

## **Interfaith Infrastructure: The Indispensable Value of the Local**

Diana Eck & The Pluralism Project Staff

*As our country and world become urbanized and connected to an unprecedented degree, we hear of trends on a sweeping, large scale: we may know that anti-Semitism is on the rise in America, but we rarely hear about the people, the relationships, and the networks that are working to combat that anti-Semitism. I remain steadfastly convinced of the integral importance of the local as a foundation for America's interfaith infrastructure. In this article I will trace the roots of the Pluralism Project, which I founded over twenty-five years ago to explore the ways in which new religious immigrant communities were changing the fabric of America and becoming changed themselves. Since its beginning the Pluralism Project focused its research on the particularity of the local, and from that emphasis on the local we have been able to understand interfaith work and its infrastructure in a comprehensive way. I will present salient examples of interfaith efforts that are steeped in the local context of their home communities and encourage readers to consider the ways in which specific local context is foundational to interfaith infrastructure within the United States.*

*Keywords: interfaith, case study, case learning, interreligious studies, pluralism, Harvard University, multireligious, America, United States, research*

In October 2017, one day after Yom Kippur, Judaism's holiest day, and just two days after the end of the Hindu festival Navratri, I was honored to receive the second annual award from the Interfaith Institute of the Islamic Center of Long Island (ICLI). Dr. Faroque Ahmed Khan, board of trustee chair of the Interfaith Institute, and the community of the ICLI have been pioneers in interfaith relations and have modeled the future of our lives together as Americans and as people of faith.<sup>1</sup>

As I prepared my remarks for the occasion, I returned to the concept of infrastructure, the lifelines of our cities and towns. The deficits of America's aging infrastructure—our highways, bridges, and transportation systems—have been the subject of political and economic discussion and debate. Though these concerns are warranted, I find myself more concerned with another kind of infrastructure: the human and cultural bridges, the communications networks, that link the people of a city together. And in America's increasingly diverse cities, religiously diverse in ways unimagined fifty years ago, this is what I call the “interfaith infrastructure”: it is a kind of everyday pluralism, a grassroots pragmatic pluralism that is critical for our common future.

In 1991, I began to offer a course at Harvard University on “World Religions in New England.” The course developed out of my growing interest in how the religious landscape of America was changing and the diversity of my students was reflective of that broad change. The diversity of the students in my classroom was a microcosm of the shifts occurring in Boston's religious landscape, which was itself a microcosm of changes throughout the country:

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<sup>1</sup> This article has as its foundation the remarks I offered at the ICLI ceremony in Westbury, NY on October 1, 2017.

When I first met these new students—Muslims from Providence, Hindus from Baltimore, Sikhs from Chicago, Jains from New Jersey—they signaled to me the emergence in America of a new cultural and religious reality about which I knew next to nothing. At that point I had not been to an American mosque, I had never visited a Sikh community in my own country, and I could imagine a Hindu summer camp only by analogy with my Methodist camp experience. I felt the very ground under my feet as a teacher and scholar begin to shift. My researcher’s eye began to refocus—from Banaras to Detroit, from Delhi to Boston.<sup>2</sup>

This was the start of the Pluralism Project, as my students and I began to research and document these shifts in our own community in Boston. Though the Pluralism Project has now been at this work for over twenty-five years, and despite countless case studies, research projects, and organizational profiles, in many ways we are left with more questions than answers. I see this as a sign of the depth of our work; indeed, meaningful research often opens up a new labyrinth each time one dives in, tempting the researcher to fully immerse herself within the subject and get deeper into its messy, complicated reality.

In this article I will examine the ways in which America’s interfaith infrastructure is grounded in the local context, and encourage the latest generation of researchers—both at the Pluralism Project and elsewhere—to keep their focus on the particularity of the local. By surveying the Pluralism Project’s history and early research, exploring our case study method, and offering numerous salient examples of interfaith engagement, I will underline the local context and the personal relationships that are integral to interfaith infrastructure, and stress that we as researchers must continue to keep our focus on the local if we are to accurately represent interfaith efforts in the United States.

