



## **Lived Experiences of Interfaith Leaders in Promoting Solidarity and Peace in Pagadian City**

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DOI: 10.53103/cjess.v5i2.335

### Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of interfaith leaders in Pagadian City, particularly their efforts in promoting Solidarity and Peace. It involved interviews with nine interfaith leaders from the city, whose personal insights were collected through in-depth discussions. The study points out how personal encounters influence their interfaith efforts, the nature of their engagements with diverse religious communities, and the activities they implement. This study is qualitative and mainly utilizes a phenomenological research design. This design was chosen to identify the common patterns in the experiences of all participants. The findings highlighted that the leaders strongly emphasize unity, shared objectives, community involvement, and resolving conflicts. Key activities include the Mindanao Week of Peace, World Interfaith Harmony Week, immersion initiatives, the Duyog Ramadan Program, and efforts to spread interfaith Dialogue. The study highlighted several important points. Challenges faced by interfaith leaders include misinterpretation, prejudice, low attendance, personal agendas, clan feuds, recruitment difficulties, and financial limitations. To overcome these obstacles, the leaders focused on promoting understanding, staying consistent, embracing new ideas, respecting Dialogue, maintaining a positive mindset, motivating others, and turning to prayer. They also emphasized the importance of collaborating with government agencies, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders to advance interfaith Dialogue. The recommendations include continuing dedicated interfaith Dialogue, improving collaboration, strengthening interfaith networks, engaging the youth, and directing future research toward the impact of ongoing interfaith efforts. This study highlights the crucial role of sustained Dialogue and collaboration in fostering harmony among the diverse religious communities in Pagadian City.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Interfaith Leaders, Challenges, Solidarity and Peace, Strategies

## **Introduction**

In an era marked by diverse perspectives and cultural complexities, the role of interfaith leaders in fostering Solidarity and Peace became central focus. Two challenges are identified: the challenge towards Solidarity and the challenge towards Peace. The situations that breed poverty, disorder, and conflict continue to affect our society. Promoting Christian unity and Solidarity for Peace was the rallying cry among the Moro people, Indigenous people, and most Christians for more than 20 years. Without Peace, there is no integral development; without proper development, there is no real peace. (Canova & Ma'rof, 2023).

One study conducted internationally stated that Women with a Turkish immigrant background have a lower chance of being invited for an interview when looking for jobs in Germany. If they wear a headscarf, the discrimination increases significantly. The findings imply that immigrant women who cover their heads face prejudice stemming from various stereotypes associated with their race and religion Weichselbaumer (2020). Through this study, it is very clear that discrimination among different religions in the workplace abroad is evident. Discrimination, bias, and stereotyping can impact hiring, promotions, and work experiences. Research suggests that inclusive policies, diversity-focused initiatives, and cultural awareness training can help reduce these challenges, fostering a more welcoming workplace for everyone (Linando, 2024).

In the Philippine context, the Archdiocese IFD, led by Cardinal Orlando R. Quevedo, OMI, DD, and supported by Rev. Fr. Robert Layson, is dedicated to addressing various challenges faced by the country. These challenges include ignorance of religion, land disputes, intolerance of others, violence, discrimination, and corruption. The primary objective of the Archdiocese IFD is to promote understanding, respect, and forgiveness among people, with the ultimate goal of fostering Dialogue, justice, unity, Peace, and care for both natures in Mindanao and the entire Philippines.

ISIS-Philippines' activities, including the Marawi siege, a suicide bombing in Basilan, and an attack on a Catholic cathedral, have increased suicide bombings in the country. Organizations like the Peacemaker's Circle Foundation, Religions for Peace Philippines, and the Bishop-Ulama Conference work to foster Dialogue and cooperation and counter violent extremism (CVE) between Muslim and Christian communities. Programs like Transforming Conflicts in Sulu and Basilan aim to reduce localized violence through Dialogue and capacity-building. Equal Access International (EAI) held peace summits in Mindanao in 2019 and 2020 to promote interfaith understanding and peacebuilding (Rhoades, 2020).

Achieving international Peace requires religious harmony, which can be attained through interfaith Dialogue. This Dialogue encourages understanding, respect, and cooperation among people from different religions, fostering an appreciation for diversity

and peaceful coexistence (Corpuz, 2021). Interfaith communication is widely acknowledged as a powerful tool for addressing societal issues, promoting tolerance, and creating a peaceful and just society. The Archdiocese IFD in the Philippines fosters unity, Peace, justice, and care for nature and the country by prioritizing Interfaith Dialogue.

