

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE FROM AN AFRICAN AMERICAN EVANGELICAL
CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Master of Arts in Speech Communication

By
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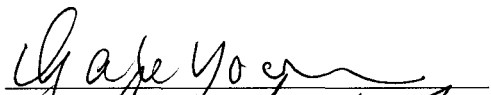
Abstract

This study explores the culture sharing group of five African American Evangelical Christians from the San Francisco East Bay and their engagement and experience in interfaith dialogue, or dialogue between religions –a proposed remedy for hope, peace, and cooperative action between religions in the global community. Evangelical Christians, because of their strong and conservative faith claims, are often deemed as intolerant and hostile toward other faiths. This study reveals how African American Evangelical Christians understand and participate in the “spirit of dialogue” as defined by David Bohm (1996), and how their Evangelical Christian faith informs their engagement in interfaith dialogue. Through the analysis of significant statements and coded themes from the personal interviews of the five participants, research reveals that it is possible for these African American Evangelical Christians to engage in dialogue with other faiths without compromise of their beliefs. Even with limitations regarding equalizing the veracity of all faiths, as a result of interfaith dialogue, there still remains experiential evidence of cooperative actions, transformative relationships, and hope for future justice and peace— what interfaith dialogue scholars qualify as success. This exploratory research gives voice to the experience, understanding, and concern of five African American Evangelical Christians, and offers insights into how African American Evangelical Christians are living out their faith, and participating and engaging with other faiths – all through interfaith dialogue.

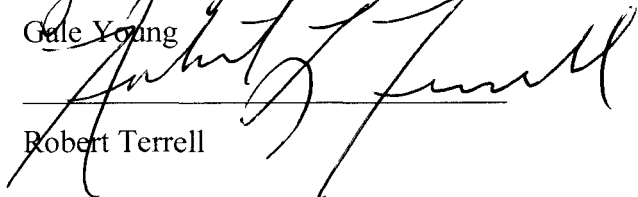
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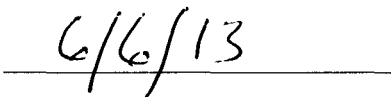
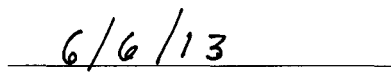


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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

“It’s impossible for Evangelical Christians to participate in interfaith dialogue.”

Like a heavy steel door unexpectedly slamming in my face, in May of 2010, an interview with an interfaith dialogue organizer challenged my integrity as a Christian, and my ability and willingness to participate interfaith dialogue. “Could this be true? Why are Christians being excluded?” I ignorantly asked myself. As a flood of thoughts and defenses filled my mind and weighted my heart, I made a point to find out where this perspective had emerged. After the organizer’s explanation of an evangelical’s incessant need to proselytize and their hypocritical intolerance of other faiths and peoples around the world, I knew there was a ripple in the interfaith world that had to be straightened out, or at least explored a bit further for me.

To my surprise, this was no new perception of evangelical Christians, nor was it limited to this specific religious group. Religious conflict, usually produced by intolerance for others, has plagued our world for centuries. Just within the last thousand years, extraordinary tolls of carnage and death have been the result of assumptions about which lives are worthy of life and death, values and beliefs concerning acceptable and unacceptable ways to live, and claims, attitudes, and dispositions of intolerance and violence toward any stranger of culture, ideology, or ethnicity. To get a better picture of the number of lives taken, statistics say approximately three million were killed in the Crusades ending in 1291 (Robertson, 1902); over 3,000 Sikhs were killed along with over 35,000 claimed deaths in the 1984 Sikh Genocide (“U.S. Court Summons,” 2001); two million were killed in the 17-year Second Sudanese Civil War ending in 2005

("News&Resources: Sudan," 2001); and the current conflict between Israel and Palestine, continues to take thousands of lives. Together these conflicts have caused slaughter, famine, displacement, and much heartache around the world to say the least, and one religious difference against another, or religious war, is identified as the culprit. Many religious faiths are frequently implicated in international conflict, and are responsible for untold tolls of carnage, just like the ones listed above. Many may like to specifically implicate, accuse, and condemn responsible perpetrators and offenders for such disagreements, but history and statistics show that the blood resides on many hands across the globe. However, is violent conflict the inherent fate to be endured on behalf of religious difference and disagreement?

Hans Kung (1991) begins his book, Global Responsibility by stating that, "No survival without a world ethic. No world peace without peace between religions. No peace between religions without dialogue between religions" (p. xv). A lofty claim and call to a global audience, Kung is calling on, to say the least, the five major religions of the world Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism ("Table of Major Faiths," 2007), to take action. To purposefully zero-in on the largest global religion, Christianity remains high on the inter-religious conflict scale; it has a protracted history of conflicts, especially imperialistic tensions, arising from mutual mistrust and demonization of the "other" which usually lead to the "proselytizing" of the "non-believer"¹ and/or their demise. Under the veil of propagating Christian morals and foundations, from the Crusades, to the Thirty Years' War killing an estimated 7.5 million, to the conquest of America and the slave trade destroying millions upon millions, and in

light of today's hostile anti-terrorist political climate in the United States against Muslim countries in the Middle East, Christianity still remains center focus for intolerance toward other religions. Rather unfortunately, as suggested by Kung, some believe this kind of behavior will only lead to the death of peace in our global existence. There is a desperate call to transform the hostile climate and deep disparities in global policy between religious communities and in the global human relationship.

Interfaith dialogue or "dialogue between religions," as projected by Kung, is a growing field of research and practice that brings a proposed remedy for hope and peace between religions and in the global community. Dialogue being the central key to change, taking on the true "spirit of dialogue" according to David Bohm (1996), will be absolutely necessary. The true spirit of dialogue allows one the ability to hold many points of view (i.e. religious beliefs) in suspension, while having an interest in creating common meaning. Dialogue requires a level of openness and willingness to listen to others with sympathy, and if given good reason, one will be ready to change their point of view (Bohm, 1996). This kind of dialogue is designed to enable the most contrasting religious groups to engage positively. In fact, successful interfaith dialogue has been recognized by its respective scholars and those participating in dialogue for creating mutual understanding, respect, trust, and benefit, cultivating cooperative activities and even transforming hostile relationships between groups of people through forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation (Smock, 2002).

For these reasons, and as a way to scrutinize the claims and inquiries brought forth in my May 2010 interview experience, in this study, I will explore the Kung proposition concerning world religions finding cooperative peace through dialogue, by examining how a portion of one socially-deemed “most intolerant” religious group, Evangelical Christians, participate, contribute, benefit, and relate to interfaith interactions. This Christian movement has been increasingly characterized as intolerant and hostile toward other faiths, because of their strong faith claims and conservative viewpoints. The literature around interfaith dialogue discusses Christian involvement, but not many scholars have concentrated on the evangelical sect.

In addition to examining the relationship between evangelical Christians and other faiths in interfaith dialogue, to further shape the inquiry, this research will also explore how intersections of race influence understandings of evangelical perspectives by examining African American Evangelical Christians. This group of Christians, though not relatively new to the evangelical scene, has a unique set of concerns, perspectives, and points of view that cause many to live out their evangelical faith in very different ways from their non-African American counterparts. The hope for reconciliation and dialogue for some African American Evangelical Christians comes both in the area of race relations inside the evangelical faith, as well as reconciliation and dialogue with others outside their faith.

Through the testimonials of five African American Evangelical Christians from the San Francisco East Bay currently engaging in interfaith dialogue, the central goal of

this research are to observe and analyze how dialogue plays out for this group of African American Evangelical Christian as compared to the literature on interfaith dialogue and evangelicalism, examine the understanding of the spirit of dialogue through openness, listening and learning, explore tensions and intersections between the goals interfaith dialogue compared to common Christian faith paradigms of hell, evangelism, and the role of the church and its leaders, and how this information can inform an understanding of the challenges, qualifications, and participation in interfaith dialogue from an African American Evangelical Christian perspective.

While this study is among the first of its kind, it is just an introduction to thinking about faith, dialogue, intra-and inter-faith conflicts, and the consequences that arise from participating in interfaith dialogues from an African American Evangelical Christian perspective. This research analyzes voices, stories, and concerns of African American Evangelical Christians and leads to unexpected insights into the intricate dynamics of interfaith dialogue.

What is Dialogue?

While faith can arguably be perceived as a fundamentally human experience, religious faith still has a tremendous impact on how many find meaning, interpret, and live in this world. Many times religion is the primary ideology used to inform, control, and govern a culture and people. And because there are so many different controversial competing interpretations and understandings of faith, religion unfortunately is “with regrettable frequency,” a factor in international conflict (Smock, 2002). With religious

conflict usually arising in an attempt to assert one's truth over another's, or to control or regain control over a culture or people, religion is made a tool and put at the mercy of its wielder to manipulate, force, or convince. However, many are asserting that religion can also be a powerful instrument in peace and reconciliation (Solomon, 2002). As noted earlier, Kung argues that the emergence of peace between religions will only be accomplished through dialogue.

The term "dialogue" often conjures up ideas of simultaneously sending and receiving messages, coupled with some sort of debate and/or argumentation that will get a particular point across, or thoughts of a dramatic roleplay that reveals dispositions, assumptions, and opinions. There are many philosophers, sociologists, and communication scholars who study dialogue including Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, and Mikhail Bakhtin to name a few. Buber defined human experience in its meeting and relation of "I and thou," and believed dialogue to be a primarily relational phenomenon in that its participants did not develop apart from one another (Anderson, Baxter and Cissna, 2004). Gadamer built on these ideas, holding that communicative understanding is a dialogic and reciprocal experience, where new and fresh meanings are produced (Anderson et al., 2004). Habermas' perspective analyzes how public dialogue groups with divergent ideas and opinions can be successful in communicating (Anderson et al., 2004). Finally, Bakhtin takes a critical approach and examines how dialogue has functioned in history and language (Anderson et al., 2004). These scholars considerably provided much of the western understandings and foundations of how dialogue functions. But questions still remain as to what it truly means to have a dialogue. Is it not more than

an exchange between two people? What needs to happen in the midst of transaction for dialogue to be sustained and be successful?

David Bohm (1996), a prominent communication scholar, defines the word “communication” from the Latin root “commun” or common, along with the suffix “ie” meaning to make or to do something. Logically this leads us to deduce that “to communicate” means “to make something common” (Bohm, 1996). Bohm argues that “to communicate” is more than simply making something common; it is to make something “in common”, or to create something new between two people (Bohm, 1996). Rationally, it does not make much sense for people to “make common” information and ideas already known and shared amongst them, but it is in the midst of the interaction that novelty in relationship and unity are formed and built upon; it is something that takes shape in mutual discussion and action (Bohm, 1996). Dialogue is about the mutual creation of ideas, information, and learning that takes place between all parties involved. It is about the unique relationship that is formed between people.

Communication scholar John Stewart (1982) adds transactional and/or relational nature to the concept of dialogue that develops a “spiritual child,” “the inevitable offspring of every human meeting.” Together people create this “child,” (or, in other words, *relationship*) that is unique to only them—the child remaining as long as one person lives. Just like a natural child, its rearing is reflected in its disposition and health. Stewart (1982) says, “If we come together in care, authenticity, honesty, and positive regard, our [spiritual] child will be healthy, vibrant, winsome, and beautiful. We will love

it.” The quality, openness and willingness to create something new during the communication and or dialogue are what produce meaningful, fruitful, and lasting connections. However, openness and the willingness have implications that may mean a suspension, rearrangement, or negotiation of self, and/or thoughts to create common ground.

This is why dialogue cannot withhold definitional confinements of a monologue, a sermon or lecture, an exchange of facts and information, or even dialogue by means of persuasion or force (Massoudi, 2006). Accordingly, dialogue is a mutual transaction of the self that is novel to every encounter, and depends on the suspension of assumptions, judgments, opinions, and being willing to listen and respond to the idea of being transformed by the other is essential. The constitution of dialogue extends to levels of mutual trust, respect, benefit, and understanding. Mutuality respects the points of view of others, as well as implying a level of interest, learning, and exchange between participants. Mehrdad Massoudi (2006) further explicates the inherent positive qualities of dialogue to include “...a balanced exchange of one’s emotions and one’s reasoning with another person. Therefore, certain qualities, such as respect and tolerance for other people’s points of view, are necessary but not sufficient. There must be a genuine belief that the other person’s point of view is as valid and as appropriate as one’s own point of view or path” (427).

Bohm and Peat (1987) in Science, Order and Creativity further explore mutual transaction by distinguishing between ideas of discussion and dialogue. The word “dialogue” roots from the Greek word “dia,” meaning “through,” and “logos,” meaning

“the word,” or rather the meaning of the word. Dialogue can be considered a free flow of meaning between people in communication (Bohm & Peat, 1987). This “free flow of meaning” is essential to understanding dialogue; without it, the interaction may not really be considered dialogue.

“In discussion [*discussion* literally meaning to analyze or break things up], people hold relatively fixed positions and argue those points of view in order to try and convince one to change or take on their point of view. In the end there is either an agreement or compromise but, nothing is created out of it. When regarding issues of significance, positions are held non-negotiable leading to either confrontation or avoidance of the issue” (Bohm, 1996, pg. 7; Bohm & Peat, 1987, pg. 241)

Discussion essentially breaks interaction up and any attempt to mutually share, or create together (Bohm & Peat, 1987). However, Bohm and Peat explicate dialogue to mean:

“There may also be a position held but it is not held non-negotiable. Dialoguers are ready to listen to others with sympathy and interest in order to understand the meaning of the other’s position, and if given good reason, ready to change their point of view. There must be a willingness to subscribe, explore and engage a viewpoint not of one’s own in order to possibly form unity” (Bohm & Peat, 1987, pg. 241).

In other words, “the spirit of dialogue...is, in short, the ability to hold many points of view in suspension, along with a primary interest in the creation of a common meaning” (Bohm & Peat, 1987, pg. 241). Dialogue is primarily relational. It is through the interdependence of dialogue participants that an inevitable fluid process of co-authoring new meaning and constant performance of transformation takes place. Dialogue requires a great deal of trust, as it requires one to let one’s assumptions, opinions, and presumptions to become suspended, but the strength of dialogue relies on this process.

Leslie A. Baxter in her essay, “Dialogues of Relating” (Anderson et al., 2004) uses Bakhtin’s work to encompass the relation between self and other as vital to producing knowing and understanding. In dialogue, the self and the other are at once occupying the same time and space, creating what Bakhtin describes as an “excess of seeing” (Anderson et al., 2004). The unique excess of seeing from another, allows for a person to see themselves with a more complete and whole view, not accomplishable on one’s own (Anderson et al, 2004). Because a person is only known through how others see them, realization and knowledge are only produced through communicative relationship and feedback. This dynamic between the self and the other is what Bakhtin calls, “a simultaneous unity of differences in the interpretation of utterances” (Anderson et al., 2004).

Thus Baxter is positing that the unity of difference is just as important to dialogue as similarities are important to relationships, since they both are needed to “sustain coordinated interaction” (Anderson et al., 2004). Baxter reports that differences are what produce individual growth, and helps produce the “self” to become (Anderson et al., 2004.). Baxter suggests that in order for this growth to be accomplished, one must be open—that is, willing to listen to the different perspectives, interests, and approaches of another, as well as be receptive, and open to change in one’s own belief and attitudes (Anderson et al., 2004). This reinforces the conclusions previously drawn from David Bohm, David Peat, and Massoudi. With these perspectives being noted, if religion usually requires observance to one central explanation of faith that is relatively non negotiable,

and dialogue requires a willingness to be receptive to a possible transformative, redefining encounter, how do religious scholars perceive dialogue and openness?

Kenneth Burke (1970) offers a perspective to this question in The Rhetoric of Religion stating that the terminology or language of religion is what produces division in confessions of faith. Simply because of “our many disparate ways of life,” it causes us to understand “the same articles of faith...differently to the extent that our relations to them differ...” The way that people and cultures understand words like grace, faith, and God, differ primarily because of the context in which they are spoken and experienced. Burke (1970) says,

“The rich man’s prayer is not the poor man’s prayer. The Youth’s God is not the God of the aged. The God of the wretched condemned to be hanged is not the God of the chap who just won at bingo under ecclesiastical auspices” (pg. v)

However, when using dialogue, the process of suspending opinion and judgment in order to co-author meaning for perception transformation and personal growth, would make it possible for the religions of the world to use, teach, express and share the vernacular and experience of their faith with others. Dialogue takes the “words” of faith and makes them accessible to all who listen; “...dialogue is opened in the direction of the truth that we all are” (Gadamer, 2004). Dialogue by this definition allows participants to discover not only the differing elements of their faith and truth, but to understand and accept those differences in order to meet each person where they are, to try and create a new and personal understanding together. The realization of common ground produces an atmosphere of trust, understanding, and respect between all involved.

What is Faith?

Thus far, discussions of dialogue can be summarized as a fluid process of creating meaning through reciprocating open and honest negotiable thoughts, readiness to transform points of view, and the development of personal and relational growth. However, when intersecting with religious faith, a system that usually requires an adherence to beliefs (including but not limited to divine being or beings) that are unlikely to be negotiated, compromised, or changed, dialogue seems to dissipate very quickly when two different belief systems come together.