### ***A New Urban Reality***

Cities—their neighborhoods, surrounding towns, suburbs—are important sites of religious encounter, religious diversity, and potentially religious pluralism. The city, writes Lewis Mumford in his now-classic study, *The City in History*, is “energy converted into culture.” Since he wrote in 1961, the energies of towns have been fueled and driven by an increasingly diverse population, and these are the very places where we discern how to live in a complicated multicultural society. This is where we gather up the complexity and diversity of a culture, not always in harmony, but sometimes in conflict. Here we can see the fault lines of a culture where its revolutions begin, the stretching marks where a whole society is giving birth to something new. Our urban centers are the nexus for the overlap of cultural, religious, civic, and other personal commitments. Indeed, the Pluralism Project has been attuned to these interwoven dynamics since the inception of our work.

The economist Jeffrey Sachs speaks of the twenty-first century, our century, as the “urban century”: “For the first time in human history, most of the world’s population will live in urban centers” and the sprawling surround of villages. Well over half the world’s population live now in such urban complexes where Sachs enumerates “a host of challenges.”<sup>3</sup> Poverty is urbanized.

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<sup>2</sup> Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 17–18.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded Planet* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 25–27.

Hunger is urbanized. Job creation is urbanized. Transportation is impossible. Gridlock is ghastly. Pollutants are concentrated. There are unanticipated health challenges with this intense human proximity.

But nowhere among the many “urbanized” issues that Sachs investigates are the people themselves, the structures of their ethnic and religious communities, their density and proximity, perhaps their fears and prejudices, or the challenges this diversity poses for human interrelations in a century marked by increased urbanization. Despite the fact that there are many new theories about the crisis of cities, the megalopolis, and the urban future, they attend little if at all to religion. I would like to talk about another kind of infrastructure: the human and cultural bridges that link the people of a city together. These networks in America’s increasingly diverse cities, religiously diverse in ways unimagined fifty years ago, are what I call the “interfaith infrastructure.” And it is critical for our common future.

In the past five decades, the migration of peoples has changed the religious demography of the world and of the United States, creating a level of cultural marbling and interpenetration in cities that is unprecedented in human history. And this is true not only of large cities, but smaller cities as well: while big American cities are “world cities,” small cities and even suburban villages like Westbury, New York on Long Island now increasingly have a population that is marbled with the diversity of the globe. This is something new in modern American history.

How do religious communities contribute to the health and well-being of our cities and towns? How does the local context affect interfaith infrastructure and cooperative interfaith relationships? Changing demographics and densely packed neighborhoods mean citizens typically cannot avoid interacting with fellow neighbors who may look, act, and pray differently from them. As the world’s population is increasingly located in urban centers, practical questions—What sounds constitute an expression of faith versus noise pollution? Where can parishioners park for worship? How might civic leaders choose to decorate their town for the holidays in a religiously diverse community?—become more and more pressing. The practical and higher-level questions are not simply abstract inquiries divorced of context; as we have learned in the course of our research, these questions are integrally dependent on local and personal dynamics.

As I will share below, our 2011 in-depth study of interfaith groups around the United States confirmed our notion that interfaith work is steeped in the local and personal context. In our earliest work and during our 2011 study, we used three typologies—leadership and constituencies, context, and purpose—as the lenses through which we viewed interfaith efforts. It is important to note that these typologies are not intended to measure interfaith work but instead serve as the framework through which we are able to examine these vast and complex networks.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, studies of interfaith work often focus primarily on constituencies (who is being served) and purpose (what is the goal of the organization) rather than context. Just as Sachs ignores the human religious elements of an urbanizing world, studies and conversations on interfaith work often cast aside the important third typology of context, both local and personal. I will focus my examination here almost exclusively on context, keeping in mind the inevitable ways in which these three typologies overlap. In examining how interfaith infrastructure manifests on a local level and exploring many

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<sup>4</sup> “The Interfaith Infrastructure: Citizenship and Leadership in the Multireligious City,” The Pluralism Project, accessed January 22, 2018, <http://pluralism.org/interfaith/report/>.

examples of this infrastructure in various American cities, we can appreciate both the infrastructure itself and the integral importance of a local context in this work. There is perhaps no better place to start than our original laboratory: the city of Boston.

