

Faith in the System?



Public Dialogue Report
Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue Fall 2011
Religion, Spirituality, Contemplative Inquiry and Social Action

Index

Preface	pg. 2
Faith in the System?	pg. 3
Picture of the Day	pg. 4
Guest Speakers	pg. 5
Synthesized Themes and Content	pg. 8
Wordle	pg. 9
Small Group Discussions	pg. 12
The Community Quilt	pg. 17
Outcomes	pg. 28
Looking Back	pg. 29
Looking Forward	pg. 30
What We Learned	pg. 31
Process	pg. 32
Content and Structure	pg. 33
Dialogue	pg. 35
Conclusion	pg. 36
Thank-You's	pg. 37
Appendix	pg. 38

Preface

Simon Fraser University's Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue welcomed a diverse group of participants to the public dialogue "Faith in the System?" at Vancouver's Heritage Hall on November 23rd 2011. We used stories, discussion and artwork to explore ideas of community resilience in a time of economic crisis through the lens of spirituality, religion and contemplation.



The Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue at Simon Fraser University uses experiential learning, community engagement and dialogue as tools for personal growth and social change. The Fall 2011 semester was a collaboration between SFU's Centre for Dialogue and the Vancouver School of Theology that focused on how spiritual, religious and contemplative practices inform action on social issues such as poverty, health, peace and the environment. Our class of 16 came from a wide array of academic, religious, spiritual and experiential backgrounds and we have learned considerably from the close-knit relationships we formed with one another over the course of the semester. We facilitated and engaged in weekly dialogues with spiritual and intellectual leaders from the community to discuss the benefits and challenges of bringing their religious, spiritual and contemplative insights into civic work. Other projects such as writing newspaper articles and investigations into social issues through interviews and research allowed us to delve deeply into the semester's topic, guided by our personal interests and passions.

Faith in the System?

Relationships are at the heart of the Semester in Dialogue. We have been profoundly affected by one another, learning as participants and facilitators to create the open, safe spaces where real dialogue and learning can take place. We've come to understand that sharing stories, listening with engagement and building meaningful relationships are powerful tools for creating change, and the Faith in the System public dialogue was our opportunity to put these lessons into practice.

The Public Dialogue's title "Faith in the System?" reflects two questions. First, do our communities have faith in current government and social systems in these uncertain economic times? And second, what role do our religious and spiritual wisdom have in our largely secular civic society?

In a time of profound economic instability, our dialogue explored how religious and spiritual communities are building strong community networks to mitigate at a local level the effects of price inflation and chronic unemployment. Our dialogue sought to draw out the unique ways religious and spiritual organizations or groups are forming community solidarity to resist economic pressures that could threaten the stability of neighbourhoods.

Picture of the Day



The public dialogue began at 11:30am with “Eat and Greet” as arriving participants had a chance to network with others while sharing interests, ideas, and lunch. The food was a selection of vegetarian dishes from a variety of restaurants and catering companies that promoted healthy, sustainable, ethical and supportive initiatives.

Kelvin Bee, a First Nations elder who works at Aboriginal Front Door opened up the day with an Acknowledgement of the Land and Welcoming Ceremony. He was followed by an activity about the nature of Dialogue where participants were invited to contribute responses to the questions “what comes to mind when you think of dialogue?” and “what values are necessary to create dialogue?” This set

a tone of active participation in the dialogue, and allowed us all to reflect on our individual responsibilities for a successful dialogue. Participants shared ideas such as respect, understanding and compassion. Once everyone was satisfied with the compilation of ideas, we agreed by consensus that during the day’s dialogues these ideas and values would guide participation.

Guest Speakers

Five guest speakers were sprinkled through the day, sharing their stories and insights.

Heesoon Bai

Heesoon Bai, a Buddhist practitioner and Doctor of Philosophy, spoke about awareness of the self, and living in community with the world around us. In Buddhism, the entire universe is a community and everyone is a participant in this large community. She stated how we are all active buddhas when we try to access this community through meditation and self-awareness.



