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Interfaith Grand River: The Potential and Limits of Dialogue to Transform Participants and Impact Communities

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the dynamics between an interfaith dialogue group and its community. While interfaith dialogue is used for various reasons, I will study how Interfaith Grand River (IGR) deals with issues of religion in Canadian society through their monthly discussions. IGR began in September 2001 as an initiative to ensure different religious adherents in the Kitchener/Waterloo and surrounding area could meet regularly to discuss different faith topics and develop relationships. IGR serves as an illustration to compliment the theoretical works on the limits and possibilities of dialogue. Data on IGR has been derived through participant observation and interviews which is complimented by a literature study. In order to understand the multifaith context of North America Diana Eck provides insight into the challenges pluralistic endeavors face. Gadamer, Abu-Nimer, and Panikkar provide the philosophical backdrop from which to answer the research question: what are the limits and possibilities of interfaith dialogue? Through this analysis the intent is to address concerns of religious diversity in Kitchener/Waterloo and the degree to which interfaith dialogue can positively impact its participants and the community at large.

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Introduction

Interfaith dialogue is used by many different groups for various reasons. Dialogue is often presented as a means for conflict resolution, community development, promoting religious tolerance, or a method for participants to seek self-edification and delve in to questions of truth, knowledge and understanding. Through dialogue participants are put in a situation where they are encountering an other. This means that worldviews are put next to each other, scrutinized, assessed, and shared all at the same time. The dialogical process imports the necessity to question one's beliefs and to challenge one's assumptions. Through this process of encountering new ideas and re-evaluating one's own presuppositions those who engage in dialogue often consider it a means of deepening their understanding of both their own religious tradition and the religions of others (Panikkar 1978, 10). While this process only engages a percentage of the religious, its impacts can be far reaching.

In my study I utilize Interfaith Grand River (IGR) as an illustration of how an interfaith dialogue group deals with issues of religion in Canadian society through their monthly discussions where they share their religious perspectives. IGR brings together the religious communities of Kitchener, Ontario and its surrounding communities. Since IGR's inception September 13, 2001, it has served as a resource to other organizations which seek to deal with religious diversity by sharing religious experiences and pooling resources for community development. Grand River Hospital turned to IGR when constructing its multifaith room. The police and school board have approached IGR over the years in order to understand the needs of various religious groups. IGR also aids many social justice endeavors by providing insight and volunteers. While this takes place,

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IGR members meet every month in order to form relationships across religious boundaries and encourage understanding between individuals of various religious traditions.

For my research on IGR I used a phenomenological approach as described by John Creswell. Here the researcher begins with philosophical ideas and seeks to understand the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell 1998, 31). Creswell notes that using this method the researcher aims to learn from those who experienced the phenomenon. "This translates into an approach to studying the problem that includes entering the field of perception of participants, seeing how they experience, live, and display the phenomenon; and looking for the meaning of the participants' experiences" (Creswell 1998, 31). Creswell notes that this can be done through interviewing participants and seeking to address the underlying significance of what is taking place (Creswell 1998, 65). To accomplish this I have attended five IGR meetings and interviewed six members in order to grasp how IGR functions and what challenges it faces.

IGR meetings are two hours long, taking place on the second Thursday of every month. While each month has a topic of discussion (for example it may be marriage or afterlife) participants of IGR attest that they have grown in understanding of their own, and their neighbour's religious tradition through dialogue. Often it is argued that dialogue itself promotes truth and knowledge in a unique way. This means of promoting truth is at times presented as an alternative to debate or competition amongst the religious. Through the knowledge gained in interfaith dialogue IGR seeks to espouse a better understanding

of religion in the community at large and tries to encourage ideals such as tolerance, respecting diversity, shared goals, and truth seeking as an ongoing process.

Since IGR considers truth seeking an ongoing process the members are constantly challenging their own assumptions and asking questions about themselves and their dialogue partners. IGR has always had a component of community development to its organization and to what extent this aspect of IGR should be a priority has been questioned and discussed over the past few months. Members have recognized a need to promote their values and learning which have been gained through interfaith encounters to those who are unexposed to religious difference. How to go about applying interfaith dialogue to bring about a positive change within the community is a challenge that is ongoing for IGR and many interfaith dialogue groups. Questions that will be discussed throughout this paper are: how dialogue actually promotes and questions worldviews, how dialogue pragmatically impacts communities, and what motivates dialogue participants?

To answer these questions this paper is divided into four parts, each focusing on an aspect of interfaith dialogue and how it is practiced. In chapter 1, I relate a brief history of interfaith dialogue in North America. Through analysis of Richard Hughes Seager and William Hutchinson I discuss the promises and challenges that arose within interfaith dialogue's first major event, the Parliament of World's Religions in 1893. This chapter attempts to answer the question: what is the context for interfaith dialogue today? There were assumptions that were propagated and criticized through bringing delegates of the world's religious together. Because this event took place in America near the turn of the 19th century, there were worldviews and misconceptions that were underlying the

Parliament's makeup. Through interfaith dialogue, notions of American supremacism and Christian universalism were questioned. This set the tone for interfaith dialogue to be a means of prompting questioning and seeking knowledge through the exposing of divergences alongside sharing in the similarities various religious communities share. Utilizing Diana Eck to document the status of interfaith dialogue in a more contemporary North American context, I will focus on how issues of immigration and new understandings of what it is to be a North American are bringing issues concerning difference and interfaith closer to home than ever before. With changing immigration patterns the encounter with a religious other has evolved from being a huge, organized, planned event to the everyday encounters people have at work, in their neighbourhood and around their community. This has impacted interfaith dialogue in that there are now localized, smaller interfaith groups that seeks to build relationships amongst the religiously diverse of their community and not simply encounter a religious other from across the world. I continue to narrow my focus in order to present the demographic and societal context of Canada and specifically Kitchener and its surrounding area. This is where my fieldwork research will allow me to speak to an interfaith group. Through the study of a local interfaith dialogue group in Kitchener, IGR, I discuss the practical application of the theoretical work on dialogue.

In chapter 2 I undertake the research questions: who are IGR? What do they do? To do so I analyze IGR, an interfaith group in Kitchener/Waterloo (KW), and describe its successes and challenges in promoting a positive attitude towards religious diversity amongst its members and the community at large. IGR began in September 2001 as an initiative to get different faith groups in the Kitchener/Waterloo and surrounding area to

meet regularly to discuss different faith topics and develop relationships. I have attended IGR's meetings and conducted interviews in order to research an on-the-ground attempt to deal with issues concerning religious dialogue. IGR began as an offshoot of the Kitchener-Waterloo Council of Churches, an ecumenical group that sought to meet with people of various non-Christian communities by inviting them to multifaith dinners throughout the year. Eventually a group dedicated to interfaith dialogue emerged and IGR became an organization in which local events and faith issues can be discussed by members of the various traditions of KW.

IGR considers itself an interfaith group because many different faiths are present during their discussions every month. IGR makes an effort to be an inclusive group that welcomes people from all religious traditions and they desire to have no religion dominate the meetings. While there is no formal membership IGR describes their members (as in those who regularly partake in the dialogue) as coming from these traditions: Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Pagan, Sikh, Unitarian, Baha'i, and Kriyayoga. I sat in five meetings of IGR presented below is the data on those who were present during my study.[1]

Month	Male	Female	Christian	Non-Christian	Unknown	Topic
Nov 09	9	7	7	7	0	Medical Ethics
Dec 09	12	7	11	8	0	Gideon Bible Distribution
Jan 10	11	9	8	10	2	Contextual

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[1] This table and the subsequent lists are based on my observation during the meetings I attended and the minutes I was able to access. At the beginning of an IGR meetings participants will state what religion they adhere too, however, since some people would come in late or rather not say what tradition they represent there are participants who did not state their religion.

						Theology
Feb 10	11	10	9	11	2	Goals of IGR
Mar 10	11	7	9	10	0	Reasonable Accommodation
Apr 10	14	10	10	12	3	Interfaith Dialogue Modules

Next I will break down the monthly meetings and describe which religious traditions were present.

- November: Islam, Buddhism, Unitarian, Judaism, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Swedeborgian, Sikh, Lutheran, Christian Science, Mennonite, and 2 others.[2]

- December: Unitarian, Christian Science, Unity Centre, Mennonite, Judaism, Roman Catholic, Swedeborgian, Mormon, Lutheran, Buddhism, Islam, Neo-Pagan, Sikhism, Presbyterian, and three others.

- January: Neo-Pagan, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Buddhism, Christian Science, Unity Centre, Mennonite, Judaism, Swedeborgian, Unitarian, Mormon, Islam, Sikhism, and three others.

- March: Neo-Pagan, Sikhism, Unitarian, Lutheran, Christian Science, Mennonite, Presbyterian, Unity Centre, Judaism, Roman Catholic, Swedeborgian, Mormon, Buddhism, Islam, Baha'i, and three others.

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[2] The others include myself and another student who was there for research reasons and not to participate in the dialogue itself. During some meetings there were also those present who represented an organization like the Grand River Hospital or the Mosaic centre who would at times partake in the dialogue.

- April: Sikhism, Christian Science, Baha'i Unity Centre, Mennonite, Judaism, Roman Catholic, Unitarian, Buddhism, Islam, Neo-Pagan, Lutheran, Hindu, and two others.

Often there were more men than woman at the meetings and while there are more Christians who partake in the dialogue than any other religion, there are various denominations present and by and large the dialogue does not a feel of being overwrought by any one perspective. The members are typically middle aged or over while there was at most four participants under 40 in any given meeting. While some participants are leaders in their faith community there is no mandate stating one must have an official position in their tradition in order for one to participate in the dialogue. While there are several retirees, many are still working. The meetings are conducted in english and while for some english is their second language, they seem fully capable of communicating in this group setting.

While unity and inclusiveness are central themes to IGR many members have mentioned that this group is at a crossroads and is debating what the group will look like in the future. In order to appreciate how IGR is at a crossroads, and in what way they will be moving forward, I conducted six interviews to compliment my participant observation. I performed qualitative research in order to ascertain how IGR has dealt with issues in the past, the time of my study, and the foreseeable future. While there is no formal membership to IGR there is a steering committee. This committee consists of 9 members, three of whom were unavailable to be interviewed. The participants who did agree to partake in an interview come from various religious traditions and have been with the group for anywhere from four to its commencement. Each participant I was able to

interview offered insight into IGR's past and current situations and discussed freely about interfaith dialogue in general. Most are involved in the community through organizations other than IGR and believe interfaith dialogue is one means of impacting their community in a positive way. The following six members of IGR provided their perspectives on how IGR has developed over the years and what direction IGR will be taking in the future. Brice Balmer works at the Wilfrid Laurier University Seminary and is a Mennonite. He is a founding member of IGR concerned with community development and the current issues that arise when IGR tries to address difficult issues through an interfaith forum. Idrisa Pandit, a Muslim woman who founded K-W Muslim Social Services. She has been participating in IGR for seven years since moving to the area after completing her studies in the United States. Pandit has recently been involved in a local debate over the role of religion in the school system. Lee Dickey is a Unitarian who is now retired. He participates in IGR regularly and during our interview he discusses what it is about interfaith dialogue that propels people to be so committed to this group. Steve Higgins is a Caucasian Zen Buddhist and works as an insurance broker and martial arts instructor. He has been a part of IGR for a long time and offers insight into how IGR should carefully consider what will be its defining role in the upcoming months. Bob Chodos, a reformed Jew, was an editor before he retired. Chodos has been with IGR since its inception and has written for various journals some of which focused on interfaith dialogue or multifaith projects. Chattar Ahuja is a Sikh who owns his own manufacturing busyness. He is a long-time member of IGR who is very active in interfaith dialogue in the community and is dedicated to various volunteer organizations. Through these interviews and by attending five meetings over the past few months I was

able to discuss how IGR functions as an ongoing interfaith dialogue project that seeks to impact its community.

Chapter 3 builds off chapter 2 and considers the application of interfaith dialogue as well as the process that can take a dialogue group in many opposing directions. This chapter's central question is: in what way does IGR interact with its surrounding community? At times, the direction is advanced by those who administrate the group, by the members as a whole, or by external factors. This chapter addresses these facets by considering the ways in which IGR relates with its community. IGR has different forces both from within the group and from the surrounding community which are compelling its members to consider how to achieve the goals of promoting tolerance and understanding in those who have diverging worldviews. Within the group there are those who are interested in moving IGR into more of an advocacy role, seeking to convince other groups of how to understand the role of religion in their community. Some would use IGR as a springboard from which they can apply a multifaith perspective to ongoing debates considering religious tolerance in KW. Others are more interested in keeping IGR "dialogue focused" and are keen to seek deeper truths with those already actively engaged in interfaith dialogue. And, of course, other members fall somewhere in between, those who seek balance and medium between the different roles and goals of IGR so that the group as a whole will be able to maintain its balance of community engagement and interfaith dialogue.

The community has had an impact on IGR in part because of the changing social factors which have brought different ethnicities and religious traditions into a geographical area and enhanced the desire and need for a dialogue group to emerge. At

the same time, there are those who are interested in having one voice dominate the public sphere of KW, a voice that discourages dialogue and does not value diversity. Those who express intolerance and ignorance are the antithesis of IGR. During my research IGR has come face to face with that which they want to discourage and to what degree the group ought to respond, and how, has been a trying question for IGR.

In order to further consider the intricacies of IGR chapter 4 allows for analysis on interfaith dialogue and what can be learned from IGR in a broader context. This chapter attempts to answer: where does IGR fit in the broader landscape of theory and understanding? Mohammad Abu-Nimer, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Raimon Panikkar provide a philosophical basis from which to discuss such issues as: what are the implications for using the terms "interfaith" and "dialogue"? What are the limits and possibilities of interfaith dialogue? Who benefits from interfaith dialogue? By using various theorists alongside one another I am able to compare where various themes relate to my illustration IGR. Abu-Nimer and Panikkar discuss the experience of interfaith dialogue and how the process impacts its participants. This can be considered alongside Cantwell Smith and Gadamer who take a more philosophical approach to themes that concern interfaith dialogue. How the philosophical landscape can bring insight into the potential and limitations of interfaith dialogue will be considered in this chapter by comparing and applying aspects of various theoretical approaches.

Chapter 4 will discuss such themes as the term "interfaith." Interfaith denotes a certain type of encounter which is only partially accepted by IGR in practice; therefore, how IGR does utilize "interfaith" is assessed. Dialogue is considered to be a process where differences are brought together in a manner that seeks to enlighten everyone who

participates instead of validating one understanding over and against another. The religious encounter that makes up a dialogue session is understood as a means of knowledge seeking in which the use of language, questioning, and consideration to other viewpoints is needed. How dialogue impacts an individual and what significance a meeting with someone who is considered an other is thus explored in some depth. Issues concerning identity and self understanding are highlighted in regards to how one experiences religious difference in a dialogue setting. Here the notion of the dialoguer's search for religious truth and understanding are studied in order to extrapolate the experience interfaith dialogue has on its practitioners. Through this theoretical discussion, insights and aspects of IGR will be brought into a new light.

In the conclusion I present my research in the broader context of the study of interfaith dialogue. The conclusion discusses such questions as: what are the limits and further studies needed to be done for the research of interfaith dialogue? What does IGR's role look like for the future? While there are more questions to ask, further research to be performed, and additional considerations to explore it is my intention that this thesis allows for a coherent analysis of IGR and its implications for theory surrounding interfaith dialogue. In the conclusion limitations and potential avenues for further research are explored. This thesis seeks to provide an in depth study of the group Interfaith Grand River and analyze the insight it offers into the larger philosophical dialogue discussion. Interfaith dialogue is often presented as a means of promoting a pluralistic, peaceful society and yet the limits and potential of dialogue have yet to be fully addressed. Through studying an interfaith group my research has allowed for an examination as to how dialogue impacts participants and the community at large.

Alongside more theoretical discussions, a local on the ground movement allows for different aspects of dialogue to be approached. Through this thesis the ability for dialogue to bring about religious understanding and promote and better society are addressed.

Chapter 1: History and Context of Interfaith Dialogue in North America

Part 1

The World's Parliament of Religions as a Starting Point for Interfaith Dialogue in North America

Interfaith dialogue can be used to describe many different types of encounters between people. What is needed for interfaith dialogue to take place are different religions being represented and some sort of communication being conveyed. This chapter will attempt to present an understanding of how interfaith dialogue has developed in North America. To do this the implications of the World's Parliament of Religions of 1893 (the Parliament) will be considered; also, major theorists who have introduced notions of how religions can relate to one another will be discussed. Finally, a look into the North American context socially and historically will be brought to light. Interfaith Grand River meets regularly in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. The considerations for the Canadian, modern context within which this particular dialogue takes place must be acknowledged. This will allow for an understanding of the foundation and circumstances within which IGR performs their monthly interfaith meetings. While this group has only met regularly in Kitchener since 2001 it has been influenced by the previous attempts, progresses, and difficulties of interfaith dialogue and other endeavours to unite religious people from various traditions.

