

Motivations for the Support of Tri-Faith Initiative Leaders and Volunteers

Prepared for Sacred and Violent honors colloquium class offered by Dr. Ramazan Kilinc at
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Introduction

This report was produced as an outcome of an honors class at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). In Spring 2018, Dr. Ramazan Kilinc offered a class titled Sacred and Violent. This class was a collaborative effort between UNO and the Tri-Faith Initiative. While students learned historical and theoretical approaches to the issue of religion and violence, they also interviewed the members of the Tri-Faith Initiative to examine the sources of accommodation and peace among the faithful from different religions.

Throughout the class time, the leaders of the congregations that comprise the Tri-Faith Initiative visited the class and the students conducted interviews with Tri-Faith leaders and volunteers. We are thankful to all who contributed to this project. We particularly thank those who took time to share their insights with us. In January 2018, the faith leaders Rabbi Brian Stoller, Reverend Eric Elnes, and Imam Jamal Doudi, along with Nuzhat Mahmood, visited our class, and shared the historical background of the Tri-Faith Initiative. In February and March 2018, the religious leaders came back to the class to talk deeper about their faith tradition's perspective on conflict and collaboration. During the same period, the students conducted their interviews. In April 2018, Bud Heckman, the Executive Director of the Tri-Faith Initiative, visited the class and provided us with a great background to situate Tri-Faith within a larger framework of global interfaith movements. Vic Gutman, Lisa Winton, and Arianna Cabrera helped us in organizational matters in the facilitation process of the project.

This report is based on student interviews with Tri-Faith leaders and volunteers. The students enrolled in the Sacred and Violent class interviewed 18 community members. Each student interviewed one leader or volunteer employing the same questions. After the interviews, each student wrote an analysis of the interview that they conducted. The students examined

personal, theological, and socio-political motivations that led each individual to contribute to the Initiative. Then, students focusing on a particular faith combined their individual analyses and prepared a group report summarizing the findings of the interviews for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Finally, the students prepared the final report that coherently brings all the findings together.

The report first introduces the Tri-Faith Initiative and its partners. Then, it identifies some of the challenges that the partners faced in the beginning of the project. It finally summarizes personal, theological, and socio-political motivations of the leaders and volunteers in supporting the project.

Brief Introduction of the Tri-Faith Initiative

The Tri-Faith Initiative started with the idea of sharing a parking lot. Temple Israel, Omaha's only Reform Jewish Synagogue, needed to move as it had outgrown its building at 67th and Cass streets. The building was serving 750 families and was built to serve only 350. Temple's Board started the process of looking for a new building and assessing the cost for moving. Then, Bob Freeman, one of Temple's members, had an idea. What if they found a partner to build with them so they could share parking and build something intentional? Rabbi Aryeh Azriel contacted a Muslim colleague who directed him to a group of Muslims that wanted to start a new mosque in Omaha. One of the leaders of this group was Dr. Syed Mohiuddin, a highly respected cardiologist and Chair of the Department of Medicine at Creighton University.

Mohiuddin and other Muslim professionals in the Omaha area wanted to build a new Islamic center that would also serve as a community center to host educational, cultural, and social events for all ages. Mohiuddin and Azriel met at a library in January of 2006 with a few representatives from their faiths. After a long conversation they decided to pursue the idea of co-locating and the leadership also developed and signed the Memorandum of Understanding.

Tri-Faith also decided to look for a third member of the Abrahamic faiths - Christianity. The first Christian partner was the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska. Then, in 2011, four entities; Temple Israel, the American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture (the former name of the American Muslim Institute), the Episcopal Diocese of Nebraska, and the Tri-Faith Initiative purchased a portion of land at 132nd and Pacific streets.