Guest Speakers



Pastor Tim Dickau

Pastor Tim Dickau spoke about his church, Grandview Calvary Baptist in East Vancouver, and the programs it is running that are creating community support systems. Tim explained how God is not a passive observer but is involved in the world, inviting us into practicing a different way of being human. This means inviting those on the margins of society into community, and working towards justice for the least. He said that every community has its trouble, but God works to restore the creation within it. The Christian community believes entering into the suffering of others also means being closer to God. all one.



Kelvin Bee

Kelvin Bee returned to share his experiences in the Indian Residential School system, the pain and suffering it caused, and how he struggled to maintain his traditions, culture, and faith. He reminded us of the importance of family life, remembering our roots, and how when we gather we are all one.

Guest Speakers



Rabbi Laura Kaplan

Rabbi Laura Kaplan of Congregation Or Shalom, sharing the Jewish community's long history of organized responses to economic instability and community need. Laura spoke about the oppression of Jews and how they have been seen as the other several times in history, suggesting the importance of remembering that the other in any situation is just like us. She explained that in the history of the Torah, it is our responsibility to take care of relatives and the larger community, ending with, "if you see someone in need, reach out your hand."



Felipe Lozano

Felipe Lozano, started a micro finance organization in Mexico. Triggered by his experiences in this work, Felipe believes everything depends on everything else; if poverty is produced by the system, then it can also be fixed by adjusting the system. He believes the answer to the problem is love, by trying to love others better than oneself. Felipe is on a journey to find God's great mercy, and through this, he believes hope is possible.

Synthesized Themes and Content



Wordle: Hopes and Fears

We conducted an activity between speakers asking participants to write down their hopes and fears for themselves and their communities in our economic crisis. After individual reflection, participants were asked to share those hopes and fears with those seated around them. Written responses were collected and the key words were used to create a Wordle, a visual representation that emphasizes common trends. The larger words represent the hopes and fears that were shared by the greatest number of people.

How has the current economic situation personally affected you and people from your community?
In terms of the ongoing economic instability, what **fears** do you have?

What are your long term **hopes** for your community? For you, what is a sign of hope or growth in your community presently?

Our Fears in Times of Crisis



The greatest fear was unemployment, followed by greed and concerns for the future, reflecting a balance between tangible outcomes of crisis and the underlying ideas that are fueling our troubled economy. Unemployment is a measurable outcome of an economic downturn that poses a real threat to the majority of our community members. In contrast, greed is a value that plays a lead role in much of our economy, creating roadblocks

for community development. Concerns about the future encompass both of these aspects. If greed and unemployment persist in coming years, solutions to our crisis will become increasingly difficult to find.

Small Group Discussion

A key focus of the day was the small group discussions we had with the participants, facilitated by students from the Semester in Dialogue. Voices from many religions, cultures, professions and age groups came together in respectful conversation discussing how the current economic situation is impacting our community and what we can do about it.

We broke participants into groups of 7-10 by randomly assigning coloured symbols on their name tags upon registration. This breakout session provided the opportunity to speak openly and honestly about values, religious beliefs, fears or concerns regarding the current economic situation. Tables were covered with paper to encourage participants to write notes or draw pictures to stimulate their imaginations. The speech by Felipe Lozano helped stimulate ideas and conversation, and provided an example of a concrete solution to crisis.

Small Group Discussion

The discussion began with introductions and then a series of questions were put onto the overhead projector for groups to discuss:

Our poster names values of dignity, mercy, love and compassion. Name one or two values that guide how you live in community with others. Where do these values come from within your religious tradition, faith, spirituality, life? As you answer, please keep in mind specific examples of how you have lived your values-whether in personal interactions or in the work you do.

Moving forward, how might we channel these religious and spiritual values into concrete responses to our hopes and fears for our communities?

What Values Guide a Community?