The current use and understanding of 'interfaith dialogue' has been profoundly impacted by the World's Parliament of Religions, in Chicago 1893. "As a singe event, the World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, is now often identified as

the starting point of the modern interfaith movement" (McCarthy 2007, 16). This is because,

> The Parliament, in some ways was a rather modest venture, achieved epochal status because it was almost completely unprecedented. Intellectual and various other leaders of the various non-Western religions had never before been invited to such a gathering. Not only that; American Protestants had never included Jews and Catholics in a conference on religion, and almost never in meetings concerning other subjects of supposedly common concern. A mere seventy or eighty years earlier the idea that Hindus or Muslims might have intellectuals to send, or even that these religions might be real ones with something to offer, would have been considered laughable (Hutchison 2003, 112).

The Parliament brought together various ideas that were present at that time and challenged others. As a part of the World's Columbian Exposition, the Parliament was a celebration of America and its perceived place in the world. Through this interaction, religious leaders of diverse backgrounds brought forth and challenged ideals within an interfaith dialogue, beginning a model for the kinds of dialogue taking place between many religious adherents today.

One aspect of America's place in the world that the Exposition emphasized was as the beacon of modernity. This is what Seager refers to as the Columbian Myth (Hughes Seager 1995, 4). The Exposition was to be the highlight of modernity and humanity, exposing America as the place where science, politics, and religion came together in the most progressive state in the world. This theme was a conveyed by presenting America as the inheritor of the classical, philosophical traditions of Greece alongside the universality derived from Christianity. In this way America portrays itself as the secular inheritor of the enlightenment and the religious inheritor of the kingdom of God. America was celebrating that it could "build the kingdom of God on earth through the institutions of the republic" (Hughes Seager 1995, 5-6). The exposition itself was

meant to display the culmination of science, philosophy, and also religious apex of civilization through the 1893 festivities. With the exposition taking place in America, it was displaying itself as the centre for human achievement. With the religions of the world meeting in an American metropolis there was an ever present sense of triumphalism and Christian universalism which were underlying the notions of equality of all religious traditions. While formally it was stated that all religions were to be treated equally and with respect, the fact that American triumphalism was so tied with the celebration made this unachievable in practice. It would be hard not to notice the fact that Christianity was presented as the central religion all other religious traditions could come to. "The Columbian Myth of America and the White City were expressions of a white, mainstream, American ideology sanctioned by a theology forged in the old Anglo-Protestant mainstream, but flexible enough to be alternatively, broadly theistic, civil Jewish, catholic and generally Judeo-Christian …[America] was heir to the classical world and the Christian or Judeo-Christian tradition" (Hughes Seager 1995, 22-23). Therefore we have a setting in which this unprecedented, and widely celebrated event took place where all the world's religions were meant to come together and share wisdom, celebrate humanity, and join together for the common good with heavy undertones of Christian universalism still on the minds of the hosts of this event. The dynamic of the World's Parliament of Religions then is one that started a certain type of interfaith dialogue in North America, one which would eventually attempt to undermine its underlying tones of Christocentricism over the following years.

Part 2

Assumptions Encouraged and Discouraged by the World's Parliament of Religions: Christocentricism and its impact on dialogue

The reason why this Christocentricism remained an undertone and was not overtly apparent or recognized during the Parliament is because it was an assumption or worldview which was promoting Christianity while apparent actions (like the Parliament) and lip service was spent on notions of equality and mutual respect. Secular and religious spheres were mixed during the Parliament to such a degree that they seemed inseparable. Hutchinson describes the relationship between liberalism and Protestantism as growing stronger in the late 1800s and thus there was an informal treaty between the secular and sacred elements of American society. He describes Protestantism and liberalism on the rise and a powerful duo (Hutchison 2006, 116). But simply because mainstream, protestant America was having more liberal tendencies this does not mean that the Parliament itself was able to fully embrace these ideals. Part of this dynamic was due to ignorance of other cultures, while America was displaying its own propaganda by presenting its place in history and role as a world leader, the place of other countries was not so well defined. There was America and there was the rest of the world, but what wisdom, knowledge, and purpose Eastern countries could perform was not yet recognized to an adequate degree.[3] Masuzawa notes the prevailing attitude of America's place in the world, and was especially entrenched in Chicago. America presented itself as the "vanguard of an emerging global civilization" (Masuzawa 2005, 268-269). It was assumed that only in America could such a peaceful, world-focused gathering of religious

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[3] While it is true that many scholars had been studying other cultures well before the first World's Parliament of Religions the accepted value of these cultures were not yet established.

communities come together (Masuzawa 2005, 268). Also, this Parliament put Chicago on the map, especially the University of Chicago and its new Comparison of Religions department which was heralded by John Henry Barrows who had a major role in organizing the Parliament (Masuzawa 2005, 269). As a result America positioned itself as a place for groundbreaking religious studies to take place alongside a celebrated gathering of religious adherents triumphantly on an emerging city's soil.[4]

The World's Parliament of Religions was meant at its time to display what was meant by the terms world and religions. The term 'parliament' was used to allow for religious representatives to come together while avoiding the need for official representatives of a given religion to have any special status in the hierarchy of their tradition in order to take part in the proceedings (Kuschel 1995, 81). The Parliament was supposed to be about unity and equality but this was not entirely the case. One means by which The Parliament displayed inequality came through in the organization of the event and the representation of religious traditions. Who came to the proverbial table, and who did not, played a role in defining the ethos of the Parliament.[5] As for those religions which were present includes: Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. Those whom were not a part of the Parliament were Mormons, African Americans, any religion coming from Africa for that matter, nor South America, Indigenous religions, Sikhs, or Tibetan Buddhists (Kuschel 1995, 84). This was the first time many Americans had actually heard a representative from Asia speak about their tradition first hand (Eck 2001, 184). And with this exposure to Eastern wisdom came also criticism of American policies at times. "One delegate from Japan pointed explicitly to

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[4] It is worth mentioning here that Masuzawa questions the scholastic value and the celebrated nature in which some scholars describe the Parliament of World's religions (Masuzawa 2005, 269-274).

the anti-Japanese sentiment that greeted him in America, with signs that read 'No Japanese is allowed to enter here.' 'If such be the Christian ethics,' he said, 'well we are perfectly satisfied to remain heathen'" (Kuschel 1995 84-85). Another questioned the Christian triumphalism outright, "In seeking 'universal values', most parliament liberals really meant that Christianity was the emerging universal religion, able to stretch its canopy over the whole world, including Buddhism. Dharmapala showed how the universal teachings of the Buddha had come to many centuries before Christ" (Eck 2001, 184-185).

The Hindu delegation led by Swami Vivekananda caused a sensation in the United States (and in India) and its impact has been felt for years to come. Vivekananda, during his stay in America seemed to be well received, "At the parliament in Chicago, Vivekananda was received with enthusiasm. Perhaps America's own burgeoning universalist spirit was eager to hear the spirit echoed by a young Hindu reformer from the other side of the world" (Eck 2001, 97). He spoke to his America brothers and sisters and was appreciated for his tone and charisma; he also taught of ending persecution and intolerance for the unity of all religious traditions (Eck 2001, 97). However, Vivekananda while being pleasant, gaining popularity, and promoting some of the focal points of the parliament was not shy about mentioning criticisms and challenging assumptions about his hosts as well. Subsequently, he did have those who were not so fond of him at the time. While the parliament espoused inclusion for many religions, some saw this as merely a means of promoting a friendly style missionary project (Hutchison 2003, 180). More broadly, diversity was respected with the assumption that eventually the world would become more like America (Hutchison 2003, 180). So the voice of hearing

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[5] And perhaps every interfaith dialogue encounter since.

Vivekananda promote religious unity across the globe was tampered by him redefining what kind of universal religious unity this would be, i.e. it would not by an assimilating, Christianized world religion, rather a unity of diverse religions. He spoke about how no one religion should prosper at the expense of another and that God would forbid the ridding of religious traditions; therefore Buddhism and Hinduism should continue on, despite what lay in the hearts of certain Christian missionaries (Hutchison 2003, 181-182). Through these speeches the voices of religious traditions that had not previously been heard in America brought forth a means of displaying 'eastern wisdom' in way that peaked the interest of their audience, however the criticism of American/protestant triumphalism and universalism was also brought up in a manner that may not have brought about instant revolutionizing change, but did plant seeds for what would be eventually defined as a pluralism that gains popularity and is still talked about today. Pluralism seeks to undermine these long held American assumptions and attempts to reinstate a new worldview over and above those that were underlying the Parliament.

The notion of Christianity being destined to be the universal religion of the world was not realized in the 20th century. Through a series of significant events we see the trend from triumphalism to pluralism as political situations change and various religions' status have altered. India became independent in 1947 and thus became a country where many diverse religions had to work out for themselves self-government without the British overseeing them. This provided autonomy, and perhaps in some people's eyes, legitimacy to the religions of India (Kuschel 1995, 89). The creation of Israel put Judaism on the world map and also impacted the Muslim nations surrounding it which have been united against this occurrence of 1949 (Kuschel 1995, 89). However, the oil crisis of

1970's put funding and therefore authority into many Arab states because of their oil reserves (Kuschel 1995, 89). This parallels the fact that Islam is now the fastest growing religion in the world (Richard 2004, 100). Alongside these trends there is an increasing economic growth in China and India. And the continued increase in immigration has allowed countries to be less and less defined by religious homogeneity. What follows from this development? The expectation that Christianity would become the dominant, universal world religion in the twentieth century in the wake of Eurocentric modernity failed all along the line (Kuschel 1995, 89). Not only was the world not Christianized, on the contrary; at the end of the twentieth century on the whole the other religions of humankind were better positioned than they were at its beginning (Kuschel 1995, 89). The dominating worldview has gone from Eurocentricism to polycentricism (Kuschel 1995, 89). And in North America there has been a steady increase to go from merely accepting a few minorities in a tolerant fashion to a full blown multicultural society.

Part 3

Forming New Perceptions Concerning Religious Difference: Introducing the Inclusivists

Because of this change in political, cultural, and global understanding, Christianity has had to come up with new ways to understand its place in the world. While this process is taking place, new notions of how Christianity relates to other religions have had an impact on interfaith dialogue. John Hick, a philosopher of religion, took an active role in creating new understandings of Christianity and its role amongst other religions of the world in the latter half of the twentieth century. Hick posits that

religious differences are secondary to a greater underlying aspect of the religions themselves which he refers to as the Ultimate Reality. This is something to which all religious people are relating to through their respective cultures. Hick provides an example of an inclusive theology which he tries to present as a starting point for a deeper interfaith dialogue than was ever before possible.

For Hick, if religious people were to focus on their unity and how each religious person relates to the Ultimate, there could be harmony and genuine acceptance of doctrinal differences. While Hick's intentions of bringing people together through dialogue is often interlaced with his notions of the Ultimate Reality his theories can detract from the goal of promoting religious unity. Hick's method for promoting unity relies on the assumption that that there has to be a great common thread in all religions which ought to be the focal point for interfaith relations to be successful.[6] However, the desire for coming up with an overarching unifying theology hinders the potential for religions to come together and celebrate the differences as well as their similarities.[7] If one were to focus only on inclusivist/pluralistic theologies what is produced is not a unity of humanity but rather another religious view to be pitted against all the others. Because of the oppositional aspect of the inclusivist versus exclusivist debate which followed these theologies, when considering interreligious dialogue one must move past these frames of thinking in order to promote a more productive religious debate for a wider audience.

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[6] Paul Knitter uses this term 'common thread' to describe various methods (including Hick's) for promoting interfaith dialogue based on similarities between religions (Knitter 1999).
[7] The notion of celebrating the convergences and divergences of different religious traditions is something that is very important to IGR and will be discussed more fully in chapter 2.

Hick champions an inclusivist position as a means of destabilizing what people understood about religion in order to provide a new framework for dealing with religious difference. He describes himself as the "Copernicus of Religion" (Hick 1982, 36). As Copernicus changed people's understanding of astronomy by explaining that the planets revolve around the sun as opposed to the planets and sun revolving around Earth, Hick also wants to shift his contemporaries' understanding of how the universe works. Hick attempts to shift the discourse of religious studies from having Christianity and its conception of God at the centre to something vaster, something to which all religions can relate. This model places Christianity alongside other religions in relation to Hick's Ultimate Reality. In the past, Christians considered themselves, and their perception of God, as the centre of all religious understanding and Hick wished to broaden the conception of religion so that Christianity would not have such a privileged position. Hick called for a "radical transformation of our conception of the universe of faiths and the place of our own religion within it" (Hick 1982, 36). He sought to promote the legitimacy of other faiths as well as to bring down the favoured position that Christianity had long held in Western thought.

What this type of understanding does is put Christianity within a certain frame that which is used in its relations to other religions. Hick proposes that one is either set in the belief that their religion is correct or that each religion has a means of bringing about truth, and within this spectrum a truer dialogue can come from the latter while a shallower dialogue derives from the former.

> Discursive or theological dialogue, then, takes place somewhere on or moving about within a spectrum of which ranges between two opposite conceptions of its nature. At one extreme there is purely confessional dialogue, in with each partner witnesses to his own faith, convinced that

this has absolute truth while his partner's has only relative truth. At the other extreme is truth-seeking dialogue, in which each is conscious that the transcendent Being is infinitely greater than his own limited vision of it, and in which his partners accordingly seek to share their visions in the hope that each may be helped toward a fuller awareness of the divine Reality before which they both stand (Hick 1982, 116-117).

Here Hick sets a range from which viewpoints on the truths ascertained by one religious adherent towards the other is the benchmark to decipher where along the spectrum a dialogue may take place. Hick notes that either dialogue is confessional or truth seeking. However, by pertaining to this categorical approach to interfaith dialogue Hick has placed a very limited form of what kinds of dialogue should be sought after. According to Hick, truth seeking dialogue can only occur when a religious adherent's personal theology resembles the progression Hick is trying to move amongst Christianity in general. While considering one's dialogue partner to have relative truth may allow for some conversation, if one considers both religions to be a means of relating to the Ultimate Reality than much better dialogue can take place. With Hick acting as the Copernicus of religion, he sets out a means of moving Christian theology from being all about absolute truth claims to a self-understanding that provides a framework for all religions to be viewed as equal. However, what this means for dialogue, is that it is limiting. During one IGR meeting this very topic was discussed and there were those who felt that they could not adhere to Hick's vision of an underlying unity within religious traditions. However, they did feel strongly that interfaith dialogue was still possible and beneficial to them in a manner that does not fit Hick's notion of a confessional dialogue; rather it is more aligned with the truth seeking dialogue he describes. There is a spectrum presented by Hick within a framework that pits exclusive truth claims against inclusive theologies, as opposed to interfaith dialogue as is practiced by IGR where exclusivity and inclusivity

are secondary to the participant's willingness to take part in dialogue in a respectful manner. For a dialogue to take place with people who are concerned with different questions and different directions for seeking encounter with other religions, Hick's framework does not suffice.

For another approach to unifying religious traditions inspire of doctrinal differences let us consider Cantwell Smith. According to Cantwell Smith every religion has access to truth not because it accurately describes a means in which the Ultimate interacts with people; but rather, religions are true symbolically. Religious truth is to be taken within the context of time and space in which they are written and read (or told and heard). Cantwell Smith opines that every religious statement has importance but often necessitate interpretation - which can be achieved by the faithful (Cantwell Smith 2001, 45). For Cantwell Smith interpretation is possible because his understanding of truth is not rigid. He argues truth is not monolithic; rather, there are different types of truth (Cantwell Smith 2001, 49). Religious truth needs to be recognized and valued for what it is, i.e. something that is temporal as opposed to objective (Cantwell Smith 2001, 38). Cantwell Smith applies his understanding of truth to reinterpret the difficulties that are usually presented when it comes to religious difference. Religious people can state different things and still know the same God because in Cantwell Smith's mind truth changes to meet the needs of the situation. For a Christian, truth comes through Jesus; while a Muslim refers to the Qur'an. Cantwell Smith would affirm all religious statements are valuable and true. "I have not come across any religious statement anywhere whose meaning did not illuminate for me something about man" (Cantwell Smith 2001, 45). However, the manner in which one becomes illuminated is described in

a particular manner. Cantwell Smith presents truth as contextual and possibly deeply personal. Therefore people's ability to convey truth from one culture to another can be difficult.[8] That is why Cantwell Smith invites us to accept religious statements as valuable without necessarily comprehending them; however, when it comes to interfaith dialogue, comprehension is broadly considered to be important. While Cantwell Smith's usage of the word truth allows for any religious statement to have deep significant meaning, however, the meaning may become lost on the audience.