In 2013, Temple Israel started to serve its congregation on the Tri-Faith Commons. In the same year, the Episcopal Diocese approached Countryside Community Church and asked them to be the Christian partner and Temple Israel's new building on the Tri-Faith Commons was

dedicated. In 2015, Countryside voted to become the Christian partner. In 2017, the American Muslim Institute opened on Tri-Faith Commons and ground was broken for Countryside Community Church, which is expected to open in 2019. Tri-Faith hired its first Executive Director, Reverend Bud Heckman, in 2018. The Tri-Faith Center and a circular bridge connecting the four buildings are expected to complete construction in early 2020. The total project cost of the Tri-Faith Commons is \$65 million, with the majority of the funds raised coming from Omaha community members and local philanthropic foundations.

Brief Introduction of the Tri-Faith Partners

Tri-Faith's mission for spiritual and communal understanding is being brought to life by the dedication of its three partners: Temple Israel, Countryside Community Church, and American Muslim Institute (AMI). Each place of worship has its own unique history that contributes to the community of Tri-Faith.

Temple Israel is a founding member of Tri-Faith. The Reform Jewish congregation was founded in 1871 and they were the first to raise their building on the Tri-Faith Commons. Temple Israel's synagogue has now been serving its 725 families on the Tri-Faith Commons since 2013. Temple Israel strives to provide a modern spiritual experience for its members and offers many social and educational opportunities to engage their community that include K-8 education and Adult Study.

The newest addition to Tri-Faith is Countryside Community Church, an open and affirming place of worship that was founded in 1949 and is affiliated with the United Church of Christ. Countryside hopes to create a supportive and diverse community that encourages its

members to pursue their full potential with the support of Christ and God. Countryside is still waiting to become a physical presence on the Tri-Faith Commons as the construction of the Church began in June of 2017 and is expected to be fully completed in early 2019.

AMI is another founding member of Tri-Faith. AMI is a local non-denominational autonomous nonprofit organization that was founded in 2006 originally under the name of the American Institute of Islamic Studies and Culture (AIISC). They are one of the founding members of the Tri-Faith Initiative with a mission to promote a better understanding of Islam in the Western world via education and study. Their educational programs are grounded in the core values of Islam: acceptance, compassion, equality, justice, and peace. Their mosque on the Tri-Faith Commons serves as a place of worship and study for the hundreds of Muslim families in the Omaha community and has been doing so since its completion in May of 2017. All partners are excited to work together to promote a future of peace and understanding.

Initial Challenges

Each of the three faith groups encountered a set of challenges when making the decision to join the Tri-Faith Initiative. One of Temple Israel's challenges stemmed from opposition from its congregation members. An interviewee mentioned that "there were people who left the synagogue because they did not want to be involved" in the Tri-Faith Initiative. They feared that Temple Israel's involvement in Tri-Faith could lead to threats and violence towards the congregation. An issue faced by the members who were deciding to leave the congregation was that Temple Israel is the only Reform Jewish congregation in Omaha. Another challenge Temple Israel faced in joining the Tri-Faith Initiative was instances of prejudice. The prejudice came

from both the general public and other Jewish denominations. These challenges, many interviewees fear, will continue to exist in spite of the dedicated work of Temple Israel and the Initiative.

Countryside Church was very deliberate in tackling the problems with shifting their Church to an entirely new building. The congregation of Countryside was not like the other two groups; they already had a building and a presence in the community. Additionally, some members did not want to join Tri-Faith at all. As one interviewee put it, “There were people who had been there for a long time, and just did not want to leave the building they had worshipped in for years.” However, the Church solved this problem by holding a period of deliberation during which they debated about the importance of joining the movement and whether or not God wanted them to join. After months of discussion, Countryside decided to join Tri-Faith in 2015, losing the members that did not want to move to a new facility with the Tri-Faith Initiative.