Empathy:

the ability to put ourselves in another person's shoes
The biological and physical changes we go through can affect our hopes and fears, and teach us empathy and compassion.

Love:

using love as a guidance for life

Fairness

Honour

Contributing to the community

Kindness

Joy:

using positive energy to encourage others and experiencing laughter, happiness, and healing

Respect

Dignity:

We recognize everyone deserves it, and this is especially realized by interacting with people who have been robbed of dignity.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation:

an example discussed was the Residential Schools system in the Christian faith

Value for life:

recognizing each day is a gift
having love for all of creation
engaging with the world, including nature

Peace:

building relationships through listening and communication

Hope (or hopefulness):

the anticipation of something positive to happen
the implication that things can always get better
Although hope can spring from fear, we cannot surrender within this despair; we would not be able to change the world this way.
Hope can eventually lead to something greater, such as optimism.

Action:

engaging in the world allows us to take action.

Integrity:

having the capacity of knowing what is true
Integrity includes the word "integrate," allowing a person's experience to integrate their beliefs and values
If our moral values are respected, then integrity thrives.

The groups also discussed how our values and goals can be obstructed by cynicism, scepticism, fear, and disempowerment, all leading to a sense of apathy.

Turning Values into Concrete Responses

On the paper provided at the tables, one person wrote: "Faith teaches that you live for others." This beautiful statement tied in to another theme shared across the tables: allowing our values to guide how we relate to one another. Participants spoke about how knowing your neighbours, spending time together, and talking to one another builds community. They expressed the importance of empathetic listening, and working across cultures and generations, and discussed how our personal vulnerability and openness to sharing goes hand in hand with a sense of kinship. Overall the focus was on going from the individual to the collective in order to find the support we need.

Turning Values into Concrete Responses

A couple of tables made lists of concrete solutions, ranging from simple, personal changes to more global changes.

Live in community out of love, regardless of where the community is.

Don't define yourself only by where/what your community is now, but how it contributes to the wider community.

Get to know each one of your neighbours personally.

Know your limits and what's truly important.

Don't let language/cultural barriers get in the way of knowing people and acknowledging each other.

Take steps out of your individual world, talk to strangers on the bus, chat in line up at the grocery store.

Have potlucks. Break bread together.

Don't ask someone only about where they're from, but also about where they're going.

Provide informal support of individuals that is outside social programs.

Live in gratitude

Slow down: fight the machine of individual consumerism.

Save and share resources

Engage in shared projects and activities

Create the space for dialogue

Ideas for Systematic Change:

Microfinance programs

Social models that support the values we believe in, not just modern societal values of money, time, efficiency, "success", etc