According to Adherents.com (2007), a database for national and world religion statistics, the top six religions of the world based on the number of their adherents include: Christianity² with 2.1 billion people; Islam with 1.5 billion; Secular/Non-Religious/Agnostic/Atheist with 1.1 billion; Hinduism with 900 million; Chinese traditional religion³ with 394 million; and Buddhism with 376 million people. It is important to note here that Adherents.com (2007) defines religion as an "...umbrella" that it includes clearly polytheistic, tri-theistic, monotheistic, pantheistic, non-theistic, and atheistic traditions". This list is only six of the twenty-two "major" religions identified around the world, and not nearly a total representation of the many other sects, denominational branches, traditions, subgroups, etc., that can be identified within the listed, and among other faith groups around the world. Point being, with so many different divisions of religion, evidence of unity in those differences seems non-existent. Faith can be an extremely loaded concept, especially when defined in the various contexts of

religion and beliefs. However, scholars have made tremendous efforts to reveal that faith can be understood at a simpler level within the foundations of human life, and in the realms of religious experience across all beliefs.

Faith, defined by James Fowler in Stages of Faith (1976), is what we put our confidence in, which protects, empowers, and encourages one's insecurities, fears, and vulnerabilities to stand before the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the unexpected, and many times intimidating, mystery of life. Faith is confidence, peace of mind, and assurance in something or someone. Fowler (1976) states that it is faith that keeps humans undergirded when "...our life space is punctured and collapses, when the felt reality of our ultimate environment proves to be less than ultimate"; faith is the source of our human survival and continued existence, "[so] fundamental that none of us can live well for very long without it." Faith, to believe in something, divine or not, is universal. Fowler (1976) and Wilfred Smith (1979) each respectively trace faith's origins to the Greek verb *pistuo* and the Latin verb *credo* which permits "writers and speakers to say, "I trust, I'm committing myself, I rest my heart upon, I pledge allegiance." These active modes of faith speak of "being and [commitment]— a way of moving into and giving shape to our experiences of life" (Fowler, 1976). Whether it's the belief in self, a deity, patriotism, or innate human goodness, faith allows one to navigate life, yet being unique and personal to each person. However, it is important to recognize also the people, objects, symbols, ethical patterns, etc. that the phenomenon of faith is centered upon and expressed by. For Fowler, faith can be understood and extended beyond the bounds of religion, revealing that we all use and need something to support our very unpredictable

human lives. The base upon which faith stands, or is centered on can also be understood to beyond religion as well, extending to the "...persons, causes and institutions we really love and trust, the images of good and evil, of possibility and probability to which we are committed..." (Fowler, 1976, pg. 4)

Faith's derivation and drive is also described by Paul Tillich (1957) in his book Dynamics of Faith stating:

"Our real worship, our true devotion directs itself toward the objects of our ultimate concern. That ultimate concern may center finally in our own ego or its extensions—work, prestige, and recognition, power and influence, wealth...Ultimate concern is a much more powerful matter than claimed belief in a creed or set of doctrinal propositions. Faith as a state of being ultimately concerned may or may not find its expression in institutional or cultic religious forms. Faith so understood is very serious business. It involves how we make our life wagers. It shapes the ways we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties." (as cited in Fowler, 1976, pg. 4-5)

Tillich and Fowler challenge some traditional religious notions of faith saying that faith is in *that* which we put our trust, *that* which becomes our "ultimate concern", that becomes our source of faith. "The ultimate concern is concern about what is experienced as ultimate" (Tillich, 1957). Faith is a "most centered act of the human mind" that involves the personality, personal life and all its elements (Tillich, 1957). For some the ultimate may be family, love, greed, politics, and even religion; whatever it is that concerns us ultimately will be the driving force for our decisions, motivations, desires and "costly loyalties".

A seemingly powerful and potentially dangerous weapon, “[faith] is [also] our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person’s way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (Fowler, 1976). A person’s faith in whatever is constituted as ultimate, is also by this understanding the source of what governs much of one’s thinking, understanding, and participation in the world around them. Based on these definitions, faith is an assurance, confidence, reliance, or hope in the something(s), or someone(s) of ultimate concern in ones life, which illuminates, informs, and/or governs thinking, relationships, and participation in the world they know and interact with, and among the world at large. This understanding helps shed light on considering how people are driven to do, say, think, and believe many things that may be at odds with others, and even lead people to offend, dehumanize, and harm others. Faith can be a powerful force.

To bring faith to a universal understanding is good to exemplify the breath of its inhabitants and the multiple variations of its origin, but to exclude specific religious definitions would be a major oversight and underrepresentation. It is religious faith in divine beings, super natural power, heavenly visitations and mandates, and in higher forms of wisdom, intelligence, and living, that govern billions in the world. The distinction of religious faith from universal faith must be recognized to include for some, a mentality and reality that a higher source, often composed of having omniscience and omnipotence over all things, or some kind of supernatural order or function, is the source or ultimate concern for those who subscribe. This belief that there is something greater

than humanity guiding, strongly compels many to do, say, believe, and trust ideas beyond social and cultural norms and values, and human boundaries. An example of this type of commitment can be seen in the hundreds of suicide bombings across the globe that were a result of allegiance and obedience to religious beliefs, nationalistic ideologies, obedience to charismatic and authoritarian leaders, and desire for political change (“The Real Origins,” 2012).

Wilfred Smith in his book Faith and Belief (1979) and Jacques Ellul in Living Faith (1983) argue that faith is highly personal, yet sustained in religious traditions, answers and understandings. W. Smith (1983) states:

“Faith is deeper, richer, more personal. It is engendered and sustained by a religious tradition, in some cases and to some degree by its doctrines; but it is a quality of the person, not of the system. It is an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one’s neighbor, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension.” (pg. 12)

Faith can be seen here as perhaps an individual endeavor when it comes to executing its principles, ideas, and credence worthily into one’s life and world, but a person’s prompt and foundation to do so is not divided from the instruction of religious traditions and doctrine. W. Smith (1979) goes on to distinguish the notion of “belief” and “faith” arguing that belief is only the “holding of certain ideas”, but faith allows one to experience life in abundance from the self, to the world, and beyond. In summary, belief is a sort of preliminary confidence that every person may hold in something or other, (much like the universal definitions of faith expressed earlier), and faith is another kind

of expression, that in a religious context, is an effort to translate experiences of transcendence beyond the physical world into the supernatural.

Jacques Ellul (1983) also contributes to the discussion of faith and belief to say that while “belief talks and talks, it wallows in its words, it interpolates the gods,” faith is what listens in silence to the “indisputable words of God,” which leads to “answers, a message, morality, action, and commitment.” This highly individualized faith (or trust) in “the words of God,” distinguishes it from “belief” that can bring many together to a consensus of ideas, rituals, religion, culture, and communal life (Ellul, 1983). It’s religious faith that allows one to transcend beyond the ordinary, and even the community by which one believes with (humanity), to follow the commitment to their conceptions of the divine.

This discussion on faith provides only a portion of the many explanations and examples available, especially when it comes to the various differences in interpretation and application, respective to every human being, religion, and belief system. However, for the sake of this research, faith can be defined as, that in which people put confidence, assurance, and hope in, which derives from an arguably human need to make sense of, survive in, and exist in life and the world around. The source or derivation of faith is centered in the objects of “ultimate concern”, both religious and non-religious, which in many ways shape people’s motivations, decisions, desires, and the way people participate and give meaning to the world around them. When faith is defined in religious terms, religious doctrine, tradition, and ideology become the guiding force, or ultimate concern

for those same motivations, decisions, and points of view, and is essentially lived out by each individual who subscribes. To consider such understandings of faith is an opportunity to look inside the inner workings and implications of such a mysterious phenomenon that many across the world experience, and allows a chance to examine how dialogue in terms of faith, informs the dynamics of human relations across the globe.

Evangelicalism. Considering the foundation for basic tenants of faith, it is also necessary to examine the faith traditions and history of the group of interest for this study, African American Evangelical Christians. While understandings of Evangelicalism and Christianity can be explained individually, the intersection of the two with the dynamic of race in the juncture, offers an interesting view into the realm of controversial and minority fringes of people and religion, that boldly speak in the conversation with mainstream understandings and conceptions of Christian faith, and the African American race, but have rarely been brought to the forefront.

The term evangelical is rooted from the Greek word evangelion meaning “gospel” or “good news”, and in essence relating to the belief and/or declaration in the Gospel, or message of Jesus Christ. During the 16th century Protestant Reformation, theologian Martin Luther embraced the term evangelical as a way to distinguish Protestants from Catholics in the Roman Catholic Church, and a way to break away from, or “protest”, the ritualistic top-down piety structure of the Church (“Evangelicalism”, 2012). The evangelical movement put emphasis on individual piety, and an active practice of Christianity including: “the need for personal conversion, or what some call being “born

again”; a high regard for biblical authority; teachings that proclaim the saving death and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ; and actively expressing and sharing the Gospel (Institute for the Study of American Evangelicalism [ISAE], 2012). In Albert G. Miller’s (1999) essay, “ The Rise of African American Evangelicalism in American Culture,” he stated more specifically and definitively that evangelicals have in common certain theological traits, such as the belief in: “the complete reliability and final authority of the Bible in matters of faith and practice; the real, historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture; personal eternal salvation only through the belief in and trust in Jesus Christ; evidence of a spiritually transformed life; and the importance of sharing this belief and experience with others through evangelism and mission works” (Miller ,1999, pg. 260). Combined these explanations make up what can be considered historic “fundamentals” of the Evangelical Christian tradition.

The evangelical movement, and the evangelical protestant church reformation, continued to spread with the help of many other key figures in England and North America like, brothers John and Charles Wesley, founders of the Methodist Church, George Whitefield, and theologian John Edwards. The evangelical movement brought rise and revival to the larger, modern, white American evangelical movement seen in denominations we have today such as, American Baptist, Evangelical Lutheran, United Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Moravian Churches, and the Church of Christ, to name a few (The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2000).

In the early 20th century, the term evangelical was also commonly associated with fundamentalism, a movement concerned with doctrinal purity and separation from cultural and societal decadence and “apostate”(liberal) churches. However, the modern evangelical movement began to shape as a result of a split emerging from controversial conflicts between fundamentalist-modernist controversies in the 1925 Scopes Trial (Miller, 1999; ISAE, 2012). Here, conservative Christian creationist worldviews were pitted against secular evolutionary views, resulting in fundamentalists “disappearing” from the cultural stage, and developing a denotation of a particularly aggressive style of faith practice (Miller, 1999; ISAE, 2012). As a reaction to the fundamentalist movement, modern white evangelicalism formed a coalition that showed up in World War II, playing a major role in extending evangelical definitions to social, political, and cultural arenas. Where fundamentalists once accused evangelicals of being too concerned with social issues, social acceptance, intellectual responsibility, and being “too accommodating to a perverse generation that needed correction (“Evangelicalism”, 2012), modern American evangelicalism was made popular with TV personalities like Billy Graham, theological and seminary institutions, and evangelical organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals (ISAE, 2012).

Much like its association with fundamentalism in the early 20th century, in understanding evangelical definitions and history, it must also be recognized that the term evangelical and Evangelical Christianity has been used interchangeably with ideas like “right-wing conservative,” and the “Christian right” in contemporary United States politics as well. Often times, American politicians infuse Christian morals and beliefs

into the fabric of conservative and republican politics, equating the political party as the “good” Christian choice regarding controversial issues such as gay marriage, abortion, and the distribution of wealth. With the loudest, most abrasive, and influential conservative representatives out in the forefront staking their claims with evangelical standards, positions in conservative politics and being a follower of Christ often get blurred, and then called evangelicalism. This causes many Christians, who may in fact believe the evangelical theology, to shun the “evangelical” label and its associations.

Edward Gilbreath (2006), editor for the magazine *Christianity Today*, and author of Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical’s Inside View of White Christianity, stated that the problem with these broad political labels for Evangelicals is that American people are more complicated than the illusion of conservatives watching Fox News Channel and liberals CNN, or conservative proclamations of Merry Christmas” and liberal mutters of “Happy Holidays.” He stated that media, marketers, and special interest groups make conservative and liberal disagreements out to be viscous ranting and ravings, when really evangelicals and Americans at large hold a variety of opinions, allegiances, and philosophies that do not always fit perfectly into one political party (Gilbreath, 2006). Furthermore and more importantly, Gilbreath (2006) makes the point that political allegiances have gotten in the way of Christian unity, because many Christians have become so over zealous about their conservative politics, that they bring it into their understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. Gilbreath (2006) being an Evangelical Christian himself, contends the separation and refocusing of the evangelical in politics stating that:

“It’s not that we shouldn’t be politically engaged; there’s certainly a place for that...But the notion that America is historically a Christian nation—and the church the designated police of its values—is dubious at best, and its’ disconcerting to see how far some of us take it. In our zeal, we sometimes forget Christ’s command to love our neighbors—and enemies. Often in the heat of defending moral standards or the lives of unborn children, we lose sight of the individual that God has placed before us to love at that moment. Christians are called to stand apart from the venom and inhumanity of worldly politics and inject into the process compassion, grace and a spirit of reconciliation. Unfortunately, even among believers politics usually bring out our worst.” (pg. 140)

Because religious faith for many informs choices, world views, and the quality of life, ideas like political allegiance that form and govern the culture and society at large, may never be completely separated from the influence of faith. However, I believe it is safe to say that based on a fundamental definition of terms, aside from influences and manipulations, that Evangelicalism and the U. S. political conservative right wing agenda, are at essence not designed to be the same.

African American evangelicals. While American evangelicalism has a defining image of history, theology, and even politics that sets it apart from many other religions and Christian denominations, there is yet distinction that can be made. In the midst of the rise of modern American evangelicalism, during the early 20th century a distinct group of African Americans also aligned themselves with theological tenants of the fundamentalist movement, essentially becoming black evangelicals. This on-slot of race to the evangelical movement created a whole other understanding of faith relatively distinct from the larger modern white evangelical tradition. Often over looked or under defined because of the disassociation many African American Christians have with the term “evangelical,” associating it with a middle class white-dominated theology, or social and

political overtones, indeed 61 percent of blacks described themselves as “born again” in a 2001 Gallup poll, the highest of any racial group in the United States (Gilbreath, 2006). For many African Americans, while the term evangelical means “white”, the African American Protestant population in the United States (8 or 9 percent) is pretty evangelical in theological orientation (Gilbreath, 2006).

Historically in the early 20th century, black Evangelicals arose out of a separation from the traditional black church. While the traditional black church (or African American Christians of various denominations), were certainly aligned with theologically conservative/fundamentalist doctrine and belief (a doctrine that is theologically “evangelical”), some accused the church of mixing experiential and ecstatic elements, “remnant of the (West) African ‘sacred cosmos’” (Miller, 1999, pg. 262). The modern black evangelical movement, however as it developed, placed more emphasis on the propositional aspects of faith rather than the experiential and ecstatic elements, causing strains between the black evangelical movement and the traditional black church; black evangelicals were accused of being “doctrinaire and schismatic fanatics,” and the black church as “apostate and unbiblical” (Miller, 1999, pg. 262).

With the need to focus on conservative, propositional, and doctrinal aspects of faith, rather than social, ecumenical, and emotional tenants found in the traditional black church, African Americans began to join white fundamentalist, and evangelical bible schools and congregations in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Soon, however, black Evangelicals began to notice an issue of attracting African Americans to Evangelical Christianity due

to social issues around racial discrimination (Miller, 1999). Not only was racial discrimination hindering the organization and/or evangelization of African Americans in to the movement, but many black Evangelicals inside felt the lack of support, and the acknowledgement of presence and leadership from white evangelicals—essentially denoted as racism. Many black Evangelical leaders like Berlin Martin Nottage, and John Davis Bell responded by launching movements, the black Plymouth Brethren churches, and the black Christian and Missionary Alliance [C&MA] respectively, to advocate meeting the needs of African Americans in theological training and missions, fellowships and gatherings that many were once excluded from by their white counterparts, and organizing blacks to be independent from white control, all in effort to effectively evangelize the African American community.

Around the same time these movements began, many of the black Evangelicals who attended evangelical seminaries founded what is now known as the National Black Evangelical Association [NBEA] in 1963 (Miller, 1996). The NBEA is an umbrella association of individuals, organizations, and churches from the same theological origin of the larger, modern, white American evangelical movement (Miller, 1996). In the beginning, social issues of the day (Civil Rights and Black Power movements) did arise in the NBEA, but evangelizing to and developing leaders in the African American community remained at the forefront of the associations concern. However, the movement could not ignore confronting these social issues, and much like the concerns of Nottage and Bell, the NBEA's tension with their white counterparts arose from what blacks perceived as spiritual "benign neglect" for the evangelistic needs of the African

American community. Soon the NBEA had tensions between black critics and fundamentalists inside of the organization. Fundamentalists argued personal conversion of the human heart rather than changing social conditions, while black critics argued the idea that the whole truth of the gospel cannot be preached without meeting social needs as well (Miller, 1996). While the debate continued to arise and evolve into other concerns, the NBEA is the clearest presence of the modern Evangelical movement within the African American community (Miller, 1999).

