

The Evolution of an Activist Pastor: Reflecting on the Practice of Listening, Learning, and Leading

Mansfield M. Kaseman

Abstract: This set of reflections captures the experiences and insights I have gathered as a senior pastor reflecting upon a lifetime of activism in search of social justice and moral direction. It begins with my early years of family and community influences followed by the impact of a premier divinity school. It then traces my congregational journey through four communities to arrive at a set of leadership principles and practices. The final phase of the journey captures my transition from serving as an activist pastor and executive director of an interfaith nonprofit community ministry to becoming Interfaith Community Liaison in the executive branch of county government. It concludes with a set of lessons learned.

Keywords: moral conscience, social justice, interfaith, beloved community building, human services

Early Influences and Roots of an Activist Ministry (1941–1962)

I grew up in a religiously conservative home where I remember being taken to funerals at the age of six by my father, who was an Evangelical United Brethren pastor. Missionaries stayed in our home for weeks at a time, showing slides and telling marvelous stories about other countries and cultures. Guest evangelists spoke at nightly services resulting in my being “born again” at the age of eight.

Following the death of my father when I was 13, I became the “man of the house,” and our family went on welfare. The struggle included facing discrimination against our college-educated mother who could not get a loan and whose friends took advantage of her trust in negotiating financial arrangements and handling repairs to our home. I went to work at the age of 16; that coincided with my sibling twins going into first grade, our mother going to work, my buying a car, and our family getting off welfare. I worked a 35-hour week through the last two years of high school.

After graduation I went to a small church-related liberal arts school in Le Mars, Iowa, named Westmar College. While working many different jobs, I give credit to the stories of the missionaries visiting our home for my interest in becoming the student advisor and advocate for the first two Black students from Kenya and Mozambique. My surrogate father, Dean George Thompson, was a philosophy professor who gave me the following advice: “If you want to live a rich and fulfilling life, find a cause worth dying for and commit yourself to it.”

Divinity School Experiences (1963–1966)

During my college years, I lived with the creative tension between faith and reason. I founded a philosophy club that led me to Paul Tillich and subsequently chose graduate studies at Andover

Newton Theological School (ANTS), part of a consortium of highly rated divinity schools including Harvard where Paul Tillich was a professor.

In 1963 it seemed ironic to be preparing for ministry in a cloistered environment that was required by ANTS. At the risk of expulsion, I organized an alternative model for theological education in the urban setting that included four white seminarians living on the second floor of a tenement in the inner city. The model included community organizing in the Roxbury and Dorchester communities and inviting friends to all-night social events leading to resourceful partnerships developing the Stokely Carmichael Park for children, writing grants, and organizing demonstrations.

Different from the unofficial activities located where I was living, my official student ministry in the upper-middle-class suburban Dover Church was laced with creative tension beginning when the church committee asked me not to live in a highly segregated and impoverished neighborhood. Instead of following their request, I engaged suburban Dover youth with urban youth in the inner-city Columbia Point low-income housing project. I also involved church members in projects serving the inner-city residents and brought Black leaders for seminars and speaking into suburban worship services.

This form of community engagement led to planning the first initiative calling for systemic change outside the South by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., where I also was part of his security corps. He was affectionally known as “Brother Martin” within the movement, and he became my role model, mentor, and spiritual guide. A pivotal moment in my life came as we were forming our prayer circle following rehearsal for his protection in a subsequent demonstration on the Boston Commons and were instructed in the event of his assassination to unlink our arms and allow the press through to do their job. I, too, had found a cause worth of dying for and committed myself to it. With it came a sense of freedom, responsibility, solidarity, courage, and energy characterizing the rest of my life.

From Divinity Student to Congregational Pastor (1966–1976)

I cried leaving Boston’s poorest inner-city neighborhood and felt guilty leaving the Dover Church that had come to embrace my ministry to the point of raising sufficient funds to hire me full-time. I was leaving cherished relationships believing I could accomplish more for the disenfranchised in New Haven.

I had been recruited by the Senior Minister of the New Haven United Church on the Green who knew that the survival of this dying church depended upon its relevance in a troubled city. He was aware of my commitment to creating Dr. King’s (1956) vision of the beloved community as well as my ambivalence in joining the establishment. Our negotiation resulted in an agreement that I would be free to develop a mission program with a \$50,000 budget and share a \$10,000 discretionary account.

While I was nervous and insecure, my anxieties receded in the light of the confidence of the senior pastor, and the small size of the 60+ congregation made it easy to become acquainted.

Within weeks the city was facing rebellion within inner-city neighborhoods, and I was back in my comfort zone working with inner-city leaders—and finding that being white and based at the United Church on the Green were assets in developing resourceful relationships with faculty and students at the Yale Divinity and Law Schools, which helped me become recognized as a credible community organizer.