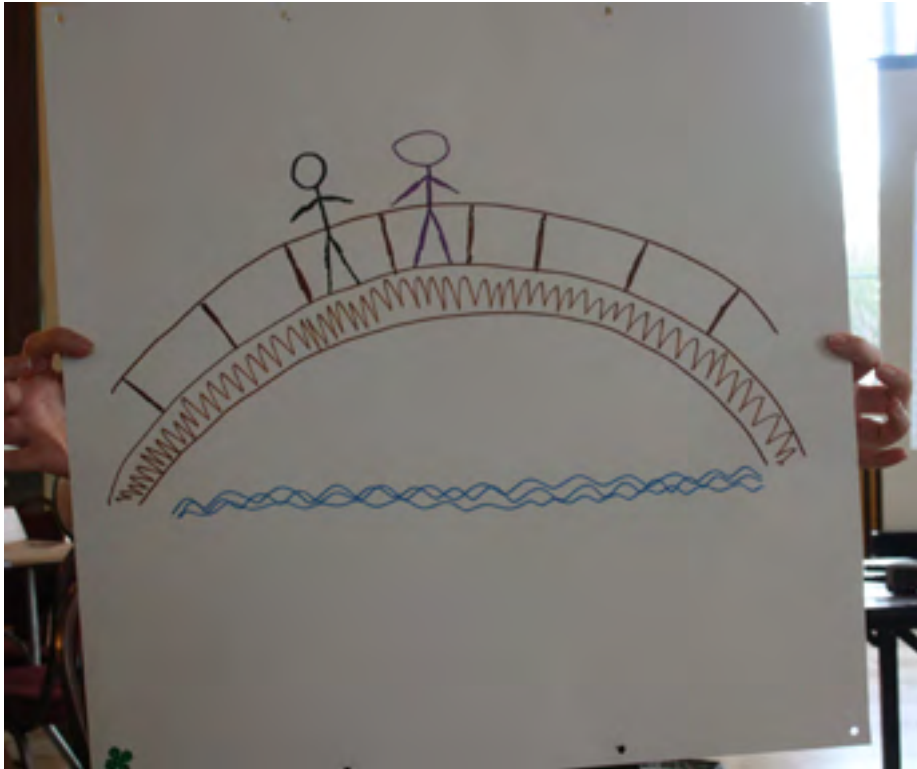
The Community Quilt



After engaging in dialogues around these questions, each group created a poster about how we can each use our values, religions and spiritualities to help us individually, in our families, and in our communities during these difficult economic times. The poster visually represented each group's main concrete idea.

The Experience of Facilitation and the Making of the Quilt

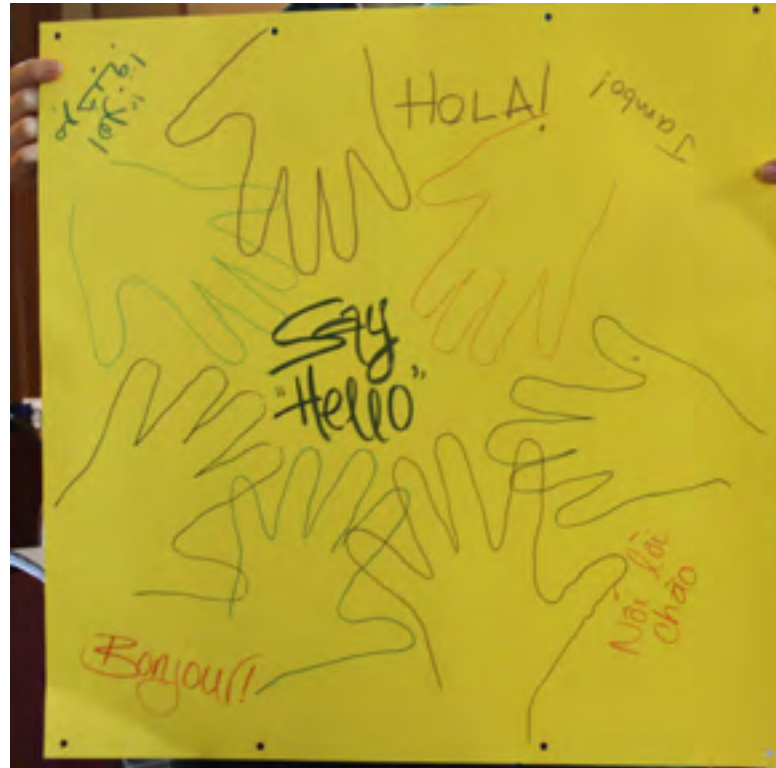
The following are summaries from one or both of the student facilitators at each table, reflecting their experiences and what ideas their group's quilt pieces represented.



Bridge

We ended with the general theme of a bridge. There were a variety of perspectives, all focused on finding a way to move from our present situation to the situation we want for the future. Some opinions emphasized hope, citing its ability to help us persevere in times of struggle. Others described the importance of personal agency to take control of the parts of life we can, helping attain the future we desire.