The American Muslim Institute has had some ideological differences amongst their members about the Tri-Faith Initiative, mostly centered around misunderstandings about the goals and the nature of the Initiative. Multiple interviewees expressed having heard confusion about trying to create a new religion mixing all three participants or about a hidden political agenda. One member of AMI explained the problem, which still is an issue when introducing Tri-Faith to other Muslims: “I think it revolves around two themes, right? You know people don't understand what you're trying to do. So, some people think, ‘Oh, Tri-Faith is coming up with a new religion,’ which is absolutely not the case. So, a lot of people are going to stop there when they hear about Tri-Faith, they really don't want to hear more or already have their minds made up. The other oppositions are because people don't understand that (Tri-Faith) really has no political agenda. It is just a group of people trying to make something happen on a social level.”

There was a commonality in the challenges faced by Temple Israel, Countryside Church, and the American Muslim Institute in joining Tri-Faith. One of the common challenges faced by the three faith groups was opposition by a few of their members in becoming a part of the Tri-Faith Initiative. Countryside Church's opposition seemed to stem from the fact they had a presence in the community as well as a nice facility. While the American Muslim Institute had misgivings on the goal of Tri-Faith, Temple Israel's distrust appeared to stem from fear.

Interviews and Motivations

Within each religious group, we interviewed a diverse set of people. In total, we interviewed 18 members of the three faiths, 8 women and 10 men, including the religious leaders of each section of the Tri-Faith Initiative and religious leaders from two non-Tri-Faith affiliated institutions. Each group we interviewed had 6 people which allowed us a variety of people within each faith community to give us a broad understanding of each community, as those involved ranged from leaders to youth teachers to parishioners.

The ages of our group went from early 30s to late 60s. We had 6 immigrants across the three faith groups coming from Egypt, Tunisia, Pakistan, Palestine, The Netherlands, and Afghanistan. The majority of our immigrants came from the Muslim community. A handful of our interviewees were born abroad but spent their lives traveling, which gave them the ability to give a different idea of a multi-faith community.

An interesting note was that within each faith group we interviewed we had one convert. This allowed them to give a unique perspective on their involvement in the Tri-Faith Initiative.

All three spoke about how their conversion influenced their interest in the Initiative and helped move them into a place of encouraging others to help unite with one another.

Now that we have discussed the makeup of our interviewees, we will move onto the various motivations of the people involved in Tri-Faith. We will discuss the personal, theological, and socio-political motivations that our interviewees gave us as to why they became interested and involved in Tri-Faith.

Personal Motivations

The personal motivations for members of the different religious congregations are numerous and unique to each individual. However, commonalities among the interviewees in personal motivations show that the groups have common binding ties and drives. We shall examine the personal motivations to join Tri-Faith within the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities based upon our interviews.

The personal motivations for members of the Jewish community to join the Tri-Faith Initiative is vast and varied amongst the interviewees. Exposure to different faith traditions and love for diversity are common ties that attracted many of the interviewees to the project. The Tri-Faith Initiative allows for Jews and non-Jews to discuss and learn together, which leads to lasting mutual understanding and cohesive bonds.

One of our interviewees was attracted to Tri-Faith based upon their previous outreach experiences. They had a vast exposure to different religious traditions in their lifetime and was originally of a Christian denomination before converting to Judaism. They enjoyed continued studying of faith and getting to learn about others, stating “I always loved study.” Through

meeting many people of different faiths, the interviewee came to grasp the importance of mutual understanding and sustained ties between the different faith groups. Continuing their love for community outreach, the interviewee now is in leadership roles on committees for Temple Israel's involvement in the Tri-Faith Initiative.

Another interviewee is an immigrant from Europe. She was exposed to progressive ideals in her home growing up, and these values transferred over to the allure of Tri-Faith. "I grew up in a very liberal place, a very diverse place, a very open place." When immigrating to the United States, she kept these personal values and found a home with Temple Israel, which made the move to a more open, accepting environment almost natural.