In initial meetings with the senior pastor, I was told “sincerity is no excuse for incompetence,” and learned we were high achievers, shared a common sense of mission, argued constructively, and complemented each other’s strengths. We were serving a small congregation of older people who knew they needed to change in order to survive. Being a pastor’s son, acquainted with grief and having clinical training, prepared me for enjoying pastoral ministry. By recruiting divinity school students, we created programs that enhanced the life of the congregation and appealed to new members. Many of our accomplishments are noted in Table 1.

Table 1

Community Engagement Activities at the New Haven United Church on the Green (1966-1976)

- Organized and incorporated the Downtown Cooperative Ministry (DCM) to serve as “agents of human empowerment to address the needs of the disenfranchised.”
- Organized and led the Churches Act Against Poverty program that was engaged in political advocacy and funded inner-city nonprofits and schools.
- Organized and incorporated the Killiam’s Point Conference and Retreat Center, saving an ecological haven on Long Island Sound and serving inner-city youth.
- Organized and incorporated Community Housing, Inc. that bought, renovated, and sold affordable houses to inner-city residents.
- Organized and funded the first hospice in America, beginning with homecare and resulting in Branford Hospice.
- Administered the United Community Nursery School with bilingual staff, full scholarships for inner-city children, and training for staff and parents with the Yale Child Study Center.
- Facilitated the formation of the Black Coalition and empowered it with a grant of \$10,000.
- Organized and administered daily noontime prayer services for Peace in Vietnam running over two years.
- Organized and funded a Peace Center that, following the war, was devoted to serving the veterans.
- Organized a movement to fire the police chief replaced by James Ahern; Ahern’s community policing initiatives led to his becoming a consultant for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.
- Coordinated the Memorial Service for the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the New Haven Green with public officials, Council of Churches, and Black and Latino organizations, and served as moderator.
- Organized and administered a month-long Black Cultural Festival featuring Black writers, lecturers, musicians, singers, dancers, and artists.
- First religious institution to fund liberation movements in Southern Africa led to advising the World Council of Churches in forming their Program to Combat Racism.
- Organized a network of indigenous community leaders and clergy for responding to incidents of community disruption to neutralize conflict and monitor the police.
- Involvement with the Black Panthers, including testifying in defense of a leader that led a judge to threaten me with jail and anonymous life-threatening messages.
- Aware of phone lines being tapped in the office and home.
- Founding member of the Center for Social Responsibility in NYC and the National Impact Program in Washington, D.C.

Signs of hope within the parish included successfully leading a movement to fire the police chief, incorporating four nonprofits, and hosting daily anti-Vietnam war noontime prayer services for over two years. I was also able to complete my divinity school thesis on the

response of American churches to liberation movements in Southern Africa that coincided with the establishment of the World Council of Churches' Program to Combat Racism.

Like my discomfort with studying in a confined, cloistered divinity school environment led to forming an alternative form of theological education in an urban setting, the revitalization of a suburban church prepared me for my activist role in New Haven. However, I was ready for another bold step that would take me to the Deep South.

United Church in Tallahassee (1976–1979)

The move from a prestigious church on a New England green to an inner-city community center in the Deep South to develop a new church with a budget less than my salary in New Haven seemed ridiculous to my colleagues. I was attracted by 23 individuals believing that “the church exists by mission just as fire exists by burning” (Brunner, 1931, p. 108) along with a promise to invest half their budget in social justice and mission-oriented programs. I shared their countercultural vision and felt equipped to develop an alternative church making an impact in the city and state.

My excitement upon receiving their call was deadened by my wife telling me she wanted to remain in New Haven for teaching the following semester. I received counseling and informed the United Church in Tallahassee that I would be coming as a person who is separated from his wife, and they should turn to other candidates. They responded by sending flowers, wishing us well, and telling me they hoped to minister to me as I would be ministering to them. I was grateful and found being a wounded healer elicited compassion that led me and others to more authentic relationships. It was a reminder of our common need for love that is at the heart and central message of the church. My receiving counseling and being spiritually grounded and present for others greatly benefitted the congregation.

As I entered an overtly racist and ideologically conservative culture, I was confronted by a stranger observing, “you’re a Yankee—ain’t ya!” The cultural shock energized me and deepened my appreciation of the congregants who chose to share worship space with the World Community of Islam in the West in the Black inner-city neighborhood. We advertised as being an alternative church and the congregation grew with folks I identified as “religious refugees” because they had given up on finding a relevant church. We quickly became the most racially integrated and social justice-oriented church in the capital city of Tallahassee.

I felt honored being asked to offer invocations at events such as a national assembly of women’s rights advocates for the Equal Rights Amendment. With subject matter experts in the congregation, it was easy to advance progressive legislation related to migrant labor, gun safety, hunger, and poverty. I traveled throughout the state gaining endorsements from religious organizations.