### ***Boston’s Changing Religious Landscape—and Beyond***

During that first “World Religions in New England” course in 1991, I led my twenty-five students out of the classroom and into the increasingly diverse religious communities in and surrounding Boston for research and documentation. Our pioneering work had a special emphasis on Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist communities, understanding research as a tool for engagement across lines of difference. From the Sri Lakshmi Temple, located close to the starting point of the Boston Marathon, to New England’s first mosque, established in the shadows of the cranes of Quincy’s shipyards, students documented the post-1965 transformation of greater Boston’s religious landscape. The result of this research was the publishing of *World Religions in Boston: A Guide to Communities and Resources*, a printed guidebook that would serve as a model for future research. In 2009, as we adjusted to an increasingly web-based world, we published an updated and online version of *World Religions in Greater Boston*. With this work, we were documenting buildings, relationships, and societal issues to form a full picture of communities. The student researchers who worked with the Project were pioneers in the documentation of a new religious America, and they soon expanded their reach from Boston to cities and towns across the country.

These researchers spent summers documenting this new religious reality in their hometowns and regions: the mosque with its minarets rising from cornfields outside Toledo; the Hindu temples in Wilmington, Delaware; on a hilltop south of Atlanta; in Pearland, south of Houston; in a western suburb of Nashville. They collected short histories of dozens of Islamic centers in Chicago and Houston, urban and rural Buddhist centers in North Carolina, and Jain and Zoroastrian centers in Orange County, California. In Fremont, California, they discovered that Muslims and Methodists had purchased property together and had begun to build side-by-side. This was a time of dynamic change, year after year, and our academic instincts told us that someone should be paying attention to what was happening. Our work in those early days was “part history, part ethnography, part immigration studies, part cultural geography, part what we used to call civics.”<sup>5</sup> We have always understood that we cannot be exhaustive in this work; we simply cannot document each and every faith community in the United States. But by paying careful attention to the many varied snapshots offered, noting the differences and similarities between them, the ways in which each local context affects and colors an issue, we come to see the larger picture and appreciate the deep and interwoven connections that are being forged all throughout America.

To speak of interfaith relations now in the United States is not to speak of global issues and of people in complex societies on the other side of the world, but of local issues and of neighbors metaphorically and often literally across the street. As we completed more and more research at the Pluralism Project, we came to an almost paradoxical conclusion: while common themes emerged from our research, so too did a recognition that the local environment was integral to understanding our research in a comprehensive way.

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<sup>5</sup> Diana L. Eck, “Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75, no. 4 (December 2007): 750.

### ***Criticality of the Local: The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization***

Returning for a moment to our first living laboratory of Boston, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO) offers a clear example of how interfaith work is inherently steeped in the local context. The GBIO was formed in 1996 by forty-five clergy and community leaders with the primary goal to “develop local leadership and organized power to fight for social justice.” As it brings together leaders of many different faiths, its aims are rooted in overcoming the deep divisions between Boston neighborhoods, particularly those divisions driven by race and class issues.<sup>6</sup> In order to work toward erasure of these divisions, the GBIO has launched campaigns to address needs in affordable housing, financial literacy, affordable healthcare, and education.

In the 1970s, Boston’s public schools were essentially segregated even if not legally so. From 1974 to 1988, the city’s schools were under a court order to integrate by means of a controversial and complicated busing plan that transported black students into predominantly white school districts and white students into predominantly black school districts. During the time of forced busing, racial tensions in the already racially charged city of Boston intensified. With this in mind, we can come to appreciate the uniquely local issues that were present when the GBIO formed just eight years after busing ceased, and why the group might have prioritized bridging race and class divisions over other shared concerns. Because the GBIO has had great success during its two decades of work, other cities may be able to look to the organization for guidance on how their faith communities might respond to the needs of local citizens, but it is critical that we recognize the context-specific way in which the GBIO determined its priorities.

### ***The Local Personified: The Development of the Case Studies Method for Interfaith Research***

To further examine the particularity of the local context in this shifting religious landscape, we began to document moments when religious identity and civic life come together in points of tension. These situations became the basis for our case studies that are now widely used in faith communities, college classrooms, and public conversations about religious diversity.