The last influence to be discussed in the development of the NBEA and the larger black Evangelical movement is the black Pentecostal tradition, exemplified in denominations such as the Church of God in Christ. Black Pentecostals did not emphasize propositional Christian doctrine like others in the evangelical movement, but had its own dispensational theology. This movement was at odds with the traditional black church because of its stress on sanctification, the baptism in the Holy Ghost, and “tongue speaking” which was seen as a return to the biblical apostolic experience in the Book of Acts (Miller, 1999; ISAE, 2102). The black Pentecostal tradition focused on the experiential, ecstatic side of the Christian tradition with an exuberant style of worship, but had fundamentalist doctrines because they were bible literalists. Like most Pentecostals, emphasis is on the importance of experience over theology, “including an attitude which insiders “know” and “feel” when they encounter it” (ISAE, 2012). However, this perceived emotionalism kept black Pentecostals away from the mainstream black evangelical movement. Furthermore, white and black Evangelicals saw black Pentecostal parishioners as poor and disadvantaged, forming a class barrier. Not until the

1960's with an increase in social and class status, and middle class parishioners, were black Pentecostals seen differently by their counterparts.

Most of all, black Pentecostalism differed from the Plymouth Brethren and C&MA tradition because they were independent of white control. This allowed for many black Pentecostals such as William Bentley to pursue theological training and attend liberal colleges and seminaries where they were introduced to Evangelicalism. Early relationships between black Evangelicals and Pentecostals began here, and even led to a Pentecostal president of the NBEA, Bishop George G. McKinney, Jr. of the Church of God in Christ. However, while black Pentecostalism incorporated areas of theological fundamentalism of black Evangelicalism, they still saw themselves as part of the traditional black religious community.

These three movements, the Plymouth Brethren with propositional theology, the C&MA with mission traditions, and Pentecostalism with independent black churches and experiential theology traditions, contributed to the formation of the NBEA and the larger African American Evangelical movement. Where Evangelicalism was once seen as a white middle-class tradition, the presence of the African American community certainly changes the picture of Evangelicalism as a whole. Even with the rise of black consciousness and involvement in the evangelical tradition, many African Americans still today have trouble with their white counterparts, expressing that many do not know how much their "whiteness" affects their faith (Gilbreath, 2006). Filtered by white, middle-class values, Evangelical theology is hindering many blacks from connecting to their

own racial community, causing many blacks to “live with this strange DuBoisian dichotomy—a “double-consciousness” that often requires them to see their faith through a white cultural lens” (Gilbreath, 2006, pg. 18). Yet, these tensions do not keep blacks and many others from joining and participating in the modern American Evangelical movement. Evangelicalism from the beginning has been defined by tensions and paradoxes. From the Protestant reformation, to theological separatism, to political debate, and addition of race relations to make things even trickier, Evangelicalism seems to flourish in these tensions, with many parishioners dedicated to the ongoing rub of culture and Christ.

What is Interfaith Dialogue?

Thus far we can note not only the tensions within Evangelicalism, but also in dialogue, faith and religion; all carry innate tensions within their individual understandings and function, let alone their intersections. Tension in dialogue arises when one must embrace the “spirit of dialogue” and restrain the thoughts, opinions, and assumptions that one carries, to remain negotiable for change and growth; especially when those views and ideas are the things in which confidence, assurance, and hope are placed to help make sense of one’s world and life (faith), and they are contrary to another’s perception of ultimate concern. Friction arose in the history of Evangelicalism when Martin Luther and others decided to break away from traditional doctrines and theology to include personal piety and biblical authority, to start a brand new movement with social, cultural, and intellectual responsibilities looked down upon by their

traditional counterparts. And conflict continues to thicken within the Evangelical faith system, namely with African American Evangelicals, where dialogue fails to create shared meaning across racial, class, political and theological barriers, creating rippling manifestations of discord across cultural, social, and religious arenas alike.

This resistance embedded within each these individual concepts also brings up notable concern when entertaining the thought of their intersection, many of which this research explores and gives voice to. In effort to fill the gaps in research and address the difficult questions emerging through tensions, **my first inquiry is**, because Evangelical Christians have relatively stable fundamental theological beliefs, is it possible for Evangelical Christians to embrace “the spirit of dialogue” with others of different, or opposing notions of ultimate concern and faith? Furthermore, **my second inquiry** continues in asking if the embrace is possible, what does it mean for the retention, commitment and execution of doctrines and beliefs according to the Evangelical Christian tradition, and for its followers? And if not possible, what are the limits of dialogue from an Evangelical Christian perspective?

While intersections of opposing positions and understandings of faith, religion, and dialogue can cause an uncomfortable rub of psychological, cultural, and theological norms and values, the friction of these components can also carry tremendous potential to create a temperature, energy, and/or power that can be the catalyst for change and action. With Hans Kung’s (1991) assertion of “no peace among religions without dialogue among religions” in mind, it can be interpreted that intersections of opposing faith and

beliefs, under the guidance of dialogue, can create peace. As a proposed remedy for hope and peace among religions, David Smock (2002) in Interfaith Dialogue and Peace Building describes interfaith dialogue as “a conversation among people of different faiths on a common subject, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change or grow...” (pg. 6) In essence, interfaith dialogue is a strategy for faith participants to find a common ground, engage in peaceful cooperative efforts, and “develop honest, loving, and holistic relationships with God and neighbor” (Smock, 2002, pg. 6) that go beyond the specific bounds of religious faith.

Specifically in interfaith dialogue, discussions around theology and paths of faith raise issues in developing mutual trust and respect. It is in this area of theological difference where most conflict arises. Though these issues may never be discussed formally in dialogue, acceptance and respect that one’s own belief is not that of the other is necessary. It is also necessary that there is a mental, emotional, and theological “leveling of the field” and/or an equal supporting of other faiths just as one’s own. Gadamer (2004) says in Philosophical Hermeneutics, “the universal human task” is based on “genuine speaking, which has something to say and hence does not give prearranged signals, but rather seeks words through which one reaches the other person...”(pg. 17). Dialogue, and specifically interfaith dialogue, is about relationship. The interactive quality of dialogue and spoken words allows for the self to “expand one’s ‘window of perception’ [and] to step outside, overcoming the limitations of the boundaries (Massoudi, 2006) of religious dogma and barriers. Walter Ong (2002) stated, “[the] spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one

another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups” (pg.73).

While connection and relationship are important, it is also important to address the notions of religious plurality. There comes a point in interfaith dialogue that calls for conversion, but not necessarily the converting of faith traditions. The only conversion to take place is from a narrow and uncompromising point of view that is in many ways futile to the goal of assembling together spiritually, emotionally, and cognitively.

“Through authentic interreligious dialogue we can help each other overcome the sense of separateness and alienation that keeps us from awakening to the unity and wonder that is at the heart of ordinary living” (Bryant & Flynn, 1989, pg. 31). Reaching back to arguments made by Hans Kung (1991), part of the goal of interfaith dialogue is change for a stronger unified humanity. This does not mean that one must compromise the foundations of their faith, but there must be a willingness to experience change and/or experience challenge to one’s prejudice, ignorance, narrow worldview, or religious conviction.

For interfaith dialogue, truth is not defined as an exclusive absolute possessed by one faith. Instead, truth is recognized as relative, valid, and valuable for each individual faith. Jaco Cilliers (2002) stated in his essay “Building Bridges for Interfaith Dialogue,” “The purpose of focusing on truth during interfaith dialogue is to seek and discover “truths” within a religious tradition that form identity and provide opportunities for cooperation and engaging in joint discovery of different traditions” (pg. 55). Discussing

truth is not about correcting or falsifying any faith's beliefs, but it is about hearing and listening to the other side, discovering what is 'true' for others, and developing mutual understandings and respect. Cilliers (2002) stated that "part of the "truth discovery process" is for groups of different religious traditions to understand how they can share their values in such a way that the true message of their faith benefits people from other faith traditions" (pg. 55). This understanding of truth even goes further to offer mutual benefit for all faiths.

This openness to gain a deeper knowledge of the issue at hand, and perhaps change previously held opinions, may also involve a responsibility concerning personal motives and dispositions, and the confession wrong doings and injuries committed against others. For instance, many times in the meeting of conflicting faiths and their theology, there often is a need and/or pretense to prove validity of one's own faith and falsify the other, in order to proselytize. For example, Muslim and Christians have had long time disagreements in theology and some have 'lurking suspicions' that hidden agendas and compromises of faith will occur during dialogue (J. Smith, 2007). While proselytizing or persuasion is not highly looked upon topic for dialogue, it is still important to recognize and identify personal spiritual resources (motivations) that are considered manipulative or coercive, then refrain from doing them (J. Smith, 2007; Steele, 2002).

Lastly and most important, interfaith dialogue purposes to create unity, diversity, and cooperative action. Interfaith dialogue not only endeavors to allow people to engage

safely and comfortably in relationship and conversation, but also ventures to allow people to experience, hope and work for a new worldview and ethic for the future. The pluralistic nature of interfaith dialogue conditions human beings to interact successfully in the diverse world in which we live. Interfaith dialogue calls for cooperative tasks that emerge as a way to establish relationships and impact communities. Cooperative actions are tasks interfaith dialoguers can participate in, to further the levels of mutual understanding, respect, trust, and benefit. Religious faiths come together to serve their communities and each other in “initiatives related to humanitarian relief, development, and peace building (Cilliers, 2002). These collaborative actions are designed to create measureable millstones of achievement that goes beyond talk, to powerful interaction (Smock, 2002). Focused on relationship, things like supportive institutional structures are created. These institutions place “high priority on building personal relationships and rapport with the various religious communities” and work hard to “make repairs” in religious communities (Steele, 2002, pg. 86-87). They include various religions but, are independent from religious hierarchies and have credibility within the community (Steele, 2002). A cooperative project along with or following dialogue instills the foundations and purposes of interfaith dialogue into the lives of the participants and furthers the building of peace between religions.

While these claims seem to be great in theory, there still remains a challenge of negotiating fundamental Christian truths, expectations, and doctrines to consider in interfaith interactions. Kenneth Burke (1970) begins his book, The Rhetoric of Religion, with a sobering truth that demands us to look at humanity, and the nature of religion and

conflict between nations of the world. He states, "...the history of religions has also been the history of great discord. It would seem that nothing can more effectively set people at odds than the demand that they think alike. For, given our many disparate ways of life, we couldn't really think alike, even if we wanted to" (Burke, 1970, pg. v). With Burke's argument for inherent difference, and each religion holding various positions and points of view, many times the people who participate in religion perceive and govern their religious doctrine, theology and faith as the sole way to live life, excluding all others who do not do not follow that worldview. Even the most controversial faiths like Evangelical Christianity, where there is a protracted history of tensions, imperialism, and mutual mistrust and distrust of the "other," many still do not entertain any petition to join in interaction with others, let alone think alike and speak the same theological language. Which leads me to **my third inquiry**, what does Evangelical Christianity say about interfaith dialogue, and how do cultural and social constructions like the African American race, denominational doctrines, and church leaders, inform the perspective? In addition, when the goals of successful interfaith dialogue are mutual understanding, respect, trust, and benefit, and Evangelical Christian doctrines can be interpreted to emphasize separation from secular norms and values, **my fourth and final inquiry** asks, what does successful dialogue (inter-and intra-faith) look like from an Evangelical Christian perspective in relation to what interfaith scholarship deems as success?

Together dialogue, faith, African American Evangelicalism, and interfaith dialogue provide an interesting relationship full of tensions that may be difficult to solve, but deserves a chance to be explored. I doubt that my personal experience with the

interfaith dialogue organizer in 2010 is the first or last encounter Christians and people of other faiths have had with competing or opposing opinions, beliefs, and assumptions. Whether it is because of stereotypical prevailing images, intolerant attitudes towards others, strict beliefs and values, or the fear of one's beliefs being challenged internally or externally by others, this research reveals new perspectives and dispositions concerning Evangelical Christians and their relationship with interfaith dialogue, and the intra-and inter-faith consequences that arise from participating in interfaith dialogue from an African American Evangelical Christian perspective. In sharing the voices, stories, and concerns of five African American Evangelicals who are participating interfaith dialogue, this research presents fresh understandings about the intricate dynamics of faith, dialogue, and the interfaith movement from an African American Evangelical perspective.

Chapter 2: Methodology

To reiterate, the purpose of this study is to describe and interpret how the culture sharing group of African American Evangelical Christians explore and engage in interfaith dialogue. The examination of this group's experience not only sheds light on the involvement of the group in interfaith dialogue as participants, but also on how interfaith dialogue can be perceived and interpreted from an Evangelical Christian perspective, given the various tenants of the faith practiced. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to describe the action plan and procedures that were used in attempt to answer the four research inquiries in Chapter 1: One, is it possible for Evangelical Christians to embrace "the spirit of dialogue" with others of different, or opposing notions of ultimate concern and faith? Two, if the embrace is possible, what does it mean for the retention, commitment and execution of doctrines and beliefs according to the Evangelical Christian tradition, and for its followers? And if not possible, what are the limits of dialogue from an Evangelical Christian perspective? Three, what does Evangelical Christianity say about interfaith dialogue, and how do cultural and social constructions like the African American race, denominational doctrines, and church leaders, inform the perspective? And four, what does successful dialogue (intra- and inter- faith) look like from an Evangelical Christian perspective in relation to what interfaith scholarship deems as success?

Method of Inquiry and Design

For this project, an ethnographic approach was the best fit. Ethnographies seek to describe and interpret “the shared and learned patterns, values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a cultural sharing group” (Creswell, 2007). The African American Evangelical Christian being the cultural group of interest, this research explores how they interpret and describe interfaith dialogue. As a result, rich descriptions and close authentic representations of how they interpret, participate, and experience interfaith dialogue come forth.

Participant perspectives and understandings are the primary focus for the research data. The researcher is not a participant in the study, but is a knowledgeable member of the African American Evangelical Christian faith tradition. The perspectives in this research do not represent the sole truth about any situation, every African American Evangelical Christian, or the personal opinions and perspectives of the researcher. However, the introduction of bias from the researcher into the research is possible, and will be discussed in Chapter 4. IRB approval from the California State University East was attained for this research June 23, 2011, prior to the collection of research data and interviews (See Appendix A for IRB Approval).

Subject Population

To ensure the most accurate information, five face-to-face interviews were performed with African American Evangelical Christians who are involved as leaders or members in interfaith organizations and/or activities. Interview participants were selected

through the recommendations of personal acquaintances of the researcher, recommendations from employees at Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action [BOCA], and People Improving Communities through Organizing [PICO National Network].

Five participants were selected in all for this research, all from the San Francisco East Bay including Hayward, CA, Oakland CA, and Berkeley, CA. Two participants were members of BOCA, including its executive director; one is a member and employee of Congregations Organizing for Renewal [COR]; one is an employee of City Team Ministries in Oakland, CA; and one is an executive board member of the Church of God in Christ religious organization. Four of the participants were ordained ministers and/or pastors in their local communities, and the fifth participant is simply a parishoner. All participants are a part of an Evangelical Christian denomination of the Pentecostal or Baptist tradition. Participant ages range from mid-thirties to sixty years old; four are male, one is female, and all were of African American decent.

These participants were chosen using purposeful sampling— simply the use of choosing participants with characteristics relevant to the study and thought to be most informative. Out of the combined population of 647, 490 persons in Oakland, Hayward, and Berkeley, CA combined, a collective total of 49% are black and/or African American, and 30-40% of the city's religious population are Evangelical Protestants.⁴ Each participant in this study is part of leadership positions throughout their respective communities, representing and serving thousands of people locally and worldwide. Three

participants are a part of the BOCA organization, (one of which is the executive director), and the COR organization serving 18 congregations and 10,000 families locally; this organization is also a part of the larger PICO national network of 350 congregations and 400,000 families.⁵ One other participant is serving in leadership in the Oakland City Team ministry, a Christian based organization, serving thousands of residents a year of many races and religions. The last participant, Second Presiding Bishop on the executive board for the Church of God in Christ, makes decisions for a population of 6-8 million predominately African American parishioners. These participants are arguably sufficient to represent the wider population of the black, evangelical protestant members and churches in the San Francisco East Bay, with reasonable probability of contact and influence with the wider, mainstream black religious community due to racial and religious demographics.

Site and Setting

All interviews were conducted at a time and place selected by each participant, such as a church or religious organization, business office or conference room, free from considerable interruption. All interviews were conducted in Hayward, Oakland, or Berkeley, CA.

Data Gathering Methods and Procedures

Interviews were audio tape recorded, and hand written notes were taken. Prior to the recording of the interviews, participants first signed and dated consent forms for research provided in advance to participants via email, and obtained at the interview by

the researcher (See Appendix C for Informed Consent). Participants were then verbally reminded at the place of interview that the interview would be tape recorded and all information would be used unless otherwise stated. Participants individually responded to approximately fourteen open ended questions at individual times and location, with interview duration from 30 minutes to one hour (See Appendix D for Interview Questions). The total duration for conducting individual interviews was four months, November 2011-February 2012.

