>Email Dr. Ward</td>
<td>Emailed completed IRB.</td>
<td>Awaiting response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/23/18</td>
<td>Call to Dir. Rel. Freedom Center</td>
<td>Will not pursue this source at this time.</td>
<td>No response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/28/18</td>
<td>Meeting with Participants 1, 2, 6</td>
<td>Began plans for Session One.</td>
<td>Outline of responsibilities complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/28/18</td>
<td>Emailed Participant 10</td>
<td>To confirm commitment to lead Session Two.</td>
<td>Participant 10 committed. Will check w/ Participants 1-9 on prospective dates for session 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/30/18</td>
<td>Emailed Dr. Ward</td>
<td>Checking on progress of IRB. He did not receive.</td>
<td>Re-emailed IRB and got confirmation Dr. W rec’d. He will send it on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/31/18</td>
<td>Emailed Participants 1-9</td>
<td>Requesting preferred dates for Session 2</td>
<td>Response from Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/2/18</td>
<td>Emailed Participants 1-9</td>
<td>Reminder re: gathering initial data</td>
<td>Response from Participants 1-7, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/4/18</td>
<td>Emailed Participants 1, 2, 6</td>
<td>Summary of planning meeting and table to enable communication as planning progresses.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/4/18</td>
<td>Dr. Ward</td>
<td>Received IRB with suggestion for one correction. Emailed edited version.</td>
<td>Awaiting response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/11/18</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>Participants 1-9</td>
<td>Reminder to send gathered data on biases and assumptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rec’d response from Participants 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/11/18</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Confirmed date of Session 2, Church Tour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Session 2 will be Oct. 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/12/18</td>
<td>Dr. Ward</td>
<td>Emailed Dr. Ward to check on progress of IRB</td>
<td>IRB meets next week or beginning of following week. He will forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>their recommendations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/13/18</td>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Completed Course from NIH on Protecting Human Research Participants</td>
<td>Received Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/25/18</td>
<td>Rec’d email</td>
<td>IRB committee passed proposal with request for two clarifications.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/4/18</td>
<td>Sent email</td>
<td>Submitted two clarifications on IRB to Dr. Ward.</td>
<td>IRB complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/4/18</td>
<td>Emailed</td>
<td>Participants 1-9</td>
<td>Sent chart of gathered data for review before session 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reminder: update email contact for Participant 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/8/18</td>
<td>Participants 1-7, 9</td>
<td>Session 1 presentation by Christian subgroup</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/9/18</td>
<td>Called</td>
<td>Participant 8</td>
<td>Called to check on her and plan to provide tape of session 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant 8 will be taking a seasonal leave of absence from group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>due to responsibilities associated with starting grad school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/11/18</td>
<td>Participant 10</td>
<td>Meeting to review for Session 2</td>
<td>Participant is looking forward to session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/15/18</td>
<td>Participants 1-7</td>
<td>Emailed reminder to journal further reflections.</td>
<td>Favorable response from all emailed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/22/18</td>
<td>All participants except 7</td>
<td>Called with reminder of session 2 coming up this week. Clarified directions, answered questions.</td>
<td>Participant 1 will be traveling for work and may not be able to attend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/25/18</td>
<td>Participants 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10</td>
<td>Session 2</td>
<td>Tour of church and presentation. Participant 1 was absent. Meeting was recorded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/3/18</td>
<td>Participant 1, 6</td>
<td>Recording of Session 2 provided</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/12/18</td>
<td>Participants 1-7, 9</td>
<td>Session 3, See appendix</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/13/18</td>
<td>Participants 1-7, 9</td>
<td>Emailed final questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### APPENDIX C: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Religious Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>Reform Judaism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>Methodist converted to Catholicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7</td>
<td>Follower of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10</td>
<td>Episcopalian Clergy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D: Pre-Sessions Gathered Data

Gathered Data
Beliefs and Assumptions Held or Heard Regarding Christianity
APPENDIX E: Christian Literacy Pre-Session Quiz

Name: _______________________________
Pre/Post-experience Christian Literacy Survey

• Name the four Gospels.