What Cantwell Smith's concoction of meaning, religious truth, and interpretation imply for interfaith dialogue is that the ability to respect religious statements seemed to be tied up in the amount of truth one can put onto the doctrines. Cantwell Smith states that all religions are true, but is unable to describe or show why and how they are true. This may pose as a stumbling block for some whom engage in interfaith dialogue because simply holding onto the fact that certain statements means something to someone, somewhere, may not be enough. Because religious statements are indescribable in Cantwell Smith's framework, the ability for dialogue to meet people's desire to speak frankly about their understandings of religion is not needed. While for some religious people speaking frankly about their faith is exactly what they would desire out of dialogue (Dickens 2006, 402-403). Cantwell Smith's truth suggests that one cannot speak plainly about their religion can be a hindrance for all people in dialogue. This manner of redefining religious truth puts limitations on how religious adherents can express their religious truths (which have to be constantly reinterpreted anyways) and in that they can

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[8] This is apparent in Cantwell Smith's discussion of the Statement "the sky is a cow" because Cantwell Smith notes that this statement's meaning is lost on him, he is simply sure that the statement has meaning if one were to know how to discern it. Thus displaying the limitations of people's ability to share truth, which could have implications for interfaith dialogue (Cantwell Smith 2001, 47-49).

only speak to a certain type of truth as described by Cantwell Smith. There are those who partake in interfaith dialogue at IGR who would struggle with the notion of their claims to truth being described in such a way. At IGR truth is not a conclusion (be it temporal or otherwise) but an ongoing goal one would like to achieve. IGR allows for individuals to draw their own religious truths, and frame them however they would like, therefore allowing for different understandings of truth to be present every month. By applying the Cantwell Smith's notions to interfaith dialogue there suddenly become many restrictions of what can be accomplished by the dialogue itself.

Part 4

Social Justice as a Means of Promoting Religious Unity

Another way to reconsider certain Christian notions which sought to promote interfaith dialogues comes from Paul Knitter. Like Hick and Cantwell Smith, Knitter desires to promote religious harmony through interfaith dialogue and he believes that to do so we require new theologies applied in new ways. Knitter however avoids the overarching approach by Hick and does not follow Cantwell Smith down the path of reinterpreting religious truth. Instead he leans on the liberation theology to provide a theoretical framework for interfaith dialogue which is not only focused on the dialogue itself, but the outcome of the dialogue as well.

Knitter uses liberation theology to promote dialogue as a means of avoiding the difficulties of a dialogue based on ideas. Knitter would agree with Hick and those who claim that no one religion can have an absolute claim to truth at the expense of other religions. He understands religious knowledge as particular to a specific context in time and space (Knitter 1999, 452-453). He is wary of putting ones hope for interfaith on some

type of commonality between religions. "The image of a 'common thread' (or threads) is often used to suggest that if we look closely and carefully enough, we will find something that is understood to have a unifying quality. But when it comes to stating precisely what that common thread is – or even where we can find it – conversations usually becomes vague or contradictory" (Knitter 1999, 22). While Hick, Cantwell Smith, and others have sought to promote dialogue based on a perception of commonality amongst the religious, this effort has been criticized for stifling dialogue by dismissing the notion that dialogue needs to address both the differences and similarities between the religions.[9] Knitter affirms that religious differences should not be undermined for the sake of religious dialogue (Knitter 1999, 22-23). While differences should not be undermined, Knitter does not see religious differences as a fruitful discussion topic either, so he comes up with a way of bringing religions together without forming new theologies or religious doctrines concerning other religions, but rather, he tries to find some means of bringing religions together through joint efforts.

Religions can be united even if their doctrines and beliefs do not line up. Knitter argues this unity can be based on the fact that all religions desire to better the human condition.[10] Therefore liberation theology which seeks to bring about positive change for those who are oppressed or suffering is a theology that can be used across religious boundaries, and therefore is well suited for interfaith dialogue. "But I trust that it is, basically, a model which can win the approval of a significant number of believers in all

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[9] One such criticism comes from W. T. Dickens who states that promoting unity as a means for dialogue puts those religious adherents who believe in the authority and truth of their religion can be stifled or unable to take part in this type of interfaith dialogue. By allowing differences to be prominent new dialogues that are more robust can take place (Dickens 2006, 397-420).

[10] That we can assume all religions seek the better the human condition (and seek to do so in a similar manner) has been contested (Meeker, 2006).

the major religious communities of our day. I believe that concern for the promotion of human welfare in this world constitutes, if I may use a highly suspect term, what may be called a *soteriocentric core* within the history of religions" (Knitter 2001, 149-150). This core will allow religious differences to be secondary to the need to act. This model relies on there being people in need and religious individuals who are compelled to respond with action, so compelled that they will work together for the greater good even if theological discrepancies are left intact (Knitter 1999, 23-24). While religious adherents may not agree on the afterlife or whether one should pray or meditate, all recognize social injustices ought to be addressed. This poses as an ideal starting point for dialogue in Knitter's mind because this is a common ground where every religion can meet without creating a new theology or looking for hidden messages beneath the surface doctrines. "Here we have a common starting point for interreligious dialogue that is not imposed by any one religion on the other, for it is 'imposed' on all of them by the reality of the world in which they live" (Knitter 2001, 148). Since religions are all facing some kind of human predicament and actively seek to address this suffering in some way dialogue is a means of promoting a better human condition by joint effort of the worlds religions working together to bring about a positive change in the world.

Knitter's model however, also has its limitations for interfaith dialogue. Here Knitter is limiting dialogue not simply on its ability to cope with religious difference, he goes further to promote a very specific kind of dialogue. The type of actual dialogue Knitter describes is reflective in that it takes place after the religious participants have already agreed to undertake some project together.[11] The focus then of the dialogue is not

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[11] Knitter describes the dialogue he envisions as "analysis," "reflection," and "a second step," following social justice work performed by the religious participants (Knitter 1999, 148).

simply shared understanding, or relationship building, but rather there is a focus on first: "what can be achieved?" and then: "how did it go?" Knitter still regards dialogue as a learning experience and important, "To put this assertion simply and pointedly: in order to be authentically religious — that is, in order to nurture and deepen our religious experience and knowledge — we cannot be religiously monolingual" (Knitter 1999, 456). However the focus is on being able to communicate in a manner that allows religious people from various traditions to work together, not to simply be together and share conversation for its own sake. Here dialogue takes on instrumental value as opposed to the intrinsic value some would argue it ought to have. The closest Knitter comes to acknowledging dialogue for its own sake is when he describes dialogue itself as a means of bringing about an end to oppression by creating new scenarios and language comprehension breaking down traditional barriers that brought some to power and others to become the oppressed (Knitter 1999, 464). But even here it is clear that Knitters goal is to bring about an equating of that which was not equal previously. Therefore the dialogue itself, its ability to promote friendship, understanding and cohesiveness between people from various religions has not yet been fully recognized by Knitters model for interfaith dialogue.

Part 5

The Canadian Context: The Changing Landscape that Dialogue Takes Place in Today

While a complete comparison of how interfaith dialogue has developed in the United States and Canada is a worthy avenue of study, this section has a narrower focus. The changing social situations that have impacted all of North America will be

considered alongside some research as to how Canada has specifically struggled with issues of religious diversity. Through this section it will become clear that IGR is taking place during a time and context in which interfaith dialogue is necessary.

While the theorists tried to promote interfaith dialogue and deal with the issues presented by the 1893 Parliament over the following century, pragmatically some notions of that were propagated by the Parliament were challenged by changing social realities. Eastern delegates challenged notions of western supremacy based on its treatment of minorities while Vivekananda challenged preconceptions of Eastern religions and what they had to offer. This prompted a reconsideration of Seager's Columbian Myth. When one considers the changing landscape over the next hundred years or so, Christianity changes from expecting to be the world's religion to being one amongst many. From this worldview alteration we now have a new cultural setting that is steeped in the past, yet differentiated from the original Parliament of World's Religions.

As Christianity realized it was not going to be the major religion of the world, it has now come to many people's attention that it may not dominate North America as it once did. This is apparent as Eck describes the religious landscape of America in *New Religious America*. In a similar manner, others have noted how Canada has been changing in the face of immigration patterns so that ethnically Canada is more diverse now than ever before (Noivo, 2000 85-86). In 1971 Trudeau and his multicultural policy opens up Canadian immigration to new parts of the world when previously it had been dominated by Europeans (Roopchand 2000, 210). Canada went from having over 90% of its immigrants being European pre 1960 to half its immigrants being Asian in 1989 (Edite 2000, 185). What this means is that some have argued Canada needs to change its

definition of what a Canadian is (Biles and Ibrahim 2005, 155). The discussion is how to make newcomers become full citizens in their own minds, the other Canadians' minds, and in essence. "Immigration is one of the touchstones of the elusive Canadian identity" (Biles and Ibrahim 2005, 156). With immigration impacting the Canadian identity how religion factors into this equation is an important consideration for interfaith dialogue. In order to integrate new religious minorities into Canadian society, communication is necessary.

How religion fits into other social spheres is also a factor. Because of this change in immigration, notions of Canadian multicultural policy, what constitutes a prototypical Canadian family, and what a typical classroom should look like have been challenged. With this challenging new self-understanding, Mackey notes that Canadians seem to have an identity crisis (Mackey 2002, 141). What constitutes Canadian culture and what it means to be Canadian is often questioned. In turn, this notion of questioning has become a crisis in that there is concern Canadians have lost the ability to declare their own identity comprehensively, in a manner of speaking patriotism cannot be defined or expressed. "With all this semiotic activity, it is very difficult to spend even a short time in Canada without becoming acutely aware that Canadian diversity not only exists, but poses a serious problem" (Day 2000, 4). In response to this notion, Mackey suggests that Canadians become comfortable with having various influences on their identity (Mackey 2002, 164). It is through recognizing our diversity, accepting it and allowing diversity to be valued and not feared that Canadians can be comfortable with social realities and the pressures of patriotism (Day 2000, 227). One means of dealing with the crises and proposed solutions is through interfaith dialogue. There are many formal and informal

dialogues taking place throughout Canada in order to allow for differences to be recognized and understood as part of a Canadian multicultural society.

As a result of this new ethno-religiously diverse North America interfaith dialogue is taking place like never before. Not only has the role and notion of Christianity changed since 1883, the notion of interfaith dialogue has also evolved. While the Parliamentary model for dialogue still takes place, the notion of dialogue has changed because of the fact that exposure to various religions takes place all over Canada and the United States.[12] Previously the Parliament could be accused of being expositional, displaying the exotic foreigners for the enjoyment and gawking of the hosts. Today, there are conferences that seek to unite religions from all over the world happening more frequently. Often, the Hindu is represented by a local practitioner, not a delegate from India.[13] Also, interfaith dialogue is taking place on different scales, such as workplace conversations (or controversies) (Eck 2002, 316, 332). There has also been an increase in interfaith marriages (Edite 2000, 183-184). This provides not only a different understanding of interfaith dialogue, but also the level to which it does take place in Canada.

> It is safe to say that interfaith dialogue has become an established part of the Canadian scene. It is not an overwhelming part, and many Christians and people of other faiths would not have heard of it. Yet there is a pressing sense of the need to come to terms with our new religious and cultural pluralism in Canada. People are asking questions, forming coalitions, planning joint projects. Some are small and some of these have been highly successful. Others are much larger and still tentative, reaching out to all Canadians in order to see what the future shape of interfaith will

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[12] The Parliament of World's religions decided to bring together the religions of the world in Chicago again in 1983 to celebrate the 100 year anniversary of the first Parliament, since then there have been world meetings about every 5 years (http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/).

[13] For example, while IGR would not formally be a part of this conference many of the members in IGR took part in the Conference of World's Religions which was hosted by the University of Waterloo. Also, during the Municipal Multifaith Prayer day, IGR members (and others) were present and praying for their respective faith communities.

be. But one thing is really certain. All Canadians now know that they are not alone within their own religious tradition or ethnic/cultural group (Berthrong 1985, 470).

In light of this it becomes clear why Brice Balmer, who had a crucial role in founding Interfaith Grand River (IGR) wrote *Meeting our Multifaith Neighbors* to discuss his (and others) dealing with interfaith issues that arise in day to day life.

Chapter 2: Interfaith Dialogue in Kitchener and Waterloo

Part 1

Interfaith Grand River: Interfaith Dialogue as a Response to Challenge

The first IGR meeting was on September 13, 2001. While IGR's beginning falls shortly after the attack on the World Trade Centre of September 11th 2001, this was merely coincidental since the group had been planning for this meeting well into the previous summer. It has been noted that following the attacks on the World Trade Centre there has been an increase in multifaith groups and interfaith dialogue is presented as a response to religious violence (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 3). The realization that religious differences could be so dangerous was a reality that was highlighted and brought to the forefront of the populaces' conscious at the time of IGR's conception.

> Since September 11, 2001, there has been increased interfaith activity in North America, especially among Christians, Jews, and Muslims. Trialogues among the Abrahamic faiths have taken place in different cities to break down prejudice and stereotypes as well as to deflect the 'terrorist rhetoric' in the U.S.A. Christians, Muslims, and Jews have meaningful conversations and learn to know each other's faith story. Interfaith groups have increased again after the USA invaded Iraq (Balmer 2005, 6).

It is within this setting of interfaith dialogue becoming more prominent that IGR began. With an increase in interfaith dialogue also came high expectations that religious groups discussing their differences in a supportive, friendly manner could advert or counteract the threatening aspects of religious extremism and violence exemplified in the attacks of September 11th. IGR members themselves have noted that because of the timing of their conception there has been a sense that dialogue is important. In the first meetings the weight of what was happening in the United States was felt to have added urgency and necessity to a group that sought unity amongst religious individuals.

IGR developed by trying to meet the needs of Kitchener, Waterloo, and its surrounding area.[14] IGR grew largely out of Brice Balmer's efforts to develop the KW through his various community building projects. "I was the chaplaincy director at the House of Friendship; there were more and more Muslims coming to community centres and also to the food hamper program and were asking about halal meat and some people were asking about why we did Christmases and why we didn't do Eid and other questions started to rise" (Balmer 2009). Alongside Canada's changing immigration policies and immigration patterns in general, the KW area has become more ethically diverse since the 1970's. While KW has a history of being prominently German with Mennonite communities of various orders it now has people from countries all over the world and religious individuals from many different traditions. Because of the changing demographics of KW throughout the past 30-40 years this has affected anything from the workforce, schools, and neighbourhoods to food hampers. Recognizing the need to make contacts throughout different faith communities in order to do his work Balmer started to make ties with religious leaders and laypeople in the region on his own and at a formal request by the people he worked with as the chaplaincy director at the House of Friendship. The House of Friendship is a Christian charity organization that was established in 1939 and its goal is to work with many faith groups in order to, "... serve low-income adults, youth and children in need of support, and to promote opportunities for personal growth, wholesome relationships and community development through the

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[14] IGR's boundaries are not defined by Kitchener and Waterloo, but they are more flexible. They have connections in Cambridge and surrounding municipalities in their community involvement and whatnot. They allow and acknowledge that people from a large geographical area are welcome to participate in IGR and would not discourage membership or partnership from someone based on geography alone. Yet IGR does meet in Kitchener and most members are from this area. For the purposes of this paper Kitchener/Waterloo will be used with the understanding that what is really meant is "Kitchener/Waterloo and the surrounding areas".

application of holistic Christian principles" (Neufeld). Because this organization seeks to serve those in need, when the people in need change, the services provided need to address this alteration. So while not only was there a recognizable difference in the religious landscape of KW but the needs of the community at large had changed as well. Balmer was invited to become a part of the KW Council of Churches in 1999, a Christian ecumenical group with approximately 35 congregations to which he served as the Mennonite representative.[15] While this group is specifically a Christian ecumenical organization its mandate is: "The Council invites denominations to work together by responding to needs in our community, and by fostering respect and understanding for other faiths, religions and philosophies" (Kitchener-Waterloo Council of Churches). This shows that Council of Churches displays some interest in reaching out to do interreligious work and that this organization served as providing an atmosphere where Balmer could begin his multifaith work. When Balmer went to the KW Council of Churches he was asked what kind of program he would like to see to address the spiritual needs of the community. Balmer responded that he wanted to see the group expand to more of an interfaith focus rather than simply a Christian-ecumenical one; "My issues are as much multifaith as much as they are Christian" (Balmer 2009). With the KW Council of Churches backing, Brice worked with various individuals to herald several multifaith programs in the area in order to form relationships and coordination between the various religious traditions of KW.

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[15] The KW Council of Churches lists 35 congregations as members as of 2007-2008 which is the most up to date information available, Kitchener-Waterloo Council of Churches, "Membership Congregation 2007-2008" (http://www.kwcouncilofchurches.org/2.htm"http://www.kwcouncilofchurches.org/2.htm). Balmer was the Mennonite representative in 1999 to which there is no information available as to the membership or size of the organization at that time.