Recruitment

A simple request for participation was issued via email and by phone to each person participating (See Appendix B for Recruitment Script). No participants asked to participate in research refused.

Ethical Risk

There was a potential risk of emotional and psychological discomfort in the form of anger or frustration, defensiveness, argumentation, or stress, but it was extremely low and their seriousness was not a significant factor in the research. There was also a risk of persons being identified in the research being that participants agreed to the use of real names and identities via the consent forms signed. However, all names and identities are protected by pseudo names assigned by the researcher leaving the risk moderately low as well. All participants were given the opportunity to withdraw their participation in the study, choose which questions to answer, and/or strike their name, personal information,

and/or any information from the research documents and records. No participant requested such measures.

All data was stored in the private possession of the researcher in password secure computer file documents and folders, with access belonging only to the researcher. Original transcriptions and coded data were only examined by the researcher and departmental advisor of this project. In the future, only the researcher will have access to the research data and interviews, which will be stored in a locked cupboard in the researcher's residence. Though interview participants did consent to the release of their interview transcript to the researcher, only upon request of the participant will duplicates of the original interview transcript be made to participants.

The participants were informed in advance of the nature and content of the research goals, endeavors, and purpose via email and telephone, and given a maximum of two weeks to make a decision to participate, followed by a courtesy email and phone call to confirm meeting time and location.

Data Analysis

After the completion of each interview, gender specific pseudo names were given to each interview. The researcher then transcribed and coded the content into themes and categories of meaning, derived and interpreted from significant statements and quotes found in the interview to ensure a more genuine representation of the information.

Pseudo names are: Respondent 1- Marcus; Respondent 2- Brian; Respondent 3- Katy; Respondent 4- Jason; and Respondent 5- Sam. Meaningful statements were individually

highlighted in each transcription, summarized by the researcher in terms of idea, and then connected with their relevance to the literature, and the common language, beliefs, and values held by Evangelical Christian religious texts, doctrines and understandings. Common themes found in the interviews included openness, interpretations of other faiths, rules for evangelism, the role of leaders in interfaith dialogue, participation qualifications, challenges/conflicts from interfaith dialogue, and success through relationship and cooperative action. These overall themes and categories were connected to concepts found in the literature, and new emerging ideas and concepts unique to the interviews, thus creating an interpretation and picture of the culture sharing group, and answers to research inquiries.

Limitations

The research is limited in that it only represents a portion of the entire Evangelical Christian population in terms of denomination, ethnicity, sex, age, and location. The participants used in this research only represented two Evangelical denominations, Pentecostal and Baptist. These faith denominations can be practiced dramatically different due to race and location. While most Evangelical Christian denominations hold the same general doctrines and biblical canons, the way these beliefs are practiced vary from church to church. Age and sex also limits the perspectives and experience in that perhaps a younger (18-30) population may stand at odds with common practices of faith, perhaps growing up in a society more tolerant of diversity and change. Differences in sex may bring up specific issues respective to men and women as well.

This research is limited to a very specific sample of Evangelical Christians, but further research can include and compare the impact of race, age, denomination, and location amongst other variables. There is also a limitation in perspective, given that four out of five respondents are ordained ministers or leaders in the Pentecostal church. This perspective from leadership may differ greatly when compared to the knowledge, privilege, exposure and opportunity of those members in church laity.

Chapter 3: Results

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to examine the individual perspectives, responses, and profiles of each of the five research interviewees, in regards to their demographics and involvement in interfaith dialogue. These results will help summarize not only individual interviews using representative quotes, but highlight similarities and differences amongst them, as members of the Evangelical Christian culture sharing group. Each question presented below comes from the official set of fourteen questions asked in each interview. Each quotation of information used comes from the personal communication and/or interview of each participant. Respondent 1, “Marcus,” made the personal statements that will follow in Chapter 3 November 22, 2011; Respondent 2, “Brian,” on December 6, 2011; Respondent 3, “Katy,” on January 19, 2012; Respondent 4, “Jason,” on January 26, 2012; and Respondent 5, “Sam,” on February 2, 2012.

1. Please describe your religious affiliation.

Respondents Marcus, Brian, Katy, and Jason all essentially described their religious affiliation as Pentecostal, with Marcus and Jason specifically distinguishing a “Holiness” Pentecostal tradition. Marcus did mention he is “presently non-denominational,” however, was ordained with the Church of God in Christ, Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and Bible Way Churches of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Katy and Jason too expressed their root affiliation in the Church of God in Christ, however, Katy currently attends an Assemblies of God church, while Jason serves as Second Assistant Bishop in the Church of God in Christ. Respondent 5, Sam, is the only respondent not a part of the Pentecostal

tradition, describing his religious affiliation within Christianity from both American Baptist and Progressive Baptist traditions.

2. What does interfaith dialogue mean to you?

Marcus offered an interpretation of interfaith dialogue as an attempt to get religions and faiths in a conversation to discover a place of synthesis or commonality, for cooperative activities, peace building, learning, understanding, and justice. Jason expressed similar thoughts describing interfaith dialogue as leaders, and perhaps members of different denominations, discussing what they have in common, including challenges and crises, and questions they cannot solve— in summary an “open line of communication across denominational lines.” Brian essentially described much of the same, but uses the words “the converging” of two different faiths to achieve a “joint outcome.” Convergence comes as a result of shared activities and purposed outcomes because of faith.

While these three respondents shared a general consensus in definitions, Katy and Sam made effort to point out that interfaith dialogue takes place with those from a different faith than one’s own, rather than just having dialogue within one’s own faith. Katy described it as a “respectful conversation with an open mind” among people of a different faith system, while Sam described it as your “willingness to engage” with people who do not share the same basic faith tenants. For Sam, interfaith dialogue extended far beyond the “local Baptist church, the local Methodist church, and the local COGIC church,” that pretty much “hinge their belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,” or these same churches doing something together in an ecumenical sense. Interfaith

dialogue to Sam means, “you gotta step beyond that” to engage “with Muslims, with Jews, with Buddhists, with Hindus...” Interfaith dialogue in this sense crosses lines of the familiar to perhaps the unfamiliar, with an open mind to engage.

3. When did you learn about interfaith dialogue?

Answers for this inquiry were a bit more complex given the various events that led each participant to interfaith dialogue, and the multiple places in the interview where explanations related to this question showed up. Katy and Marcus both explained their encounter with interfaith dialogue emerging out of a need for answers and justice. Both explained that prior to their involvement in interfaith agencies and organizations, they had little exposure and/or fellowship with those of other faith backgrounds, having some to do with the lack of emphasis put on other faiths by their own faith traditions while growing up. While a youth pastor at Bible Way Church in San Jose, CA, and student at Bethany College in the year 1999 or 2000, Marcus described his first real introduction to an interfaith setting beginning through an effort to mobilize a faith community to respond to “police brutality,” “unjust,” and “racist kind[s] of affairs,” happening in the community and juvenile justice system.

As for Katy, prior to working for an interfaith organization like PICO, she “had questions around the process...of how what was being done as being done” in her church. She stated that the “content” of her faith was not in question, but contrary to her perspective of Christianity growing up after “having more conversations with people,” she recognized that “it was ok for [her] to you know, have these conversations” with

other people outside of her faith. Working for an interfaith organization allowed Katy to “give a lot more thought” to the idea of interfaith dialogue—questioning, being open, and intrigued by other people’s faith.

Jason succinctly and matter of factly described his emergence into interfaith dialogue as an “ongoing part” of his 34 years of pastoral ministry, revealing that, “you represent the Kingdom, but you’re not the only representative.”

As for Brian and Sam, interfaith dialogue arose out of the relationships formed down through the years, and experiential exposure to other ways of life and faith. Brian said that “experience” with, and long time relationship with his “Muslim brother” (stemming back to “when he [his friend] used to be a Christian”), informed him to continue to explore the relationship, rather than “drop a wall” in it because his friend changed his beliefs. Where Brian admitted that, “up until years ago” he was “dead set against,” and “closed off” to any kind of interfaith dialogue or engagement, the respect and love inspired in this relationship kept them working together, creating a space “to be inspired by how each other’s faith has made [them] to be.” This experience allowed Brian to see what interfaith dialogue could look like when “relationship and love is involved.”

Sam recalled his first real encounter in interfaith settings as a preteen growing up in Berkeley with “kids that were not only Christian,” but that were Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and those who practiced local religions like Santeria and Yoruba. However, Sam’s first dialogues occurred during his collegiate years at San Francisco State University as an International Relations student, encountering friends from across the world. During this time (around the 1990’s), he remembered several professors at that

time claiming that the next enemy of the United States would be Fundamentalist Islam. Watching events unfold over the years to support such claims, has caused him to see a need for many faiths to find “commonality and common ground.”

4. How would you describe your level of participation in interfaith dialogue thus far?

Participation levels in interfaith dialogue were described using the words, “high,” “extremely active,” and “heavy,” by respondents Katy, Marcus, Jason, and Brian respectively. Sam is the only respondent not asked this question directly in his interview, but an “active” participation level can be inferred by his description of the many interfaith organizations, institutions, and relationships he is currently involved in like BOCA, and the American Baptist Seminary of the West, where he serves as an adjunct professor. For Brian, active participation in interfaith dialogue consists of leading interfaith community events, and listening and learning to the individual faith journeys. For Marcus, organizing faith congregations for peace building “that is required in this very violent world,” comes in the form of his work with BOCA as well. Katy continues to work for an interfaith organization (COR), and describes not necessarily having conversations on a consistent everyday basis specifically around interfaith dialogue, but is involved more than say the “average person.” And lastly, Jason, described a various array of intra-faith interactions across Christian denominational lines locally and nationally as chairman of the Pentecostal Churches of North America, on the board for St. Rose Hospital, the School of Urban Ministry, Patten University (both in Oakland,

CA), and previously on the board for Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship in the Washington DC-Virginia area.

5. What were the different faiths represented in the interfaith dialogue?

The one faith that every participant said was represented in their interfaith dialogues was the Christian faith, in many ways making it intra-faith dialogue. Each described a different denomination in Christianity such as Methodist, Pentecostal, Baptist, Catholic, and a gay Christian expression, but none the less having Christian origins. The next ranking faith that followed was Jewish and Muslim, also mentioned respectively in every interview. Some of the other faiths cited were Sikhs, mentioned by Jason, and Islam, Buddhist, Agnostics, and indigenous traditions, mentioned by Brian.

6. How many interfaith dialogues have you had so far?

Three of the five respondents were actually asked this question officially— Brian, Katy, and Jason. Brian revealed that he has had 15-20 dialogues with four to five continuous discussions. Jason revealed 40-50 dialogues and maybe more than that. Katy revealed that because the conversations are not “set” dialogues where she refers to them as interfaith dialogue, she does not have a count. Instead she marks that events and meetings are planned to include and represent everyone and their respective faith.

7. How would you define a successful and/or fruitful interfaith dialogue?

Most of the respondents, though using their own distinct words, essentially revealed the same criteria for success. Sam said that “the ability to be able to listen and hear,” and “be willing [and open] to learn...something about somebody else” qualifies real success in dialogue. However, he did mention that doing this does not “necessarily mean that your gonna walk away from every conversation holding hands and singing cum-by-yah,” but it does allow one to embrace engagement and understand multiple perspectives concerning different faiths. Jason shared a similar perspective saying that when “we can hear each other” and repeat back what someone has said, then dialogue is taking place. Again, he stated that this does not mean people have to agree, but dialogue can still occur when people agree to disagree. Katy too said that successful dialogue “would be one in which people are able to learn something from each other.” Learning helps people to grow and be challenged, and again Katy stated these “respectful conversations” are not ones “necessarily where we’re all in agreement,” but ones in which you know you’ve grown and know something else at the end.

Brian and Marcus had a slightly different vision of success that extended from listening, respect, and relationship. Brian affirmed that “a lot of listening” and “a lot of respect” in a “real authentic way,” and in a “discovery format” is one key to success. He also added that success has a certain measure of “egalitarianism, peace on earth, justice, fairness in the world, and social ethics and love” involved. However, to accomplish such goals, “somebody has to be willing to serve the process;” meaning someone has to be willing to resist lording authority over others, but instead “open an opportunity for people

to say what they need to say and be respected.” This in turn opens opportunity to have relationships.

Marcus took on a more practical observation of success, but still attributed their fulfillment to “buckets of learning, of justice work, and of peacemaking.” As manifestation of these goals, success would involve various congregations and faith leaders organizing together to lift up justice, people being treated with dignity, fairness, and nonviolence. Also, being able to “transform day to day realities of people living in very oppressive situations across the world” by impacting policy, is a goal of these partnerships. Lastly, Marcus stated that “success at the heart, or at the root of it is relationships.” He stated that he tends to call the people that he works with in interfaith dialogue “good friends,” and being able to “nurture those relationships in a private space and in a public space...is a very wonderful success.” Forming and nurturing these relationships will help people to “move beyond the labels and categories” and “treat people as human beings,” and “perchance...touch the hearts of some folks and introduce them to Jesus in a way they never had been introduced to him before.”

8. How many were successful and/or fruitful? In what ways?

Three out of five respondents, Jason, Sam, and Katy, were officially asked this question in their interview. Each person also had something very different to say about levels of success. Jason stated that success is determined by definition, but if using the terms he stated earlier about being heard and appreciating each other’s comments, then the majority of dialogues have been successful. However, every goal or purpose that was

set out to accomplish was not always met. Katy stated that she cannot put a number on successful dialogues, but knows that personally she has grown a lot and learned a lot, not only concerning other faiths, but in her own as well. She stated, "...a lot of the conversations that I've had with people have, I would say further grounded me in my faith almost... 'cause it's challenged me to like go deeper in understanding my own faith right, and why I believe what I believe..." Sam also stated that he cannot put a number on successful dialogues, but contends that what is more important is living "beyond the dialogue." He stated that the relationships built, the "cultural and systemic change," and a "bend toward justice" should be more important to note than the number of congregations, faiths, and local practitioners coming to meetings and fellowships.

9. Why are you involved in interfaith dialogue?

The only participant not asked this question officially in interview was Marcus. However, a response was given in some measure when asked about his level of participation in interfaith dialogue, stating that peace building is necessary in a "violent world." As for the other respondents, various perspectives were presented. For Katy, even though she understands that everyone does not share the same beliefs and backgrounds, she stated the fact that "there are lots of things that we care about that we work on together," and that common ground allows people of faith to work together. She also stated that "we're all people of faith," and being able to "recognize that there is something out there that is a higher being" actually "says something about you," and when united produces "something powerful."

For Sam, not only is building relationships an important reason for involvement, but so is social justice, and living out one's Christian faith. Sam stated that, "part of the mission of Jesus Christ was not only about salvation for the individual and the soul, but it was about really confronting systems and power structures...particularly where the least, the last, and the lost continue to find themselves on the fringes." Jason too saw his involvement in interfaith dialogue as a way to live out his faith as a Christian, stating that because "in America particularly, nobody lives in a vacuum," you must do ministry across all lines. Jason went on to describe a number of examples and experience where he has meet people of other faiths on common ground while respecting differences, has had a focus of love and respect rather than condemnation or conversion, and has been a help to those in need because his faith informs him to. He stated, "...because the Lord instructs us to minister to the stranger...and as much as I love the stranger, and I have provided food and raiment for the stranger, you love the stranger as well." Jason also stated that a person cannot be "totally committed to Christ" without being "totally committed to the values and ideals that Christ has set forward", namely the service and love toward all people.

Just as Jason, Brian's faith also informed him to be involved in the community and world around him. Brian stated that he is involved in interfaith dialogue in order to "make the world as God wants it to be." This reason also being what he wants to accomplish in interfaith dialogue, he understands that the majority of the world is not Christian, but making everybody a Christian, he stated is "not the world that the scriptures inform me

that God is imagining.” But it is working together to create a world with transformative results the purpose he sees in his faith.

10. What do you hope to accomplish through interfaith dialogue?

With Brian already stating his goals in interfaith dialogue to “make the world as God wants in to be,” the four other respondents hoped to accomplish many of the same goals. Sam stated that particularly with his work in BOCA, the biggest goal is to see the organization grow in engagement across ecumenical and denominational lines with the organization’s Jewish congregations, and hopefully opening to Muslim and Buddhist congregations. Not only that, but he hopes to have “fruitful dialogue” with outcomes other than establishing commonalities, but to a level of understanding and empathy “as brothers and sisters united in the struggle to organize our congregations and communities.”

Rather than focusing on the inclusion of other faiths, Katy, Jason, and Marcus focus more on representing their Christian faith well. Jason was hopeful that “we [as in Christians] can validate more clearly our reason for existence and the reason why our message goes forth,” just as Jesus was constantly in dialogue with people. Jason also stated as a part of that hope, just like Jesus “was able to fill the voids that were in people’s life” through the same kind of engagement, Jason hopes that, “whether they believe or not... I’m hopeful that they will see that the gospel that we preach is real and it’s powerful.”