In 1992, Chris Coble, a graduate student in one of my first seminars on Boston’s religious landscape, wrote some of the Pluralism Project’s first case studies. Coble engaged in extensive fieldwork to document emerging forms of interfaith activity in Boston and developed two papers: one analyzing the formation and growth of interfaith groups in greater Boston, and three richly described narrative case studies that comprised the paper “A Wreath, a Prayer, and a Shovel of Dirt: Three Case-Studies of Religious Pluralism in the Greater Boston Area.” Each case study relied on specificity and context:

- In suburban Weston, controversy emerged when the local garden club learned that their thirty-year tradition of decorating the school doors with wreaths was now against school policy. Did the removal of a wreath signal an increase or a decrease in the tolerance and diversity of the community?

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<sup>6</sup> “About GBIO,” Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, accessed February 8, 2018, <http://www.gbio.org/about-gbio>.

- At the Cathedral of St. Paul in downtown Boston, planners of an interreligious prayer service struggled to balance the integrity and particularity of diverse faith traditions—some with music, others with silence—and the unifying theme of justice and harmony. For the first time, they were celebrating together, as Christians, Jews, Neo-Pagans, Hindus, and Buddhists, yet they worried: would they be able to fit everything into a one-hour time frame?
- After a Muslim community was blocked from purchasing a property in a neighboring community, clergy in the predominantly Jewish town of Sharon came together to offer their assistance. Years later, those same clergy members celebrated the groundbreaking of the new Islamic Center, each turning over a shovel of dirt. One local rabbi commented, “We are truly breaking ground today.”

Written twenty-five years ago, these cases capture that moment in time, yet they introduce questions that continue to be relevant today. Coble recognized that as cases, the stories of a wreath, a prayer, and a shovel of dirt needed to be free of analysis or frameworks; in other words, to allow room for the readers of the case, or those discussing the case, to provide their own analysis and construct their own frameworks. The context is specific; the problem is actionable. These were true stories about specific events, richly described. They did not shy away from conflict or controversy; indeed, they pointed to the fact that sometimes the strongest bridges are built over the deepest divides. The “shovel of dirt” turned at the interfaith groundbreaking was an indication of how problems can, in fact, be generative: religious leaders in Sharon invited the Muslim community to come to the predominantly Jewish city after the local mosque’s leadership had been prevented from buying property in the neighboring town. It was part of a trend, which we have observed in many communities over the years, where innovative interfaith activity grows out of a specific crisis or conflict. The problem and promise are interrelated, if not inextricably linked.

Our cases are so successful as teaching tools because they harness the human desire to connect one-on-one, even if hypothetically, as the reader takes on the protagonist’s commitments and choices. In this way, our case studies represent a moment when the local becomes personified through the protagonist’s perspective. While engaging a case, the reader is forced to consider the nuanced and complex questions brought up for the particular person and community that is profiled. In “A Mosque in Palos Heights,” a local Muslim community in Palos Heights, Illinois attempts to buy a church long for sale to repurpose the building as its worship space, but receives pushback from the local community. How would the reader respond if she were the mayor? How would she vote if she were a member of the city council? In “Driven by Faith,” we learn that Somali Muslim taxi drivers in Minnesota do not want to transport clients who are visibly carrying alcohol, and we hear from the airport director as he struggles with how to properly serve customers while respecting his drivers’ religious faith. How would the reader respond if he were the airport director? How would the reader respond if he were a customer denied a taxi ride from the airport because of the bag of duty-free alcohol in his hand? We consider these case studies to be snapshots of the issues that arise from the new reality in the world’s most religiously diverse nation. As we began to see that interfaith collaboration was built on the foundation of relationships, we recognized that any teaching tool must prioritize this sense of personal connection in order to be effective.

In our case studies, we always establish the local context in which the dilemma takes place so that the reader can consider how these factors might affect the developing moment of tension. As an example, I will share a short excerpt from “A Mosque in Palos Heights” that demonstrates this helpful framing:

Palos Heights, Illinois is a small bedroom community with a population of just over 12,000. The city takes its name from a Spanish word for “trees,” and is bordered by a forest preserve. It is a grid of leafy neighborhoods with neat, upper middle-class homes, as well as newer “McMansions” emerging as symbols of growing affluence on the local landscape. Driving along the main thoroughfare of 127th Street, which stretches across the Southwest suburbs of Chicago, one small city blends into another, dotted with low buildings, strip malls, and churches. In Palos Heights, this stretch of road was home to five churches, including Reformed Church of America, Baptist, Christian Reformed, and Assembly of God denominations, and the Palos Bible Church.