One interviewee was attracted to the project by his conservative upbringing, marriage to a non-Jewish spouse, and professional association with people of Christian and Muslim faiths. Raised with traditional Jewish values, this interviewee faced trouble when his college sweetheart was not of Jewish faith. The interviewee's own Rabbi would not marry the two, nor would the synagogue consider their children to be inherently Jewish. After that backlash from the Rabbi, the interviewee decided to become a Reform Jew. This moment also inspired the interviewee to become actively supportive of interfaith initiatives. Upon being asked directly, he acknowledged that the interfaith marriage certainly caused him to fight for Tri-Faith later in life.

The Christian interviewees had similar motivations. In order to better understand why our interviewees chose to be a part of the Tri-Faith Initiative or not, we need to understand their choice to be of the Christian faith. All five of the Christian interviewees cited a personal belief that uniting the three faith groups in the name of peace was a good cause. Each cited a personal belief in the merit of the idea, although there are a few differences in how each person viewed the issue. Naturally, Reverend Elnes puts an emphasis on the Bible when deriving his reasons for

the movement, although many of the other interviewees put more of an emphasis on personal belief and a feeling of creating a better future.

The interviewees believe that by helping to build Tri-Faith into an organization that will stand as an example to the world of religious harmony. Each interviewee felt that love and understanding are things that guides them to eternal life and a strong community that feels just right is important in developing their faith. According to Reverend Elnes, the idea that if “you are going to love your enemies you are also going to love those who think a little differently from you” is very poignant in regard to the Tri-Faith Initiative. There were a particular series of Sundays an interviewee remembers in which Dr. Syed Mohuiddin, Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, and Reverend Eric Elnes discussed different topics such as forgiveness and the role of Mary in respect to their own faiths. After those services she came to the conclusion that each faith, “all believed the same thing... we take different roads to get there...” The discussion on topics such as forgiveness led to some of the interviewees to conclude that each faith fundamentally believes in the same thing; they just approach it in different ways. The feeling of peace that their faith brings to their lives encourages each individual to spread that to others. Through Tri-Faith, they are each able to move forward to spread the peace they have witnessed though their faithful beliefs to as many people as possible; as well as the promote the freedom of religion without the fear of being mocked, ostracized, or ridiculed.

There are moments in our lives where we question our beliefs, and the members of AMI are no exception. A deeper evaluation of these moments is necessary if we are to understand their choice to join the Initiative. Like almost all aspects of life, family seems to be heavily involved. Many of the members we interviewed were born into a Muslim family and grew up in a Muslim society. This framework gave them the knowledge of what it means to be a good

Muslim, but like one interviewee stated, "...If you are born and raised as a Muslim you take it for granted and you start working as it being a part of your daily life and routine." A time of contemplation is necessary for people to realize that their faith belongs to them. Those whom joined Islam later in life managed to develop a similar cognition of the faith and dealt with the process of contemplation before their conversion.

An overarching theme for the members of AMI was their views on peace. One interviewee who converted to Islam said, "[Islam] is a religion of peace. We try to grow up like a peaceful person and have thought for everybody... So, I think that faith plays a very important role in dealing and communicating with people and doing my job. I think Islam is a part of who I am." This ideology was justified with different scripture readings, but it was believed in because the individual's experiences. Their resolve to work together, regardless of their heritage or religion is something that these members seemed to share. Therefore, the level of acceptance shown by the institutional structure of Tri-Faith provides the perfect platform for these individuals to practice the peaceful teachings of their religion.

Though there are many times we think about why we do what we do, it is clear that the decision to join Tri-Faith would require such thought. With the assistance of their family, friends, and strong beliefs the Muslim interviewees have answered this question by accepting the challenge to live a unifying life.

So, what are the similarities in the personal motivations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims? It is easy to see the similarities between the three congregations' personal motivations. We must begin by saying that the common personal motivations for joining or remaining in the movement are NOT all-encompassing - various community members have certainly had their own unique journeys undiscussed by this research. As extensively as we could understand,

however, the leading personal motivation for all three faith groups included a personal background in interfaith relations prior to their involvement in Tri-Faith as we know it. What is meant by this? Well, we have studied the journeys of religious folks who have previously participated in multi-faith societies and so they themselves have had friends, family, or significant others who held different faiths than their own. This personal and diversifying experience, of deeply knowing people of other religious traditions, has life-long significance; it is arguably the greatest motivator for many members of the Tri-Faith congregations to become fully involved in its Initiative. Given that prior experience, it is simply natural for religious people, acting in their larger communities, to work, live, and interact with members of other faiths. Tri-Faith is a continuation of the diversity many of its members have already known and practiced.