Katy too defined her goals or objectives to be “that people see the love of Christ in me.” Her goal is not to persuade people, but she is hopeful that “by the fruit that’s being produced, people will be able to see Christ in me.” Marcus, though not asked this question officially interview, reveals some of his goals for interfaith dialogue in other interview questions as, making the world a more peaceful place to live, helping to transform the lives of people being oppressed in local communities and worldwide, but also to take responsibility to “be a good witness of the gospel,” not in a way to force people to believe, but to simply proclaim truth.

11. Describe what you have learned and/or accomplished thus far in interfaith dialogue.

All of the participants expressed in some form or another, the impact relationships have in their learning and accomplishment in interfaith dialogue. Jason stated that he has learned patience, and that “everything rises and falls based on relationships.” He stated also that the integrity of the relationships formed with the community and individuals is important to support one’s witness and influence when helping others. Without it, people are likely not to listen to anything being proclaimed or offered. Building relationships, he stated is also one of the biggest challenges, much like Katy and Sam revealed in their interviews.

Sam stated he has learned that “the dialogue is not an easy one to have,” because every person is not the same, and there is no use trying to “squeeze the proverbial square peg into the round hole” when it comes to understanding people and their faith. Instead, learning to listen and share lived experiences are most effective. Sam also stated his

accomplishments are the relationships he has formed with people of other faiths. As for Katy, she stated that dialogue is very difficult, but not because of understanding others, but because of understanding one's own faith as well. She stated, "one of the biggest things that I've learned is if you're not grounded in your own faith, and in who you are, and you participate in interfaith dialogue, you could definitely be moved from where you are. So it's important for you to know who you are and why you believe what you believe." Relationships begin with one's own personal relationship with their faith.

Marcus and Brian, though not asked this question officially in interview, they too revealed moments of learning and accomplishment within the conversation. Marcus stated when explaining some of the challenges he has faced in dialogue, that he has learned and "found that deep investments in relationships with people from different religious traditions have helped to carry us over those kinds of very tenuous spaces without us ever having to agree;" and the ability to bear witness to the truth in love, humility, honor and respect for others is one of the "greatest tools in our tool belt to be able to show a truth or revelation of who Jesus is." Brian revealed his learning experiences when he explained what caused him to take on "a posture of being open" when negotiating his Christian faith and the faith of others. The intense discussions and fellowships he had within his relationships with those in and outside of his faith, brought him to a certain point where he learned, "[he] had to admit that the world was not as simple, that spirituality was not as simple as [he] wanted it to be;" this caused him to be brought to an open place for dialogue and open discovery of others.

12. What kinds of challenges have you encountered thus far in interfaith dialogue?

A variety of challenges surfaced when faced with interfaith dialogue, and each respondent had their share of specific challenges. Beginning with Jason, one of his challenges in interfaith dialogue arose from people questioning his motive asking, “why are you doing this? What’s in it for you? What are you going to get out of it? Are you using me to make yourself look big?” These questions of motive he stated, are always the first to be asked.

Katy explains one of her challenges in interfaith dialogue came up when working with a “Unitarian” church where she described the people as “open about not necessarily agreeing with [her] beliefs,” and she herself being opposed to theirs. Through this experience she questioned what her role was among them, and her endorsement of their beliefs concerning homosexuality and pluralism while working with their organization. After being asked to speak at a service at the church, she was challenged with thinking the people of the congregation were “a group of sinners,” reminding her of her “kind of closed minded up-bringing.” The challenge for Katy essentially was the thought or assumption that she would be compromising her beliefs through her close interaction with the Unitarian congregation. However, in the end she recognized for herself that “it’s ok to work with people who are not believers” instead of essentially “preaching to the choir” (quotations mine,) or those who are already Christian believers.

For Sam, he essentially summed up his challenges in interfaith dialogue to walking and thinking that you’re going to have like minded people in dialogue, thinking that theology is the only or biggest barrier, setting the bar too high or too low for dialogue

accomplishments, and understanding that one victory or accomplishment does not mean all the problems are going to go away.

Marcus revealed his challenges arise in a number of factors as well. One was being able to “reconcile theological absolutes” to maintain truth, but not use it as a weapon or “vehicle for division” for himself and others in dialogue. This particular challenge created another major dilemma for Marcus’ church congregation in getting people to move from “a very kind of fundamentally black or white, like no gray areas, ...right or wrong, ...either heaven or hell, ... go to war against the devil” mind frame, into a kind of open, multi-frame perspective for people of other faiths. He stated that getting his congregation to understand that partnership or participation with non-Christians does not minimize or diminish the truth of the gospel, has been a feat and even caused some to leave the church, counting these partnerships with non-Christians as a “blasphemous exercise.” The greatest challenge he stated is being able to work through these kinds of tensions.

Lastly, in a turn in perspective, Brian revealed that his greatest challenges have been within himself, rather than from exterior circumstances and forces. He stated that at a certain point he began to question, “whether [he] had some kind of evil spirit at work inside” due to his interfaith engagement. He also stated that he questioned whether he had become a heretic— being deceived to the point he doesn’t even know he is deceived. Most of the challenge came from his “Christian brothers and sisters” who he described as, “nervous, or upset, or scared, or frustrated, or insecure, because they felt like [he] was challenging things that framed their worldview.” He also said that those who were limited

in their context of knowledge and theological education were also culprits in challenging his interfaith engagements, because they could not understand things about their own faith, let alone other faiths. This left him feeling alone in the process of interfaith dialogues, battling within self.

13. How does your faith interpret the faith claims of others?

With one exception, each respondent provided an explanation that had open respect for others, but still had conditions to how far that openness extended. Sam claimed his faith allows him to respect others, in that whatever he “respectfully disagrees with,” he is ok with. He explains that as long as what you believe does not harm others (like satanic worship), and is something that helps move one towards peace, and the good of the universe, he is ok with that. He stated that he is comfortable enough in his own faith in Jesus Christ, which is something no one can take away from him, and that he does not need to “bash” anyone else because of his faith, but is open to listen to others. He stated that until one “can find a place where God speaks to your soul” about interacting with others, or “be willing to be challenged to think about what you believe,” one’s faith is no good.

Jason too saw respect as a proper interpretation for other faiths, stating that the faith of others is just as valid as one’s own. This respect he stated comes from listening and “appreciating the fact of where people are,” however, it is important to help people see Christ not only in word, but in deed. Katy on the other hand had a more straight forward perspective on the faith claims of others, and held a perspective straight from her faith

tradition. She stated that her faith tradition in the Church of God in Christ and Assemblies of God is very clear on, “if you don’t believe Christ, essentially you are going to hell.” However, she does also mention that the Assemblies of God tradition is a bit more open to working with people who are not of similar faith.

Marcus stated that as a Pentecostal, the Holy Spirit allows him “multiple opportunities to be surprised by God,” meaning, “being Pentecostal allows [him] a little bit of space to appreciate that God might be moving in other people’s lives that might not be Christian, in a way that [he] can’t understand.” He stated that the “spirit moves however the spirit moves” and is not controlled by anyone. Marcus stated his only responsibility is to be obedient to the spirit and be faithful in his response. However, he does not state that all roads lead to the same destination. While he said religious traditions may have points of intersection and synergy, Jesus still has to be somewhere in the equation, meaning his belief in the Christian faith is non-negotiable. Nonetheless, this does not require him to disconnect himself from other religious claims in terms of studying them and understanding them. The ultimate goal is to figure out where different notions of truth about God can make the world a more peaceful place.

Lastly, Brian offered a very different perspective that does not involve limitations. He stated that his personal “faith in Jesus, the Jesus way, the Jesus ethic, and the Jesus teaching” empowers him to celebrate the good in every other faith system other than his own. Though he will still talk about Jesus when expressing his faith, he stated that he will allow his faith in Jesus to help people to become the “best Muslim that they can be, the best Buddhist that they can be, the best Jew that they can be.” Brian stated that

proselytizing is not his business, but instead lets his faith help him see the good in other people and their faith, and hopefully become more engaged in transforming the world around him.

14. On a scale from 1-5, how open would you consider yourself to be in your willingness to understand and see other faiths as equals?

With one being the lowest in willingness and five being the highest in willingness, the respondents had various scales and reasoning behind their rankings. Katy and Jason essentially ranked their openness as a zero revealing that equality is not the same as having respect. Katy stated that she is not open at all to her faith being equal to someone else's faith, but believes that everyone has free will to choose their faith, and she is even willing to learn and have conversation around their faith. Jason too stated that he does not classify all faiths as equal, and does not see gods on a mantle place for multiple choice selections. Jason claimed "there's one living God", and Christ is not on a level with all other faiths. While Jason did state that he does respect people of other faiths, it does not lessen his belief in a way that demotes his God to be equal with others.

Brian scaled his willingness one number up stating that even after all that he has stated about openness and treating others as equal, "something still to [him]... is very special and holy and divine about the way of Jesus," that leaves him ranking equality at a one. He stated that he knows what he has experienced because of the way of Jesus, supernatural things, and those things cause him to see His (Jesus) way as higher. Brian said that he does not believe that other faiths are deficient, but just simply different.

However, Brian reveals a bit of dissonance concerning what he would like to believe, and his experience, and truth with Jesus.

Sam ranked his willingness at three or four and stated that it is based on his limitations to accepting or radiating towards faiths that are not monotheistic. For example, he stated that religions that perform blood sacrifices like Santeria, he is not “cool” with. This is what pulls him from a five ranking for equality.

Marcus is the only respondent that ranks his willingness to understand other faiths as being valid as his own at a five. However, he qualified this statement and stated that every person’s faith is valid to them, and he can respect their beliefs. So if equal is about respect, five is his ranking.

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the individual perspectives, responses, and profiles of each of the five research interviewees, to delve into their backgrounds, thought patterns, and involvement in interfaith dialogue. While these results help summarize not only individual interviews using their own words, it also highlights the similarities, differences, and complexities amongst them, as members of the Evangelical Christian culture sharing group. Each question presented comes from the official set of fourteen questions asked in each interview; however, each respondent was not solely asked these questions. In fact, there are other inquiries revealed in the official interviews, such as an inquiry on congregational involvement for the three respondents who are pastors. Information on this inquiry is further discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Analysis

So far Chapters 1, 2, and 3 have laid the ground work for prior research done in the areas of dialogue, faith, evangelicalism, and interfaith dialogue, the need for research to be done in understanding Evangelical Christian relationships to interfaith dialogue, and the specific processes of accomplishing such inquiries. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to pull out and make sense of the emerging themes found in Chapter 3's Results, by analyzing and discussing their implications in understanding African American Evangelical Christian perspectives toward dialogue, faith, and interfaith dialogue, comparing participant responses to the existing literature, and most importantly explore answers to the research questions for this study presented in Chapter 1. The categories from this section derive from significant and reoccurring statements and themes emerging from each participant's personal interview, and representative quotes from the participants are used throughout to further demonstrate categorical presence.

Understanding the Spirit of Dialogue

The "spirit" of dialogue as purposed in the literature by Bohm and Peat (1987) reveals that dialogue takes place when participants can suspend judgments and assumptions long enough to listen and begin to create new meaning through the exchange, essentially defining the idea of openness. Mehrhad Massoudi (2006) also adds to the definition to reveal that dialogue is not simply a tolerance of opposing perspectives, but a genuine belief that another person's point of view is as valid as one's own. Respondents demonstrated their orientation to these ideas through embracing openness, listening, and learning.

Jason: *“So it’s a monologue when you do all the talking and never find out whether or not I hear what you’re saying. It’s only dialogue when we can hear each other. When we can appreciate each other’s comments and when we can agree to be, to be—to disagree. And still have respect for each other, that’s dialogue. So it doesn’t mean we have to agree, but we do have to, we do have to agree that we can disagree. Alright, you see it that way, I see it that way, uh, which is ok, that’s dialogue.”*

Openness. Jason revealed these same ideas explaining that being able “to hear,” and or allow space for variance in perspective, produces dialogue. Openness comes with the appreciation and respect for the divergent comment, and with a settling of the spirit in understanding that it is “ok” to engage in a viewpoint other than one’s own. This also reveals that to make something “in common,” or the process of creating relational meaning, is not limited to having identical or agreeing perspectives, but expands to include the disagreement. Understanding the differences, the disagreement in opinion, perspective, assumption, etc. can in fact be an avenue for building respectful and appreciative relationships and dialogue.

Marcus stated, “I think that being Pentecostal allows me a little bit of space to appreciate that God might be moving in other people’s lives that might not be Christian, in a way that I can’t understand.” Not only does allowing space for varying perspectives come from a general disposition of openness, but can be seen in specialized tenants of one’s faith. In his understanding of the Pentecostal faith tradition, Marcus believes that “the Holy Spirit has afforded multiple opportunities to be surprised by God.” Marcus stated the “Holy Spirit”, an agent of the triune Godhead in the Christian tradition, is not

something that can be controlled, and forces him to accept multiple interpretations of scripture, or what he calls “creative literalism.” This understanding of the Holy Spirit’s sovereignty to fulfill divine purpose and will as He chooses, allows God to be freely omnipotent in Marcus’s faith, and in the lives of the non-Christians around him; so much so where God can move in the lives of humanity at His discretion, without Marcus needing to validate true experiences with God by his own understandings and encounters. In other words, other’s involvement with faith in God may not be from a perspective, expressed in the language, or felt in the manner that he has experienced, but that does not limit the veracity of their experience with the divine.

However, while there is space for openness in understanding the workings of God in the world and creative literalism in the scripture, Marcus still contended there are factors of direct literalism in the scripture that must be taken seriously like, Jesus’ pronouncement that “He⁶ is the way, the truth, and the life”.⁷ Marcus stated how people experience “the way” through Jesus is allowed variable interpretations, but it does not change the non-negotiable claims of his Christian faith. Marcus stated, “I do not believe that all roads lead to the same destination. I think that if the integrity of religious traditions are to be maintained then I think certainly while there may be points of intersection, overlap, and synergy, I think that Jesus has to be somewhere in that equation.” For Marcus, establishing non-negotiable faith tenants grounds him in the Christian faith, but it does not disconnect him from people of other religious claims. Connection again does not come through agreements in religious faith and belief, but in

studying and understanding the people of other faiths, their motivations, and their understanding as a person of another faith.

These levels of openness described by Jason and Marcus takes a great deal of humility and temperance to refrain from asserting the opinions, beliefs, assumptions, rights and wrongs of one's personal truths. However, they reveal that the temperament of dialogue extends from taking an open posture and disposition, to being challenged and vulnerable in person, and in faith, to allow a free flow of meaning and understanding to occur between people on all levels.

Listening and learning. Understanding the spirit of dialogue does not end with openness, but openness is illuminated through the qualities of listening and learning. Three out of five participants revealed that successful and fruitful dialogue comes from the ability to listen and learn authentically. This listening and learning is the catalyst for producing relationship, appreciation for the other, and growth. However, admittedly, most confess that taking on these qualities does not, “necessarily mean that you're gonna walk away from every conversation holding hands and singing cum-by-yah”(“Sam”, personal communication, February 2, 2012), or guarantees total agreement, accomplishment of all goals, or even acceptance of other faith perspectives; but it does help produce understanding and relationship.

Brian: “I have opportunities to lead in the areas of, in areas within the community. In that sense, my interactions with them had, with these other folks of different faiths, had been that by me first putting myself in a place of listening, being willing to listen, and not in a gimmicky kind of way, but in a sense of really being able to listen and to want to learn about other people's journeys.”

The spirit of dialogue through listening and learning brought Brian to a place of trust, relationship, and opportunity with a Muslim friend in the Nation of Islam. He achieved it by taking on a posture in which he calls “a discovery format” where one can explore one’s own life, faith, and the faith of others. To discover, or to listen and learn, afforded Brian an opportunity to develop interfaith relationships with a community that he may have never had the occasion to engage, fostering mutual trust, respect, and creating occasion for mutual understanding and benefit; many of these outcomes the goal of interfaith interactions.

However, these qualities and outcomes of listening and learning did not come without price. Brian added another layer to the discussion by incorporating the need for service. He stated that this discovery format also requires one to “serve the process” by “going [in] low” with a posture of humility; that is, being a servant to the experience of interfaith dialogue rather than being the authority in it. Listening and leaning implies an attending to not only personal postures of humility and openness, but attending to the words, feelings, beliefs, understandings, and perspectives of the other as well. Much like discussed in the literature, it is about being ready to engage others “with sympathy and interest in order to understand the meaning of the other’s position...” (Bohm & Peat, 1987, pg. 241)

Servicing the experience of listening and learning may even mean hearing things that are uncomfortable and challenge faith customs, traditions, and cultural understandings. In his interview, Brian described a time when sitting in a café with a “60

year old gay black man who was minister in a gay church,” when he expressed that he was infected with HIV. While Brian described his “own ignorant bells and whistles” went off for fear of contracting the disease and taking something back to his family, his faith interceded to inform him to “instantly reach out and touch him...to connect him back to community.” Describing this as one of the “holy moments” he has experienced in interfaith dialogue, he revealed that it may not have been possible if he had not positioned himself to discover in a real authentic way, “[where] everything that I know is not it,” and being able to invite the unfamiliar.