The Experience of Facilitation and the Making of the Quilt



Traced Our Hands

We spoke about values that we try to live by and the barriers to living out these values, such as selfishness, fear and isolation within our busy fast-paced lifestyles. We also discussed approaches to creating systemic change despite disagreement. Dialogue about the issues and talking to our neighbours is the first step. For our quilt piece, we each traced our hands on the paper, representing the collective action needed to build community. We then wrote down "Hello" in the different languages spoken at the table to symbolize the important first step of breaking out of our own silos and communicating with our neighbours in our own diverse ways.

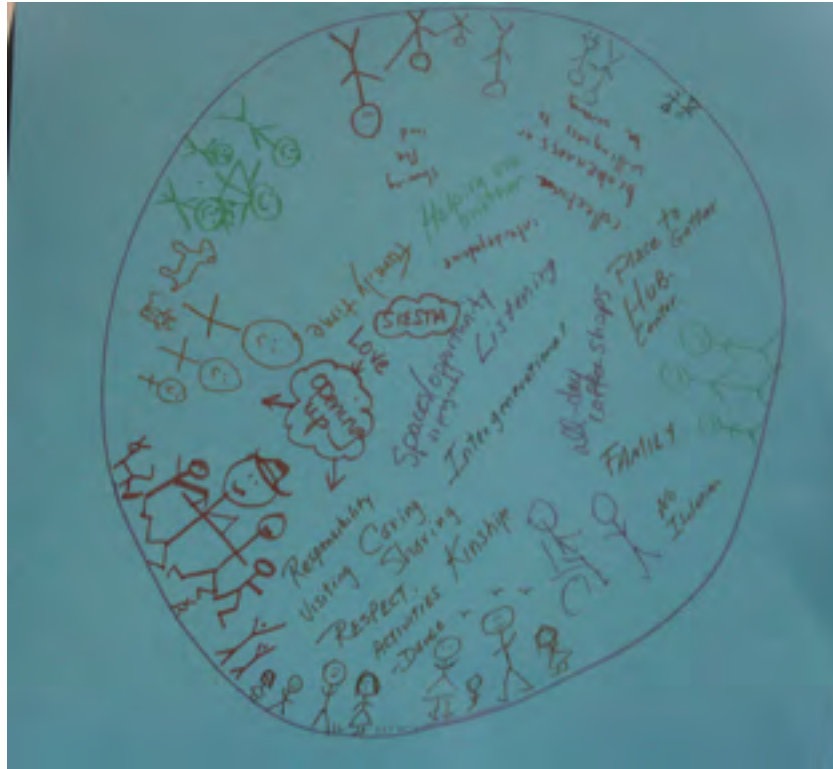
The Experience of Facilitation and the Making of the Quilt



The Things That Give Us Life

Each of us plays a vitally important role in the life journey of our community. Our quilt piece represents those things that give us life and therefore give life to community: creating! Eating together, growing an organic community garden, founding a pottery group in a church's basement, gathering together with our instruments and voices to make music, all benefit from listening to one another. Our group had less religious diversity but good generational diversity, with participants ranging from their twenties to their sixties. We agreed that intergenerational connections are necessary in building resilient communities, because each age group brings different sorts of life experiences to the table. It is also useful for those of varying levels of religious participation to come together as it helps to break down stereotypes held between those who are religious and those who are not.

The Experience of Facilitation and the Making of the Quilt



Public Square

We focused on how our public spaces reflect our internal lives. We have become an individualistic, internally focused society, and our public spaces reflect this. Our personal lives are organized around tasks instead of around people, leading to the creation of endless programs, when what is really needed is interpersonal communication and community.

Our group's quilt piece reflected a desire for a public square, where we can be together in conversation. There was momentum in our conversation to break patterns of isolation, and the drawing on our quilt represents this.

The Experience of Facilitation and the Making of the Quilt



Shoe Print

We created our image of the Shoe Print because it represented the idea of the other. Many of our values related to the other: how we connect with the other, how we respond or react to the other, how everyone is the other. One important topic was interconnectedness and how that was not happening in our current community settings. Our concrete solutions mostly revolved around how we as individuals could create change. The shoe represents our connection with the other and our struggle to walk in their shoes to come to understand their perspective. The reason the planet earth is the heel of the shoe is because our planet is full of others.