To form a unified multifaith organization took time and practice. Initially Balmer worked with people within the Council of Churches in order to facilitate interfaith meetings. The Council of Churches was already holding four dinners a year in order to organize events, fundraise, and promote fellowship. Balmer worked with various individuals within the Council of Churches to bring an interfaith element to these dinners by inviting adherents from different religious traditions to attend. The idea was to create a Christian-Jewish dialogue one time, then a Christian-Muslim dialogue, a Christian-Hindu dialogue, and so on (Balmer 2009). While these dinners were well-received there were aspects to it that were unsatisfactory for some. For starters these dinners were fairly spread out and always with a different faith tradition; and therefore different representatives. This hindered the ability to form relationships across religious boundaries. Another issue was that it was a Christian dinner hosting another religious tradition, while for certain events this can be an excellent means of reaching out this was not a means of providing equal participation and neutral territory for a dialogue to take place.[16] From this beginning Balmer decided to try to organize an interfaith group which met regularly and joined religious people of KW in order to impact the community in a joint manner.

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[16] Balmer describes how to organize a successful, rigorous, equal, and safe dialogue setting. He notes the need for no one group to dominate the dialogue and for the issues of power and space to be addressed (Balmer, 2005). Similarly Mohammad Abu-Nimer and co. describe issues of power and space (Abu-Nimer et al 2007, 39-41). Here, what group is the majority in the society the dialogue takes place is discussed as well as who holds the most political power and what role the minority religious groups have both inside and outside of the dialogue all comes into play. By paying attention to location, timing, participant selection and other issues power equalization may not be complete, but it can be addressed to some degree. It is suggested that the groups should be kept small and follow certain ground rules in order to keep everyone safe. As IGR develops as its own entity, many of these guidelines were followed while the dinner dialogues addressed less of these issues, which may not be uncommon as a first step towards creating interfaith dialogue group.

It was decided that an interfaith group should be formed that followed certain guidelines to ensure a safe equal setting for the religious traditions of KW to get together. The first attempt at an interfaith group "met for half a year and then fizzled out" (Balmer 2006, 167). This interfaith group did not last because of various reasons ranging from the people involved to the circumstances surrounding the group. While the group was interested in developing interfaith programs for youth and adults, the participants did not take the time to develop personal relationships with one another (Balmer 2006, 166-167). Another issue was that the group had a majority of its members who were Christians and so one religion tended to dominate the group. To add to this issue, those of other religions who were involved had struggles within their own faith communities to coincide with their attempt to participate in a multifaith group. "Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and other non-Christians newcomers had not established communities or even built structures for worship" (Balmer 2006, 167). While the group did not last long it did have an impact on those involved and because of the difficulties this group experienced, Balmer's next attempt to form an interfaith group learned from these struggles. Balmer's early work to form an interfaith community helped to establish an even greater amount of networking and did introduce various members of different religious communities to one another. At a deeper level however, IGR has certain guidelines or principles that are applied to avoid certain potential dividing issues which are very important to the members of IGR. These five guidelines can be summed as follows, no one religious should in the majority, no more than two representatives from any religious tradition, no proselytizing, speaking with respect and tolerance, and the emphasis is on both relationship building as well as community development.

Part 2

IGR: Representation and Interfaith Dialogue

      The founders of IGR learned from previous experiences and as a result developed guidelines for dealing with religious difference for their next inception. Considering the ideological and personality difference coming together to form a unified group putting these principles into practice was a process of its own. IGR's first two principles have to do with representation and who participates, the second two with the tone of the conversations and the final guideline has to do with logistics; the group's purpose and its ethos. Representation can be a convoluted issue for interfaith dialogue organizers. There is a desire to be fair, to have a lot of religions present, to avoid marginalizing anybody, and to get people involved who will contribute in a positive way. An ideal dialogue has "an atmosphere of equality and openness" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 37). However, there can be a perceived burden of responsibility. This comes with the participant's knowledge that they are speaking from a particular viewpoint and yet stand as a representative of a vast, diverse religion in the minds of those present. Power dynamics come into play whenever representation is discussed. Abu-Nimer discusses how having an equal number of people from each faith tradition may still not fully address power issues considering the context that a dialogue takes place within (Abu-Nimer et al 2007, 39). One must consider all aspects of the dialogue in order to address power issues (Abu-Nimer et al 2007, 40). IGR does not actively recruit members, participation is voluntary and not necessarily consistent, and so it relies on the group's recognition of the need to avoid having any one religion become overbearing. There is a steering committee and a meeting chairperson who alternates every month to help direct the discussion. But IGR

for the most part simply relies on its members to keep the tone safe, inviting, and dynamic. IGR does seek to address issues of representation while recognizing the religious makeup of the KW area. While there are a lot religious traditions who call this area home, Christianity is still the majority religion. So, while IGR does not want their interfaith meetings to be dominated by Christians, it is difficult to turn people away who want to take part in the dialogue. If more Christians than non-Christians show up at any particular meeting there is not a lot to be done about this. A typical meeting will have many different religious traditions present; during the meetings I attended there were religious adherents from Islam, Sikh, Buddhism, Unitarian, Judaism, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Christian Science, Mennonite, Hindu, Baha'i, Lutheran, United Church, Neo Pagan, Church of Latter-day Saints, and Swedeborgian. At certain meetings there were as many Christians as non-Christians but in some of the five meetings I attended there were as more non-Christians than Christians.[17] In this way the group is able to avoid having Christianity as being the majority in an overwhelming sense. While any particular meeting may stray outside the guidelines somewhat (for instance if three Unitarians were to show up one time there would not be any consequence), because of the diversity of the group and the amount of people who have ties to IGR there is an ability to say that the group is not overwhelmingly Christian. This is tampered by the second principle that states there should only be two representatives from any faith tradition. In an interview, Steve Higgins said that one of the learning points early on in IGR's history was for many people to discover the vast amount of denominations, subsections, distinct communities, and diverse affiliations within religions other than Christianity. This ability to recognize

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[17] See pages 5 and 6 for a more complete account of the meetings I observed while researching IGR.

the complexity of other faith traditions is considered an important element for producing a positive dialogue (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 37-38).

However, at IGR some dilemmas surrounding representation do arrive from time to time. At the beginning of each meeting the group will always introduce themselves and what faith tradition they come from. One person introduced themselves and as for their religion they simply stated "human" emphasizing the fact that religious identities can divide while our humanity can unify. At another meeting there was an ongoing joke where someone would say "I'm the token ___". While this showed the group's ability for good natured humour, there may be an underlying feeling for some people present that they are a part of an interfaith group simply because the group does not have anyone else from their tradition.

The ability to speak for a whole religious tradition is difficult, even speaking of one's own personal faith experiences can be problematic. There is a tendency for people who take part in dialogue to not want to speak for their whole tradition claiming that they are only speaking from there personal experiences as a religious person.[18] In 2004 this was an issue for the Parliament of World's Religions as well, "This honest particularism, it was argued, would foster a sense of mutual respect for difference and therefore enable us to discover the brother in the other. At the same time, there was a keen sense that members of perceived religious communities should confront the actions of other individuals who claimed to act in the name of their community" (Zavos 2008, 56-57). In an interview one participant emphasized this point in that no one at IGR is appointed by

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[18] In fact, the IGR website emphasizes this point where its membership is posted, it states, "The individuals who attend the Interfaith Grand River meetings are members of the groups listed. These individuals attend for the purpose of discussion and understanding and do not officially "represent" their respective groups

their religion to represent them, "I stand in IGR as an example of a Unitarian and not as a person appointed by Unitarians for IGR" (Dickey 2009). While someone participating in IGR may recognize that they can only speak for themselves, it is apparent that at times there is only one Roman Catholic, one Mennonite, or one Buddhist in the room. Conversely there are times when people will bring up the official stance of their tradition in order to shed some light on the discussion topic at hand and so there is a vacuum between the particularistic stance that any dialogue member is compelled to put forward and the nature of interfaith gatherings where people are expected to speak for their faith tradition (Zavos 2008, 57). While there may be no simple solution to how people should deal with representation and interfaith dialogue, IGR deals with this issue in a month by month manner in which participants are encouraged to share their thoughts and experiences with the group and they are simply accepted as a part of an ongoing dialogue. Another consideration of representation does not stem from the people participating in the dialogue at all - but rather those who are not participating. While it has already been noted that many religious traditions have religious adherents who participate in IGR there are still religious communities that do not come out to any meetings. IGR does recognize this fact and actually states: "We are still hoping to find individuals from the Zoroastrian and Native Spirituality traditions, among others" (Interfaith Grand River). There is also a lack of conservative or orthodox religious perspectives amongst those who participate in the dialogue. While not all religious communities may have an interest in interfaith dialogue and some people may simply be unable to take part in this particular group, there are religious voices in the KW area whose voice is not represented by IGR,

nor report back to them"
(http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org/members.shtml"http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org/members.shtml).

however, the group has never made claims to being able to speak for all the religious communities of KW, simply that it provides a multifaith voice.

Part 3

Tone and Interfaith Dialogue

Now that the first two guidelines dealing with the issues of representation have been discussed the second two guidelines (that there should be no proselytizing and people should always speak to one another with respect) shall be addressed. The tone of the dialogue is very important. It is possible to have boring, placate, or even hurtful dialogues, but for every meeting of IGR I have attended there has always been robust, dynamic, and encouraging discussions taking place between the participants. I was told by several IGR participants that their dialogue is not for 'seekers.' A seeker is one who wants to simply learn about all the religious traditions they can or those who are trying to find a religious path for themselves. The dialogue is intended for those who will be able to contribute by speaking about their lives as a spiritual person. The importance of having participants of interfaith dialogue adhering to a faith group can be described as crucial (Bryant and Flinn 1989, xii). Since this dialogue is not meant for those who consider themselves religious seekers, proselytizing is out of place. IGR wants to promote a dialogue that is focused on the sharing of religious ideas and experiences, not a place for religious communities to try and find new participants. However, proselytizing as a part of interfaith dialogue does have a history. The tendency for joining a group where one gets to talk about their faith to lead to active proselytizing has goes back to the first World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. "Although not successful on this occasion,

Dharmapala did write in his diary about successful conversions at the Parliament, as indeed did Barrows in his official account. This, then, is evidence of a kind of competitive spirit underpinning the Parliament, a struggle for dominance in a perceived common space, the space of religion" (Zavos 2008, 49). One means of keeping the dialogue at IGR cordial (and not competitive) was brought up in the March 2010 meeting. There was a discussion on the nature of religions and whether religious traditions are actually distinct in many ways, even in a very central and pertinent manner or if each religion is at its core a means of bringing all people to one source.[19] One member brought up the fact that the reason IGR is able to keep a dialogue ongoing is that there is no judgment making of other people's religions, and there is no need for the group as a whole to come up with conclusions or even consensus about their dialogue topics. There is an understanding that issues will not be accepted by every member in the same manner and that allows the dialogue to take place, but not get caught up in a constant battle for one stance to win out over others.[20]

This not needing to come to a consensus came through in my interviews as well. When discussing proselytizing throughout the interview different members of IGR had different stances on what the role of evangelization should have in the community at large. Higgins noted the difference between witnessing, which is sharing aspects of one's faith and is an important aspect of interfaith dialogue, and evangelizing which is unsatisfied until one has changed their dialogue partner's whole belief structure. (Higgins

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[19] Different members would use different terms for this source. Sometimes it was called Divine or the Ultimate. Other times it was only described through allegory as light or the end of the journey, as in a place.
[20] IGR states officially that it seeks, "to deepen the knowledge of the commonalities and differences among religious and spiritual traditions"
(http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org/.shtml"http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org/.shtml).

2009). Through witnessing people can learn about different religions and understand them, but evangelizing is much less appealing to Higgins. Similarly Dickey is against proselytizing as it is often practiced (Dickey 2009). Someone can share aspects of their faith if they are so compelled but forum and methodology can make the difference between friendly exchanges and uncomfortable proselytizing. Bob Chodos did not comment on proselytizing but did advocate for the IGR sponsored program Encountering World's Religions which teaches students about many religious traditions and alluded to the fact that religious knowledge should be shared in a fair manner where no religious perspective is held above all others (Chodos 2010). Meanwhile, Ahuja is less concerned about religious adherents evangelizing as long as it is done peacefully and with good intentions; "Intention is important. Like if somebody is forcing onto somebody else their religion, then Sikhs are against that. If somebody is spreading the word of God, it doesn't matter how they do it, if they're doing it in a peaceful way, if they're not hurting anybody" (Ahuja 2010). Throughout our interview Idrisa Pandit stressed the need to recognize and respect difference in our community. While she did not condemn evangelizing outright she did speak against the desire to make everybody the same and she emphasized that differences, even religious differences are good for a community and are God's will (Pandit 2009). Meanwhile Balmer states specifically that proselytizing should have no part in interfaith dialogue.

> *No Proselytizing.* This is a cardinal rule and probably should be
> first. Entering into interfaith/multifaith organizations and activities is
> not for proselytizing... The purpose of interfaith discussion is to learn
> to know the other people and their faiths. Respect for their traditions,
> beliefs, history and values is essential, even though one may disagree
> with a doctrine, interpretation of history, or practice (Balmer 2005,
> 12).

Through these responses it becomes clear that while different opinions on how to share one's faith may have some divergences throughout IGR there is a consensus that talking about faith is a loaded process that requires contemplation and consideration of the recipient of one's efforts. While some are more favourable than others towards evangelizing, as a whole the IGR meetings are able to have an ongoing dialogue because each person's respect for diverging views.

Part 4

IGR's Dual Roles: Interfaith Dialogue and Community Action

Although proselytizing is not a part of the dialogues at IGR that does not mean people are not impacted and affected by the discussions. There is still the ability to grow in one's faith and to come to understand other religious traditions without converting to them. The interfaith dialogue itself, monthly meeting, sharing of religious truths, and experiences to be had motivates members of IGR to support their group. Ahuja, Higgins, and Pandit all mentioned in our interviews how being a part of interfaith dialogue can deepen one's own faith. "The primary goal of dialogue is for each participant to learn from the other" (Swidler 1981, 9). While projecting one's thoughts and views are relevant to promote discussion, the ability to understand and hear what someone other than oneself is saying is a central aspect of dialogue. Part of this process means clearing up misconceptions about other faiths; one must go from "unlearning misinformation to discerning each other's values to exploring new areas of truth" (Swidler 1981, 12). Within this process people are expected to learn and develop new insights. However their own religious views should not be threatened as a part of dialogue. Balmer noted that one

important aspect of IGR is that there is a collective understanding that everyone in the room has a profound spirituality (Balmer 2010). This respect and appreciation of other people's spirituality allows for the acceptance that the group as a whole does not need to conform to a singular religion to be fulfilled. Mojzes agrees that this approach is beneficial to interfaith dialogue; "no synthesis is to be expected" but as an ongoing cooperation, it is a process and not an endpoint (Mojzes 1989, 206). Dialogue should not be based on the need for the participants to adhere to view that are not their own, they should be given the space to alter their views, but they should be allowed their own discovery of truth (Mojzes 1989, 199). This is a matter of emphasis. Instead of focusing on what belief is the most correct, the dialogue ought (and is at IGR) to be centred on bringing people together. The aspect of relationships formed allows one to overcome theological differences because of the respect people have for one another. "Dialogue is a method, a path, a way, by which one person or group relates to one anther" (Mojzes 1989, 204). Dialogue needs to focus on the human element, it can only happen between people (Mojzes 1989, 201). Dialogue does not take place between religions, it takes place between people, and so the development and the characteristics of a dialogue must to recognize this factor.

Though dialogue should not be conclusion driven, there can be different goals of any particular interfaith dialogue endeavour. Often interfaith dialogue efforts are often divided into three groups. McCarthy describes these three groups as those seeking to promote a change in society, those seeking the edification and enlightenment of the practitioners, and those seeking an academic dialogue, a conceptual "truth-seeking" dialogue (McCarthy 2007, 20-22). IGR fits in between these models in that it takes one

hour to take part in the dialogue proper – engaging in seeking the edification of the practitioners and taking part in a conceptual dialogue. The second hour is dedicated to community involvement – during this hour people discuss what events are taking place - they network and plan on how to impact the community. There can be debate over what style of dialogue is the most pertinent or beneficial.[21] Networking and cooperation are potential results of interfaith dialogue and these can be useful tools in impacting one's community. Some argue that genuine dialogue ought to encourage action and have communal focus (Mojzes 1989, 202). Of the IGR members I interviewed there are some who are interested in the first hour while others are motivated by the second. Dickey describes the most significant part of IGR is the sharing of ideas, the ideas that are presented by IGR members month in and month out is what stands out to him (Dickey 2009). On the other hand, Pandit seems much more motivated by action than by talk. She describes a desire to move from simply discussing issues to engaging the community in a more direct manner (Pandit 2009). She regards the reason for having an interfaith dialogue is to be able to impact one's community. "The ultimate goal of any interfaith organization should be what impact is our meeting or coming together has on the community at large" (Pandit 2009). Meanwhile Higgins argues for the balance that makes IGR so distinctive. He opines that because the dialogue part of the meetings has been maintained IGR is so successful as a multifaith group. Higgins shows concern for the community involvement aspect to take over IGR's identity because he values both as important and one should not overshadow the other (Higgins 2009).