Participant Katy, went through a similar situation in that the community organization that she was working for was working with a Unitarian church. Her religious traditions are very different from the all-inclusive Unitarian environment that is accepting of atheists, Christians, Buddhists, and any other religious faiths and cultural beliefs, so naturally she described being challenged working with the homosexual woman pastor over the congregation. She reports that amazingly, even after knowing and understanding her beliefs, the pastor asked her to speak to the congregation at the church. After moving past her biases and first impressions she states that she was reminded, “Christ was out there speaking to people... [and] sharing the gospel with them”; sharing it with all. Upon opening up the door to share her faith and speak, her faith informed her to speak about Christ and love. As a result she realized that she had made an impact, and learned it was ok to work with people who were non-believers. Much like Brian, though these experiences were a stretch for their cultural agreements, norms and understandings, serving the process of dialogue allowed for understanding, growth, and learning to take

place. Most of all, by engaging with someone else on a purely human level, devoid of theological battles, relationships were formed.

Katy: "It doesn't mean—right and openness means many different things for many different people, right? But for me I'm thinking about it in regards to like just being willing to sit down with someone and learn, like why does someone believe what they believe, right? Like, what brought them to this place, you know? Um, but it's not acceptance. So it's like there's a clear distinction. It doesn't mean that I agree with you, but I'm open to learning about, you know, you and about your beliefs, right? Um, yeah."

Combining notions of openness to listening and learning, again we hear the spirit of dialogue is about discovering someone else's journey— putting one's self in a mindset that allows one to be changed by the experience and perspective of another. This process does not have to solely rest on notions of agreement, but on fostering mutual respect, trust, and understanding. Scholar Leslie Baxter (2004) reinforces this idea contending that in order for this kind of growth to be accomplished, one must be open, that is willing to listen to the different perspectives, interests, and approaches of the other, as well as be receptive, and open to change in one's own belief and attitudes. In addition, the respondents personal openness was also aided by the finding a welcoming space in their faith where they understood it to include others and/or experience others.

Brian: *“So I think you know for us, if we’ll serve the process, be Jesus in those circles, we open up an opportunity for people to say what they need to say and be respected. Jesus had, you know, interfaith dialogue with the woman at the well in John 4. That led to a whole town being reached and changed and transformed. I think if we would be able to use that same pattern of listening as Jesus did with her, about her whole idea of about them worshipping on the mountain and some worshipping in the valley and so and so forth. I think it’ll open up opportunities for us to have relationship that can produce transformative results for our world.”*

In response to inquiry one, according to the respondents it is possible for Evangelical Christians to embrace the spirit of dialogue while still maintaining stable beliefs. Respect, trust, understanding, and an open posture to listen and learn about others involve no necessary compromise, break down, or disposal of their beliefs. In fact embracing differences still provide ground for agreement, and does not divorce the respondents from engaging with people of other faiths.

Putting it in Perspective: Christian Faith Paradigms and Interfaith Dialogue

While taking on an open posture through listening and learning may seem simple enough for the Christian to develop the spirit of dialogue, there still seems to be fundamental contradictions between faith understandings that are difficult to resolve when it comes to the willingness to be changed. There is a disconnection between common Evangelical Christian faith claims and the faith claims of others when it comes to the commitment, retention, and execution of the evangelical tradition. The question remains of what does Christian faith say about interfaith dialogue and the faith claims of others? Interfaith scholars agree that topics of theology become very problematic in

dialogue. If theological discussions are included in dialogue, it is agreed upon in advance, and most dialogues focus on what each faith has in common, while appreciating differences (J. Smith, 2007; Smock, 2002). In the case of Christian interfaith dialogues specifically, for some, preconceived notions of Christian intolerances produce assumptions and limitations in authentically engaging in dialogue, usually around areas of deities, the afterlife, and conversion among others. However, the five respondents in this research revealed many complex and competing understandings of some of the Evangelical Christian tradition and doctrine including heaven and hell, conversion, being an example or witness of their Christian faith, and what it means to be evangelical.

Katy: “I think that um, I mean I think that I’m thinking—right now I’m reflecting on both my COGIC upbringing as well as you know, the church that I’m a part of the Assemblies of God. Um, I think that both you know, traditions are very clear on you know not—are very clear that you know if you don’t believe Christ um, essentially you’re going to hell right? So I think that both traditions believe that to say the least...”

Heaven and hell. The eternal resting place of the soul has been an issue of debate for the mortal man for centuries. Most Christian traditions believe that the repentant soul that has believed in the divinely incarnate life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, (essentially what is called the gospel), will receive a heavenly entrance to eternal life. On the contrary, all those who choose not to believe will be condemned to punishment in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone— hell. While the Christian reserves the right to these beliefs, what does this mean for the quality of dialogue and interaction between “Christian believers and non-believers”? Katy stated that she

understands what she calls the “close minded” view of some in her faith tradition in that they are more concerned about retaining the integrity of the members of the faith. Katy stated:

“...[They’re] concerned with people swaying or moving from the faith so rather than, so rather than exposing yourself to all of these things they say don’t do this, you know, it’s not ok, God is not ok with this, or it’s a sin, right?”

While having a possessive view of one’s faith can be expected in that one’s faith is personal, personally lived out and experienced, this exaggerated mind frame can be a debilitating force in dialogue. If the Christian faith is something owned by those who subscribe to it, not only does it mean that entitlement to its benefits (heaven) is exclusive, but it also does not make sense to engage with anyone, any idea, or any object that will threaten, challenge, or contradict the validity and integrity of the possession. It seems as if there is a strong desire to preserve and protect the safety of one’s faith as it is, at any cost; thus the possibility for change, multiple interpretations, and difference in perspective needed for dialogue has the potential to be destroyed. This mind set also may drive some Evangelical Christians to impose their beliefs on others in the hope that they too will possess eternal life and escape damnation. However, because dialogue must take on a free flow of meaning between participants in order to successfully create new meaning in and among all, an imposition of one’s faith beliefs on others may cause strenuous conflict if there is disagreement.

Brian: *“So when we feel like we’ve got all this power, we want to preserve. I think a lot has to do with our pride. I think a lot has to do with our concepts of heaven and hell, the afterlife. I think it has a huge influence on it because if being a good Christian according to like modern definitions equals heaven, then we don’t want to, there’s a sense of ownership and entitlement we have to that, we don’t want to open that up to everybody. Even if it was the case, we wouldn’t want to open it up to everybody.”*

Brian and Katy’s comments should not be interpreted to mean that all paths lead to the same destination, or that all perspectives are acceptable truths for the Christian religion, but, it does reveal that this type of possessive mindset can stifle dialogue and interactions between Christian believers and non-believers on even a very basic level of conversation that does not include theological and religious paradigms and frameworks.⁸ This type of exaggerated mindset can cause isolation to the point of denial to any and all engagement with those outside of the Christian faith. For some this isolated engagement only occurs regarding certain topics of dialogue such as, truth, deities, and even eternity, but for others the differences wedge an absolute breach on every topic and/or may even cause verbal and physical attack on the “other.”

These sentiments not only have led to some closed minds toward interfaith dialogue, but also extend to a total disconnection from all those who do engage in interfaith endeavors. Marcus revealed that some members of his church have left his congregation feeling as though the community partnership between non-Christians and Pentecostals at his church is a “blasphemous exercise or enterprise.” Those who have been “raised in a church context” (as opposed to those who are just learning about Jesus

and Christianity) have been his greatest challenge, suggesting perhaps that the longer one has been indoctrinated, the less tolerant of others they become. When “the other” steps into the picture, in conjunction with the “politicized cultural issues like abortion, gay marriage...and other kinds of issues” that often come with dialogue, there are “certainly abrasive interactions” with the “historical Christian, text, or theology.” Many in Marcus’s congregation believe that genuine dialogical interaction, and entertaining other perspectives on faith, truth, and God, diminishes, negates, neutralizes, or minimizes the truth of the gospel. Marcus revealed that his greatest challenge is getting his congregation to release these assumptions and embrace a different understanding; an understanding that in honoring and respecting one another, one can be a better witness to the truth and revelation of who Jesus Christ is.

Many of the participants in this study in one way or another alluded to these kinds of issues within the faith, and the struggle trying to engage in interfaith dialogue that includes a community of Christians. However, each made point and case to express that sending someone to hell for their choice not to believe in Jesus Christ is far from their purpose— the eternal state of a person is instead God’s task and decision to determine. Respondents revealed their purpose in interaction and dialogue is not to argue or assert faith beliefs, but to learn from one another, cooperate with one another, potentially benefit from one another, and represent their faith in truth and love. In most cases, subsequently ongoing relationships are formed.

No conversion, no compromise. Issues and generalizations around the afterlife are not the only problem Evangelical Christians face in intra and interfaith dialogue, but so is the notion of conversion or proselytizing. However, respondents revealed that their purpose in interfaith dialogue is not to convert or condemn, but share, tell, express, and live out their worldview, and deeply held beliefs and convictions like any other member of faith, or human being for that matter, without compromising their personal convictions.

Jason: "This past Friday night I was the speaker at a Jewish Synagogue. Ok, which was highly unusual for Pentecostal preachers to be invited. But I was invited to a Pentecostal setting for that purpose... And um, I understood that we have a different tradition, alright. I understand that I accept Jesus Christ as, as the Son of God, they accept him as a prophet and uh, a wonderful man but, they do not accept him as a, as the Messiah. They believe the Messiah is still coming. Uh, I say the Messiah, I say he is coming but you missed him the first time and don't miss him next the time. And uh, so we kinda laugh about it, we go back and forth, but I can understand. So I, when I go in to those kind of settings, I don't go there with the intent of trying to make them see my point of view. To make them feel, you wrong and I'm right. That's not my—when I do interfaith dialogue that's not my purpose. Once people know that that's not your purpose, the dialogue can continue. If your purpose is to come in and say, I'm right, you're wrong, and uh, that's the way it is and I'm here to convert you 'cause you're totally lost, then the walls go up and you can't have dialogue. So when I went to the Jewish Synagogue I did not go there with the intention of making everybody Pentecostal."

We can note that Jason's relationship with the Jewish Synagogue went far beyond the restraints of religious boundaries and conversion, but extended even to a level of fellowship. The purpose was not to convert or persuade, but to share and engage. While each interview participant is open to learning about and understanding other faiths, they all firmly asserted that there is still only one way to God, and that is through Jesus Christ. Jason stated that in his encounter with the Jewish Synagogue he still represented

his faith traditions in song and in the message of Christ, but by expressing it in a way that stemmed from the Jewish scripture, which “earned” him the right to be heard. He was able to bridge the gap between not only religious paradigms, but build a bridge from himself to another community of people through humility and service.

Many participants expressed that in interpreting the faith claims of others and seeing their faith as equal with another, that there remained a confident assurance that their faith in Jesus Christ is true. Brian said that throughout all his experience and learning about other faiths, there is still something “very special and holy and divine about the way of Jesus.” He believes that “his [Jesus] way is the way above all other ways,” yet it is still not in his authority to say that other ways are deficient. Katy on the hand made a clear distinction between her Christian faith and others, expressing that she is “not accepting” in the sense that she disagrees with a lot of the faith traditions she has been exposed to. However, she does respect the free will that people have to choose what they want to worship, and she yet expressed a desire to learn about others.

Sam took on another perspective that supported people and their faith that “help you move towards peace, and move towards the good of the universe.” As for his faith in Jesus Christ, it is sure in that no one can tell or take that away from him. His confidence in his faith is so strong that he stated he has no need to “bash” anyone else to validate his belief; he is clear in his “spirit” about both who he is and who he serves. Jason too agreed that Christ is his God, but takes it a bit further to announce that in equalizing all gods

actually disqualifies one from professing an allegiance to a particular god. Thus implying you must make clear who your god is in order for it truly to be your god. For example:

Jason: "I- I still believe that there's one living God, alright? And so I don't put— I'm not on an ecumenical page that says that um, this is a multiple choice and God is now on a mantle place uh, and takes his place, there's Jesus, there's Muhammad, there's Hare Krishna, there's this, there's that. I-I don't, I don't view Christ on that level, uh, at all. But I do respect people who have a different faith tradition than I do, ok."

Conversion again is not the primary goal of interfaith dialogue, and it does not mean that there is a compromise or concession of one's faith. Instead in many cases, participants expressed that listening, developing relationships, showing love and respect have been the primary goals, and in some cases a better example of Christ and Christianity than a sermon. In a few closing words to his interview, Marcus quoted the words of St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the gospel always and if necessary, use words".⁹ Being Christ-like is still a priority for the participants, but it does not keep them from interacting with others, or tarnish their example for their faith in Christ.

Brian: "Somebody gotta be servant. And I think historically it has not been the Christian. Historically I don't think the Christian has desired to serve that process. The Christian has desired to rule that process, which is kind of anti-Jesus, it's anti-Christ to rule that process because Jesus is the one who comes and he serves. He's not one that lords authority over folks. So you know I just think...I think that's the difference between the more prophetic Christianity and the Constantinian Christianity. The imperial Christianity, the imperial theology is Christianity from the top down instead of Christianity from the bottom up. And so in that you know it's seen as we must impose, we must insure this survives."

Example rather than authority. Throughout each interview, respondents revealed not only their orientation toward common Christian faith paradigms toward the

afterlife and conversion, but also what their place and responsibility is as a Christian in interfaith dialogue, and amongst the world as they endeavor to in some ways redefine the stereotypical Evangelical Christian image of intolerant, imperialistic, detriments to society.¹⁰ According to Brian, it seems as if Christianity over history has lost sight of the true Christian (or Christ-like) approach to engaging people that was presented in the Bible days. Making reference to the Constantine rule, perhaps the Roman Inquisition, and the Crusades, the desire to rule through force and pride “to make sure the faith survives,” is a mind set that has survived even until today.

Brian further gave example in his interview, specifically concerning the hypocrisy of the American nation, that has for centuries claimed Christian ties and foundations, while yet producing a system of inequality and injustice (i.e. capitalism) that oppresses not only its own, but people around the world. Perhaps addressing the conservative Christian right political image that permeates American politics, Brian asked how such prideful, forceful behavior can reveal the character or message of Jesus, when Jesus demonstrated a life of service and love for all. Brian stated:

“Our Christianity is not, is not about serving like as a life style. It’s about we’re right. And with that mentality comes, with that absolutism comes a sense of power, a sense of authority, and you know like they say absolute power corrupts absolutely you know so... (laughs).”

Still juxtaposing the Christianity of the Bible, the Christianity of the Roman Empire, and in some respect today’s political structure within the U.S. government and the Evangelical Christian religious institutions and denominations, tensions between

service and power have created a religious institution that is passive and hypocritical. Unfortunately, the notion of corrupt absolute power can be seen in many who have come in the name of Christianity, and in many other political, social, and national arenas around the globe that have deceived, cheated, and killed other human beings. The history of force and violence on others has proven to be a detrimental and ineffective way to represent the Christian faith. However, each participant in one way or another expressed the importance of being an example to their Christian faith rather than being an authority for it, in a way that “re-symbols” the Evangelical Christian image.

Marcus: “So I think it’s about understanding my role, my place in the equation. Trusting that God is going to figure out how to work all some of this stuff out. That at the end of the day all I’m asked to do is bare witness. I’m not asked to force people to believe what I believe, anymore that they can force me to believe what they believe. Truth does not need soldiers. I think truth needs proclaimers.”

As an answer in some regards to the tensions of believers and unbelievers, power and servant hood, Marcus adamantly expressed that placing matters into God’s hands is the resolution needed. He contended that God does not need people to fight others for him, defend, or provide him, no more than he (Marcus), needs his preschool aged daughter “to go to work every day and bring home some money to help pay the rent.” Every participant revealed that their job as “ambassadors” for Christ was to “plant seeds” of their faith and love, rather than be the culprit to bring forth tangible results. Conversions by force, persuasion, or coercion, again are not a part of their agenda, but planting seeds that reveal the character and testimony of Christ is. This reference to

planting seeds used by every respondent derives from the biblical New Testament scripture in 1 Corinthians 3: 5-9 that says:

“What, after all, is Apollo’s? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.” (New International Version)

The emphasis of this scripture is on the humility and servant hood of the disciple to sow the Kingdom of God, leaving God the task of producing a harvest or results. This concept reinforces the Bohm (1996) and Stewart (1982) perspectives of dialogue that the relationship or “spiritual child” is created or birthed as an independent result of the communication, without the need for force, persuasion or judgment. Though one has beliefs, assumptions, and opinions, the inclination to usurp authority in expressing oneself has been suspended in order to have fruitful dialogue. It is the gentle process of planting seeds or creating relationship that is most important to the birth or growth of transformative results.

