

INTERFAITH PHOTOVOICE

Roman R. Williams, PhD | roman.williams@calvin.edu

Introduction

If you are like most Americans—indeed, most people globally—you carry a mobile phone with you wherever you go. In fact, you may be reading this report on your smartphone. It is also likely that you frequently use your cell phone to snap and share photographs. People use these images to document their lives and communicate with others. I recently texted my teenage daughter to ask what she was doing and she replied, not with words, but with a photograph. After all, a photograph is worth a thousand words, right? Since photos are able to communicate meanings, we could learn a lot about each other by scrolling through photographs. What would your photos reveal about your everyday life?



Participants discussing photos about faith in everyday life (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Sept 2018).

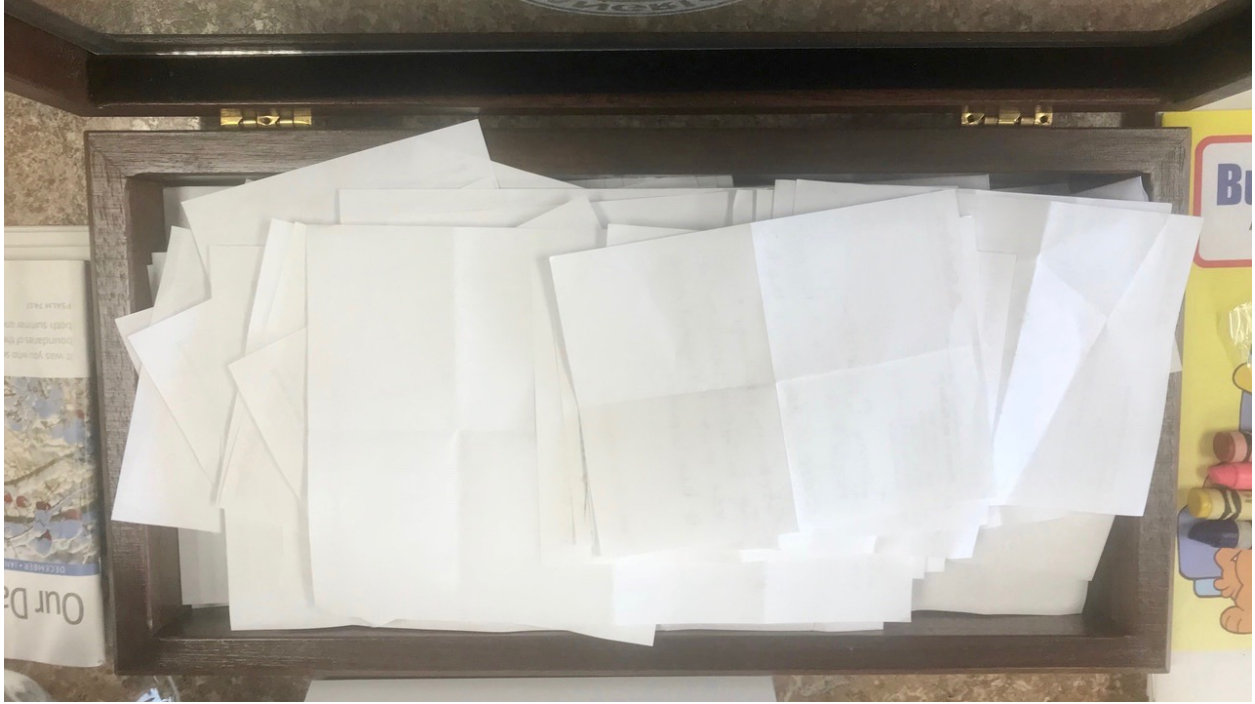
Photovoice: A New Approach to Interfaith Dialogue

The idea that photos convey narratives is the starting point for an innovative approach to interfaith dialogue called photovoice. We bring together groups of people from different religious backgrounds to explore faith in everyday life through amateur photography and small group conversations. Participants commit to five meetings that unfold over the course of several weeks and use their own photographs to have conversations about faith. In each meeting, participants use their photographs to discuss faith in everyday life, including the challenges they face and the changes they would like to see in their community. At the end of a project, participants work together to select photographs for a public exhibition. And in this way, they extend their conversations and engage the broader community with their experiences, insights, and concerns.



Photographs add rich layers of description to our conversations (Grand Rapids, Michigan; September 2018).

As a facilitator, I've watched people from different faith backgrounds learn a great deal from one another, form new friendships, and develop empathy. Last fall, I watched this happen with a group of two dozen Muslims and Christians who met at the At-Tawheed Islamic Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. One example of this is a conversation in which Christians were enthralled by a Muslim's photos showing the challenge of fitting daily prayer into their life at work. As the conversation unfolded, he described the ways coworkers help him to create space to pray. He also described the challenges of being faithful in a culture that is not structured around Muslim prayer times. This prompted a Christian woman to share a photo of a box of prayer requests that sits on the conference table at her work, a private business that is not officially affiliated with Christianity, but owned by a Christian. She described how people in her office pray for their clients. As they exchanged descriptions of their respective prayer practices, visual narratives about Muslims and Christians being faithful in prayer at work garnered a new appreciation and deepened connections. The experiences were unfamiliar until we discussed them. As far as I know, Muslims don't have prayer request boxes (nor do very many Christians or workplaces for that matter). Likewise, most Christians are unfamiliar with what is involved in daily Muslim prayers and how challenging it can be to be faithful. By combining verbal descriptions with photographs, these unfamiliar worlds became more easily understood. And Muslims and Christians built a deeper appreciation for a practice (prayer) that they share in common, even if their practices are different.