The Experience of Facilitation and the Making of the Quilt



The Village In Rwanda

Our table shared many good stories centered on the idea of community. One participant spoke of his experience growing up in Rwanda. In his village he could go anywhere he wanted and talk to anyone he wanted without his mother's supervision. This, he said, was because, "No one [was] a stranger. Everyone is an aunt or an uncle [figuratively]." Another participant spoke about her mother who is very active in her local church, and the strong sense of community that she gains in return. These stories sparked conversations asking if the root problem in our city is a lack of community. If everyone is a stranger, how can we build the communities we want? Perhaps we think of communities as neighborhoods, but they can also be a group of people who regularly see each other.

Our quilt piece is of the village in Rwanda that sparked these ideas, and we attempted to include symbols from many religions to express the hope that we can all work together to create a better sense of community in Vancouver.

The Experience of Facilitation and the Making of the Quilt



Communication

We focused on the act of spreading awareness. We discussed how communication is vital for the foundation of a community. Community resilience is started by sending out a message: a call for help, support or a moment for reflection. On our quilt piece we began by the idea of bridging the gap between generations. The older generation can teach the young their successes and mistakes, the younger generation can move forward and take up the torch of the old. We discussed social media such as Twitter and Facebook, and decided that, although important for the purpose of spreading information to others, there is still a need for meeting face to face to build an interactive community. With this idea in mind we discussed the need for safe spaces and events for these meetings to take place and to form deep connections.

The Experience of Facilitation and the Making of the Quilt



An Open Heart

This piece representing An Open Heart is symbolic of our need to approach relationships with an open heart and mind. Without fear of it being broken, and knowing that it can be healed through community, the heart has the power to lead us on a path of love and peace. By inviting others to join us on this journey, we can create widespread change.

Presentations

The nine posters were presented to the large group at the end of the small group discussions and then assembled as a quilt and hung on the wall. It was an amazing moment to hear how devoted each group was to their shared idea, and to hear the highlights of each table's conversation.



Outcomes



“As a facilitator for a small dialogue group, I found it interesting and gratifying to see how people from different religions and cultures could use respectful dialogue. This dialogue was used as a way to work together on finding common ground; it was used to assist finding concrete ways to navigate a path through the real fears, concerns, hopes and ways to help individuals, families and communities through these difficult economic times.” -Esther

Looking Back

Looking back at the day, a few central themes emerged:

Personal Responsibility and Authenticity: Cultivating responsibility for oneself and the ability to be authentic were seen as important to building a better future.

Isolation: One of our prevailing problems is separation from others, with greed, lack of communication and misunderstanding contributing to isolation.

Community: Community emerged as a response to isolation, and cultivating community means building connection and support.

Dialogue: We learned from the conversations how important it is to bring those of different faiths together, and about a deep need in our city for a greater sense of community. By knowing each other, we are more likely to help each other.

Networking: The dialogue was also an opportunity to work towards similar goals to connect and hear about each other's projects.

Looking Forward

Looking forward, it is important to see our dialogue in context to the social environment it took place in. Our society is secular, and its values are defined by law and constrained by the economic system. Our greater societal narrative embodies values that don't necessarily fit into our communities, but could emerge from faith and spiritual communities that are linked more closely with our personal values.

We often shy away from discussing religious and spiritual values in the public sector in our secularized Canadian society. By doing so, we overlook the values that are embedded within spiritual communities that can be applicable to humanity as a whole regardless of religion, spirituality or contemplative practice. The values of respect, community and caring that characterize faith communities are universal concepts without boundaries and show no discrimination across faith based and secular communities. While the civic arena has maintained a level of equality and objectivity by holding strictly secular views on public policy, there remains a wealth of values within the spiritual communities that could work towards addressing social inequality in times of crises. By holding these values in high esteem independent of the religions they are tied to, the civic and spiritual communities can come together in a

means of emphasizing the importance of human connections regardless of individual theological, spiritual or contemplative beliefs.