Palos Heights had been called “a city of churches” and even a “Christian city.” Many of the city’s residents were of Dutch ancestry, affiliated with the Reformed Church of America and the Christian Reformed church; in addition, a large and active Catholic parish served the city’s considerable Irish-American population. In the year 2000, of the eleven houses of worship in Palos Heights, all were Christian. One of the largest and most vital churches was the Reformed Church of Palos Heights, with ties to the community that were as long as they were deep: some residents say that the plans for the church existed before the city was incorporated in 1959. The Reformed Church enjoyed strong linkages to Palos Heights’ own Trinity Christian College and provided the city access to its gym for recreational programs.<sup>7</sup>

With this framing, the reader is compelled to think about the local environment in which our cases take place and is also encouraged to consider how her own framework is similar or different. Through this she can consider how a particular situation would unfold in the context of her own community. When reading “A Mosque in Palos Heights,” the reader can ask herself: How might the situation turn out differently if it were taking place in the reader’s hometown of North Andover, Massachusetts versus Palos Heights, Illinois? This curious mix of locally specific, yet generalizable issues and themes can also be seen in two city-specific examples in Austin and Omaha:

“An Invitation to a Tri-Faith Neighborhood”<sup>8</sup> considers not only the challenges of the Tri-Faith Initiative, but also tells the story of Omaha, Nebraska, and its distinctive experience with diversity. By understanding what a shared space project might look like in Omaha, readers are then challenged to think about how these issues would, or would not, apply in other cities: What is emblematic about the dilemmas they face, and what is specific? What are the risks—and rewards—of any

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<sup>7</sup> Elinor Pierce, “A Mosque in Palos Heights” (Cambridge, MA: The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, 2007), 2.

<sup>8</sup> In our 2012 case study “An Invitation to a Tri-Faith Neighborhood,” Reverend Tim Anderson is asked if the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska would like to join the Jewish and Muslim communities in a groundbreaking tri-faith neighborhood in Omaha, Nebraska.

co-location of religious communities? In Austin, Texas, the case study of an Interfaith CEO, “Cultivating Change,” is uniquely “Austin,” at once corporate and creative. Yet the issues this interfaith organization faces, whether financial insolvency, lack of new, younger participants, or needing to change the organization’s name to reflect an expanded constituency, are common to many interfaith groups. As “city-based” cases they are specific and situated, which, in turn, makes them more generalizable for use as teaching tools.<sup>9</sup>

As our work progressed at the Pluralism Project, we appreciated the specificity of each community’s context, but also wanted to explore if we might draw out those common themes that were just beginning to surface in our early work. How might we demonstrate in more concrete ways how these initiatives are similar? How they are different? And how do the leaders of these groups orient themselves and their work?

To tackle these questions, the Pluralism Project developed a nationwide study of interfaith groups with a city-based approach in our initiative “Interfaith Infrastructure.” We used this particular language of “infrastructure” to make the point that cities and towns need not only the infrastructure of highways and bridges to deal with transportation and potholes but also the human framework that offers foundational support to local communities.<sup>10</sup> This work again used the lens of the local: we mapped interfaith activity in twenty U.S. cities, surveyed leaders at interfaith organizations, and developed case studies to add dimension and particularity to our study. This work comprised a catalogue of 410 organizations across 20 cities, with survey results from 124 (30%) of those organizations.

When, during our extensive research, the Pluralism Project surveyed program leaders about their purpose, over 80% identified “relationship building” as their primary purpose. “Education” and “dialogue” were listed next, followed by “service” and then “spiritual development.” Additionally, 70% identified their context as “city/metro area.”<sup>11</sup> Here we see in stark numbers the central importance of both the personal (relationships) and context (the local environment) in the nuanced and varied interfaith communities located in American cities.