Members that were interviewed from all three congregations cited some desire to increase social consciousness: to improve society or the world through their faith and through togetherness. This desire may be spurred from their theologies - and their theological motives are about to be discussed in full - but clearly, the drive to become an actor for the greater good is a deeply personal motivation.

Theological Motivations

At the root of any belief, there are personal motivations. As we have now detailed the most prominent and convincing personal motivations behind the three faith groups joining the Tri-Faith Initiative, next we will outline theological motivations of members from each faith community joining Tri-Faith, starting with the Jewish community.

Regarding the theological perspectives of the Temple Israel members, each person's theological relationship and interpretation of Judaism is individual and unique. For Reform Jews, specifically, some theological differences arise in interpretation and practice, as they may not always attend services or follow Kosher dietary laws. Many marry outside of Judaism, and it is more about a sense of history and tradition than feeling like they "did the right or wrong thing." Temple Israel has members who were previously Protestant. On one member's quest to conversion, she participated in a *Derekh Torah*, an adult introductory Jewish class. She read voraciously, up to one book each week, in detailed study. She would ask the Rabbi questions that would arise during her personal study.

Another member remained relatively secular in his interview, as he did not emphasize scripture or how it can be used to justify Tri-Faith. He tended to focus on Temple's desire to share resources and his personal experiences with people of other faiths. He explained that "Tri-Faith is a means of countering intolerant ideologies, and that is the main focus."

After asking Rabbi Azriel if there is anything in his holy book that would theologially support the creation of Tri-Faith or such grand acceptance of three distinct beliefs, he emphasized an idea from Leviticus, Chapter 19, that draws out a recipe for paying attention to strangers who are in the midst. He reiterated the importance of compassion for strangers and unknown ideas, as one religion is not superior to other religions. Every religion has specific traits that speak to individuals who accept the canons of the faith, and what is perfect for one believer may not be for another.

A strong theological motivation for joining the Tri-Faith Initiative that one member emphasized was, "one of the beliefs of Judaism is that you are put on this earth to do 'mitzvah,'

which are good deeds basically.” This implies that Jewish testaments contribute to the creation and incorporation of Judaism into the greater Tri-Faith operation.

The Christian Community has similar theological backgrounds to the Jewish Community. As a whole they believe in a liberal, with a small l, viewpoint on the Bible and religious teachings. One of the main cores to the United Church of Christ is that each individual is encouraged to make up their own minds about religious texts, not necessarily follow what the church hierarchy says. As a result the theological background for the Christian community involved in the Initiative stems from Jesus’ teachings of love and acceptance. The three great loves that are considered central are the love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self and all come straight out of scripture. These great loves feed directly into the belief that it is God’s command to go out and be inclusive of all people. After all, it is like Reverend Elnes said: “If Jesus commands us to love our enemies we are just as likely to love those who are only just a little bit different from us.”

Overall, from the interviews that we conducted it became clear that theology was the base foundation for personal and socio-political motivations. A strong belief in love and inclusion that comes directly from the scriptures allows for the practical applications of going out and making the world better through diversity. Almost all of the interviewees truly believed that the three faiths share the same beliefs but take different paths to get there, like hiking different sides of the same mountain; each respective path may look different, but the end result of climbing the mountain is the same. Reverend Elnes gave the Bible verse John 10:16 where Jesus says, “I have other sheep in this fold and they recognize my voice and will come when I call.” Different iterations of this verse were given by the members of his congregation that were interviewed.