We need to create a bridge between our ideas and our actions to move through despair, making hope accessible. We hope this downturn could be an opportunity to restructure our system with higher ideals and more community-minded ethics.

The notion that your well-being is linked to mine weaves us together. Relationships are formed by listening, and it is through listening that learning happens. We need to live more through the lens of a collective we than through one of us and them that creates separations. Society is fragmented because we fail to put ourselves in other's shoes. This process requires reflection: having the curiosity to learn about every individual, as well as interaction with the other to create openness and sharing.

We realized the importance of having intention and living with it, which means approaching every moment with attentiveness and practicing non-violence. We need presence, having fewer expectations of outcomes in a day and showing gratitude for what exists, providing the time and space to walk our talk with integrity.

What We Learned



We Semester in Dialogue students gained many insights from the experience of planning and carrying out the “Faith in the System?” public dialogue.

Process

It is week one of the Fall 2011 Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue, sixteen strangers are glancing awkwardly at each other as they await instructions from their faculty. Heads are eagerly nodding as we go over the syllabus and the occasional hand is raised to inquire about the logistics of the semester.

Soon after, we are told that we are about to be faced with the largest group project that we will likely ever encounter; we are to host a public dialogue on Religion, Spirituality, Contemplative Inquiry and Social Action. The instructions end and the awkward glances have turned into desperate ones of panic and uncertainty.

Several large group meetings left us all questioning how we were ever going to fulfill this task, and we collectively decided that we needed to change our process. We realized that while some of the larger decisions required the entire groups input, it was in our best interest to split up tasks into small committees.

Once our topic was decided upon and each of us felt we had a fair say in that choice, we were left to trust that each sub-group would carry out their responsibilities in a way that reflected the standards of the entire group. We made a conscious shift away from a dialogical style of meetings into one that was more focused on delineating tasks and evaluating progress. We each arrived at Heritage Hall with a clear sense our responsibilities and carried them out efficiently. Each individual was required to put their trust in fifteen people, and it was through great faith in one another and belief in our own efficacy that we were able to make the day possible. **We learned that faith in each other is required to have faith in the system.**

Content and Structure

We were faced with the challenge of presenting the topic to a broad audience in a way that encouraged open and innovative discussion. The topic “Faith in the System; Religious and Spiritual Visions for Community Resilience in Times of Economic Crisis” required research and in depth analysis of the current global economic situation. In order to create meaningful dialogue about an extremely broad and complicated issue, we tailored the topic to reach communities on a local level. What role did each individual play in today’s economic climate? How can communities work together to avoid economic crisis? These questions are surely in the forefront for many of us, and we hoped to create an environment that these issues could be discussed openly and honestly.

We tried to set a positive and welcoming tone by warmly greeting our guests and offering a wide array of deliciously sustainable fare. The hall was set up in a way that allowed for an organic flow of guests from one point to the other. By starting the day off on a casual and friendly tone, participants were able to ease into the dialogue rather than feel bombarded with complex issues and questions.

We continued to set a positive tone for the day by acquiring the wisdom and expertise of several faith leaders from the community. These speakers helped us set the stage for the rest of the day and solidified the context of our dialogue. Feedback forms noted the lack of a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh presence which would have been a valuable and enriching addition to our dialogue. Our dialogue was open to the public and our invitations were strategically sent to a wide range of guests, but our networks were based in Christian, Buddhist, Jewish and First Nations faiths, so that these communities had a larger representation.

Content and Structure

We created several activities to encourage communication between participants. One was an art component that amalgamated the ideas of the small group dialogues into an image on a poster board. These images were then sewn together and displayed on the wall for the guests to view as they exited the building. This activity was effective in offering a different medium to represent thoughts and feelings, and gave guests an opportunity to express themselves as individuals. It was also successful in encouraging strangers to come together and work towards a common goal that had a final, tangible outcome. We could have also included a movement component to the day, helpful for those who are more responsive to the bodily kinesthetic forms of learning and expression.