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[21] In chapter 1 it was discussed how John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith are presented as those who recognize dialogue for its potential in truth seeking and they seem motivated by this notion. Meanwhile Paul Knitter opines that social justice action is a more promising reason to base one's dialogue upon.

As when IGR began there are still a growing number of religious ethnicities in KW and IGR is still regarded by its members a means of helping the community at large deal with its changing religiosity. Pandit works in many volunteer organizations and she has started and continues to run her own, Muslim Social Services. "Because, mind you, Muslims are not a monolithic group. We are like 50-60 languages just in Waterloo spoken in the Muslim community so it's not one culture or one race of any sort - it's a very, very multiethnic group of people" (Pandit 2009). IGR has become a means of helping the community deal with issues that have risen in past, like the hospital multifaith room, prayers services, peace walks, Encountering World Religions, and now Building Bridges which is program where a faith community will open its services to people of different faiths. IGR has also provided a voice for the multifaith community of the KW area. Shortly after their first meeting IGR felt compelled to issue a statement regarding the terrorist attacks of Sept 11, 2001 and since then it has issued a few public statements promoting a positive understanding of religion which is fostered by the dialogue that takes place every month at a meeting of IGR. As will be seen in chapter 3, recently the need to speak out in the community has driven IGR to take on more of an advocacy role than before speaking out against prejudice and racism that has shown itself in the community.

Part 1

Interfaith Dialogue and Social Justice

Many members of IGR have mentioned that the group seems to be at a crossroads. The group has been more involved in advocacy and community engagement in the past few months than usual and some are questioning whether this is simply a response to a specific situation or whether this is a genuine progression of the group. As the members of IGR have been meeting for almost nine years there is some discussion as to how the group should move forward. IGR was conceived as a dialogue group to be a resource for the community and as a means of promoting religious adherents of various religious traditions to get to know one another. Whether or not this dual purpose remains has been raised for discussion. IGR has an informality about it. Most people come to a meeting only knowing a broad theme for that month; while some bring notes, many do not. The conversations are not formalized but organic. There is a moderator who seeks simply to assure that those who want to speak get a chance to do so and tries and keep the meetings running on time. This balance between rigidity and fluidity means that IGR as an organization does not usually seek specific goals, but relies on whoever is present to bring to the table whatever is important to them. This is contrasted with McCarthy's study of interfaith groups in America which has lead her to the conclusion that; "Most interfaith work is a purposeful, intentional thing. Driven by intellectual passion, politics or a commitment to community, harmony, people of different religious identities find or create structures that will allow them to explore their difference and find a common purpose" (McCarthy 2007, 126). While it is certainly true that aspects of McCarthy's

assessment does hold true to IGR, it does not capture the fact that IGR relies on spontaneity and the friendships in the groups to encourage and spark conversation. There is a disorganized amount of dialogue that is allowed in order to keep IGR to being about the specific participants and not simply the goals or ideals of what a dialogue group should be or ought to accomplish.

Interfaith dialogue can set out to accomplish various feats. It can foster peace, understanding, truth seeking, built relationships, new appreciations for different beliefs, and religious peace. However, if one were to test whether an interfaith dialogue group actually accomplishes these goals the very nature of this process can make it difficult to measure. For instance, many of IGR's goals are abstract or vague.[22] Interfaith dialogue as a process takes time and is very dependent on the people involved to promote change. It is heavily dependent on the participants to take the dialogue seriously and to stick with it. Because of these issues the impact interfaith dialogue has can be unquantifiable. "As with other dialogue groups (ethnic, cultural, or racial), one criticism of IFD [Interfaith dialogue] is that it does not accomplish anything tangible. For this reason, the action and advocacy model emerges, which focuses on undertaking a common project with those of another faith" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 26). One way to deal with the lack of quantifiable results produced by an interfaith dialogue group is to focus on certain tasks of either advocacy or action in community development. This focus does put pressure on the group. Conversely, Paul Knitter suggests actions as a means of providing unity to a multifaith group, a unity in the desire to bring about certain changes in society. He argues that when searching for something to unify the religious what is needed is not a theological similarity that will bring the religious people from all different traditions

together, rather a common purpose can unify religious people (Knitter 1999, 23). Knitter argues that religious unity is necessary and sought after, and so he turns to the world's ills as a means of calling the religious into joint action to address social injustice. "I suggest that we begin that process not by looking for something within the religions (the elusive common thread) but for something that exists outside of the religions; something that tall of them cannot ignore; something that stirs them, unsettles them, challenges them, something that calls for a response from each of them – a common set of problems" (Knitter 1999, 23). With a focus to bring religions together, doctrinal differences can become secondary and societal impact becomes primary. Here dialogue is not set simply for edification or interpersonal encounters, but for the ability to aid the needy, the poor, the oppressed and the suffering. This type of dialogue depends on the participants to seek out a certain kind of experience. While some dialoguers may be more comfortable sitting at a table discussing theological abstracts Knitter decides that it is more prudent for religious individuals to try and better the world we live in. While Knitter's prescription may offer promising ventures towards bettering the needy, why interfaith dialogue has to follow this model is unclear. There are various approaches to interfaith dialogue and while Knitters offers insight into how to unify participants who are struggling with religious differences, his approach to interfaith dialogue as a whole neglects the potential for simple discussion and knowledge-seeking dialogue to take place, such as is found in IGR.

Throughout IGR there are those who are interested in community development and social justice issues; as well there are those who are motivated by the dialogue itself, by the exchange of ideas. However, these two types of dialogue are not necessarily

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[22] IGR's goals can be found in the Appendices page 94 .

mutually exclusive. IGR as a group has managed to balance these various methods of dialogue in the past by addressing the exchange of ideas for one hour and the planning of community involvement for the second. In an IGR meeting participants can become more aware of the needs of different religious communities and can be better able to work with them. "By extension, the more complex one's experience of religious identity group differences, the greater one's ability to engage in more cooperative, peaceful, interactions across religious lines" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 28). While dialogue does not have to be action oriented it can serve as a catalyst or a foundation to help community engagement along. Because IGR as a group has different polarizing components within its makeup, how it addresses the models of advocacy and action for interfaith dialogue could be very defining for what direction it takes in the future.

Part 2

An IGR Member and a Community Issue

It has already been noted that how one goes about impacting their community depends on the makeup of that community. IGR was developed in part as a response to needs the founders of the group saw in the community. In late 2009, IGR recognized a need in the community and took action to respond. This need was based around a newspaper article, and reactions to it, when it was found that the Gideon's International in Canada program were distributing Bibles to fifth grade students in the Waterloo district school board. At the time, a journalist working for local newspaper, the Record, was interviewing Idrisa Pandit along with two other women about an unrelated topic; a statement made by the Muslims Canadian Congress concerning legislating the niqab so

arguing that the government should prohibit its use. Within that conversation Pandit was asked what she thought of the Gideon Bible's being distributed and she described the interaction as such: "Well, as a person living in a democratic secular society I don't see what place this would have in a public school system. As you know I have a child that goes to a Mennonite school and that's a choice I have made to send my child to a Christian school, ... I also have a son who goes to public school and I wouldn't expect him to have a religious education in a public school, or to have any proselytization going on" (Pandit 2009). Later, another reporter also working for the Record, writing about the education system in Waterloo decided to ask Pandit about Bibles being distributed to grade five students and in her words this is how a Pandit became the focus for a local debate,

> She [the reporter] said, 'well what do you think about the matter?' And I told her that what I think about it. She said, 'is it ok to use your name with your statement?' and I said, 'sure I don't mind you can use my name in that you asked me.' What I didn't know is that she would make the story about me on the front page of the newspaper. So apparently making it appear that I had gone to the school board with a complaint, or gone to the newspaper with a complaint and of course the issue went from there (Pandit 2009).

The article Public schools shouldn't help distribute Bibles, mom says by Luisa D'Amato, Nov 14, 2009, became the source of an ongoing controversy. While the article does not actually say that Pandit approached the school board or the paper with a complaint, it was often assumed by readers that this was the case. This article does place Pandit in opposition to the school board's decision to distribute Bibles and quotes her throughout the paper depicting Pandit as "concerned" and mentions the fact that she is a Muslim woman. Once the story got out, however, the real issue became apparent. There were talk shows and debates on the local Television station in which this controversy was brought

to. There were angry letters to the Record displaying that some citizens who were upset, complaining that a Muslim woman was opposed to the Bible. There were those who stated that Canada is a Christian country and that those who are not comfortable with this assessment should 'go back to where they came from'. Notions of tolerance and respect which IGR tries to foster were not recognized and one of their own members was being targeted for their opinions, and at times, for their religion. Pandit got phone calls at home and some vandalism in the aftermath of the article being written. Pandit's name being put into a newspaper article and the response brought about a reaction throughout the city that she found distressing.

> But what I found quit shocking... are the deep levels of resentment that exist in the Waterloo region towards newcomers, towards immigrants. All of these resentments that were underlying all of a sudden they came to the surface, and all of this hate and venom that started to spew. It was unbelievable to the point where they started to send letters to someone who had my last name, threatening letters and whatnot. So it's disturbing, it's very disturbing to live in a community where this is - and the level of hatred that exists below the surface where there's this level of politeness (Pandit 2009).

This reaction and the recognition that there was this deep seeded resentment in the community, which was being directed at a member of IGR enticed the group to respond to current events in a more direct fashion than in the past.[23] IGR has issued statements towards events taking place in the community both before and after the Record article on Pandit. While IGR at this time was not new to issuing statements on religious tolerance, this particular case seemed to promote more discussion amongst IGR members for several reasons. First, IGR went to new avenues to get their message out. IGR members

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[23] One of the first things IGR did after its meeting in September of 2001 was issue a response to the violence committed by terrorists on the world trade centre. IGR has also promoted peace talks and spoken against violence and hate speech regarding the Gaza conflict. IGR recently condemned the vandalism that

went on the local television network, Rogers Cable to take part in a discussion on the school board's decision to distribute Bibles; this level of advocacy was new to the group. Also, IGR has had some of its constituents meet with members of the school board to discuss their ideas of a positive way in which religion can be a part of the school system. Secondly distinguishing factor about this issue is the length, the article was printed in Nov 2009, and in May 2010 IGR's meeting's topic is how to engage the community towards understanding IGR's position on the Gideon Bible distribution. Finally, this case stands out because of its timing; IGR has been meeting for almost nine years and seems to be at a crossroads. Many of the members I interviewed mentioned that IGR is taking a more active role in trying to impact the community, as it has been noted, some are more enthusiastic about this development than others, however all feel compelled to react to when one of their own is feeling threatened. This highlights the fact that IGR is moving into new territory regarding how to impact the community in certain ways.

Because of the makeup of IGR, different members prefer different means for how the group should interact with the community at large. Pandit, who is very involved in various volunteer organizations throughout the city, would like to see more direct action taken by IGR as an organization. Pandit notes that interfaith dialogue in itself does not suffice in order to have an impact on the community. When speaking of interfaith dialogue she opines, "I think it's a start. I think if we become complacent and some how feel that we've done our job be being part of a multifaith group it doesn't serve its purpose at all" (Pandit 2009). Dialogue is presented as a means of promoting relationships and as a catalyst for social justice action. Balmer agrees that IGR could play

took place at a local Synagogue and Sikh temple, to see this statement refer to the Appendices pages 99-100.

a role in promoting relationships which will enable further community action (Balmer 2009). Balmer notes, "first of all I don't think you do conflict resolution in a community as big as Waterloo Kitchener without building some kind of relationship together" (Balmer 2009). After building that relationship Balmer seeks to address the root cause of conflict in the society. He states that, "religious intolerance is tied to a lot of other issues like prejudism and racism and stereotyping and a lot of other things" (Balmer 2009). While dialogue is a means of confronting intolerance it is presented as a beginning; therefore, there is a tendency for some in the group to desire moving beyond mere dialogue. Pandit attests, "meaningful dialogue has to translate into action so all of this talk is ok but how do we translate this talk into real stuff outside of this table that is what is most critical" (Pandit 2009). Dialogue is presented as a stepping stone or part of a larger picture in that it has potential to lead to action which is what really matters.

With interfaith dialogue leading the way for action, the type of action to be had must be considered. As far as what course of action IGR should take Balmer notes that the group has been active already and now needs to get at the heart of the issues that were exposed during the responses to the Record's article.

> Well I think, I think the first thing is that we've already put a statement out which was appreciated by some people. The second thing, when I saw the comments that came into the paper in some ways some people's thoughts being silent about the changing religious texture of our community and that's alright. But it also indicates a racism and intolerance which is, it didn't go underground like, it came to the surface. So now that its at the surface we have to deal with it we can't act like it doesn't exist so I'm glad for that (Balmer 2009).

Now that the intolerance has come to the surface, Balmer sees a reason for IGR to respond. Meanwhile, Pandit speaks to the need for dialogue to play a vital role in impacting one's community because it promotes open communication which leads to

trust which allows for communities to be stronger (Pandit 2009). The goal in Pandit's mind is to go beyond mere politeness, past tolerance to a pluralistic society. Pandit's call for communities to be built on trust reflects Eck's description of what a pluralistic society is, as Pandit herself recognizes. Eck describes pluralisms as a goal that is beyond diversity and tolerance. "First, pluralism is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond mere plurality or diversity to active engagement with that plurality" (Eck 2002, 70). Having a diverse society simply means that there are people who are a part of that society who are different. Where we go from there as a society and how one interacts with difference is where Eck puts her emphasis. "Second, pluralism goes beyond mere tolerance to the active attempt to understand the other" (Eck 2002, 70). Tolerance in Eck's view is not discriminating against diversity and this is not enough. Pluralism necessitates one has a positive interaction with difference calls for something more than neglect or indifference. Thus pluralism is presented as a means of facing differences and promoting a positive outlook despite the tendency to fear or distrust it. In Pandit's mind interfaith dialogue is a step towards promoting a pluralistic society. IGR has a role in fostering understanding and positive understandings of differences, however to go beyond the dialogue IGR would need to leave the proverbial dialogue table and become more active in the communit

Part 3

Seeking a Balance Between Dialogue and Activism: The Role of Religious Differences in an Interfaith Group

While some present dialogue as a stepping stone that allows IGR to move onto other work, there are those who consider dialogue as having intrinsic value. Chodos describes maintaining a balance is important for IGR, one that recognizes the potential to impact the community at large but also realizes dialogue as having an intrinsic role to the group. Chodos explains that there are different ways in which IGR impacts the community and he sees a balance and a pattern that has emerged from engaging the society while simultaneously focusing on the dialogue itself. For example, as a group, IGR organizes and cosponsors events. Other times, IGR has been compelled to respond to crises that arise in the community (Chodos 2010). While IGR acts as an official sponsor to certain events, often members of IGR are actively engaged in organizing events because they may be in other volunteer organizations. In this way IGR stands as a resource for its own members by providing religious individuals, potential volunteers, contacts, networking, and a place to meet like minded individuals. At times the group itself plans and delivers events in order to promote a cause like prayer walks and a course for adults on the different religions of the world called Encountering World Religions. Responding to crises has come up throughout IGR's meetings as early as the first meeting on September 13, 2001 and it has issued public statements decrying religious violence, intolerance and such over the years. Another way in which IGR impacts the community is by "... acting as a resource group to people in the community as we've done with Grand River Hospital and with some police and so forth. I think there's always been that

balance and I think what the emphasis is, is depending on external events" (Chodos 2010). Chodos presents IGR as a dialogue group primarily that is reactionary to external events. Because debates over religious tolerance enter the public sphere, IGR responds to these opportunities. When organizations like the police or the Grand River Hospital approach IGR, it has the capabilities to offer insight into many diverse religious perspectives. While IGR does facilitate community events, and certain members are very active in volunteer organizations, the group itself seems to be primarily propelled by the dialogue and relationships that are formed, not through any specific goals on how to change its community. This type of attitude prompts the question of how far reaching an impact a group like IGR can have. Chodos admits that "there are those whom dialogue does not impact" (Chodos 2010). There are those who are unaware of the conversations IGR has every month or who are simply uninterested in them. There are some who pertain to a worldview in which religious pluralism and diversity are not valued and so "we're open to the charge that we're only talking among ourselves or only talking to people who think the way we do" (Chodos 2010). And yet that is not to say that Chodos thinks IGR is not having an impact.