A box full of clients' prayer requests (Grand Rapids, Michigan; October, 2018).



Participants selecting photographs for our exhibition in Richmond, Virginia (March 2018).

Photovoice is known as a participatory action research method, which is a fancy way of saying that the goal of photovoice is not entirely academic. In fact, the first order of business is to build understanding by empowering people with a process to explore experiences, needs, and concerns in their community. This is where photovoice gets its name: using *photos* to give *voice* to people's narratives in a way that generates insights that impact communities. Where many approaches to interfaith dialogue are top-down, photovoice provides a bottom-up, grassroots approach to interfaith understanding. In an era when people of faith carry cameras wherever they go (in the form of a smartphone), photography represents a new opportunity for interfaith dialogue.

The Interfaith Photovoice Initiative

The Interfaith Photovoice Initiative is an effort to pursue the goals of understanding, empowerment, and change with people of faith. Our initiative is international and underway in four locations in North America: Richmond, Virginia; Grand Rapids, Michigan; New York City; Fredericton, New Brunswick (Canada). The project is based at Calvin College, funded by the Louisville Institute, and conducted in partnership with The Kaufman Institute (Grand Rapids, Michigan).

The project team comprises two sociologists, two Christian ministers, and an imam. Ammar Amonette is a Muslim theologian and a graduate of the Graduate Institute for Imams-Makkah and of Umm al Qura University (Saudi Arabia). He serves as imam of the Islamic Center of Virginia, USA. Michael S. Bos, D.Min., is a pastor, author, and interfaith proponent. He currently serves as senior minister of Marble Church in New York City. Catherine Holtmann, Ph.D., directs the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research and is associate professor of sociology at the University of New Brunswick. William L. Sachs, Ph.D., is an Episcopal priest, author, and interfaith advocate based in Richmond, Virginia. Roman R. Williams, Ph.D., is a visual sociologist who studies religion in everyday life. He is assistant professor of sociology at Calvin College and directs the Interfaith Photovoice Initiative.

World Interfaith Harmony Week Events

In celebration of the 2019 World Interfaith Harmony Week, we held three events to engage the wider public with the materials and findings of our projects in Grand Rapids, Fredericton, and New York City. In Grand Rapids, two dozen Christians and Muslims who were part of our fall 2018 photovoice project curated an exhibition comprising 35 photographs, which were on display February 1-28. The Grand Rapids exhibition was officially opened by Roman R. Williams on February 4 with an opening night reception. During the reception, Prof. Williams provided an overview of the project and exhibition, and one Muslim and one Christian participant shared reflections about their experiences. It was an intimate event with approximately twenty people; turnout was lower than anticipated due to inclement weather. The exhibition was hosted at First United Methodist Church and was part of their annual Celebration of the Arts, which draws hundreds of visitors during the month of February. Our exhibition was viewed by approximately 500 people who visited the exhibit.



Visitors peruse the photovoice exhibition in Grand Rapids (February 4, 2019).

In Fredericton, we organized a photovoice exhibition at the Fredericton Public Library, which featured 25 photos created by Christian and Muslim students and young adults from the University of New Brunswick (UNB) who participated in our fall 2018 photovoice project. The exhibition was officially opened on Thursday, February 7, by Catherine Holtmann, the facilitator of the Fredericton photovoice project. Charlene DeMerchant offered comments on the exhibition from her perspective as a leader in the English language program at Capital Community Church. Aladdin Suliman, a Muslim leader at the UNB prayer room, also spoke, emphasizing the importance of interfaith dialogue and harmony for all Muslims. The Fredericton Public Library hosted the Interfaith Photovoice exhibition, which was on display February 1-28, 2019. Many library visitors viewed the photos and library staff indicated that all comments about the exhibition were enthusiastic.

In New York City, we hosted an event that gave two dozen people a taste of interfaith photovoice on February 10 at Marble Collegiate Church, facilitated by Roman Williams and Michael Bos. We invited a diverse group of Christians, Muslims, and Jews to discuss their photographs as a way to introduce them to our photovoice project, which will be underway in late spring 2019. In preparation for our event, we instructed attendees to take 5-10 photographs that show what their faith looks like in everyday life. During our meeting, we strategically created small groups comprising a mix of different faith backgrounds and invited them to simply show one another their photographs and to share the story behind each one. As the meeting progressed, participants had meaningful conversations about such topics as prayer, food, sacred texts, and religious clothing. By the end of the event, new friendships were formed, differences diminished, and

stereotypes were challenged. Likewise, many expressed enthusiasm about participating in our project scheduled for later in the year.



Roman Williams facilitating photovoice at Marble Church in New York City (February 10, 2019).

Conclusion

Dorothea Lange was among the photographers employed by the US government during the Great Depression to document American life during the 1930s. Near the end of her life, she made profound statement to a biographer: “The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.” We hope our project achieves this goal. So far we have enjoyed a measure of success. We observe that participants’ photographs give others permission to be curious about faith in everyday life. As curiosity gives way to conversation, photographs become bridges of understanding upon which people can cross religious and cultural divides. As they cross these bridges together, friendships result and mutual trust allows participants have deep, meaningful conversations. Ultimately, we hope our modest project can help people see the world through another’s lenses, thereby promoting interfaith harmony. And this goal is what encourages us to continue to expand the Interfaith Photovoice Initiative to new locations around the world.