As we learned during our early years and confirmed in our 2011 study, no examination of interfaith work would be complete without *both* quantitative and qualitative data. For example, mapping Austin’s twenty interfaith organizations offers a helpful but specific kind of insight, but it is incomplete and shallow without fuller profiles such as the one we undertook in our case study “Cultivating Change,” mentioned above. We recognized then, as we still do now, that we could only “capture glimpses into the breadth and depth of America’s growing interfaith infrastructure.”<sup>12</sup> Interfaith work has always been a grassroots effort and by that very nature is always changing. We mapped these organizations in their diverse, complex, and dynamic forms, understanding that we are studying these organizations and communities *in vivo*; this is an ongoing project with communities that are fluid and in flux. Omaha’s Project Interfaith is a striking example

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<sup>9</sup> “The Interfaith Infrastructure.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



of this fluidity: the organization was an impactful one that we documented in our 2011 report under the section “Promising Practices,” yet it had closed its doors by the start of 2015.<sup>13</sup>

These complex and robust manifestations of interfaith infrastructure are everywhere and various in their local energies and contexts: the Queens Interfaith Council in New York, the Marin Interfaith Council in California, Serve2Unite in Milwaukee, OneJax in Jacksonville, the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization in Boston, the Wayland Weston Interfaith Action Coalition in the Boston western suburbs, the Interfaith Hospitality Network in Columbus, Ohio. Local interfaith initiatives might bring women together, like the Daughters of Abraham Book Clubs in New England or the Women Transcending Boundaries in Syracuse, New York, a group that began as women reached out to support one another after 9/11. More recently, the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom formed in New Jersey when a Jewish woman and a Muslim woman gathered a small group of women who met for conversation, celebration, and community engagement.<sup>14</sup> The Sisterhood is a recent example of an initiative that started locally and gained a much wider reach: in 2010 it was simply one small group of women in New Jersey, and by December 2016, when the *New York Times* published a profile on the group, the Sisterhood had fifty chapters in twenty states.<sup>15</sup> Yet despite the Sisterhood’s wide reach, we cannot gloss over the importance of appreciating the local context.

As we learned when we researched one of Boston’s chapters of the Sisterhood, each chapter has its own foci and limitations, and to ignore the particularity of the local here would prevent us from accurately documenting the on-the-grounds interfaith infrastructure. In Boston, one of the Sisterhood chapters has a somewhat uneven roster of attendees, with more Jewish women than Muslim women attending regularly.<sup>16</sup> Through our research we learned this is mostly due to the different life-stages of its members: the Jewish members tend to be empty nesters who are retired, while the Muslim women are younger and still building their careers and their families. With even this small focus on the particularity of the local, we can gain deep understanding of the needs, limits, and opportunities for the Jewish and Muslim women who participate in the Boston chapter profiled.

Another local-turned-national endeavor is the Amazing Faiths Dinner Dialogues in Houston, during which people all over the city gather across lines of faith in private homes to share a meal and their thoughts on questions of spirituality, prayer, and religious practice. From Houston, these Dinner Dialogues have spread to half a dozen other cities. Other efforts that are more explicitly based in civic space have inspired initiatives in other cities: over the course of twenty years, the Louisville Festival of Faiths, a weeklong citywide festival, has become a major civic event to highlight and better understand the religious communities of Louisville, Kentucky. It includes speakers, music, and arts across traditions and cultures. The week of programming also initiates a

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<sup>13</sup> “Project Interfaith,” The Pluralism Project, accessed February 8, 2018, <http://pluralism.org/promising-practice/project-interfaith/>.

<sup>14</sup> Deena Yellin, “Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom Brings Muslim, Jewish Women Together to Fight Hate,” *USA Today*, December 28, 2017, <http://www.northjersey.com/story/news/bergen/2017/12/28/sisterhood-salaam-shalom-interfaith-organization-muslim-and-jewish-women-aims-fight-hate-and-spread/926790001/>.

<sup>15</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Both Feeling Threatened, American Muslims and Jews Join Hands,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/us/muslim-jewish-alliance-after-trump.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom Boston Chapter #3, <http://pluralism.org/profile/sisterhood-of-salaam-shalom-boston-chapter-3/>.