> ... I mean at least we have provided another voice. Its like politicians, school boards, and people they respond to the loudest voice so at least we make it clear that there is an element in the community that savours a more pluralistic response, that favours a more positive stance towards the multifaith nature of the community and that they need to respond to that as well as the as well as the narrower voices that they tend to hear (Chodos 2010).

In this way IGR brings a voice to balance out others that are in the community promoting intolerance and religious exclusivism. IGR also serves as an example of religious people with vastly different beliefs who still come together and share common goals shared humanity and form deep relationships and respect for one another. "I think there's a

there's a wide spread sense that people have that to be religious means to be exclusive and groups like IGR can sort of in their own modest way can sort of help change that perception" (Chodos 2010).

Like Chodos, Higgins recognizes the need for balance within the group and he emphasizes its importance even more. For Higgins IGR has to be careful how it defines its role. Higgins is concerned with balance between the group's opposing poles; he wants the group to remain a dialogue group that reaches out to the community, not be tied up in a situation where one aspect of the group overshadows another. Advocacy can take over a group so that the dialogue suffers. For dialogue to take place there has to be open sharing of diverging views, whereas advocacy assumes a common purpose and common goal for the members. IGR is not conclusion bound but is an ongoing process, as opposed to predetermined goals and set methods for achieving certain outcomes. This is why Abu-Nimer states: "Used alone, the action/advocacy model is not a form of dialogue. However, it can be quite effective when coupled with actual interfaith conversations" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 26). Once a common purpose has been discovered instead of imposed, and once shared interests are divulged, volunteering on further community outreach can be a positive experience for dialogue groups. This is tampered by the fact that during our interview Higgins mentions some of the perils of IGR becoming too advocacy focused. "Because [advocacy] sets a precedent, and so does being involved with advocacy. If that takes over completely then we may fall in the trap of assuming that everyone sitting around that table is sharing similar beliefs and that's not what IGR is about" (Higgins 2009). This comes from Higgins' emphasis on IGR being a group that values diversity. While every member I spoke to values different faiths, what this looks

like in practice can vary. During one meeting I attended the discussion quickly turned to how religions relate to one another. There were certain members who argued that all religions teach at their core the same principles and that all religions are leading people to the same goal. One may call this endpoint different things: God, Nirvana, Heaven, Enlightenment, the Ultimate or Supreme Being. While others had trouble with this concept and expressed that the differences are at times profound. Some argued that while their understanding of religion compels them to respect all religious beliefs, and allows them to be impacted by the profound faith of individuals pertaining to other religious, however, existentially there are deep differences in their beliefs that they do not adhere to. The fact that these members had different understandings even on the nature of religion itself displays how the group prompts discussion and not conclusions. "Dialogue is an ongoing process; it does not have an end, it is the process itself that is important" (Higgins 2009).

This deep seated respect for differences is of special significance to Higgins. He sees his role in part to question assumptions made by the group. Being a Buddhist, Higgins notes how most people at IGR do believe in a personal higher being yet this notion does not apply to him. "Because you see, you look at the group and you look at IGR and there's, I think, one other person sitting at that table that's an atheist so that a lot of the basic assumptions that are shared around the table are not universal and people tend to forget that" (Higgins 2009). Another instance where Higgins noted a common assumption in the group was the use of the word "faith". He associates that term with belief, which to him is not as important to his religion as how one conducts themselves, "Buddhism is not a faith, it's a practice" (Higgins 2009). With this focus on divergences

and not simply similarities Higgins ties to the ongoing discussion of how engaged IGR should be in the community. "You have to value the divergences and that is the problem with advocacy, if you do that what you are advocating can easily be seen as competitors rather than as contributors" (Higgins 2009). Higgins does not want the goal of promoting change in the community to override IGR's strengths as a dialogue group, in that IGR recognizes and celebrates religious differences. As opposed to Knitter who focuses on what brings an interfaith group together, searching for a common purpose that will unify religious adherents who hold different perspectives; Higgins emphasizes the group's ability to unify notwithstanding religious differences. Here there is no common thread other than the fact that every member of IGR is religious, despite the fact different members would even define religion differently. With an advocacy group, there are shared assumptions, common goals and a sought after end point. This is a very different model than IGR's current emphasis on an ongoing, conclusion free dialogue that encourages different viewpoints. With advocacy the goals, means, and methods of promoting change may not be shared throughout IGR and so they would be unable to move forward without ostracizing its own members.

The matter of how IGR should make use of activism did come up during one of the meetings I attended. Since the article featuring Pandit's opinions on the Gideon Bible distribution took place on November 14, 2009 this was shortly after IGR's November meeting which took place on the 12th. The steering committee felt compelled to act rather quickly and posted a response to the article and the reception it had before the December meeting would take place.[24] The steering committee sent out an email with IGR's

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[24] The Statement was released on December 8th 2009 and IGR met on December 10th, 2009. To see this article refer to the Appendices pages 95-98.

statement in order to allow for feedback from the rest of the members. However, the following meeting was the first time the group as a whole was able to discuss the statement and some were distressed that they had not received the email presenting the statement. There were certain members who showed some concern that the steering committee was speaking on behalf of IGR as a whole. However, when the group was asked to show support for the statement the group voted unanimously in favour of its overall message, even though some were concerned with specific phrasing or certain details. In part, this discussion is reminiscent of Hans Küng's description of the 1993 World's Parliament of Religions. He describes how at the Parliament as a process of meeting the participant's need to be heard in regards to the makeup of the document *Towards a Global Ethic*. "Initially, there was no time to discuss the declaration, then there was time to discuss it, but not to alter it" (Küng 1993, 66). There was concern over the tone of the document and some where critical of specific points, Küng defends it by stating it truly is a result of multifaith consultation (Küng 1993, 67). There were motions to change the titles of the document which were dismissed (Küng 1993, 67). Küng's experience was that while many chose to sign the document, it is difficult to present a paper to a multifaith group and expect everyone to feel heard, even if the document was created through multifaith deliberation. This exemplifies the difficulty in seeking conformity even on something that one would assume are shared values, Küng's document was meant to represent basic morality and common ethics, something one would think many religious people would share even if their eschatologies do not line up. Even in a group like IGR where people have developed friendships and worked together on various projects, it is still difficult to present a document that speaks for the groups as

a whole. Assuming that everyone understands a particular notion - even one concerning morality, in a manner that is exactly the same can be falsified. This goes to show that effort and intention may not be enough when proposing documents that are said to state a group's position. Higgins' concern for recognizing difference and divergences as a key aspect of IGR, even though to the public it presents a unified stance on the issue of the Gideon's dispersing Bibles through the Public School system by presenting a statement to the media.

It is through difference that dialogue groups can move forward. Interfaith dialogue necessitates a means of dealing with difference, otherwise there would be no interfaith. Both Higgins and Ahuja mentioned in their interviews that through IGR they discovered different religious perspectives which lead to questioning their own beliefs and as a result grew stronger in their personal faith. Panikkar notes this propensity for encountering difference to encourage questioning which leads to knowledge when he states "To answer the question 'Who am I?' I must ask the question 'Who are you?'" (Panikkar 1979, 213). Difference is so important to Higgins that divergence in itself can promote a better society. While he cautions against IGR becoming primarily an advocacy group he does see dialogue as able to impact the community in some way. Bringing up differences in an open dialogue allows one to deal with divergences instead of ignoring or hiding them.

Through the monthly meetings at IGR differences are addressed and the group as whole becomes closer together by forming trust and relationships. In a similar vein, Higgins sees potential for the differences within his community which were surfaced by the Gideon Bible distribution controversy to serve as a means of bringing people together

by dealing with opposing views (Higgins 2009). In a typical IGR meeting, Higgins may challenge assumptions through asking questions, which is why he sees the role of religion in society is to strengthen it through asking questions (Higgins 2009). Questioning is a part of the dialogue experience and it stimulates interpersonal experiences on a deeper level.

> It is clear that the structure of the question is implicit in all experience. We cannot have experiences without asking questions. Recognizing that an object is different, and not as we first thought, obviously presupposes the question whether it was this or that. From a logical point of view, the openness essential to experience is precisely the openness of being either this or that. It has the structure of a question (Gadamer 1989, 362).

Here Gadamer argues that questioning presupposes openness that both allows for the displaying and challenging of assumptions. Questioning is a process which brings forth difference and allows for it to be faced. This is why Higgins values the divergences, it allows them to be exposed and IGR has to find a way to work through them. "For this reason, dialectic proceeds by way of question and answer or rather, the path of all knowledge leads through the question. To ask a question means to bring it in the open" (Gadamer 1989, 363). In this way, questioning and difference are seen as a catalyst to finding knowledge thus allowing interfaith dialogue to play a role in edifying participants. This is why bringing assumptions that are present in IGR into question is important to Higgins, and in this way he recognizes the potential for dealing with issues that arise in the community through questioning. Because of the article on the Gideon Bible distribution the community has been asking questions that allow for groups like IGR to present a certain response. While other voices are presenting their responses as well, this exchange could lead to openness and the presentation of new voices that previously were not heard. Also, questions can be spurred by controversy and surprise.

"In fact we have experiences when we are shocked by things that do not accord with our expectations" (Gadamer 1989, 366). This is why Higgins states, "I don't think IGR should be a comfortable place to sit" (Higgins 2009). IGR is a place where assumptions can be questioned and differences will be presented. There is no consensus that the participants will only talk about issues they agree upon. Disagreement is allowed and is a part of the monthly discussions; repeatedly IGR members have mentioned to me that the group values both convergences and divergences and this has become a defining aspect of IGR. As long as people are being respectful the right to shock one another is reserved during IGR sessions. By allowing IGR to be a place where differences are encouraged and dealt with, knowledge seeking and genuine experiences are achieved. This process is one in which Higgins would like to see spread throughout the community at large. In this way the impact of dialogue is less direct, but it has the emphasis of facing differences and dealing with them instead of presenting a unified front to the community or simply focusing on the shared notions of the IGR members.

Chapter 4: "Interfaith" and "Dialogue" and what they mean for "Interfaith Dialogue"

Part 1

Interfaith Dialogue and its Terms

In the last chapter I discussed various forces that impact IGR and how the group is seeking to address them. There are both internal and external factors which seek to influence IGR directly or indirectly while the group as a whole considers how to more forward as a dialogue group. To add to this discussion, how IGR fits into a broader understanding of interfaith dialogue will be considered. In this chapter, amongst others, Abu-Nimer, Panikkar, and Gadamer will be applied in order to analyze how IGR illustrates broader themes that impact interfaith dialogue. While each individual could warrant their own chapter in any study on interfaith dialogue, I will draw from various sources to discover aspects of interfaith dialogue theory that apply to IGR. As has been discussed earlier, by exposing different views and understandings and bringing them together, this is one method to check assumptions and seek out new knowledge. My literature study will make use of the dialogical process to some degree by placing multiple theorists alongside one another. Like IGR's practice of using both convergences and divergences to propel the dialogue, I will explore how different theorists apply directly and indirectly to my study of IGR.

IGR is based upon interfaith dialogue. For the participants this can mean different things. For starters, there is no agreed upon definition of faith. Another consideration is what is meant by dialogue; what kind of communication and what is to be achieved by discussion can be contentious issues. Religions vary in practice, creed, application, and deeper meanings. To have the religious of a certain area come together to converse does

not mean that they will know what to talk about, how to talk about their religion to one another, or share common assumptions. The notion of religion itself can be divisive or lead to false assumptions. Dialogue, similarly, can have various meanings. There are interfaith groups that are based on dialogue which are very disparate from IGR. However, even the members of IGR themselves can have various understandings of the importance of defining aspects of dialogue. For this chapter an analysis of what "interfaith" and "dialogue" means will be discussed by using IGR as an illustration.

Part 2

"Religion" and its Implications: How different Understandings of Religion Impact Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue can be a loaded term when broken down. To begin with, the term faith will be examined. The "I" in IGR does not stand for interreligious, but rather, interfaith. Religion as a term can be problematic and this could be why faith is used in its place. Any single definition of religion that encompasses all of the world's religions is difficult to come by. Definitions tend to become either so vague that they do not really tells us much of anything, or they become so specific that many religious traditions do not fit. Jonathan Z. Smith reminds us that some definitions are better than others (Smith 2004, 193); however, the criterion one uses to defend their definition tends to rely on biases. Oxtoby notes the definition of religion originates from Christian roots and therefore can be misleading when applied to other religious traditions. This is because Christianity was considered the prototype for what a religion should be (Oxtoby and Segal 2007, 555-557). Because of a broader understanding of what religion can mean,

today there does not exist a single prototype. Some religions have sacred texts, some believe in a higher power, while others do not. In this way the notion of what a religion is and what it is not can be muddied. "In fact, it seems impossible to identify any feature that is absolutely essential in order for a tradition to qualify as a religion" (Oxtoby and Segal 2007, 557). While this may be the case for those who try to define religion, to those who practice a religion, the term can mean something very different, something much more personal and much more real. This is why it can be helpful to have a case by case definition of religion, in the sense that religion itself is used more to describe what is generally accepted as a religion all the while recognizing that specific religions themselves need to be defined in a mind for specificity.

This personal aspect of religion is reflected somewhat in Wilfred Cantwell Smith's argument that there is no single understanding of what is meant by Buddhism (Cantwell Smith 1962, 152).[25] As an overarching term Buddhism loosely refers to a shared history, but in practice there are many variations of Buddhists living out their religion in various ways (Cantwell Smith 1962, 152-153). Because of the personal nature of religion, a religion can mean something different to each person. Yet this is also true in a historical/geographical sense in that religions are changing and evolving with the times because of the influences and the pressures that exist in whatever circumstance the religion is found themselves in (Cantwell Smith 2001, 86). This notion of a personal consideration of religion is helpful for interfaith dialogue. Often IGR members will attest that they do not speak for their religion as a whole, but simply their experiences as a religious person who happens to belong to said religion. This notion of a vaguer, less

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[25] It becomes clear when reading Cantwell Smith's argument that while Buddhism can mean many different things and it can be more accurate to talk about Buddhisms, this principle can be applied to Islam,

defined personalized religion seems to lend itself to the term faith, which can mean the personal aspect of one's religion. Often faith is described as something inner, something that relies on experience and something that is felt. However, while replacing the term religion with faith there may be some gains; this term too has its problematic aspects.

Part 3

Replacing "Religion" with "Faith"

When using any term there are often strengths and weaknesses that come with it. Because religion can be troublesome, faith can be used; however, this term too must be weighted for its application. While the term religion has been criticized for being burdened by historical baggage, the term faith may also have underlying prejudice. Higgins mentioned that Buddhism is not a faith because he associates the term faith with belief. In our interview he talked about how during one meeting in particular a Jewish person and he connected on the basis that they considered their religion 'a practice' as opposed to 'a faith' which becomes belief centric and not about the practical living out of one's tradition (Higgins 2009). The difficulty with the term faith brings with it two issues which pertain to IGR. The first being its association with belief and the second is the ability to communicate the deeper aspects of one's faith.

This notion of tying the terms faith and doctrine together is not a unique association to members of IGR. Historically the term faith became a popular alternative to religion as the notion of belief became a central aspect of religion. "The shift to belief as the defining characteristic of 'religion' (stressed in the German preference for the term *Glaube* over *Religion*, and in the increasing English usage of "faiths" as a synonym for

Christianity, and perhaps all religions (Cantwell Smith 1962).

"religions") raised a host of interrelated questions as the credibility and truth" (Smith 2004, 182). This relationship between faith and belief however can be contentious and has been questioned. While some recognize faith and belief as intertwined, they can still be regarded as inherently distinct. Panikkar discusses this when he states, "I am not suggesting that all beliefs are interchangeable; I am saying that in a certain respect they exhibit the same nature, which makes dialogue, and even dialects, possible. Moreover, I assert they are generally equivalent in that every belief has a certain function: to express our faith, that faith which is the anthropological dimension through which we reach our goal - in Christian language, our salvation" (Panikkar 1999, 56). Here Panikkar describes a very intricate relationship between notions of faith and belief. He relies on a distinction in which faith and belief are interrelated but not interchangeable. Faith according to Panikkar is "The main function of faith is to connect me with transcendence, with what stands above me, with what I am not (yet)" (Panikkar 1999, 54). Meanwhile belief is the conductor for faith to perform its function. "Faith cannot be equated with belief, but faith always needs a belief to be faith. Belief is not faith, but it must convey faith. A disembodied belief is not faith... At any rate the experience of faith is a human experience that will not be contained in any formula but in fact couches itself in what I have called formulas of belief" (Panikkar 1999, 55). Belief offers the structure and the cognitive space for faith to act as a means of bringing one closer to transcendence. So while some may associate faith with belief in that they are one and the same, here Panikkar describes them as having different roles within a religious person's total religious self.

