



Building Social Cohesion and Resilience: Interfaith Dialogue in a Divided Society

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SYNOPSIS

There are rising social tensions and growing polarisation globally. Youth dialogue may be one way to bring communities together to promote cohesion and understanding.

COMMENTARY

The current social and political climate in the United States reflects an era of increasing polarisation. There are rising religious and political tensions, greater mistrust between communities, and an erosion of the social fabric. As many countries grapple with these challenges, particularly in light of divisive rhetoric and policies, the need to promote social cohesion has never been more urgent. This is especially true for the younger generation, who are in the process of forming their identities and beliefs amidst this growing uncertainty.

Recent research paints a dark picture of fragmentation in America. Pew Research Center statistics indicate that Americans increasingly [view their society as fractured](#), with 70 per cent of the population concerned about growing divisions, especially along political, religious, and cultural fronts.

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), hate crimes, particularly religious, racial, and ethnic hate crimes rooted in prejudice, have witnessed record peaks in [antisemitism](#). A similar rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric is also observed by the Council on

American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). As divisions widen, an emphasis needs to be placed on creating social cohesion and resilience to meet these challenges head-on.

Early Bridges, Lasting Impact

The value of interfaith dialogue in building resilience cannot be overstated. But, as recent campus violence and disruption have demonstrated, many college-aged youths already possess normative notions of hate and distrust. Interfaith dialogue can benefit the younger generation as they reach an [inflexion point in identity](#) formation, and it is the best moment to empower them with the values of cooperation, compassion, and resilience.

Engaging young people in interfaith activities, such as dialogue, service-learning, and community building, presents a strong opportunity to disconfirm stereotypes, reduce biases, and generate a powerful consciousness of common humanity across religious and cultural boundaries. This impact is most significant in the formative years when identity and worldview are critiqued, negotiated, and shaped.

With communities becoming isolated and falling into ideological silos, leaving spaces for youths to interact across religious and cultural divides can improve empathy and knowledge. Research from [Interfaith America](#) has found that youths who participate in interfaith activities are more likely to develop a sense of responsibility for social justice and are better equipped to confront prejudice and discrimination.

Furthermore, interfaith activity is likely to increase young people's knowledge of and commitment to their own faiths, promoting individual growth and confirming their religious identities. This helps to allay fears about proselytisation or conversion through interfaith activity.

Youth-led interfaith initiatives, where young people are not only participants but also drive the work to facilitate religious literacy, play a crucial role in nurturing social bonding. Active interfaith communities where people from different religious backgrounds come together, are better prepared to address various social biases, ideological contestations, and context-specific environmental challenges.

Interfaith America's [latest report](#) confirms the significance of such initiatives, demonstrating that groups engaged in interfaith activities yield more unified and stronger communities. The Interfaith Alliance also discovered that such dialogue can [decrease prejudice and enable cooperation](#) on key issues like racial justice and climate action.

Youth as Unifiers

Achieving meaningful social cohesion is not without its challenges. Polarisation is a chronic hindrance to cooperation, and fear of the "other" has the tendency to fuel division. The intensifying polarisation of American society, as documented by the Pew Research Center, is a critical challenge. Growing political division and increased religious, cultural, and ideological extremism have made it that much harder for communities to find commonalities.

But today's youths have the power to reshape this narrative. Empowering youths to communicate across political and religious divides gives them the skills to navigate the conflicts of identity and belief so that they can become leaders in their communities who can foster long-term unity in diversity. While taking up leadership positions, their experiences and ability to empathise can reshape the deeply ingrained thought process of past generations and forge meaningful connections amid societal divergences.

Investing in Unity

Now more than ever, it is important to invest in programmes that offer young people the chance to build relationships with individuals of other faith traditions. In an era when so much of what is heard in the public sphere works to reinforce division, youth programmes offer a counter-narrative, one rooted in respect, understanding, and shared humanity.

Through intentional, cross-community engagement, young people not only learn about the diversity of religious traditions but also develop the empathy and leadership skills required to bridge divides that threaten social cohesion. These efforts are not merely a matter of fighting hatred or ignorance – they are a matter of creating a world where collaboration in the face of differences becomes the norm and not the exception.

Resilience for Tomorrow

Looking toward the future, it is clear that strengthening social cohesion and resilience requires a sustained effort led by youths. As interfaith programmes continue to expand and deepen their impact, it is essential to ensure that young people have the skills to resist division and foster collaboration. The stakes are high, and the need for interfaith dialogue has never been more pressing.

While these efforts are particularly necessary in the United States, where polarisation has reached alarming levels, building resilience through interfaith collaboration is a global obligation. Every society grapples with its own context-specific tensions, and although the forms may differ, the underlying need for dialogue, understanding, and cohesion remains universal.

That said, it is important not to assume a one-size-fits-all approach. Efforts to strengthen interfaith engagement must always be rooted in local cultural, religious, and historical contexts. Still, youth-led interfaith collaboration offers a promising, adaptable framework that, when sensitively applied, can support reconciliation and unity in diverse global settings.

By equipping youths with the tools to lead with compassion, engage in meaningful dialogue, and act in solidarity, we are building resilient communities capable of withstanding tomorrow's challenges.

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among youths of diverse faiths through service learning, the arts, and experiential education. He is a member of the Interfaith Alliance's Interfaith Leadership Network, a graduate of the Miller Center of Interreligious Studies Bridges Program, and a participant in Interfaith America's Emerging Leaders Program. This commentary is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2025.

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