Strong interpersonal relationships and teamwork led to the creation of the Florida Impact program (<https://impactfl.org/>) that involved leaders from Christian denominations and Roman Catholic orders advocating for legislation meeting basic human needs and defending human

rights. Achieving legislative reforms meant working with elected officials, staff, and advocates whose positions on issues were often opposite of mine. Within a year, a statewide network was created that impacted state government, and Governor Askew attended our first annual meeting. Witnessing our shared vision of a church balancing love with justice—and being as politically active as we were spiritually grounded—attracted highly resourceful members to chair committees responsible for worship, education, pastoral care, fellowship, social action, and finance—and engaged allies in some cases before they joined the church. Per capita financial support better than doubled New Haven and acquiring our own facility in the second year was amazing. To sustain our 50/50 formula requiring us to spend as much serving others as ourselves meant providing a home for human service programs, including Habitat for Humanity and Planned Parenthood. The subsequent warnings and bomb threats were interpreted as our doing the right thing and in turn drew additional support.

My pastoral and administrative capacities and focus on shared leadership and coalition building helped us accomplish most of our five-year goals in three years. Both the church and Florida Impact were on solid ground. I was being heavily recruited to take a position in Rockville, MD, and felt lured upon learning that a United Church of Christ parish had died—in the sense of giving up its name, church home, and some members—in pursuit of social and racial justice. They were looking for someone with experience in both community and parish ministry to be a co-pastor with the minister of the parish ministry. In addition, I had come to love and envision a new and more promising future with my second wife and her two children after getting married by a rabbi in Tallahassee. Once again, it felt providential to move to Rockville, Maryland.

Rockville United Church (1979–2006)

I was proud of what we had accomplished in Tallahassee, impressed by the commitment of Rockville United Church to promote social and racial justice, and quite confident about being able to balance both community and parish ministries. I had done my homework related to community ministries but was blindsided when I learned that congregants were calling for the resignation of the co-pastor who was primarily responsible for parish ministry. The controversy lasted two years, causing the church to lose members and finances to the point of no longer being able to afford co-pastors. Our consultant provided multiple reasons for the future failure of the church that would thereby threaten the future of congregation's community ministry programs.

That proposition was unacceptable and after agreeing to serve as both a parish minister and community minister, my skills in balancing parish and community ministries was successfully put to the test. We reorganized the parish around the same statement of faith developed in Tallahassee, attracted and engaged highly resourceful leaders (that at one time included sixteen professors, clergy, and seminarians), and hosted community organizations that represented 36 percent of our budget being invested outside the parish.

Since failure was not an option, I took on the dual role of pastor of the church and executive director of community ministries. We made major changes in governance that included forming a Church Council, and the revitalization included annual planning conferences, gaining

unanimous approval for a statement of faith affirming our inclusive and cutting-edge approach to ministry, empowering volunteers, developing a stewardship program embracing community service, providing meaningful worship and education, and developing a cadre of gifted and committed individuals offering exceptional pastoral care.

Rockville United Church expanded its facilities twice to accommodate growth in mission, stewardship, and membership. The incorporation of Community Ministries of Rockville included becoming interfaith, expanding its staff from a quarter-time secretary to a staff of 72 serving a broad spectrum of human need, and exceeding a \$2 million budget.

My needs and those of our family to be part of a loving parish community, and my interests in creating a more beloved community, were being met through the balance of parish and community ministries. I enjoyed close relationships with faith leaders, including four Black churches, three Roman Catholic, the full spectrum of Protestant, one Unitarian Universalist, and two synagogues in which I preached and participated in installations and memorial services. My engagement in Rockville City Hall and Montgomery County government led to participating in hiring appointed officials, adding commissions, changing major policies, and funding human service programs.

I felt blessed after seventeen years of building a faith-based human service organization that the budget for community ministries was over \$2 million (Kaseman & Austin, 2005). In addition, parish membership was growing and drawing people from four counties, and our space for worship and education had been expanded twice to accommodate membership and mission growth. We ordained nine members into similar ministries and others became ordained in communities they were called to serve. Many of our accomplishments are noted in Table 2.

Table 2

Community Ministries Human Services to Individuals and Groups

Human Service Programs

- *Rockville Emergency Assistance Program (1981).*
- *Elderly Ministry Program (1983)* engaged teams of trained volunteers to go door-by-door through neighborhoods identifying persons 55 years of age and older to document unmet needs, calling for changes in city and county programs.
- *Manna Food Center (1983)* was created to meet the growing needs of hungry people.
- *The Latino Outreach (1993)* provided vocational and language instruction in basic English for adults and tutors for children.
- *Mansfield Kaseman Health Clinic (2004)* was developed in partnership with Mobile Medical providing healthcare for the Latino community.