Similarly Cantwell Smith makes a distinction between faith and belief, but he goes

one step further than Panikkar and ranks faith as being more important than belief in one's religiosity. "Faith is not to be subordinated to belief, not to anything else mundane. To it, all religious forms are to be seen as strictly secondary - as faith itself is secondary to, derivative from, answerable to, transcendent reality and final truth" (Cantwell Smith 2001, 184). In order to have a holistic understanding of religion, one needs to recognize belief as mundane, faith as the path to the transcendent and the transcendent itself as the highest purpose of religious life. In this way faith can be understood as an aspect of any religious person's life in that it is the intangible means of moving towards a goal, that it is the connection to the afterlife, heaven, the transcendent, enlightenment, and so faith as a term can bring about something in which religions do meet. However, this requires a specific and sophisticated understanding of what is meant by faith and to assume that all religious people involved in a dialogue will share this notion can be problematic since part of the process of dialogue at IGR is to recognize differences and promote new understandings of the other, not simply promoting preconceived perceptions.

Part 4

Expressing One's Faith: The Ability and Limits of One to Project Deeply Personal Truths and Experiences to Another

While faith and belief are two terms that are intertwined this does not have to mean that they are equivalent. The distinction being that faith is a part of one's religion that moves one forward on their religious journey and belief is the formula by which one travels. This leaves faith as being intangible, a personal matter, the breadth and width of faith is indefinable, and perhaps inherently abstract. This is why it can be difficult to

convey aspects of one's faith to another, especially someone of a different culture and even more so of someone who is coming from a different religion. One IGR member mentioned that when the group first met, the first thing they had to do was learn how to talk to one another. That being in contact with someone from another religious tradition in a setting where religious topics were discussed was a trial and error process. It has been called into question whether it is actually possible to share the innermost aspects of one's faith to another person, let alone someone from another religion. The complexity of communicating one's faith has been highlighted by Cantwell Smith, "Moreover, faith is a quality of the whole person. It has, therefore, as many dimensions as has personhood" (Cantwell Smith 2001, 138). In order to fully understand the faith of someone else is no easy task and the ability to project the intricacies of one's own faith has its challenges as well.

Soloveitchik is a Rabbi who discusses the possibility and impetus of discussing the deeper aspects of one's faith in his piece *Confrontation*. Written in 1964 Soloveitchik is writing on to what extent Jews should take part in dialogue with Christians. Because of the history between these two religions, and what was going on in the 1960's Soloveitchik cautions Jews to engage in dialogue carefully for various reasons, one being because the ability to convey Jewish religious self-understanding to Christians is limited. "The great encounter between God and man is a wholly personal private affair incomprehensible to the outsider - even to a brother of the same faith community. The divine message is incommunicable since it defies all standardized media of information and all objective categories" (Soloveitchik 1964). Here Soloveitchik describes ones religion as incommunicable thus rendering many forms of interfaith dialogue impractical.

While Soloveitchik considers faith difficult to share, he does see some avenues for interfaith dialogue to be realized. Like Knitter, Soloveitchik suggests that dialogue be relegated to talking about social aspects of society and not talking about theological issues, similar to what is found during the second half of an IGR meeting. While Knitter does so to promote unity, Soloveitchik does so to protect the Jewish community which he sees as potentially threatened by competition or power disruption when involved in dialogue with Christians. In response to this Eugene Korn writes on Soloveitchik's paper forty years later. He argues that as power distributions and theological realities have changed; therefore, the Jewish people should be more open to Jewish-Christian dialogue. Soloveitchik himself participated in interfaith dialogue when the conditions suited him (Korn 2003). Power dynamics and considerations are an important part of IGR's makeup, and careful considerations have gone into trying to make IGR a place where every participant feels safe. Because of these circumstantial factors interfaith dialogue seems possible on a political level according to Korn, but how to deal with the issues of communicating one's faith still has to be considered.

Korn addresses the issue of communicating one's faith by stating that Soloveitchik must have considered faith worth sharing (and possible) to a degree because he did so (or attempted to);

> His most famous and perhaps most personal theological confession, 'The Lonely Man of Faith' was delivered to an interfaith audience at St. John's Catholic Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts. In that work, he takes up the generic human problem of interpersonal communication and concludes that Adam and Eve were able to communicate with each other because they formed a universal covenantal community with God—well before there was any idea of a particular covenant that separated Jews from gentiles (Korn 2003).

This notion that Adam and Eve were able to communicate expresses the most basic aspect of dialogue, that we are able to convey messages to one another. Because one's faith is personal this does not mean that one is unable to make it understood to someone else. This is especially so if said person has a basis for understanding, in Korn's words – a bond with God. While people in an interfaith setting like IGR may not share the belief in God, they do value their religious tradition and it is an integral part of their life and worldview, and this is a means by which members of IGR can connect. Pandit noted that if one wants to ask about another person's faith people should be free to ask and give candid responses about their religious life. Personal barriers should be put aside for the sake for dialogue. "You really want to know why I am who I am I should be able to give a response to you" (Pandit 2009).

Harvey Cox also discusses the importance of sharing one's faith for interfaith dialogue. Cox attempts to deal with the issue of communicating personal aspects of one's faith through his experiences of sharing his Christian faith in a variety of settings. He understands faith as something that is personal and yet he assumes that it is also relatable. In fact Cox considers interfaith meetings that do not have the sharing of personal aspects of one's religion to be dry and lacking, he laments the loss of the personal voice in these situations (Cox 1998). If one were to hear about abstract aspects of one's religion in a dialogue, Cox would argue that the dialogue is not genuine and needs to be revitalized. "Dialogue often climbs quickly to airy exchanges about "Christian*ity*" and "Buddh*ism*" or one of the other faiths. The dialoguers, who are frequently trained to think in abstract, conceptual terms, are sometimes reluctant to say much about their *faith* in Jesus Christ, or *their* devotion to Krishna, or *their* path toward enlightenment" (Cox 1998). To achieve

this level of engaging dialogue Cox calls out participants to speak about their faith candidly and not to avoid the most important aspects of their religion for the sake of others (Cox 1998). At IGR there have been times where it was apparent that someone was sharing a deeply personal aspect of their religion and it was clear that they were unsure if their message would be fully understood, however the desire and ability to speak to the group about personal religious truths has been developed and is encouraged at IGR's meetings. In this way faith is presented as a relating of personal experiences within one's religious tradition as a means of letting others know about the intricacies of a religion by relating to them the personal narrative of living out one's faith.

Part 5

Dialogue and its Uses

Through analysis it quickly becomes clear that faith is a complicated term to be associated with dialogue as is the case in "interfaith dialogue". However, the ability to express and understand aspects of faith in oneself and in the other is an integral aspect of interfaith encounters. Since faith is a vast and ambiguous term it allows for various individuals to express their religious experience in different terms and yet still bring the religious participants into a joint discussion and a shared conversation. However dialogue itself is a term that also has potential and limits for promoting the unity that is desired by an interfaith group like IGR. Dialogue is a process that can transform participants by being exposed to new ideas and discovering new truths with others. Dialogue also is a process of communicating, utilizing language as a means of conveying ideas and seeking

knowledge through exchanges. While dialogue has its limits, it has the potential to impact participants as well.

The notion of dialogue being a tool for change relates to the experience of dialogue. There are different kinds of dialogue and different kinds of worldviews can be promoted through these encounters. Transformative dialogue is a type of interfaith dialogue that focuses on the participants by considering their experiences and growth that develop over time. In this manner, it becomes clear that some consider dialogue itself a religious experience thus tying the notions of dialogue and religion together. "Scholars have suggested that the primary distinction between IFD and other identity-based dialogues is that the interfaith dialogue becomes a religious experience in itself" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 15). Because interfaith dialogue is for the faithful there is a sense that there is something particular about an interfaith meeting. Participants who partake in dialogue are seeking religious truths about other religions but also about their own religions, and so this undertaking develops into a spiritual journey that can be quite intense.

As a religious experience, many participants recognize interfaith dialogue as having an intrinsic value and recognize dialogue as a means of deepening their faith. This process was described by Ahuja; he explains that through interfaith encounters he has been encouraged to express aspects of his own religious tradition which lead to new discoveries (Ahuja 2010). Throughout this process the fact that it is a shared experience with people from other religions allows for a deepened religiosity of other members as well. "At this juncture, the dialogue of which I speak emerges not as a mere academic device or an intellectual amusement, but as a spiritual matter of the first rank, a religious

act that itself engages faith love and hope. Dialogue is not bare methodology but an essential part of the religious act par excellence: loving God above all things and one's neighbour as oneself" (Panikkar 1978, 10). The act of dialogue brings about a religious experience that is described by Panikkar as relating the Golden Rule which is considered to be the most important rule for Christians. By extrapolating that which is most dear to a religion and having it be an integral part of dialogue Panikkar presents dialogue as not simply a religious experience, but a deeply profound and important religious experience.

One means of recognizing a successful dialogue is not in its tangible, community driven prerogatives, but in its impact it has on individuals who are actually a part of the dialogue. "The most successful forms of IFD reach beyond the merely cognitive, academic understanding of difference as participants begin to experience a sense of interdependence with people of other faith. Sharing faith experiences allows for the enrichment, as well as the challenging, of participants' personal faiths" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 15). This is why dialogue is at times presented as having such value by those who partake in it. There is not only a desire to impact the community or help alleviate social ills, but there is a desire for a deeper spirituality that comes through interfaith encounters. With an enhanced understanding and greater knowledge of the religious traditions a religious participant is able to find new ways of being religious without compromising their beliefs. One IGR member describes the ability for him to learn about his faith though making connections to other religions, and when recognizing the differences between his tradition and others, the dialogue process itself allowed for knowledge to be sought without consensuses being come to or compromises being made (Higgins 2010).

This type of dialogue may not have an obvious impact beyond its group, but it is apparent why this type of dialogue is sought after by certain individuals.

Dialogue itself is a means of promoting religious change in participants. At IGR there are various stories of individuals who have been impacted by their encounters with people from other religious traditions. These stories relate how knowledge in their own religion was enhanced by the questions and comments raised by other individuals. Other times, the knowledge about another religion allowed them to appreciate spirituality in a new way. This is because through dialogue the members are actively seeking religious truth, something that every religious adherent in a dialogue values. Through discussion various religious individuals are able to conceptualize and cognitive greater truths than they could previous to the dialogue. "But all this misses the point that the truth of things resides in discourse – which means, ultimately, in intending a unitary meaning concerning things – and not in the individual words, not even in a languages entire stock of words" (Gadamer 1989, 411). Here Gadamer is discussing the importance of using language to convey ideas. It is discourse that brings forth the elevated learning that is sought after by dialogue participants. Knowledge is understood through language (Gadamer 1989, 414). Thus the exchange of knowledge, through language specifically, allows for a certain type of experience that is not possible without a dialogical process. That is why there are expectations that dialogue will produce certain outcomes in individuals, which is why transformative dialogue is considered at all. The discussions allow for a type of knowledge seeking that consistently impacts those who encounter it. "One expectation of transformative IFD is that participants will, in some way, behave differently after the dialogue" (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 16). The discourse itself promotes

and impact and transformative dialogue becomes a means of producing religious encounters in participants which leads to altered individuals.

Language is a communicative tool. Language as a means of understanding allows us to see what is so important about IGR. "Language incarnates not only the "object" of understanding - a meaning, whether or not it is linguistic - but also its mode of achievement, its articulation in an understanding that makes sense... since the object and the achievement of understanding are so intimately tied to language that it appears impossible to distinguish; language about from the things themselves, and the linguistic effort of the understanding from the understanding itself" (Grondin 2003, 120). Language and knowledge become inseparable to a great degree. This is why interfaith dialogue is a means of promoting knowledge, it employs language specifically to relate new ideas in a dialogical process for its participants. When Gadamer spoke of language being used as a tool for understanding he considered it useful anywhere from sciences to hermeneutics. While IGR did not purposefully seek out a Gadamarian method for seeking knowledge the manner in which truth is deprived from conversation, interpretation, questioning, and considered an ongoing process, it is clear that IGR seeks knowledge in a very particular manner.

Language though, like knowledge and understanding has its limits. There are things that are difficult to grasp and to express. We can only know and understand so much while the absolute truths and deeper mysteries of our universe evade us. However, at times this limit of knowledge and language can be overstated. At times one may be lost for words, and thus it would seem setting the dialogical process to a standstill. Since language and knowledge are intertwined, can being lost for words stump our intellectual

process? Gadamer responds to this query by noting that language and knowing are connected, hence our knowledge can at times be expressed through silence. Like how a pause is a part of a conversation silence can be a part of knowledge seeking. "Language deserts us, and it deserts us precisely because what enlightens is standing so strongly before our ever more encompassing gaze that words would not be adequate to grasp it. Is it not a really daring claim to maintain, as I do, that even when language deserts us, this, too, is a form of language" (Gadamer 2006, 14). Through language and dialogue there is a process of bringing forth a new understanding that could not be had through any other method.

Since language and the dialogical process are tied to all understanding IGR is significant in its debates over what to do with the knowledge and how to preserve this process. We can see how an advocacy group would struggle with the question answer and seeking aspect of IGR's dialogue and conversely why IGR members want to share their learning with the community, because of the enlightenment they have received through dialogue and a desire to spread their approach to learning and religion to others who these issues are significant to.

Part 6

Interfaith Dialogue and its Ability to Transform its Participants

As dialogue transforms by seeking truth and providing religious experiences the type of transformation is described by Abu-Nimer as being converted to a new way of realizing their own tradition (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 16). This altercation does not mean that the person is completely unidentifiable or completely adhering to beliefs they did not

adhere to before the dialogue. Instead transformative dialogue changes people within their own religious tradition to understand religious truth and their religious neighbours better.

> As different ideas about the nature of religious expression are exchanged, as new kind of share truth emerges. This does not require a complete transformation of personality, but participants should leave the dialogue slightly altered – better informed and more compassionate towards the other party. Transformative dialogue goes beyond mere tolerance of the other by inviting participants into a deeper form of openness to one another (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, 16).

This alteration is a process that takes time and is not easy to facilitate. In fact not everyone is likely able to undergo such a process. Panikkar states that in order to have dialogue one must be prepared to fully encounter another's beliefs. Not to simply hear, and cognitively accept other notions of spirituality, but to truly encounter other religious beliefs first hand as the other experiences them (Panikkar 1978, 10). This brings the notion of understanding to a new level. Panikkar notes, "the first requisite for dialogue is that we understand each other" (Panikkar 1978, 8). But by understanding he describes a religious experience in which we actually understand the other as they understand themselves. Panikkar calls for participants in a dialogue to reach a point where accepting difference is not enough, one needs to share in the differences. To do this he calls for a type of religious experience that overcomes doctrinal differences. "Our human task is to establish a religious dialogue that, although it transcends *logos* – and belief – does not neglect or ignore it" (Panikkar 1978, 21). Here Panikkar is arguing that one is able to transcend belief by participating in an interfaith dialogue encounter.

However, to transcend belief can be quite difficult. To do this one must self-examine and prepare for the encounter. An encounter with other religious beliefs in such a profound manner can cause personal struggles and should not be taken lightly. There

are instances of people who have come out to one or two IGR meetings and did not return. It can be stipulated that either these individuals were not prepared for their own religious journey to be challenged in the way interfaith encounters do so. Otherwise, they were not prepared to face other religious traditions in this type of setting - barring of course the more mundane possibility that Thursday mornings did not suit their schedule or some such thing. The response to this is preparation is that one must ensure they are steady in their own religious journey and in a frame of mind where they are able to accept the religiosity of others. "In other words, if *interreligious* dialogue is to be real dialogue, an *intrareligious* dialogue must accompany it, i.e., it must begin with my questioning myself and the *relativity* of my beliefs (which does not mean their *relativism*), accepting the challenge of a change, a conversion and the risk of upsetting my traditional patterns" (Panikkar 1978, 40). While recognizing that belief and faith are interdependent but not interchangeable, the faith journey can be taken through different beliefs. Panikkar describes this type of religious encounter as being both risky and rewarding which is why he directs religious adherents who are going to partake in interfaith dialogue to do so apprehensively. Through this self preparation a divulgence into another's religious beliefs can be taken and a transformative dialogue can take place.

While preparation is necessary and interfaith dialogue may not be an undertaking every religious adherent is advised to participate in, the rewards for doing so are worth noting. Through dialogue new religious truths can be discovered and personal religious experiences are achieved. In this way the personal and interpersonal means for dialogue to impact its participants is difficult to measure and also challenging to convey. Conversely, this shows that the potential for dialogue is far reaching indeed. Dialogue

promotes a certain means of acquiring knowledge. Through questioning and the dialogical process each participant is enhanced in their understanding and in turn, wisdom. This process allows for the transformative aspects of dialogue to take place within members of a dialogue group as seen in IGR.