• “God helps those who help themselves.” Is this in the Bible? If so, where?

• “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.” Is this in the Bible? If so, where?

• What is a sacrament? List as many as you know.

• The First Amendment says 2 things about religion, each in its own “clause.” What are they?

• Which is NOT one of the 10 Commandments?
  A. Do not commit adultery.
  B. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
  C. Do not steal.
  D. Keep the Sabbath holy.

• What was the name of the person whose writings and actions inspired the Protestant Reformation?

• What is the significance of Baptism?
• Match the Bible character with the stories in which they appear. Some may be matched with more than one story.

_______  Adam and Eve  A. Exodus
_______  Paul  B. Binding of Isaac
_______  Moses  C. Olive Branch
_____  Noah  D. Garden of Eden
_______  Jesus  E. Parting of the Red Sea
_______  Abraham  F. Road to Damascus
_______  Serpent  G. Garden of Gethsemane

• The cross or crucifix was promoted by the Christian church as a symbol of:
  A. Christ’s crucifixion
  B. the faith of Christians
  C. crucifixion as a form of the Roman Empire's criminal punishment
  D. all but c

• The symbol of the Christian cross is reflected in which of the following:
  A. Structure of some Christian churches
  B. The gestural action of a Christian blessing
  C. Stations of the Cross
  D. All of the above

• The Christian cross differs from the Christian crucifix in that the cross displays:
  A. no crucified figure
  B. a figure with arms outstretched
  C. a figure with arms tied to the crossbeams
  D. a figure with hands nailed to the crossbeams

• What are the original languages of Christianity?

• What were the two major splits in Christianity?

• Draw the symbol known as the Chi Rho.
• Can Christian women be ordained?

• Match the best description of the denomination’s teaching on the bread and wine used for Communion:

  ____Baptist  A. Bread/Wine become body/blood of Christ through transubstantiation
                 B. “The body of Christ is eaten in the Supper only after a heavenly manner.”
  ____Catholic  C. Real Presence through transelementation, how is unknown
                 D. Bread and Wine are meaningful and symbolic
  ____Lutheran  E. Real Presence but how this occurs remains a mystery
                 F. Real Presence through Sacramental Union
  ____Episcopalian
  ____Methodist
  ____ Orthodox

• Who is Paul of Tarsus and why is he important?

Mark True of False
In Christianity:
  ____ Water is an important symbol.
  ____ The Bible, the religion’s sacred text, is inerrant.
  ____ The tradition is monotheistic.
  ____ Jesus is half man, half God.
  ____ Christians worship saints.

• Circle those below that are Christian symbols:

  Cross  Dove  Anchor  Ichthys
  Pomegranate  Shepherd  Shamrock  Pelican
  Anchor  Peacock  Agnus Dei  Flame
  Rainbow  Water  Oil  Ostrich egg
APPENDIX F: Agenda Session One

- Welcoming
- Mindful Moment
- Christian Literacy Pre-quiz
- Baptism
- Cross
- Communion/Eucharist
- Prayer
- Our Personal Prayer Practices
- Journaling Time
APPENDIX G: Agenda Session Three

- Welcoming
- Mindful Moment
- Christian Literacy Post-quiz
- Review of 5 Essential Dialogue Skills
- Review of Answers for Post-quiz and Comparison with Pre-quiz Score
- Dialogue on Journal Sharing and Review of Gathered Data from Before Session One
- Evaluation of the Impact of Exploring Symbol/Ritual on our Three Objectives:
  - To increase religious literacy
  - To encourage meaningful dialogue
  - To strengthen interreligious relationships
APPENDIX H: Action Research Project Final Survey of Individual Participants

Reflecting on the three sessions that comprised this initial exploration of Christian symbols and rituals, please answer the following questions:

- What did you observe or hear that stood out to you?