Community Advocacy and Coordination Programs

- *Rockville Caregiver's Coalition* was designed to coordinate the services of all nonprofit human service organizations.
- Participation on the *Citizen Advisory Search Committees* requiring candidates for city manager to have experience working with nonprofits and human service programs.
- Participation on a statewide *Maryland Interfaith Legislative Committee*.

Specialized Housing Programs

- Helped develop local *Habitat for Humanity* to engage the faith communities in building and renovating affordable homes.
- *Victory Housing Project*, a model for using church property in developing affordable housing for low and moderate-income seniors and families.
- *Steppingstones Shelter*, made by acquiring the historic Dawson farmhouse in Rockville.
- *Chase House* was the first shelter for men in Montgomery County, made by converting an old bus maintenance garage.
- *Jefferson House* became the first personal living quarters in the county for homeless men graduating from treatment programs.
- *Fireside Apartments in Rockville* consisting of 236 units to serve more low-income seniors and handicapped individuals.
- *Sophia House* for 24 homeless women with breakfasts and dinners provided by faith communities.
- *Safe and Habitable Services* added to Elderly Ministries for residents to remain in their homes by widening doors, building ramps, renovating bathrooms, and changing floor surfaces.
- *McAuliffe House* was a group home for young adults leaving mental health facilities.

Community Building Through Celebration and Interfaith Observances

- *Rockville Ministerial Alliance* utilized monthly meetings addressing self-care and social justice issues by focusing on relationship-building, learning about different faith traditions, and creating interfaith worship services.
- *Interfaith Thanksgiving Services* were designed to embrace faith communities across lines of race, ethnicity, and religious traditions as well as feature music from various traditions and acknowledge public officials.
- *The Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Observance in Rockville* included a multi-faith resource package of litanies, scripture, poetry, music, and homilies for faith communities to develop their own service observing the life and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Leadership Principles and Practices Emerging from Four Congregational Experiences

Four leadership traits emerged out of my experiences in Boston, New Haven, Tallahassee, and Rockville.

Independent Thinking, Risk-Taking and Living Comfortably on the Margins

Thinking independently, taking risks, and living comfortably on the margins of society characterized my entire ministry. For example, the Dover Church experience was precedent-setting and confirmed the benefit of thinking outside the box and living with creative tension. The decision to serve the Dover Church was made while I was risking expulsion from ANTS for breaking the requirement of living in a cloistered environment. I pursued my vision for a new model of theological education in the inner-city after the church committee asked me not to do it because I thought it was best for the church.

With the support of the senior minister, I engaged the youth from Dover with youth in a low-income housing project, Dover adults in meetings with indigenous inner-city community leaders that led to developing anti-poverty programs and civil rights demonstrations, and Dover parents with parents from the inner-city to discuss their mutual fears related to school busing.

Thinking outside the box, breaking cherished traditions, facing resignations by church leaders, and enjoying unexpected growth in membership and stewardship validated my vision of

ministry and made me increasingly comfortable living with creative tension and spanning boundaries in pursuit of the beloved community.

Not Accepting “No” for an Answer (Or “Failure Is Not an Option”) by Preferring Persistence to Patience and Forgiveness to Permission

My reputation for not taking “no” as an acceptable answer is best illustrated by my refusal to accept a consultant’s report on the five reasons that the Rockville United Church was bound to fail: 1) five competing mainline protestant churches existed in same neighborhood; 2) the conditions of neighborhood homes and businesses were on the decline and newcomers were largely Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Pentecostal; 3) Rockville United Church was the least visible of all the churches; 4) the church had inadequate facilities, with no first-floor restrooms and a social hall serving as the sanctuary with uncomfortable metal folding chairs; and 5) decline in membership and stewardship appeared too great to overcome. The prediction of this type of failure was not an option for me.

Throughout the years my colleagues have learned not to tell me something cannot be done because I have a positive attitude, focusing on solutions rather than problems, identifying additional resources, and investing more energy. I have found that having a reputation for proving naysayers wrong and being impatient to the point of preferring forgiveness to permission attracts the people and resources that assure success.

Accepting and Using Conflict as a Given in Creating the Beloved Community

The mission of creating a more beloved community through the United Church on the Green necessarily meant confronting the white power structure embedded in the church, City Hall, Yale University, Chamber of Commerce, and the public schools with the need for radical change. Awareness of the inherent conflict within such a ministry convinced me not to sign a job contract, thereby alerting everyone of my higher calling and keeping me focused on creating the beloved community.

For example, conflict was inevitable as I identified the racist and abusive practices of the police department and developed a network of indigenous leaders in the inner-city neighborhoods and allies in the city power structure who documented abuse. We scanned the police dispatch calls, went to reported trouble sites to monitor police behavior, and some of us spent nights in centers where neighborhood leaders feared a police raid. I was getting through police curfew lines and maintaining effective communication with clergy and reporters.