Various global studies highlight challenges faced by Muslims in the workplace, such as a "religiosity penalty," which affects callback rates compared to Christians. In the Philippines, the Archdiocese IFD tackles issues such as gaps in religious knowledge, land disputes, violence, and corruption, emphasizing understanding, respect, and forgiveness. Interfaith communication plays a vital role in promoting international Peace, with the Archdiocese IFD making significant contributions through its dialogue initiatives. Despite the presence of ISIS-Philippines, various organizations continue to promote Dialogue, cooperation, and counter violent extremism. This study focuses on the experiences of interfaith leaders working to promote Solidarity and Peace in Pagadian City.

In the context of Torning (2021), the key discovery of her study centers on how participation in interfaith work shapes young individuals' religious, social, ethical, and political identities. Dogarawa (2022) cites Hans Kung's viewpoint, highlighting the interdependence of Peace among nations and religions.

According to Aleem (2022), interreligious discussions should avoid doctrinal disputes. Instead, the focus should be on accepting and tolerating differences to uphold God's system, embrace the values of the Prophet, and engage positively to promote Peace, harmony, and coexistence. Additionally, Tahir (2021) highlights the role of Almighty Allah in creating humans with unique traits, stressing that Peace is essential for nurturing these qualities. Peace makes freedom in choosing a way of life, stand against force, and reject the unfair treatment of differences. While the objective of religion is to promote Peace, there is a problem that it can be misused sometimes for destructive purposes.

A study by Rizwan (2023), informed the importance of having religious harmony and interfaith communications in creating understanding, respect, and peaceful harmony among people and communities with coming from different religious backgrounds. In addition, religious harmony has positive effects on inclusive societies. They are perceived as advocates for Peace in today's world, which play a critical role. The challenges we face today call for a study of current trends in inter-religious Dialogue, offering followers a guidance to address issues of religious diversity.

Habib et al. (2022), point out that religion plays a pivotal role in interfaith conflicts, turning it crucial to involve different religious control conflict resolution. Theological and political approaches are seen as more effective, different conditions required adopted methods. Strategies should regularly reviewed to approach conflicts and keep credibility within religious communities. Conflicts in Africa come up from different aspects, including religious beliefs, ethnicity, and poverty. The Church and its leaders have the capability in playing a role in addressing these different conflicts through promoting the core religious

values such as love, forgiveness, justice, peace, and respect. Participating in dialogue and implementing religious peace-building initiatives are part of the potential strategies in managing and resolving these conflicts (Dajwan, 2021).

Interreligious dialogue (IRD) is shaped by international trends and local actor's beliefs about conflict resolution and peacebuilding. While various actors recognize IRD's value in building trust, particularly in affected communities, its role in peace initiatives is often secondary due to its indirect and long-term impact. In the Philippines, IRD demonstrates a stronger elective character with active religious leader involvement. However, a prevailing perception such as among Catholics, that religion can be a source of conflict and religious individuals are more intolerant which can pose a challenge (Suphatmet & Baybado, 2022).

A study by Cornelio and Aldama (2020) reveals that Protestants, evangelicals, and nontrinitarians hold differing views, with these groups being more likely to believe that practicing religion fosters the development of friendships. These contrasting perspectives present both challenges and opportunities for implementing covenantal pluralism in the country. The study concludes by stressing the importance of covenantal pluralism as a relational imperative, especially in a society where emerging religious minorities are gaining more significant influence and competitiveness.

According to Brooks & Brooks (2022), it indicates that principals consider religion and spirituality to be highly significant on an individual level and that both religion and spirituality serve as closely connected but distinct symbolic systems in which principals must engage to lead in school and community settings effectively. Additionally, the study highlighted important methodological considerations, particularly around translation and cultural relevance for researchers based in Australia. It emphasizes that peacebuilding efforts must be integrated with public service, creating a sensitive, hybrid approach to address societal issues. There is a pressing need to strengthen and operationalize an effective tool that promotes a culture of Peace as an ethical alternative to a culture of violence (Lataza & Lataza, 2022).