- How did you feel? Did anything surprise you, frustrate you, anger you excite you? When have you experienced something similar? Were any memories brought up?

- How do you make meaning of what you saw or heard? What did you learn? Why might it be important? What new insight did you gain?

- What is one thing you might take away from this? How might it affect how you see something in the future? What will you change?

In what ways did the exploration meet or fail to meet our three stated objectives?

1. To increase religious literacy

2. To encourage meaningful dialogue

3. To strengthen interfaith relationships
## APPENDIX I: Themes from Participants’ Reflective Journals

### Feelings
- Left each session feeling peaceful.
- Felt supported.
- Time constraints were frustrating.
- I was reminded of other meaningful encounters.
- Hearing about others’ diverse connection always brings me joy.
- Being in the church brought up memories of how white Christians would look at my early childhood family with surprise, implying that we were there only due to missionaries in India.
- Felt upset learning about the origin of some of the Christian traditions in my own church. It made me question some things, think more, investigate. This was good in the long run.

### Observations
- I was struck by some of the similarities of Islam and Christianity.
- Being in the church gave me the quiet, peaceful feeling I have in the early morning hours at the mosque.
- I loved the ambiance, the calming simplicity of the church. I experienced such peace during the tour meeting. It was a beautiful place that I’ve returned to in my mind since then. I felt so welcomed, I may visit again by myself.
- I would like to take my children for the same tour. I take for granted that they will ask questions – which they sometimes do. But this tour did such a great job that I’d love for them to have the same experience.
- Surprised at the denominational differences in Christianity!
- I think I will ‘integrate’ some of the others’ spiritual practices into my own.

### Insights
- Certain rituals are meaningful to some but not all, even within the same tradition.
- It’s inspiring to hear what others are inspired by.
- Not all Christians are the same. Their beliefs vary more than I’d imagined. It’s vital to get to know people as individuals and hear about their perspective on faith.
- I gained new insights into my interfaith friends. There’s a depth in them that I appreciate.
- I’ve always respected Christianity. I believe it made me strong in my youth and was an important part of my journey to Islam. I learned something new in that there is evening prayer.
- I don’t think I realized the power of religious symbols to transmit and communicate.
- Connections in belief systems lead to connections for people. I look forward to more.
- I learned taking things at face value may not be the wisest choice. Seeking truth by reading, exploring, experiencing is a long and worthwhile process. I love that the journey for this group is ongoing.
- Only speaking for myself, I am amazed at the instances when members of the other faiths discovered similarities. This is showing us how interconnected we are. It brings me closer to everyone. It instills a curiosity that makes me want to explore more.

### Literacy
- My curiosity grew just by taking the quiz.
- I think I’ve forgotten a lot from my own tradition.
- This inspired me to investigate within my own religion.
- So many similarities! These inspired more dialogue.
- I found the historical and theological aspects of Christianity intriguing. I’ve been guilty of misjudgment.
- I strongly recommend people of different faiths visit other houses of worship especially if there is opportunity for questions. This was an amazing experience for me.
- This exploration was an epiphany for me. The experience has motivated me to intentionally deepen my religious literacy.

### Dialogue
- I felt like we could have talked all night.
- I am now craving more of this stuff.
- The dialogue consistently invited more questions. This took us into new and deeper places, deeper sharing.
- The dialogue was food for my hungry soul and mind. THIS is why I wanted to be part of a group of different faiths.
- I appreciate the respect for curiosity everyone shares.

### Relationships
- I am immensely appreciative of the welcoming, comfortable environment present in this group.
- These meetings have an intimacy that I’ve not found even among some of my longtime friends. Spending time together engaged in such vulnerable topics breeds trust I think.
- I cherish the friendships I’ve made with these women.
- This may seem odd, but I am encouraged when I heard stories from some of the others on their own faith. It makes me see the common humanness in us.