Within a year, the police chief was fired, and a new chief with a commitment to community policing was installed. The entire process was filled with conflict because the citizenry at large was racist, and the majority favored traditional policing. I was criticized for fomenting trouble, encouraged to get a gun for self-protection, and my home phone and office lines were tapped. It was a small price to pay for promoting systemic change. My credibility grew as a pastor and community organizer, leading to more impactful collaboration with community leaders.

I recognize that using conflict as a means of constructive change, and focusing on creating the beloved community beyond parish lines, is an unusual way for reviving churches, but it works.

Fostering Strong Interpersonal Relationships and Building Strong Teams

The development of a new church in the university, state-capitol town of Tallahassee attracted strong individuals who were largely dissatisfied with traditional churches and wanted to develop a church in their own image that would have a strong impact in the greater community. By the time we had 36 members, three were tenured professors in the religion department, one was a hospital chaplain, another was an ordained minister who served as an educational consultant, and another ordained minister was Executive Director for Florida Common Cause. The congregation spanned the ideological conservative and liberal spectrum, ranging from evangelical to agnostic.

We advertised as being an alternative church that embraced diversity in faith, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and political ideology. A key for attracting and sustaining members was listening, identifying their particular gifts and interests, and engaging them in serving a common mission. It was important to build strong relationships and align their gifts and interests with committees responsible for education, membership, stewardship, social action, pastoral care, and worship.

Community-building retreats identified and affirmed our differences in the context of being a community grounded in love and creating the more beloved community. Our favorite call to worship included celebrating diversity and encouraging teamwork with the following words: “We are different, we are the same. We are separate, we are one. We are a community in love.”

Periodically people ask me how I have been so successful, and I have generally responded by saying, “Isn’t it obvious that I need help! All kinds of help.” I have never seen myself as the smartest person in the room nor the one with all the answers. I see my strength in terms of caring deeply for others and particularly God’s favorite people who are oppressed, poor, and vulnerable. My success relates to being spiritually grounded, identifying with people, helping them define their predicament, and connecting their needs with those who possess financial and political resources. I am a person always in need of assistance who is fortunate to work with wonderful teammates committed to a common mission.

Making the Transition from Activist Pastor to County-Employed Interfaith Liaison (2013–2020)

Historical Context

Based on his election platform, the County Executive embraced the emerging diversity of Montgomery County, Maryland, and empowered the Office of Community Partnerships (OCP) to build a strong policy environment with broad community participation aiming to become America’s most welcoming community. Special attention was given to the underserved, emerging communities, and neighbors in need. In 2013, I was appointed to the half-time

position of Interfaith Community Liaison (by 2016 the position had grown to full-time along with administrative assistance).

Previously developed advisory groups serving the Latino, African American, and Asian communities were expanded to include the Continental African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and Faith Communities as well as the Gilchrist Immigrant Resource Center, Montgomery Sister Cities, Fund for Montgomery, and the Montgomery County Volunteer Center.

I chose the title of Interfaith Community Liaison with the vision of engaging the full range of faith communities, spanning Anglican to Zoroastrian, in creating a more inclusive, equitable, and resilient community. Unlike the other advisory councils that consisted of some 12 to 15 members, I quickly had over 60 faith leaders serving on the Faith Community Advisory Council (FCAC). It meant creating an Executive Committee consisting of the most highly respected faith leaders within their religious traditions who had special skills and experience related to the issues being addressed by various working groups and subcommittees.

The FCAC was unique by including representatives of all races, ethnicities, genders, and faith traditions. Beyond crossing all lines of difference, the FCAC represented the most trusted voices, particularly within the immigrant and marginalized communities. The FCAC also addressed the needs and interests of all communities—and had access to significant resources, including facilities, volunteers, and money. FCAC members frequently had professional credentials and experience equal and superior to their partners in government and that recognition facilitated collaborative relationships.

Creating an Updated Database of Faith Communities

Serving as a county official made it possible for me to partner with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) staff in identifying 767 US faith communities to create a database including their community engagement, availability of space, staff, faith tradition, and contact information. This database, whose user base grew to over five thousand, made it easy for leaders of the FCAC working groups, regional directors, police and all public sector departments, elected officials, and nonprofit executives to collaborate and communicate with faith communities based on zip codes and issues of common interest.

We also developed our own connected website with relevant resources such as a digital map of the faith communities in the database, an annotated interfaith calendar, newsletters, educational videos, and guidelines for respecting different faith traditions. Readers of the related newsletter derived insight and inspiration from spiritually grounded messages addressing social issues. The database was particularly helpful in responding to crisis situations and disseminating resource material related to the 2020 Census and COVID-19. Through the use of faith-related networks, thousands of the hardest-to-reach immigrant and marginalized communities became informed and engaged.