The Muslim Community shares a similar perspective to that of the Christian Community. Based on the interviews conducted, there seems to be an overall consensus to focus on the tradition of the Islamic faith. Overcoming cultural barriers, one of the main themes of the interviews, requires an empathetic perspective, much like a passage from the Quran cited by many of our interviewees from the American Muslim Institute (AMI), “chapter forty-nine, verse thirteen: ‘O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another...’” Another AMI member elaborated on this message by stating that “we should go back to the Quran and respect everyone of faith and protect them at all costs.” On the topic of differences and similarities, it was stated by many of the interviewees that the three Abrahamic faiths involved beliefs about Jesus as a prophet, the Ten Commandments, and the idea of a single God. Relating this ideology to Tri-Faith, one of the AMI members feels that all three faiths can connect through “...food, music, and welcoming children.”

The structure of the Islamic faith must be focused on if the differences between traditionalism and modernism are to be fully understood. Many of our interviewees mentioned passages that revolve around the idea of peace and acceptance. One mentioned that there are examples of scripture that are mandatory for Muslims to follow, but applicable “as a mission for all humans.” An AMI member cites many examples of the Prophet Muhammad and his dealings and trust with the Christians and Jews. He says in regard to the ideology of Tri-Faith and AMI, that “it’s really not modern...” The same practices that bring these faiths together today are based on the same practices and guidelines set in a traditional belief setting.

Our group found many similarities and common themes amongst the religious groups we interviewed. Some of them were easy to spot and define, others were more slippery to

conceptualize. The class came away with several examples of unity between the faith communities, but one anecdote that stood out was how some participants expressed that they had experienced negativity or discrimination, and that Tri-Faith was a positive reaction against this. This common positive reaction to the hatefulness of our world is a fundamental commonality amongst Tri-Faith's communities.

The most obvious common themes were very material and easily identifiable. Common Abrahamic roots, a common monotheistic perspective, binary views on good versus evil, and a faith based in scripture were the clearest cut themes that united the interviewees in their theologies. Other common themes were more personal, value-driven, and harder to explicitly define. All of the interviewees emphasized the importance of being a good neighbor, doing the right thing, and overcoming the negative voices that seek to keep us apart. They saw the value in tradition, but were also aware of the dangers in adhering to its misapplications. None of our interviewees adhered to the deconstructive aspects of their theologies, but instead focused on the positive ones. They kept in mind the fact that they worshiped one God, only through different cultural manifestations.

Ultimately, our class concluded that Tri-Faith leverages these commonly held values to convey a message of unity; a message that people of the Book shall be united in the spiritual journey towards goodness, and in the struggle against evil. These fundamental assumptions are what brings together the Jews, Christians, and Muslims of the Tri-Faith Initiative. The commonalities between Tri Faith's theologies provide a foundational basis for all of its activities.

Socio-Political Motivations

Finally, after observing the personal and theological motivations that have shaped the Tri-Faith members' participation in the Initiative, we consider the socio-political factors that influence its members. Unlike the personal and theological factors, which are very much tied to the individual, the socio-political influences are very much a product of the modern climate both within the Omaha community and the nation as a whole, which has led to a large variety of responses and ultimately, why Omaha was a prime location for Tri-Faith to grow and prosper.

From the faith community leaders interviewed, it became very clear that nearly all members of Temple Israel saw the Tri-Faith Initiative as a necessary means to address the social issues present both in the community and the nation at large, as the previous Rabbi Azriel stated, "It makes us more grounded and active in what we do." One of the largest key social issues driving the participation in the Tri-Faith Initiative for many in the congregation is the recent rise in public antisemitism and Islamophobia. Primarily, this rationale for joining the Tri-Faith Initiative was given by both the younger members and those with kids who have experienced antisemitism firsthand, with one member recalling an experience their child had, stating "Just a few weeks ago, my thirteen year old son was told by a kid at school that the Jews should be gassed." However, the older members stated having no experience with antisemitism other than the events shown on the news, such as Charlottesville and the Alt-Right rallies. Still, those who did consider this social motivation for joining Tri-Faith saw it as an opportunity to both provide a strong sense of security to its minority members who may feel intimidated by the increasingly public stance that these extremist ideologies have seen in recent years, as well as an opportunity to dissuade such thoughts by promoting conversation and understanding with the Omaha community.