Another study by Manalu (2021) shows that their movement has successfully promoted interfaith cooperation and collaboration through a variety of activities, including waste management, environmental advocacy, and interfaith conversation. According to the findings of Musdodi Manalu (2021), interfaith discussion is the primary strategy for promoting religious Peace in YIPC. This study is significant because it fills a gap in knowledge on the effectiveness and impact of interfaith Dialogue among youth.

The Mindanao Week of Peace is a significant initiative led by the Interfaith Dialogue Program of the Archdiocese of Cotabato which aimed to promote peace and mutual understanding among diverse religious and cultural groups. This features a variety of activities which include peace rallies, interfaith dialogues, cultural exhibitions, and educational seminars. These are conducted in collaboration with various stakeholders such

as religious leaders, local government units, youth organizations, women's associations, and the military (Alferez, 2021). Additionally, the study of Interfaith Dialogue (IFD) program in the Archdiocese points out the significance of immersion in this initiative. Through active participation, Muslim and Christian youth leaders, along with community residents, gain a deeper understanding of each other's beliefs and practices. This fosters empathy and respect, which are essential for building trust and reducing prejudice within the community.

Held annually during the first week of February, World Interfaith Harmony Week is a global event that inspires individuals and communities to participate in interfaith dialogues and initiatives that cultivate mutual respect and harmony. This activity serves as a platform for nurturing understanding and collaboration among followers of diverse religions. By addressing prejudices and misconceptions, World Interfaith Harmony Week aims to deepen appreciation for the richness of different faiths and strengthen the bonds of unity across religious divides (Andrabi, 2020).

In diverse communities like Quiapo, Manila, food culture plays a significant role in fostering interreligious understanding and harmony between groups like Muslims and Catholics. Initiatives such as shared meals during Ramadan ("Duyog Ramadan") and the Black Nazarene festival exemplify this connection, bringing members of different faiths together (Tallara, 2023). This exchange stresses the potential for interfaith dialogue, particularly when centered around shared experiences like food, to build bridges and promote cooperation (Shoaib & Shabbib, 2021). In an increasingly intereconnected world, proactive interfaith engagement is crucial for cultivating mutual respect and understanding, counteracting misinterpretations that fuel prejudice and conflict (Andrabi, 2020).

Interfaith dialogue faces numerous challenges, including prejudice manifesting as communal violence, religious intolerance, and social exclusion (Intan, 2024), hindering peace and understanding. Low attendance at interfaith meetings (Mackay, 2023) and local conflicts like "rido" in Mindanao, rooted in family divisions (Trajano, 2020), further impede solidarity and peacebuilding. In Nigeria, historical factors like colonial domination and lingering hesitations among leaders discourage Christian-Muslim dialogue (Hussaini, 2020). Recruiting members and leaders also poses a significant challenge. Despite these obstacles, practices like prayer offer comort and strength (Pitman, 2024). It connects individuals with a higher power, providing solace and a sense of purpose. Prayer requires dedication, patience, and understanding, fostering hope and trust in a higher power Dandekar (2024). The study recommends adopting these methods by government, religious leaders, traditional rulers, teachers, and security personnel to manage and prevent conflicts, highlighting the new Jada of applying historical conflict resolution techniques to modern inter-religious issues Umaru & Shariff (2020).

According to Husein (2020), attempts to achieve religious concord should not be dominated by the government but by society itself. The role of society portrayed in NGO

activities takes a more bottom-up approach to societal problems. Their work is the antithesis of the government's attitude. However, not all interfaith institutions use the same approach to work. Although they work on real-world social problems, they interact with them in a variety of ways. Examples of this are Interfidei and FPUB. Interfidei has a more elitist method of interacting with society. In another study by Gisela Teran Webb (2021), history, nationality, and the maintenance of natural harmony by local faiths all contribute to religious moderation in the setting of local religions in Indonesia. According to Anggara (2023), interfaith harmony encourages respect, understanding, and collaboration amongst followers of many faiths, all of which can contribute to a society that is more just and peaceful. Achieving interfaith harmony is not without difficulties, however. These difficulties include mistrust amongst people of various faiths, fear, bigotry, and ignorance. Additionally, Sattar (2022) emphasizes the importance of promoting harmonious coexistence among various faith communities, along with the need for effective management techniques to ensure the cultural, religious, and environmental sustainability of these valuable sites. Shows that NU Kyais' alternative education program successfully created a space for interfaith discourse, encouraged understanding, and fostered cross-faith collaboration Fahm (2023). Although substantial literature discusses interfaith leaders' efforts to promote harmony and Peace, little is known about the specific tactics they use or the challenges they encounter in developing long-term peace building initiatives at the local level.