Formation of Working Groups and Subcommittees

The formation of the Executive Committee and the working groups occurred simultaneously in the winter of 2013. They were based on identifying highly credentialed and respected leaders within their faith traditions who had the skills and commitment to lead specific working groups and subcommittees. The outcomes of the initial meetings included the formation of major working groups and committees (several evolving over time):

- Faith Leaders Response Team (FLRT): A coalition of faith leaders, police, Fire and Rescue Services officers, Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security staff, and Office of Human Rights staff and its Committee on Hate and Violence responding 24/7 to acts of hate and violence.
- Emergency Preparedness Coalition for Emotional and Spiritual Care Volunteers (ESCV): Trained faith leaders, social workers and counselors providing pastoral care for victims of fire, violence, or natural disasters as first responders on 24/7 basis.
- Education Committee (EC): Faith leaders meeting regularly with the Superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools to enhance quality religious education; assure respect for all religious traditions; and secure an environment free of discrimination, bullying, and harassment.
- Religious Land Use Working Group (RLUWG): Advocates for the unique land use interests of faith communities related to unfair burdens within the planning and permitting process resulting in amending zoning and tax regulations.
- Neighbors in Need Working Group (NIN): Developed “Welcoming Our New Neighbors Resource Guide” for faith communities to serve refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants.
- Healthcare Committee: Developed inter-organizational partnerships featuring wellness-oriented systems of prevention, health maintenance, patient-centeredness, and integrative healthcare.
- Hunger Reduction Committee: Raised awareness of the harsh reality of hunger, gained collaboration among principal hunger-related programs leading to a five-year Food Security Plan, and created a digital map of exemplary faith-based programs and communities of greatest need used for developing hubs to provide food throughout the pandemic.

Informal Networking “Behind the Scenes” of the Work Groups

In addition to the formation of multiple collaborations and related programs, behind-the-scenes confidential conversations were critical to the success of interfaith community-building.

Responding to community issues as well as proactively advocating for governmental attention are at the core of 24/7 informal networking with leaders in both the public and nonprofit sectors. This section includes examples of “behind the scenes” responses to community harassment, welcoming asylum seekers, responding to hate violence, securing houses of worship, and maintaining community-wide communications through a newsletter.

Turning Fear into Appreciation

At a time when the Muslim community was increasingly harassed and under suspicion of terrorism, the Imam and President of the Board of a mosque called me because a family reported a missing member who was feared to be in police custody. I called an assistant police chief who said the person was not under arrest by county police and that he would check with other security offices. He understood the importance of handling the case prudently and within hours reported the man had been arrested by the FBI for stealing a truck and intending to kill people. I think the trust implicit in the relationships between the faith leaders and police, and the FBI learning of this man’s honorable reputation within the mosque, contributed to his being transferred to a mental health facility with limited publicity. The outcome preserved respect of the man, his family, his mosque, and the Muslim community. It also led to the chief speaking during Jum’ah Prayer and police being increasingly invited to share in their youth and other programs.

Facilitating Countywide Welcome

A minister called saying his church was having a press conference at 11 am the next day to welcome an asylum seeker and provide her sanctuary. He hoped I could arrange some semblance of support from county government. Within hours the county executive authorized me to welcome and assure her and her three children of his support. I called the president of the County Council, who sent a letter for me to read commending the asylum seeker for her courage and pledging support on behalf of the Council. I talked with the chief of police, who instructed the commander of her district to provide security and me to reassure the church that our police would be providing protection within the jurisdiction of county law. I talked with the director of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHSS), who asked me to extend her welcome and ensure the asylum seeker support for her and her children. The press was able to report that county officials and faith communities were united in affirming fundamental human rights at the core of religious faith and American values.

Solidarity with the Muslim Community

Hate and violent incidents increased by 42 percent in Montgomery County according to police records (described to me verbally) the week after the inauguration of President Trump. After the President’s Muslim ban, I heard from and about Muslim women being afraid to be seen in public wearing the hijab and children being afraid of going to school. I was encouraged to have the county executive voice solidarity with the Muslim community. Instead, I arranged an off-the-record meeting with Muslim leaders in a mosque where county and state officials could listen to their needs and interests.

The officials included the county executive, County Council, state's attorney, county attorney, county sheriff, chief of police, superintendent of schools, director of the DHSS, and representatives from the State Senate and House of Representatives. Forty-some imams, board officers, and leaders of the Montgomery County Muslim Foundation and Council were seated around a table where everyone could see each other and feel equal. The county executive underscored the invaluable contributions that the Muslims were making to Montgomery County, acknowledged the presence of Islamophobic rhetoric and action, and asked for assistance in learning about the needs and interests of their community. The Muslim leaders expressed special interest in working more closely with the police, public schools, and county DHSS.

Follow-up meetings were held with the chief of police and his assistant chiefs to develop a program whereby the police department received training related to the beliefs and practices of the Muslim community, the first Muslim chaplain was appointed, and meetings with police were held in several mosques. Similarly, meetings were held with the school superintendent and his deputies resulting in the Parent Academies, designed for orienting parents to a partnership with the school system, being moved from public schools to mosques, which was the preference of the Muslim community.