Being evangelical. Actions, efforts, and explanations to reconstitute the image of Evangelical Christian perceptions, and understand faith paradigms is good, but the process is still incomplete without defining what it means to be evangelical. When it comes to better defining the parameters of interfaith dialogue and what it means for the evangelical to practice interfaith dialogue, the participants revealed most of their

instruction and inspiration comes from the Holy scripture. While Bible based instruction is an important factor that supports what it means to be evangelical defined earlier in the literature, out of the three participants that were asked if they considered themselves evangelical, they were either confused about its true meaning, or rejected its affiliation. One of the most common assumptions for the Evangelical Christian to face in dialogue with others is the belief that their faith does not make room for cross cultural and cross faith interactions, perhaps due to faith traditions and cultural influences. However, as the literature and respondents revealed, the issue is a little more complicated than that. One; there is the issue of being evangelical. It is not that being evangelical is a bad thing or that their faith rejects others, but because of the negative history associated with the term, and the narrow, bias definitions and images attached to it today, (especially in American politics), contemporary Protestant Christians are either making a distinct break from such perceptions, or working very hard to redefine, demonstrate, and make clear their true relationship with evangelicalism. After asking Katy if she considered herself evangelical, she responded back with the question, “what is evangelical?”

Katy: “Right! Um, I don’t know. I think evangelicals get a bad rap in the U.S. (laughs). Um, I think in many ways I probably do, you know, lean more towards the evangelical side. I mean I grew up, I-I grew up from what I understand as, you know, Church of God in Christ is an evangelical church, right? So, I guess I am evangelical. Um—yeah. I think I’m probably more open than most evangelicals though in regards to just—I think a lot of times evangelical Christians tend to be very closed minded, right? I think a lot of times evangelicals think that if I sit down and listen to what you have to say or listen to why you believe what you believe means that I’m ok with it. And it doesn’t mean that, it means that I respect you and I respect the fact that you, you know, have the right to choose just like I have the right to choose. So, um, yeah I guess I’m evangelical. (laughs)...”

Seemingly unsettled about what it means to be evangelical or her affiliation, she yet recognized the tensions between contemporary connotations, a desire to remain open, and still maintain firm foundations in biblical standards associated with her religion. From the outset, it seems as though this particular evangelical is suffering an identity crisis; conflicted with the desire to remain relevant to their communities and society, while being separate from the “world’s” standard of living. However, Katy highlighted the tensions historical African American Evangelicals faced in the early twentieth century when attempting to gain independence from the white evangelical structure, address the social issues of the African American community at that time, and remain true to their fundamental evangelical identity.

While Katy revealed that her understanding of what it means to be evangelical is a bit blurred, Marcus and Sam in some ways revealed a clear understanding of its meaning. Marcus revealed a definition that holds closely to historical accounts and perspectives of African American Evangelicals from the early twentieth century, as being a predominately white enterprise, quite separate from the needs and world view for the African American Christian. He stated that the evangelical label “does not give enough description of the African American religious experience over the last century,” that he identifies as “the wells that have given us [African Americans] hope and courage, and strength to make it through like today.” Marcus too echoed the plight of evangelicals in the early twentieth century, and their effort to recognize the needs, build the African

American presence, and establish independence from the largely white Evangelical Christianity presented at the time.

Highlighting his experience attending an evangelical college, Marcus stated that he thinks:

“...evangelicals tend to be dominated by middle class white affluent folks who have a certain level of privilege where...they are not necessarily required to work with anyone, ... can successfully move any of their agendas without the presence of African American people, particularly poor people, ... and in many ways [see African Americans as] a mission field to the evangelical community.”

Preferring to identify himself as Pentecostal, Marcus argued to nuance the evangelical definition a bit more to “take more power” to describe his Christian affiliation. The evangelical definition and label in many ways can be seen as a stripping of power, due to the failure to recognize African Americans as counterparts in mainstream White evangelicalism, rather than poor, underclass, subordinates in need of a Savior. This tension and realization for Marcus, led him to search for a more accurate identification. Sam on the other hand negated the evangelical label because of the political connotations in today’s society, but also agreed with the label due to the evangelical nature of biblical scripture in the New Testament, and the “Great Commission’s” charge to share the gospel across the world. However, overall these three respondent’s view of the evangelical label was not favorable, expressing a disconnection in many ways to its connotations.

Two; on top of understanding the respondents definition of evangelicalism, and what it means for the Evangelical Christian to participate in interfaith dialogue, there is the question of actually having a faith that is inclusive of others. Over the course of the interviews, respondents referred frequently to what Jesus Christ said in biblical scriptures about entertaining and speaking to others outside of the faith. While each participant used a different passage from the scripture to support their point, most ended by bringing out the point that Christ calls the Christian to love people regardless of who they are. Respondents found an open space for others in their faith, which provided a building block to form relationships and peaceful interactions.

Jason: “And one of the key reasons is, um, because the Lord instructs us uh, to minister to the stranger that’s within our gate. And he said and as much as I love the stranger, and I have provided food and raiment for the stranger, you love the stranger as well. And I don’t believe that um, you can be totally committed to Christ if you’re not totally committed to the values and ideals that Christ has set forward. And one of those is to love people regardless of who they are.”

Jason presented a perspective that essentially says that to indiscriminately love others, is the fundamental basis of commitment to Christ. This kind of love that surpasses differences and reaches out to strangers can only be accomplished by security in faith. Each participant in one way or another made clear that a solid understanding and assurance of one’s faith in Christ allows them to love others. All respondents reported that it is not a threat for them to hear someone else’s point of view, because they are sure about what they believe. Sam explained that one must find a place where God speaks “peace to your soul” about what you believe. And furthermore, Sam stated if one is not willing to be challenged to think about what you believe, you are basically telling others

“don’t talk to me” and “don’t touch me with anything else.” True dialogue requires a connection of people across the mind and heart that someone unwilling to be challenged perhaps would avoid completely.

Necessary Credentials

The nuances of Evangelical Christian perspectives, and the embrace of the spirit of dialogue through openness, listening, and learning all provide understandings about evangelical orientations toward the limits, execution, and commitment to faith, dialogue and interfaith dialogue. However, definitions of “successful dialogue” for our interfaith participants are comparable to definitions and observations in interfaith literature. First, exhibiting a more practical side to participating in interfaith dialogue, research participants made clear that to successfully participate in interfaith dialogue one must be prepared on a spiritual, intellectual, and faith community level. In interfaith dialogue scholarship, one source of spiritual preparation comes in the form of solid understandings in faith foundations and individual beliefs. Jaco Cilliers in “Building Bridges for Interfaith Dialogue” stated, “It is primarily through a process in which groups and individuals first seek a deep understanding of their own religious traditions and then share their religious convictions and traditions with others that meaningful dialogue can be fostered” (as cited in Smock, 2002, pg. 48). A grounding in one’s own faith traditions not only provides an avenue to explain more clearly what one believes, but also an understanding of what it means to have faith. Understanding what it means to have faith allows a person of faith to be able to appreciate what it means to believe in something deeply, what it means to possess religious convictions like other people of faith they

come in to contact with. This level of connection allows for what research participant Marcus called a great starting place for relationship, or what Jason called an avenue for peace in cities because most people believe in God, but are just confused about what his role is. Precisely here is where interfaith dialogue emerges to help bridge the gap and clear up misunderstandings. As mentioned earlier by respondent Sam, groundings in personal faith, or being “clear in your spirit” about beliefs gave him the necessary credentials to respect other’s faith, and yet be secure in his own.

In addition to individual spiritual/faith preparations, familiarity and education with religious texts and sources of those whom one is in dialogue with can serve to be very beneficial in engaging in dialogue as well. Interfaith dialogue scholar Jane Smith (2007) affirms that a balance between one’s own faith knowledge and others, can actually “...eliminate further frustrations, perplexities, and even anger on certain issues within dialogue” (pg. 92), as well as foster a level of mutual appreciation and respect. Four out of five participants credited much of their tolerance and understanding of others to their level of education and study in religious texts, time spent in urban or domestic community organizing, and even growing up in a diverse environments such as the Bay Area; these environments being sort of a training ground for exposure to various cultures and religious practices. These credentials gave the necessary grounding and foundation to better understand and engage with those in which they dialogue with.

The role of individual, spiritual, and intellectual responsibility in dialogue is a necessary component for preparation, however questions arise about the role religious institutions and communities, or “the church,” play in influencing members to think about

interfaith interactions. According to three participants in the study that are pastors, there seemed to be a disconnection between pro-interfaith leaders and their congregations when it comes to interfaith topics. Not only is it rejected by some members of the congregation, like previously mentioned by Marcus, but for some it is not a priority. Sam explained that in his Berkeley congregation, beside maybe seven or eight people (who are themselves theological students or participants in interfaith organizations), congregational members are more worried about kids shooting each other on the street, or the sons, daughters and grandchildren that are in jail, or “caught up in the game.” This takes priority over worrying about whether the different faiths of the community find peace. Peace in their own communities and families supersedes the need for global peace, in that their world *is* their community. Beside the occasional holiday event or big community service project, interfaith dialogue is just not something the majority of his members sought out.

However, this kind of apathy toward interfaith dialogue may not entirely be the fault of congregations, but of the church leaders as well. In conjunction with Sam, Jason agreed that the mentality, priority, and preparation of the church leader or pastor have a tremendous impact on the involvement of the congregation. Jason argued that many churches around America are “single cell” churches, meaning there is only one thing done in the church at a time. However, the problem arises when churches “solidify” and “become sedentary” in terms of ministry and the one thing done in ministry is centered on them and no one else. With this type of mentality, pastors do not push dialogue or even interaction with others, resulting in a “dangerous” climate in the church that Jason

said does not leave much room for anyone trying to come in if they do not “look like I look” and “act like we act. This kind of preparation and/or mentality is also a part of the reason two research participants, Katy and Brian who are not church pastors, became involved in interfaith dialogue. Dissatisfied with the lack of answers to questions about what was being done in their church (not with Christianity itself), they sought out a deeper involvement with their communities.

Defining Success

When the necessary credentials and preparations of the individual and religious institution can be a challenging feat, success is still possible. To summarize most interfaith literature, the primary purpose of interfaith dialogue is to produce mutual trust, respect, understanding, and benefit. However, the measure of success is defined differently by each participant. Success for the participants can be defined in the context of transformation, relationship, and hope for the future. Research respondents revealed that even though there are challenges, success is still relatively attainable.

Transformation was described in the research in both a personal sense, and in the sense of the community or people one is having dialogue with. Jason described how after a young boy was shot down Easter Sunday inside a church in Richmond, CA, the community of Protestant Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and others in the community rallied together to lower the violence in the city.

Jason: *“The city was in chaos. You know, drove to Richmond and called all of the denominational leaders together from every denomination and said this cannot go on... Uh, you can’t do that with a denomination; not with a single denomination. You have to really work together and appreciate what you have in common and hopefully minimize the things that you, that are different and there are differences. But uh, you can’t allow that to divide you when you’ve gotta a goal in mind.”*

Success emerged when people came together, transcended differences, and helped those who were in need; Jason’s case and point brought a community together to rally against violence. Each respondent told inspiring stories about how community churches were saved from closing, the homeless were served, and communities were cleaned up, transforming the day to day realities people are living every day. This kind of transformative cooperative action affected not only the communities as a whole, but each individual involved. Respondents revealed how the challenges of faith traditions and theological “absolutes” began to be refocused to emphasize principles of justice, dignity for humanity, fairness for all, and nonviolence. The practice of these principles has grounded many respondents even further in their faith traditions, allowing others to teach them new things, challenge them, and create a desire to search deeper into why they believe what they believe.

Success can also be defined in terms of the relationships that are formed as a result of interfaith interactions. Jason said that one of the biggest challenges in building relationships is the question of motive; “What’s in it for you?” and “Are you using me to make yourself look big?” However, Jason quoted that his time and opportunity have revealed his motive is to build relationships constantly for believers and non-believers, to

produce fruitful communities and prosperous people, and redefine the image of Christianity. Sam stated that he has formed relationships that probably would not have been formed if not for interfaith interactions. Marcus too said that at the heart of success are relationships; people you can call good friends and colleagues in providing ministry to the people of the community. He stated that when relationships are formed, barriers of difference are trumped by the realization that human beings are citizens of the created universe that is entrusted to its people. However, it must be noted that success in this area does not always mean that there is an agreement or accomplishment of every goal set out. Nevertheless, these deep investments in relationship in Marcus's words "... carry us over those kinds of very tenuous spaces without ever having to agree."

Lastly, success can be defined as an outlook for future justice, peace, and understanding. Sam strongly argued that while fellowship and relationship building is important, there must be some kind of bend toward justice somewhere. He stated that to enact justice for the underrepresented, misunderstood, marginalized, and suffering will be a successful move for any dialogue, leading to the confronting of power systems to produce cultural and systematic change. Each faith tradition and their respective members deal with the issues of the world in various ways. Combined dialogues with each will offer an alternative perspective to help address the issues of global resources, ethics and values, and finances. Perhaps then can increasing levels of justice be accomplished globally.

However, true justice can only come from a place of understanding and peace between people and their differences as well. Brian stated that most faiths are trying to reach “a certain measure of egalitarianism, a certain measure of peace on earth, a certain measure of justice, fairness in the world, a certain measure of social ethics and love.” This kind of understanding and perspective allows Brian to see the world not only from a theological perspective, but with a concern to understand how these very same goals inform how people live around the world. Many times when people’s lives, wellbeing, peace, justice, and beliefs are suffering, being denied, or threatened, people forget the worth and right of someone else’s wellbeing. Understanding why someone believes what they believe, and live the way they live, helped Brian produce a level of empathy and tolerance that can restrain uncertainty and fear, hate, and even violence. In the words of Sam, this type of empathetic response must not only affect the interfaith participants of today, but “transmit generationally.” Global and local successes in interfaith dialogue cannot assume the upcoming generation will be able to see and know what a world of peace building, understanding, and cooperative actions look like. But success must be seen and enacted today, and a deliberate attempt to translate the message for the future must be strategic. Success at its heart is the belief and hope that something and someone can be changed through transformative relationships and actions, for the advancement of present and future generations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The struggle for a one world ethic as proposed by Hans Kung (1991) is much more complex than a dialogue between some of the dominant religions of the world. While this small sample for this research is specific to the Evangelical Christian religion, the African American race, mixed between leadership and laity, dominantly male, and only a minute fraction of the population from Berkeley to Hayward, CA, these respondents do shed fairly significant light in the exploration of interfaith dialogue from an African American Evangelical Christian perspective.

Here is what this research does show in response to the four inquiries presented throughout this study. One; it is possible for these African American Evangelical Christians who have relatively stable beliefs to embrace the “spirit of dialogue,” and engage with others of a different faith. Respect, understanding, and an open posture to listen and learn about others involve no necessary compromise, break down, or disposal of their belief, even if it meant disagreement. However, the participants did experience noteworthy tensions and limitations when it came to the retention, commitment, and execution of integrity for Evangelical Christian beliefs and traditions. As a response to inquiry two of this research, while interfaith dialogue endeavors to promote mutual understanding, respect, trust, and finally benefit, many of the respondents in this research stopped at mutual understanding and respect. To understand the faith of others, and respect their faith, free will, and choices is a wonderful avenue to mutually share tenants of faith, and be a good example of loving one’s neighbor through cooperative actions for

those in need in surrounding communities. These very practical aspects of dialogue are certainly needed and become relatively beneficial to all impacted.

However, when it comes to any thing beyond this, mutual trust and benefitting from that trust, cognitive dissonance begins to emerge. To trust includes an assured reliance on not only the character, ability, and strength of someone or something, but also assurance of its truth (Merriam-Webster's, 1993). The truth of another one's character is not in question, but the truth of one's faith compared to others seems to be the dividing line between respondents and their interfaith counterparts. Respondents made sure that they stated that Jesus Christ was the "only" way, and a compromise of that was not up to interpretation. The retention and commitment of this belief requires these Evangelicals to often agree to disagree regarding equality in faith beliefs, and in trust that another faith or "way", can lead to God. However, only one respondent, Brian, talked about the uncomfortable nature of trying to hold Jesus as "the way," and not negating that another way (just because he does not know that way) will get to the same destination, or is deficient in some way. However, this dissonance caused him to question many of the central claims of his Christian beliefs. One issue he faced was the idea that all unbelievers, even if a good and honorable life was lived through another faith, would die and go to hell because they did not accept Jesus Christ as God and Savior of the world. Brian stated that those kinds of "quick answers" to eternal resting places never settled very well with him. He echoed from earlier in his interview that he is satisfied with his personal Christian faith helping other Muslims, Buddhists and Jewish brothers to be the best they can be in their own faith, rather than using his Christian example to help lead

them to becoming a Christian. This kind of dissonance between personal faith interpretations and fundamental faith tenants was not displayed in any other respondent at this level. This type of tension and conflict comes with crossing the line from accepting differences, to accepting the possible veracity of other beliefs; a line in which the remainder of the respondents were not open to blurring or crossing.

This kind of pluralism and or shared spirituality between different faiths can be interpreted as an emergence into mutual trust that Hans Kung (1991) prescribes for a global ethic. Kung (1991) describes the methodology for a global ethic to include a change in moralization from a self righteous way to a self-critical way. In other words, instead of condemning people with judgment (as in you are condemned because you are not a believer of my faith), consider yourself as the same, capable of the same faults and successes; inevitably this ethic must tolerate different religions, confessions, philosophies, and ideologies (Kung 1991).