In the political aspect of participation in Tri-Faith, there were varying opinions amongst those interviewed. As a general theme, it appeared to be that those with more liberal political leanings believed the Tri-Faith Initiative to be a direct counter towards many of the political actions put forth by the current administration, particularly regarding foreign relations with the global Muslim community. For instance, Rabbi Azriel, the previous Rabbi for Temple who was a key in the founding of the Tri-Faith Initiative, implied that the Tri-Faith Initiative aims to address socio-political issues such as immigration rights, poverty, and social reform in spite of the current administration, going as far as to say that “politics energize us to work harder to accomplish this.” However, this belief in the political implications of the Tri-Faith Initiative was not shared by all, as those who were leaned more conservative believed the Tri-Faith Initiative to be apolitical in nature, as such was the sentiment of one member who stated, “Tri-Faith is not a political entity and should not aim to be.”

The Christian community is very similar to the Jewish community in terms of their socio-political reasons for joining. It is known that Countryside Church can be considered as a more progressive church with some members that have liberal views on things such as marriage equality, immigration, etc. This perhaps better enables them to be involved with an ambitious project such as the Tri-Faith Initiative in comparison to churches with more traditional stances and beliefs. Other churches would consider the project and Countryside to be a bad situation waiting to happen while Countryside itself and its members believe that unity and compassion are absolutely crucial in life considering the state of the world and the traumatic events that have occurred in recent years regarding religion.

One of the central values many members of the Christian community possess is standing together to form better relationships with members of other religious communities. Those that

did not agree with the pursuit of such an initiative were a minority of the church, and they left after Countryside made the decision to join the Tri-Faith Initiative. The members that were interviewed believe improving relationships and working together with other faiths are necessary for building a better local community and ensuring a better future for their children. An interviewee stated that, “Every religion’s goal is to build a heaven on earth,” and being able to view people of different faiths as simply other people trying to create a better social environment is one of the ways that they connect with people of other faiths. This is key for the current success of the Initiative and understanding how the Christian group interacts with the other two faiths.

Some believe that there is a lot of hate in the world and in our nation regarding how people of various faiths are viewed and treated, so the endeavors of Tri-Faith fit right alongside with their own political views. Generally speaking, most of the members of the Christian community hold these beliefs which allows them to more easily communicate and form bonds among themselves. The better the community gets along and collaborates, the better they can then work with the other two communities which is most likely a factor in the Tri-Faith Initiative’s current success. Some of the people interviewed were also from other parts of the country, and they described how friendly and welcoming the people of Omaha were. An interviewee said that, “It just felt right,” regarding her decision to join the Countryside. The welcoming environment may have contributed to the ease of building friendships among people within Tri-Faith.

Some of the socio-political motivations of the members of the Countryside Community are shared by the members of the AMI. Muslims, too, remarked on the nature of Omaha, specifically in the success of the three groups’ relationships: that Omaha provides a relatively

accepting environment based on what interviewees called “midwestern niceness” and a “can-do attitude.” One of them also shared an excellent thought on how the three faith groups are viewed, and what they are doing about it:

“Should something happen... our community should pull together and say, ‘how can we stand with each other?’ That’s why we want to be physical neighbors on the campus... Because when you’re neighbors, it matters that you pick up whatever tools you have and go over and help -- like if a tree fell down in my neighbors yard, I’d go over and help cut them down branches. It’s that neighbor obligation -- ‘my fate is yours and your fate is mine.’”