Another summit of Muslim leaders was held to hear and critically review progress and establish next steps. Two years after the initial summit, the county executive and council president signed a joint "Statement of Solidarity" in a mosque. The listening, learning, and leading approach had formed trusting relationships and produced institutional reforms that made the Statement of Solidarity credible. Replicas of it were presented to the Muslim leaders for posting in their offices.

Security for All Houses of Worship

The county executive called for a press conference in response to bomb threats of two Jewish day schools and asked me to bring faith leaders and speak on behalf of the interfaith community. Over 80 leaders spanning Anglican to Zoroastrian came to the Jewish Community Center and found more security barriers and systems in place than most had ever experienced. The Jewish Community Relations Council and Federation had been receiving county security grants for many years and during the press conference, the county executive announced an additional six-figure grant would be released immediately for further enhancing security for the Jewish community.

I called a colleague in the office of the county executive immediately after the meeting, saying we needed a supplemental grant program for all houses of worship. I talked with members of the County Council the next day, who agreed that similar resources should be available for all faith communities. Within several months master plans were being developed for faith communities free of charge, and in excess of \$300,000 was granted for implementation.

Lessons Learned from Informal Networking

Public Officials. Most elected public officials share the same values and commitment to public service as faith leaders and readily recognize and appreciate the resourcefulness of faith communities in achieving common goals. Becoming a public official provided me with respect and authority that facilitated highly productive and mutually satisfying partnerships.

Success in working with public officials depends upon building credibility through honest, transparent, and mutually beneficial relationships. Nothing can replace relationships of trust characterized by sharing cell phone numbers and being able to talk off the record in terms that include constructive criticism.

Faith Leaders. Faith leaders are naturally concerned about basic human needs and social justice, and meetings with high-ranking officials and subject matter experts can lead to remarkable achievements drawing upon the joint resources of government, nonprofits, and faith communities.

The experience of every working group and committee, community forum, and interfaith vigil demonstrates strong interest in crossing lines of difference and celebrating the richness of their diversity. The evidence is found in a volunteer mailing list of over 5,000, engagement of hundreds welcoming immigrants, development of a 5-year plan for ending hunger in the county, extended multicultural dialogues on racism, the development a community-centric model for policing, and the hosting international delegations for learning how we create social cohesion and public safety.

Lessons Learned from This Life-Long Journey

There are many lessons that can be drawn from this life-long journey of an activist pastor. They include the following: a) use of a wide-angle lens to view human behavior within the social environment, b) the powerful influence of the Rev. Martin Luther King, c) engaging key leaders and audiences throughout the community, d) making the transition from a congregation-based activist pastor to a community-based community pastor, and e) exploring personal self-reflections over a lifetime (see Acknowledgements).

Use of a Wide-Angle Lens

Upon reflection I can see that I tend to view human behavior and the social environment with a wide lens. Such a lens enabled me to balance parish needs with community needs, love with justice, and political engagement with spiritual grounding. It has meant living with creative tension (risking expulsion from a theological school, facing calls for termination, tapping of my phone lines, life-threatening calls, and being arrested). Yet, every church grew in mission, stewardship, and membership, and nonprofits grew in their capacities to serve human needs and promote human rights. The vision of creating working groups with highly credentialed and respected faith leaders working with county officials has led to changed laws, altered policies, and increased funding for programs advancing racial equity, welcoming refugees, improving

community policing, responding to acts of hate and violence, and otherwise creating a more compassionate, inclusive, and resilient county.

The Impact of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King (Speaking Universal Truths on Behalf of All Humanity)

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a greater influence on my life and ministry than anyone else because he was spiritually grounded and throughout his life, ministry, and death, he demonstrated the power of love to be far greater than all forms of loveless power. The seeds of being drawn to him were planted by my father whose ministry embraced conscientious objectors, migrant workers, African and Native Americans, and faith leaders of different traditions. My experience of being on welfare has also sustained my empathy toward all who needlessly suffer in a world of plenty.

The sense of community that I found in the Roxbury neighborhood (augmented by training in nonviolence and community organizing as well as engaging in demonstrations) motivated me to develop an alternative model for theological education grounded in the spirituality of Jesus, Gandhi, and King. It was humbling and a blessing to become friends with the parents and children suffering under the yoke of systemic racism, and to work with them in bringing “Brother Martin” to address the media from the front steps of their school.

Like many others in the Civil Rights Movement, I experienced something of the same freedom from fear in the face of threats along with a genuine desire for restorative justice rather than revenge. Brother Martin Luther King continuously reaffirmed his undying belief that “unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant” (King, 1964, p. 106). Continuing to share his belief makes it possible for me to continue standing and embracing arms to sing. “We shall overcome” (Bobelsky, 2014, p. 1) and believe it.