We learned many things from debriefing the event and from the feedback forms. Two stood out. First, there were concerns raised over the representation of ideas at the dialogue. Many of the ideas about the economy and the role of faith leaned in a politically left-wing direction, and other political sides of issues were not adequately represented. Second, in attempting to create an engaging and fulfilling day of dialogue we may have been excessively ambitious in what we hoped to accomplish in the day. This resulted in some of the activities being rushed, discussions being interrupted and our guests' attention being pulled in different directions throughout the day. This could have been avoided by limiting the amount of activities, allowing more time for reflection between activities and encouraging discussions to evolve organically.

Dialogue

In preparation for the dialogue, we identified patterns in the topic and picked up some strategies concerning the best approaches to successful dialogue through our own working sessions. These skills were put to the test the day of our public dialogue and we identified some areas of learning based on our experiences of the day.

Facilitators need to be prepared; going in with a set of questions and an idea of how they want the dialogue to go instead of relying on a Master of Ceremonies. Also, knowing your audience and catering to their needs will greatly influence how the dialogue will go.

It is better to be more prepared with less detail, than less prepared with more detail

Sometimes there will be conflicting ideas at the table. It is best to let this be and observe objectively until the issue has resolved itself, while maintaining a balance. It does not help to try to manage participants' opinions and temperaments.

It can be tricky to deal with dialoguers who lose track of time when they are talking and leave diminished room for the rest. As a facilitator it is important to be sensitive to their need to talk while maintaining awareness for the entire group and making decisions that will enrich the dialogue rather than stagnate it.

Do not micromanage conversation; a group cannot have a proper dialogue if it they feel rushed or interrupted.

Setting a tone of inclusivity where everyone's voices are equally validated and respected is key

Artistic expression is helpful in bringing groups together in dialogue

It is important for the facilitator to be aware of the entire group, and make suggestions that will enrich the dialogue rather than stagnate it.

Conclusion



Participants in “Faith in the System?” gained new insights and inspirations, and we ourselves had a strong learning experience as well. Participants believed that the qualities of respectfulness, community and caring for each that characterize faith communities at their best are lacking in the civic arena, and social inequality might be best addressed by bringing those and related qualities to policy decisions. It’s not that the public sector needs to be spiritual, but it would benefit from some of the qualities found in spiritual communities.

There were many highlights of the day, but our greatest success as individuals and a class was in organizing an event that attracted participants from diverse ethnic, spiritual, political social and generational backgrounds together. In the process, we too were brought together as a team with great confidence in each other.

Thank-you

For those who attended the event, thank you so much for your time and support. For those unable to make it, we hope that this report has given you a glimpse into the events of the day and can take you further to answering the question of “Faith in the System?” Lastly, to everyone who supported us in our process, our family, friends, faculty and generous community members, thank you for allowing us this space to grow.

Simon Fraser University
SFU Semester in Dialogue
Vancouver School of Theology
Iona Pacific Inter-Religious Centre
Heritage Hall
Mark Winston
Heesoon Bai
Robert Daum
Linda Bannister
Brenda Tang
Robin Prest
Cookies of Course

Potluck Cafe
Freshii Catering
David Carlson and the CG Organic Farm
The Salvation Army
Planet Veg Restaurant
Ethical Bean Coffee
The Jewish Independent
Olla Flowers
Rabbi Laura Kaplan
Pastor Tim Dickau
Kelvin Bee
Felipe Lozano

Appendix

Participant Feedback

<http://ow.ly/7Vk5i>

Media: Article from The Jewish Independent

<http://www.jewishindependent.ca/archives/Dec11/archives11Dec02-02.html>

Multimedia Slideshow

<http://youtu.be/wLziaKCopC0>