Passport to Understanding, extending that week into a year of visiting in one another’s places of worship to learn firsthand about religious communities one may not know. The Louisville festival packaged its approach so effectively that other cities have followed: in Greenville, South Carolina the Festival of Faiths is an undertaking of the Interfaith Forum; in Indianapolis, Indiana it has been launched by the Center for Interfaith Cooperation; and in Kansas City, Missouri the Festival of Faiths has become its own ongoing organization. The hundreds of new expressions of interfaith activity are all part of a growing, nationwide experiment in broadening civic engagement. The interfaith movement in all its forms gives expression to a new civic sense of who “we” are as citizens in a common society. What one might call the “interfaith movement” moves in many streams in the United States with no one leader, but generally in the same direction. Such is the very definition of a movement, and it is important to note the centrality of the local context to the development of this larger interfaith infrastructure.

### ***A Changed Climate: Looking Ahead***

The catalyst for the Pluralism Project’s creation was steeped in local context: as both my classroom and my city of Boston were becoming increasingly diverse, I could not help but respond with curiosity and commitment to explore these dynamics, bringing to it my “researcher’s eye.” Yet when we began our research, there was a different climate in the country: this work began before 9/11, before the Muslim travel ban. Twenty-five years later, we are still asking questions about the status and future of interfaith infrastructure here in the United States.

When we think about the physical infrastructure of the country, it is easy to get discouraged, especially in Boston where the bridges across the Charles River are aging and in constant need of repair and the potholes in the streets are large enough to swallow a tire. Aging infrastructure is glaringly obvious when a levee breaks in Louisiana or when a bridge collapses in Florida. Likewise it can be tempting to bemoan the crumbling of interfaith infrastructure when we hear of an increased number of hate crimes across the country, like when a Sikh Harvard Law student is verbally harassed just steps from campus or when Jewish cemeteries around the country are repeatedly desecrated and vandalized. Many of us are tempted to focus on these stories as evidence of divides widening. We wonder: how might interfaith communities respond in increasingly polarized times? Can the bridges they have built withstand these growing distances? Yet if we shift our focus to the experience at the local level, we can begin to see that these bridges are already expanding to reach across those deep divides.

Having closely observed and tracked interfaith efforts in Boston since November 2016,<sup>17</sup> we have seen that incidents of bias, expressions of hatred, and crimes of violence affecting Muslim, Jewish, and Sikh communities have generated an immediate response from the interfaith community. In Boston, we have seen 2,600 people gathered at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center to show solidarity against hate, brought together by leaders from the GBIO.<sup>18</sup> We have seen a standing-room-only performance of the play “Kultar’s Mime,” which connects the Russian Jewish experience of pogroms in the 1900s with the Delhi Massacre of 1984. And we have

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<sup>17</sup> This tracking was part of our project “Response and Resilience in Multireligious Boston,” made possible through a generous grant from the Open Society Foundations’ Communities Against Hate grant initiative.

<sup>18</sup> Jeremy C. Fox, “Interfaith Crowd Gathers at Mosque to Decry Incivility and Hate,” *Boston Globe*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/12/11/interfaith-crowd-gathers-mosque-decry-incivility-and-hate/DzjUCDhqch5gjlVwti511L/story.html>.

seen thousands come together in protest and solidarity in Copley Square in Boston upon the announcement of the Muslim travel ban.<sup>19</sup> These acts of solidarity may demonstrate the resilience of a community in crisis, but they also demonstrate the strength of the grassroots, everyday pluralism of this continually emerging interfaith infrastructure. Let us be sure to continue paying attention to the ways these relationships are fortified every day at the local and personal level, so that we can ensure we are documenting a full portrait of the robust interfaith infrastructure in the United States.

*Diana Eck's academic work has a dual focus—India and America. Her work on India focuses on popular religion, especially temples and places of pilgrimage, called tirthas. Since 1991 she has headed the Pluralism Project, where her work has focused especially on the challenges and opportunities of religious pluralism in America's multireligious society.*

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Arsenault, "Thousands in Copley Square Protest Immigration Order," *Boston Globe*, January 29, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/01/29/protest/5zOAYFudUwDp8TF4ZnYs5O/story.html>.