Engaging with Key Audiences

I had the vision that organizing faith leaders and developing partnerships with county officials would maximize the effectiveness of county government in meeting human need and expanding human rights. These partnerships called for the tools of effective advocacy that require solid research. It was important to be in command of the issues, engage the hierarchy of faith traditions, and host strategic town halls and conferences. By virtue of my ecclesiastical standing and reputation within the greater community, I was able to engender trust across faith traditions that led to engaging them in serving both their needs and interests and those of the greater community.

My experience as a pastor, community minister, and executive of an interfaith nonprofit contributed significantly to serving as the interfaith community liaison. I understood that most faith leaders had neither studied world religions nor met colleagues of diverse faith traditions. I knew that many (particularly those serving immigrant, minority, and marginalized communities) were neither trained, experienced, or comfortable in working with public officials. It was

helpful, therefore, to be a “reverend” who could listen appreciatively to their stories. It was by developing trust one-by-one that they could move out of their comfort zones, meet with public officials, and work on common needs and interests with different faith leaders.

My approach was to lead by example. It meant being nonjudgmental and trusting the process by which working together and getting to know “the other” would change perceptions. I was impressed by the courage and wisdom of faith leaders stepping into new roles. In some cases, their engagement with government officials and different faith leaders drew criticism from their members and boards. Their commitments were sustained through valuing personal relationships and being part of a working group or partnership with public officials that served them, as well as the greater community.

I think the dynamic by which strangers, and assumed adversaries, became teammates deserves special recognition. The lives that were transformed and the relationships that crossed all lines of difference may prove to be of greater significance than the achievements of the working groups and committees.

Making the Transition from a Congregation-Based Activist Pastor to a Community-Based Interfaith Community Liaison

My roles as pastor, executive director of nonprofits, and interfaith community liaison were highly complementary because I was following the mandate of the Christian gospel bidding me to promote love, justice, and righteousness (traditionally known as the Kingdom of God). Serving in the tradition of the Protestant reformer John Calvin, I understand elected officials are like clergy in holding a sacred trust, and the separation of church and state exists to preserve the freedom of the church in fulfilling its responsibility in holding public officials accountable for preserving human rights and administering justice for all.

My engagement with public officials led to being known as “the conscience of the community” and “chaplain.” Being respected as a pastor and able to offer personal counsel strengthened relationships and led to influencing changes related to official job descriptions, policies, budgets, and zoning codes. In a similar way, my public ministry informed my parish ministry by enhancing worship, empowering lay leaders, strengthening educational programs, improving pastoral care, expanding the organization’s mission, increasing stewardship, and expanding membership.

Reflecting on Doubts, Missed Opportunities, and Unexpected Roadblocks by Keeping an Eye on the Prize by Building Upon One’s Strengths AND the Strengths of Others

I learned that doubts, self-criticism, and facing trauma inextricably strengthened my faith and made me a stronger pastor, community minister, nonprofit executive, and public official. My theological mentors set me on the path toward a mature faith by linking doubt and courage with faith as well as looking directly into the face of evil and death with the capacity to love, dream, and create the beloved community.

The integrity of love will always be more important to me than the purity of doctrine. My parishioners knew it was more important to be living with questions than presuming to have all the answers. The churches grew because members knew they could raise critical questions; enjoy friends of different beliefs, genders, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and ideologies; deepen their spirituality; and improve the quality of life within their greater community.

The advantage of self-reflection is evident in my continuous search for improvement. Our staff knew that regardless of how well anything had been done, weekly staff meetings would include a critical review of every program noting how it could be improved next time. Surveys of programs and worship services were common as were annual evaluations of programs and staff.

Highly resourceful members were attracted by the opportunity to work collaboratively in parish and community ministries. The balance of parish and community, love and justice, and political engagement and spiritual grounding attracted people who had given up on the church. They expanded their understanding of faith-based involvement through training and mentoring in such areas as strategic planning, nurturing volunteers, leading meetings, managing conflict, and providing pastoral care. Many credited their engagement with keeping them in a faith community and advancing in their professional careers. Prior members of religious orders, chaplains, seminary professors, and students were among the resourceful new members whose engagement empowered both parish and community ministries.

In summary, my self-doubts, critical reflections, vision of the beloved community, and high expectations led to a shared sense of ministry and close relationships through which my colleagues, parishioners, and elected officials reportedly grew as much personally and professionally as I did. I am a blessed man moving into an open and promising future.

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About the Author: Mansfield M. Kaseman, STM is Former Interfaith Community Liaison, Montgomery County, MD; Pastor Emeritus, Rockville United Church, Rockville, MD; and Executive Director Emeritus, Community Reach of Montgomery County, MD (mmkaseman@gmail.com).