One of our interviewees illustrated this with his own story. He came to the United States just before 9/11, and was worried about the safety of his wife, who wore a headscarf. However, people often stopped her to ask if she was okay, which he felt was very supportive. This is especially important in light of the recent events; nearly every interviewee mentioned the misguided views on Islam brought about by 9/11, the 2016 presidential campaign, and recent media coverage. This included the social shift that seemed to arise after the election of President Trump and that the tone used to talk about the Muslim community had definitely changed.

Omaha, however, was mostly receptive to the idea of Muslims putting down roots here. Multiple people stated that it is difficult for the Muslim community to establish a core membership in the Midwest because they are already so strong on the coasts. However, most felt Omaha was perfect because of this.

While all three religions of Tri-Faith have very different histories and backgrounds, the similarities in their motivations were clear. But one particular social aspect was clear -- it was the city of Omaha that allowed this to happen.

The leading socio-political motivation for all groups was building a peaceful environment. Those within Tri-Faith know it is a tool to unite people and reduce hate within our community, and others interviewed from outside the Initiative know that there cannot be peace with religious discrimination being so visible in today's world. Throughout history, religion has been used as an excuse for violence and discrimination. The Tri-Faith Initiative hopes to be a beacon of acceptance and coexistence in a world of division, and even the interviewees from outside Tri-Faith understood the social impact that the project could have. Stereotypes are a huge issue to address, and Tri-Faith wants to help fight the stereotypes that have divided Americans for so long. These stereotypes play a major role in the social and political aspects in this country, whether because of race, religion, gender, or anything else, but like one interviewee said, "before you know what you don't believe, you have to learn what it is you don't believe in."

These motivations were able to apex here in Omaha, and many of those interviewed gave credit for Tri-Faith to the community here. People face discrimination based on race and religion, but from interviewees' accounts, it has been much less of a problem in Omaha than other places in America, and around the world. The motivations differ for each person involved but all, inside of Tri-Faith and out, were able to recognize the need for a social and political change in the way that Omaha, Nebraska, the United States, and the world as whole deal with religion, especially religious differences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have studied the reasonings behind three communities' involvement with the Tri-Faith Initiative. In this project, we have interviewed 16 members of the Tri-Faith

Initiative and 2 leaders outside of Tri-Faith to offer insight on their community's ideas of religion. They shared their personal journeys of their faiths and how they became involved with the Tri-Faith Initiative. Each of the students analyzed our individual interviews with the members. Then, we brought our ideas and combined them with the other interviews of the same faith. Finally, we were able to identify the common themes between the three religions by compiling the analyses of the entire class. Despite the differences between the three Abrahamic religions, the three communities shared personal, theological, and socio-political motivations.

The personal motivations for the members included their desire to engage with and understand people of other faiths. For many of the members interviewed, interfaith relations have been a large part of their lives and a huge motivation to support the Tri-Faith Initiative. A strong sense of community between the three groups brings the members together. For the members of the Tri-Faith Initiative, this project is not just about sharing space, but sharing ideas. They host events that promote the community they have created and not any individual religion. The members have also expressed wanting to share the ideas of Tri-Faith that would improve society and promote peace.

From a theological perspective, the three faiths confirm and support the Tri-Faith Initiative. The main idea behind Tri-Faith is that all three of the Abrahamic faiths worship the same God, but in their own way. Each religion has their own traditions, but they are reaching towards the same goal. It is important to understand that the project is not trying to create one combined religion, but rather allowing each group to maintain their religious practices. Each faith also identifies with the ideas of peace and acceptance which is essential for a project like this to exist.

From a socio-political viewpoint, Omaha is a well-integrated community and a fitting place for an interfaith project like the Tri-Faith Initiative. Many members have expressed that Omaha is very welcoming and they have faced almost no prejudice or stereotyping. Even if something were to happen to shift the political climate in the country, the members of Tri-Faith expressed how they would still support each other. The strength of the Tri-Faith Initiative is their ability to discuss issues and work together. In a world with so much violence and political division, the Tri-Faith Initiative represents the idea that people with so many differences can work together and promote peace and respect.