This willingness to be changed in such a dramatic way may seem like an unreasonable expectation for most of the respondents in this research, but it does not mean that change has not taken place for them. To say or imply that true change in interfaith dialogue occurs only when one completely accepts, approves, and or agrees with the faith and belief of another, or equally celebrates, appreciates, and tolerates another's faith as one's own, may be a reality that is not feasible for these Evangelical Christian. However change, while maybe only in the form of an open-minded perspective to listening and learning with others, willingness to serve the process of momentarily

suspending opinions and assumptions to exercise empathy, or exemplifying the love and compassion towards neighbor their Christian faith calls for, is still change.

This kind of willingness to open up, learn, engage and understand someone else, to discover a place in their faith that loves others, is in many ways a change in terms of a redefinition in the intolerant and hostile image of Evangelical Christians, that history, politics, and even respective individuals and groups have for so long blemished, maimed, and destroyed through violence, intolerance, and hate. It is also in many ways a reaffirmation and return to many principles and teachings found in the Bible that hinge upon loving God and neighbor. While some of these research participants may engage and stop at mutual respect, while others struggle with dissonance, it must be acknowledged that something is stirring in the lives and belief systems of these Evangelical Christians that is moving them to at least look at their world and faith through a new lens. A lens that can no longer ignore the needs, the mind, the life of the stranger; a lens that compels a clear understanding, explanation, and examination of one's own faith and others; and a lens that is not afraid to see the implications of faith, dialogue, and humanity on the canvas of their communities.

The limitation to mutual respect and understanding, along with their explanations of what success is in interfaith dialogue presented by these African American Evangelical Christians, also demonstrates possible orientations these Evangelical Christians have toward interfaith dialogue— answers to inquiries three and four of this research. Success in the research is defined first through the transformation of communities through

cooperative actions, and in the self toward a deeper understanding of personal faith. Success is then seen through the relationships formed in communities and individuals, that trump and/or transport over the gaping differences in faith, even though there may be disagreement in beliefs. Lastly, success means hope for future justice, peace, and understanding for future generations.

It is my belief that these definitions of success along with what has been established in the limitations of these Evangelicals, reveal that interfaith dialogue from an African American Evangelical Christian perspective is centered on people, the respect of humanity, and practical plans and endeavors that can be put into action for communities everywhere; however, that is all it is. Respondents constantly contended that instead of an argument over beliefs, and on what make each person different in faith, humanity is what puts all people in common and rights as a human should be the focus. Supporting the rights as humans from a global perspective puts an emphasis on programs to end poverty and famine, health care and aid for the weak and infirm, justice for the disenfranchised and underrepresented, and love for those faint in heart and hope. To help others is where people can come together. However, breakdown in the structure for these African American Evangelical Christians comes when trying to make spiritual matters common. Dialogue becomes difficult in this area because, where the Evangelical Christian may be informed by their belief to evangelize in word, deed, or example the singularity of Jesus Christ, for example, because spiritual matters and experience vary drastically from those totally engrossed in transcendent faith, to those totally opposed or devoid to the idea of the supernatural all together, or those who are polytheistic, and those who regard Jesus

Christ as simply a prophet, finding common ground in spiritual matters becomes instead a dividing force. To remain focused on the help, support, justice, and love of all humanity is within the acceptable bounds of service and relationship for these Evangelical Christians. Anything beyond that, for example pluralism, coexisting in the sense of making all gods equal, adopting and mixing multiple faith interpretations and doctrines, and approving all alternative lifestyles is not a factor.

However, while these conclusions are telling, there are of course other influences and questions that come up when considering understanding interfaith dialogue from an African American Evangelical Christian perspective. For instance, considering how being African American affects these interpretations. While these respondents are indeed African American, the influence of race and African American Evangelical history on the respondents is inconclusive. Some of the respondents may indeed be influenced by historical African American Evangelical traditions unknowingly, and did not significantly articulate the influence in the research interviews. It could be that the respondent's drive toward social justice, community organizing, primary support for the African American community, and gaining theological education could be the result of historical African American churches, doctrines, and motivations toward gaining independence and being heard amongst their white counterparts, is passed down through generations, gradually engrained into the fabric and understandings of what they know as Evangelical Christian faith. It may also be that the struggle of the African American Evangelical for justice and community organizing, and the need to take power in distinctly identifying themselves both inside Evangelicalism and outside in the world, is an indicator that racism and

prejudice is a persistent problem for African American Evangelical Christians. A careful examination of its power, practice, and presence in their faith origins, history, and propagation in America is much needed.

It also important to note how African American Evangelical denominations effect levels of openness, and retention of biblical beliefs and denominational traditions, to be more biblically centered and committed to theologically based social boundaries and practices. Though no evidence is specifically seen in interviews, as a member of the Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal tradition shared by four of the research respondents, I can attest that an emphasis on being “holy”, and living a separated life based on biblical scriptures like, “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (John 17:16, King James Version), or “Be ye not unequally yoked together with the unbelievers...” (2 Corinthians 6:14, King James Version), is significant, and may even be emphasized more than some other African American Evangelical Christian denominations. These biblical principles necessitate many Pentecostal traditions to live distinctly separate from secular lifestyles, ideas, practices, motivations, and company, and may be the cause many research participants found it troublesome to completely accept and approve the idea of equating all religious beliefs, finding mutual trust in others and their beliefs, and retaining limitations in their interfaith interactions and dialogue—perhaps as a way to remain committed to the execution of their evangelical and denominational Christian beliefs. Nonetheless, the strict nature of their denominational practices within the Evangelical Christian faith, may have also added another dynamic in

interpreting and practicing interfaith dialogue, which may be at odds with other Evangelical Christians, and even other African American Evangelical Christians.

While this research is simply exploratory, further research is required for a richer, more in depth critical analysis of this particular faith group. Here are some things to consider: one; to every individual point of view in dialogue, there is also the point of view of the other. It would be beneficial to interview or present this research to the individuals who have engaged in interfaith dialogue with the research respondents. This would allow us to analyze how comfortable others are with evangelical definitions of faith and dialogue, and a way to measure the receptivity, openness, and willingness to engage in genuine dialogue the participants in this research declared, compared to the opinions, perceptions, and definitions of their interfaith dialogue partners.

Two; intensive research around race and gender and how they influence the interfaith dialogue discussion would add depth to the nuances of understanding evangelical perspectives. Also, in the communities of the respondents, what do other black Christians in laity and in leadership feel about the interfaith dialogue movement? This may inform the costs, benefits, struggles and tensions going on in the African American Evangelical Christian community as a whole concerning interfaith dialogue, and perhaps inform how it is similar and different from perspectives, issues, and concerns of Evangelical Christians from other races in the community and United States.

Third; further research is needed to explore how this study can inform others for facilitating or practicing interfaith dialogue with evangelical Christians. What does a

blurring or crossing of acceptance lines look like or imply? How does Evangelical Christian intra-faith dialogue inform inter-faith dialogue? How do respective cultural norms affect understandings and practice? What other factors influence the perspectives, beliefs, openness, and execution of interfaith dialogue? Is mutual understanding and respect on behalf of the Evangelical Christian enough to have peace among religions? Is peace actually attainable with personal and institutional theological limitations? All of these questions can make for richer understandings in interfaith dialogue for the Evangelical Christian and interfaith dialogue at large.

Interfaith dialogue has primarily included Christians in the past, but the inclusion of what has been considered the most intolerant sect has proven to be a more complex endeavor. I hope by exploring the experiences of a few Evangelical Christians will deepen understandings about what interfaith dialogue is like from this faith perspective, and can offer insight on what it takes to participate in genuinely open dialogue. However, I must end in a word to the Evangelical Christians of all races and creeds across the world. The comments that the interfaith dialogue organizer made to me in May 2010 did not come from oblivion, but had deep implications that transformed me at the core. Unfortunately, many misconceptions derive not because people do not know what Christians believe, but many times Christians do not live what they profess to believe. In a letter to Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy (1910) expresses this same concern for the Christian faith as well.

“The difference between the Christian and all other nations is only this: that in Christianity the law of love had been more clearly and definitely given than in any other religion, and that its adherents solemnly recognized it. Yet despite this they deemed the use of force to be permissible, and based their lives on violence-so that the life of the Christian nations presents greater contradiction between what they believe and the principle on which their lives are built...” (personal communication, September 7, 1910)

How can a Muslim whose country is bombed by a professed Christian nation not believe that Christianity involves violence and hate? While their point of view cannot be dismissed, Tony Compolo “[thinks] that the way we are going to have peace and brotherhood is if you go to the core of what you believe, and I go to the core of what I believe. And when we get to the core and live it with true love and true peace, there will be a coming together in spite of our differences” (as cited in Claiborne, 2005, pg. 64). If the Christian message is one of redemption through love (John 3:16), there needs to be an effort from all to resemble it. Those Evangelical Christians involved in interfaith dialogue are pioneers in translating the faith that is based in love, into believers who act in love and compassion for the world we all share. Through the shared activities and dialogue between faiths around the world, Christians can practically live out their faith. This human service is not a sell-out, but can serve as a practical and beneficial way to both reinvent a distorted worldview and bring communities back together.

Notes

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

¹ Hans Kung (1991) provides two meanings of the “non-believer” in terms of those who have chosen to be free from religion or who have no religion (p. 38). In the context of this paper I would also like to extend an interpretation for this understanding of the non-believer to those who are “grounded in human reason alone without any principles of religious belief” (p. 38), and to those who believe in principles of another religious body outside of Christianity.

² Qualifies “Christianity” to include over 37 different groups.

³ Chinese folk religion includes Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as the traditional non-scriptural/local practices and beliefs.

Chapter 2: Methodology

⁴ According to the 2010 U.S Census, Oakland has a population of 390,724 with 28% black/African American; Hayward with a population of 144,186 with 11.9% black; and Berkeley with a population of 112,580 with 10% black. According to the Association of Religious Data Archives 2009 populations in the Oakland, Hayward, and Berkeley populations have 30-40% evangelical protestant churches.

⁵ Information found on the organization websites respectively. See “About BOCA” (2012) and “Unlocking the Power of People”(COR) in references.

Chapter 4: Analysis

⁶ The capitalization of the pronoun “He” is often used in biblical texts to denote God, or Jesus.

⁷ Holy Bible John 14:6 (KJV).

⁸ For example, personal interaction, fellowship, and dialogue in the everyday social spaces like the work place, grocery store, community, or neighborhood etc. does not exist with the “non-believer”, but is limited only to engagement with other Christian believers.

⁹ A word spoken after the official recorded interview referencing St. Francis of Assisi. See Bumpus & Moranville (2005, p. 88).

¹⁰ In a review by Nicholas Price (2005) of the article “The Wrath of the Lamb” by Lewis Laphamin (2005), Price (2005) states that Laphamin “... aggressively condemns the Christian right as one of the most detrimental groups in modern American discourse, and pose an immanent threat to the intellectual and political advancement of society” (p.406). Though Laphamin is attacking perhaps a more political orientation of Christianity, his reactions nonetheless demonstrate common conceptions about the Evangelical Faith.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, EAST BAY
25800 Carlos Bee Boulevard, Hayward, California 94542-3008

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
Telephone: (510) 885-4212 Fax: (510) 885-4618

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD NOTICE OF ACTION

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approval by:
<input type="checkbox"/> Full Board Review
<input type="checkbox"/> Expedited Review
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Administrative Review | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Initial Review
<input type="checkbox"/> Continuation Review
<input type="checkbox"/> Modification Review
<input type="checkbox"/> Adverse Reaction |
|--|---|

Exemption category:
(45 CFR 46.101(b).2)

Project title: Interfaith Dialogue for the Evangelical Christian

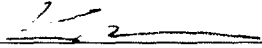
Principal Investigator: Brittney Williams

Date of Action: 6-23-2011

Expiration Date: 6-23-2012

Protocol Number: CSUEB-IRB-2011-052-S

The above Action applies only to the protocol submitted. Any changes in the content or procedures of this research must be submitted to the Institutional Review Board for review and approval.

Signature  Date 6-23-11

Name: Kevin Brown, Ph.D.
Title: Chair, Institutional Review Board
Address: California State University, East Bay
Hayward, California 94542-3008

Telephone: (510) 885-4212
FAX: (510) 885-4618
E-Mail: kevin.brown@csueastbay.edu

Please see attached comments
cc: Gale Young, Faculty Advisor
Department of Communication

Brittney Williams- IRB Title change

2 messages

Brittney Williams <brittney.williams@csueastbay.edu>
To: orsp@csueastbay.edu

Tue, May 7, 2013 at 2:22 PM

To Whom it may concern,

My Name is Brittney Williams, Net ID ta9735 and I obtained an IRB approval in June 2011. I would like to note only a change to my thesis title from Interfaith Dialogue for the Evangelical Christian, to Interfaith Dialogue from an African American Evangelical Christian Perspective. No other changes were made to the research procedures or participants.

Thank you,
Brittney Williams

Anne Wing <anne.wing@csueastbay.edu>
To: brittney.williams@csueastbay.edu

Tue, May 7, 2013 at 3:34 PM

Brittney,

Thank you for letting the IRB know of the title change for your research project. I will add a note to your file.

Best regards,
Anne

Anne Wing, ORSP
Office Manager
IRB & IACUC Coordinator
CSU East Bay
LI2310
510-885-4212
anne.wing@csueastbay.edu

From: -- ORSP [<mailto:orsp@csueastbay.edu>]
Sent: Tuesday, May 07, 2013 2:25 PM
To: Anne Wing
Subject: Fwd: Brittney Williams- IRB Title change
[Quoted text hidden]

Appendix B: Recruitment Script

Email Script

Hello, my name is Brittney Williams. I am a graduate student at CSUEB in the Communication Department. I am conducting research on Evangelical Christians in interfaith dialogue, and I am inviting you to participate because you are involved in interfaith dialogue.

Participation in this research includes an interview about your involvement and experience in interfaith dialogue, which will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at bwilliams39@horizon.csueastbay.edu.

Thank you,

Britney Williams

Graduate Student CSUEB

Verbal Script

Hello, my name is Brittney Williams and I am a graduate student at CSUEB conducting a research study on Evangelical Christians in interfaith dialogue. I am interviewing people about their involvement and experience in interfaith dialogue as part of this study.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour of your time. Would you like to participate in the interview?

- If “No”, “Thank you for your time. Goodbye.
- If “Yes”, “What time will be convenient for you to conduct the interview?” May I have an email address to confirm your interview time?
 - Follow up: I will be contacting you via email to confirm our interview time, and sending you a consent form to sign for research. Thank you for your time. Goodbye.

Appendix C: Informed Consent

California State University East Bay Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study Interfaith Dialogue for the Evangelical Christian

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The purpose of this research study is to examine the lived experience of Evangelical Christians involved in interfaith dialogue and how their experience can inform us in producing a guide to understanding and participating in interfaith dialogue. The researcher, Brittney Williams is a graduate student and teacher associate at California State University East Bay conducting research for a master's degree in Communication. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a participant in interfaith dialogue.

A. PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will be interviewed for approximately forty-five minutes to one hour about your involvement and experience with interfaith dialogue.
- The interview will be audio-taped to ensure accuracy in reporting your statements.
- The interview will take place at a time and location convenient for you.
- Total time commitment will be no more than one hour.

B. RISKS

There is a risk of the loss of privacy. Names and identities will be used in the research. However, only the researcher will have access to the research data and identifying information. There is also a risk of emotional and/or psychological discomfort due to the nature of the questions asked; however, the participant can answer only those questions he/she chooses to answer, strike any information off of the record that will not be used in any published reports of the research, and/or can stop participation in the research at any time.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

The research data will be kept in a secure location, and only the researcher will have access to the data. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information, audio tape transcriptions, and data will be kept in password secured computer files and folders, only the researcher has access to.

E. DIRECT BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefits to the participant, as this is informative study.

F. COSTS

There will be no cost to you for participating in this research.

G. COMPENSATION

There will be no compensation for participating in this research, except my sincere gratitude.

H. QUESTIONS

If you have any further questions about the study, you may contact the researcher by email at bwilliams39@horizon.csueastbay.edu, or by phone at (650) 669-3015.

Questions about your rights as a study participant, or comments or complaints about the study, may also be addressed to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (510) 885-4212.

J. CONSENT

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. You are free to decline to participate in this research study, or to withdraw your participation at any point, without penalty. Your decision whether or not to participate in this research study will have no influence on your present or future status at California State University East Bay.

Signature _____
Research Participant

Date: _____

Signature _____
Researcher

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Please describe your religious affiliation.
2. What does interfaith dialogue mean to you?
3. When did you learn about interfaith dialogue?
4. How would you describe your level of participation in interfaith dialogue thus far?
5. What were the different faiths represented in the interfaith dialogue?
6. How many interfaith dialogues have you had so far?
7. How would you define a successful and/or fruitful interfaith dialogue?
8. How many were successful and/or fruitful? In what ways?
9. Why are you involved in interfaith dialogue?
10. What do you hope to accomplish through interfaith dialogue?
11. Describe what you have learned and/or accomplished thus far in interfaith dialogue.
12. What kinds of challenges have you encountered thus far in interfaith dialogue?
13. How does your faith interpret the faith claims of others?
14. On a scale from 1-5, how open would you consider yourself to be in your willingness to understand and see other faiths as equals?