Conclusion

Interfaith dialogue does not happen in a vacuum. IGR as a group has been impacted by interfaith efforts that came before it; such as the World's Parliament of Religions and local interfaith encounters between the religious of Kitchener/Waterloo. IGR is also impacted by ongoing current events which are taking place simultaneously to the dialogue in which IGR members monthly discuss theological aspects and personal experiences of their religious traditions. When conflict breaks out in the Gaza, India, the United States, or across the street there are Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Neo-Pagans and others feeling the impact of these conflicts at IGR who are discussing what they can do in an interfaith dialogue setting. While religious differences can be presented as insurmountable and problematic, IGR has members practicing the dialogical process, seeking knowledge, and understanding one another in the face of difference every month.

Through its monthly meetings IGR members practice and engage in interfaith dialogue for various reasons. Some are motivated by the potential of a joined multifaith group may be able to achieve if they sought out common goals and pooled resources, intellects, and efforts. Some are attracted to the actual makeup of the group; the personalities who have fostered friendships and shared in conversation, coffee, and snacks month after month. Others are seeking to expose false assumptions about their religion or have a desire to learn about other religions. And often, a particular IGR member fits somewhere in between these ideas participating in dialogue for many reasons at once. All are committed to their faiths and respect each person in their own religious journey.

While efforts are made to respect religious diversity there is a unity in the group. The group stood together when one of its members was the target of discrimination and ignorance. The group discussed and sought a purpose and means of achieving that purpose that suited each member of IGR. When it was recognized that the community was in need of an interfaith voice, IGR provided statements and representatives to talk to the media in order to promote a positive understanding of religion.

IGR was able to respond to the needs of the community in such a manner because the members are dedicated to the notions of interfaith dialogue. They seek to encourage each other in their inner faith journeys which are different for each member. They seek understanding about doctrinal differences and want to learn about what is important to each participant in regards to their religious tradition. There is a focused attempt to continuously seek knowledge as a group. Through the dialogical process questions are asked, answers are sought and understanding is developed in a unique way through the encounter that interfaith dialogue provides. Transformative dialogue allows for knowledge to be sought on the practical level and at deeper more personal manners than would otherwise be possible.

IGR as an interfaith dialogue group represents a certain take on dialogue that allows its members the freedom to engage the religious other on various levels. There is the opportunity for networking and planning community development along side the potential to share aspects of one's religion and learn about someone else's religion in turn. This balancing of interfaith dialogue and interfaith action is why IGR particularly ought to continue to be studied. While issues of religious difference continue to arise in Kitchener/Waterloo IGR will continue to be a voice for religious unity. IGR has plans to

work with the school board on providing information on religious education and accommodation policies. IGR members continue to plan events which seek to engage politicians and everyday citizens in order to be a voice for religious tolerance and acceptance. IGR members have engaged in interfaith dialogue and seek to share the knowledge gained with each other on a continual basis and people in the community could benefit from an interfaith encounter.

IGR, as a group, represents an effort to recognize the past interfaith endeavours and build off them. It is also attempting to deal with new situations as they arise as it prepares move forward in the years to come. There are struggles that lie ahead such as how, and to what degree, IGR will engage the community. Another challenge is whether IGR can maintain the personal relationships that have been built over the years. IGR constantly has to seek to transform its members in order to remain a robust dialogue setting, and this requires ongoing commitment and dedication from its participants. IGR will also have to struggle with the context of being in Kitchener/Waterloo, which is home to many diverse religious beliefs and conflicting worldviews.

In Waterloo one example highlights the difficulties facing interfaith dialogue; the Mennonite Central Committee of Ontario invited six Shia scholars from the Imam Khomeini Education Institute for a dialogue session in 2007. There were protests and outcries from various groups who thought that this meeting was not conducive to promoting religious unity. The Muslim scholars were accused of supporting Iran's government which has been widely criticized while the Mennonites were considered to be naïve in thinking that a productive dialogue could come from discourse with these scholars (Hurst 2007). There was debate as to who represents Islam and the limits of

promoting dialogue through meeting certain religious adherents. The meetings were disrupted by protestors and could not be held in a public forum. This presents a case where dialogue was stifled in order to promote a political message. The notions of dialogue being able to promote transformation and unity were disrupted in this instance. IGR members must deal with the aspects of society that do not value dialogue in the same way that they do.

Because of the makeup of IGR, this is a very dynamic and interesting dialogue group. While it was intended to research IGR in a phenomenological study as to how interfaith dialogue is practiced and how this relates to the philosophical discussions surrounding dialogue, there are some limitations to this study. Three limitations and the potential for further research will be discussed in the following section. One limitation is the timing, while an ongoing study of how IGR progresses would be beneficial my study was limited to only a few months with the group. Because IGR has been meeting for nearly nine years it is unknown how much longer the group will last. While it gives every indication of continuing with rigor, in what way the challenges and prospects the future hold change the group was not something this study was able to look into.

IGR continues to practice interfaith dialogue and so the role of the researcher must continue on as well. One way for scholars to build off the work I have done here is for longer studies and continued research of IGR and its dealings with the school board and other community resources. Because IGR considers itself at a crossroads and there are members who would like to see more community development taking place, it would be a fruitful avenue of study to look at what goals are made by IGR and to what degree it accomplishes them in the future.

While the timing limited my study, the scope was also a limitation. One means of analyzing a group like IGR would be to compare it with other groups across Canada. The research presented here could be cross examined within a broader spectrum to look at other interfaith movements and what strategies they employ. To what degree other dialogue groups are involved in community development and knowledge seeking could be researched. How unique IGR is as a dialogue group would be an interesting avenue of study.

Studying dialogue groups which take place all over Canada would be a fruitful for the field. There is a need for more data to be compiled on who is dialoguing, for what purpose, and how. This could be conglomerated in order to produce a massive research on dialogue and religious encounters that are centred on knowledge seeking and community impacting. Because there are various contexts within Canada, comparative studies across the provinces and Northern and Southern Canada could be more fully brought to light. There are dialogue groups in urban and rural situations and what trends exists (if any) across the dialogues taking place all over Canada ought to be considered.

The third and final limitation is the literature. While this thesis analyzed the terms "interfaith" and "dialogue," terms such as "multifaith," "religious encounters," and "othering" could be discussed. Also, the resources on such themes of religion and its definitions, hermeneutics, the limits and possibilities of communication and community impact are broad and deep and it was only possible to briefly present some facets here. Because I took an approach that made use of many theorists simultaneously I was unable to go into the depth that would be available if I had limited my study to one thinker. At the same time, there are volumes of texts on interfaith dialogue that have not been

considered for this thesis and further research and study could be sought after. Further research, reading, analysis and philosophical discussion could provide deeper insight into the themes discussed here.

In order to build off the research performed here, one means of offering new insight would be to research more scholars, reading further into hermeneutic and the intricacies of communication and knowledge seeking. An in depth study of the application and implications for terms and how they impact dialogue groups could be studied. Further reading and continued analysis would be beneficial to the understanding of the limits and potential of interfaith dialogue.

This thesis fits into the field of religious studies in that it considers how theoretical works on the limits and potential of interfaith dialogue are applied through a dialogue group, IGR. IGR is an interesting group to study because of its interest in community development and personal knowledge seeking, it does not simply do one or the other. Often one is forced to look at dialogue groups that are either action or dialogue oriented, since IGR blends the two purposes this has allowed for a literature study that also blends different theoretical approaches to interfaith dialogue.

This study is relevant for several reasons. Interfaith dialogue is important to research because dialogue groups are needed in Canada as both preventative and reactionary resources. By allowing religious communities a means of communicating with one another isolation can be diminished and bridges can be built possibly preventing conflict. Yet if there are instances of religious intolerance there is a body ready to respond. At times religions are volatile and we need resources which allow for members of different religions to come together. In Canada groups must live together and voices

have to be heard that otherwise would not be. As Canada continues to be a multicultural society the divergences that are present within communities must be addressed and interfaith dialogue is one way to do so.

How interfaith dialogue is practiced ought to be reflected upon. Through my field work research and literature study some guidelines that a dialogue group should consider have been considered. The role of questioning is very important. Questioning allows for answers to take place, and this can lead the dialogue in any direction. Participants must feel able to ask questions to one another and be prepared for whatever response is offered. It should be recognized that assumptions are to be challenged and not only must individual participants prepare for this, the group as a whole must strive to have an atmosphere where participants are able to consider new ideas in a safe way. It is important that dialogues do not back away from contentious issues, but build trust and understanding in order to deal with them. Participants must be patient and carefully consider what the goals of the group are. While goals are worthwhile it is worth noting the group will be impacted by participants and time and may need to revisit its goals on occasion. Finally it is important to recognize that any interfaith dialogue will have certain limitations thus allowing interfaith dialogue to apply its strengths.

With these guidelines being suggested, the shape interfaith dialogue will take in the future has yet to be seen. While there are struggles ahead, members of IGR are simultaneously encouraged by peace and charity that is taking place in their community and around the world. Because of this interconnectedness between IGR and the issues that take place in their community and around the world the significance of a group like IGR is difficult to define. Potentially, interfaith movements and religious peace projects

are impacted by IGR around the world. Potentially someone is moved by IGR's statements and presentation of religious tolerance and mutual truth seeking endeavours of its members. But to asses and position the role and significance of one dialogue group within such a broad context is beyond the scope of this paper.

Part 1

IGR's Goals and Objectives

The following is a statement by IGR and is a description of their goals:

From: http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org/previousreports.shtml, accessed May, 2010.

Our Objectives are:

• To promote dialogue among our different traditions, leading to understanding and

respect.

• To provide a forum for the discussion of contemporary issues in the context of diverse

   religious perspectives.

• To challenge expressions of religious and other intolerance in the community.

• To acknowledge and celebrate the diverse religious truths in our community.

• To provide support for, and to encourage networking among, people working in a

   variety of religious contexts.

• To provide shared spiritual experiences for people representing a variety of religious

   practices.

• To deepen knowledge of the commonalities and differences among religious and

   spiritual traditions.

• To acknowledge and celebrate the religious and spiritual diversity of our community.

• To learn from and be enriched by the interaction among our respective spiritual and

   religious traditions.

Part 2

IGR Responds To the Gideon Bible Controversy

During Pandit's involvement in a local debate the steering committee of Interfaith Grand River issued the following statement to the Record's Opinion section condemning the ignorance that had been displayed by some in their community and made clear their position on the distribution of Bibles in the public school system.

From http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org/gideonbibles.shtml, accessed May, 2010.

For immediate release December 8, 2009

Public schools are no place for proselytization, says Interfaith Grand River

Interfaith Grand River, bringing together Waterloo Region's diverse faith communities and spiritual traditions, is deeply concerned about the Waterloo Region District School Board's recent decision to allow the distribution of Bibles by Gideons International through the public school system, about some of the media coverage of events surrounding this decision, and about expressions of intolerance in the community that have arisen as a result.

In our view, distribution of material by an organization whose members "share a desire to see the lost come to Christ" is an inappropriate activity in a public, secular school system. It is especially so in a religiously diverse community in which many of the students taking home the note about the Bibles would not be Christian.

The board's decision also appears to violate its own policy which requires that religious materials be for purposes of information and not proselytization. Its process

lacked the necessary openness and consultation, and adherence to past practice appears to have prevailed over thoughtful decision-making.

In defense of the decision, it has been argued that it is non-discriminatory since any religious group would be allowed to distribute its own materials. In addition, the argument goes, parents are given the choice of refusing the Bibles by not signing the note that is sent home.

We believe that both these arguments miss the essential point that no religious materials, of any religious tradition or denomination, should be distributed in a public school for purposes of proselytization. The Bible, along with the sacred texts of all major religions, should be available to students in school libraries.

These arguments also ignore the seriousness with which many parents, especially new Canadians, view materials that come home from the school. Many parents may not consider it an option to refuse materials that come with the school's implicit approval. Interfaith Grand River is not opposed to — and in fact strongly advocates — spiritual and ethical education in public schools, as well as education about the world's religions. However, this education needs to be carried out in a spirit of increasing knowledge, which is essential for living in harmony in a religiously diverse community, and not of promoting a particular religious belief.

Much of the media coverage surrounding the board's decision distorted the issues involved and served to exacerbate rather than heal divisions in the community. We understand the value of the personal element in the media's coverage, and appreciate that describing how individuals are affected by particular decisions and developments helps make what could otherwise be abstract issues more approachable for their audience.

However, responsible journalism requires taking into account the wider impact of a story, and much of the coverage of the Gideon Bibles issue failed this test. By focusing on an opinion expressed by a Muslim parent (who is a member of the steering committee of Interfaith Grand River) in response to a question from a reporter, instead of examining the circumstances of the board's decision, media helped turn the issue from a question involving the role of a public school system into one of Islam versus Christianity and placed the parent involved in a very vulnerable position.

Waterloo Region was a much more homogeneous community 30 years ago than it is today, religiously and otherwise. While younger people appear to have adjusted well to the new environment, many people who grew up in an earlier time have experienced a painful transition. In our view, some of the more extreme and hurtful opinions that have come out in response to the Gideon Bible controversy, on radio talk shows and in letters to the editor, are expressions of that pain.

But while we can acknowledge and understand the circumstances that lead people to express such views, we cannot simply stop there. Both the school board and the media occupy positions of community leadership, and we see it as their responsibility to help this community adjust to its new reality so that diversity becomes a source of enrichment rather than conflict.

In its editorial of November 18, the Waterloo Region *Record* suggested that "the board should talk with representatives of Interfaith Grand River, a group that includes members of this area's diverse faith communities." We endorse the *Record*'s call for dialogue between the board and IGR, and we emphasize our willingness to act as a

resource for the board and other concerned members of the community on this and other potentially divisive issues.

While the board's decision has already been implemented for this year, we ask the trustees to establish a more transparent and accountable process, take into account the diversity of the community, consult a wider range of community voices and reflect on the meaning of their role as trustees of a public school system before taking any such decisions in the future.

Founded in 2001, Interfaith Grand River (IGR) acts as a forum for dialogue among religious traditions and a community resource on multifaith issues. Its objectives include "to promote dialogue among our different traditions, leading to understanding and respect" and "to challenge expressions of religious and other intolerance in the community." It has met with Waterloo Region District School Board representatives on other issues in the past, as well as with other community institutions such as Grand River Hospital and the police.

IGR's active members come from numerous Christian denominations and the Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Neopagan, Sikh and Unitarian traditions. Since January 2009, Interfaith Grand River has operated as a program of Across Boundaries Multifaith Institute, a Canada-wide multifaith organization. More information about IGR can be obtained at http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org

Part 3

IGR Condemns Religious Intolerance in its Community

When a local Mosque and Gurdwara were vandalised IGR issued the following statement through the opinion section of the Record.

From http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org/news.shtml, accessed May, 2010.

After the Attacks on the Mosque and Gurdwara: What Now?

A Statement by Interfaith Grand River

March 25, 2010

Interfaith Grand River, bringing together Waterloo Region's diverse faith communities and spiritual traditions, exists "to challenge expressions of intolerance, religious and other, in the community," among other objectives. Last week's attacks on the Erb Street Mosque in Waterloo and the Guelph Sikh Society Gurdwara were particularly ugly and offensive expressions of intolerance.

Three religious traditions were direct targets of these attacks: Muslims and Sikhs, whose sacred space was violated, and Neopagans, whose sacred symbol, the pentagram, was used to portray evil in the graffiti that defaced the Waterloo mosque. These are minority religions in our community, unfamiliar to many people and therefore easily misunderstood and even demonized. People have always feared what they don't know, and fear and ignorance are at the root of these acts of violence and vandalism.

Educating the public is an ongoing task, and Interfaith Grand River takes these incidents as signals that it needs to rededicate itself to that task. We see these incidents as a great teaching moment for children in schools, who should be learning that just as bullying in classrooms and on playgrounds is unacceptable, bullying by adults on the basis of

privilege is equally unacceptable. It is also a time for people to take advantage of the many excellent efforts to increase understanding already in place in our Region, including the twice-yearly Abrahamic Faiths Forum series at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary; the ongoing Muslim-Mennonite Dialogue Forum; and Interfaith Grand River's new Building Bridges program, which invites people to visit different faith communities at their places of worship, observe a worship service and ask questions.

In a broader sense, it is not specific religious groups alone that were attacked. This was an assault on the very idea of a community where people of different religions live together in harmony – an idea that is at the core of Interfaith Grand River – and on those of us who choose to believe in and act on that idea. We offer our profound regret that these incidents have occurred, our solidarity with those who are directly affected, and our prayers for the healing of our community so that respect and understanding may prevail.

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