The rationale of this study is to share the perspective of interfaith leaders in Pagadian City. The research aims to acknowledge their efforts in building Solidarity and Peace. It strives to share its success stories, challenges, and their creative approaches while promoting cultural sensitivity. As a result, the study intends to improve understanding the pivotal role of interfaith leaders in encouraging peace and harmony among diverse communities.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This research used a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the lived experiences of leaders in Pagadian City as they navigate the obstacles to promoting solidarity and peace. By examining their perspectives, challenges, and strategies, the study aimed to understand their roles and contributions to peacebuilding, recognizing their efforts in fostering interfaith cooperation and addressing the complexities of their work (Umaru, 2019). This approach allowed the research to “bracket” their own biases to authentically capture the essence of these leaders’ experiences in promoting interfaith solidarity and peace.

### **Research Environment and Participants**

This study was conducted in Pagadian City, Zamboanga del Sur, a multicultural city with an active interfaith community dedicated to fostering solidarity and peace. This diverse environment provides a rich context for exploring the challenges faced by interfaith leaders. Participants included leaders from all nine (9) interfaith groups comprising the Interfaith Forum for Solidarity and Peace in Pagadian City. Purposive sampling was used to select leaders with at least five years of experience in interfaith initiatives, ensuring a focus on individuals with substantial involvement and knowledge.

### **Research Instruments**

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method for this qualitative study. These interviews, conducted individually with each interfaith leader, explored their personal experiences, motivations, challenges, achievements, and strategies related to promoting solidarity and peace.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

A transparent process was followed throughout the study. Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained permission from the interfaith leaders. Participants were introduced to the researchers, the study's purpose was explained, and a confidentiality consent form was provided. With participant consent, interviews were conducted using open-ended questions and audio-recorded. Following the interviews, participants reviewed their responses for accuracy. The researchers expressed their appreciation to the participants for their time and contributions.

### **Data analysis**

This study, employing a transcendental phenomenological design, explored how interfaith leaders find meaning in their experiences with interfaith dialogue. Data were gathered through focus groups and interviews with nine leaders – Catholic, Muslim, and Subanen – who had participated in interfaith forums for over five years. These participants offered diverse perspectives on the impact of their involvement. Following Moustaka's (1994) seven-step method, data analysis involved identifying relevant statements, eliminating redundancies, clustering themes, validating meanings with direct quotes, and synthesizing these diverse viewpoints to reveal the essence of their lived experiences.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Personal Encounters Shaping Interfaith Endeavors**

Through extensive research encompassing interviews with the participants deeply engaged in interfaith initiatives, important themes emerged to highlight the personal encounters driving these endeavors. These sub-themes include Peacebuilding, Community engagement, and Mutual Respect. These sub-themes show how personal interactions deeply influence interfaith efforts.

#### **Peacebuilding**

"We experienced war in our barangay, a conflict between Muslims and Christians. That was one of the reasons why I am in the interfaith movement, and because of the experience, I realized that it is not good to fight each other because we are all Filipinos." IL8

"In my personal experience, when I was assigned to Dinas, the atmosphere was tense due to an incident in which a commander's sibling from the MILF was killed, followed by a retaliatory killing within the same kinship. This situation led to a strained relationship among the Moro people, with tensions rising to the point of potential conflict. At that time, the Church intervened because the local government was paralyzed."

"I joined the movement knowing that it was necessary because I am a Muslim leader. The purpose is to bridge understanding between people with different faiths and cultures and also to serve peacebuilding." IL7

Their role as interfaith leaders reflects a commitment to bridging understanding between different faiths and cultures. By encouraging Dialogue and cooperation, they strive to build harmonious relationships and contribute to resolving conflicts within their community. This aligns with Seul's (2021) perspective on the effectiveness of religious leaders in peacebuilding efforts within conflict zones. Additionally, Abu-Nimer and Smith (2020) emphasize how interfaith Dialogue can help build trust and mutual respect, which are essential for achieving sustainable Peace in diverse societies.

#### **Community Engagement**

" My encounter is knowing God, knowing myself, and being with my community and the rest of creation." IL5

" We have meetings and special occasions that tackle our faith life experiences and our involvement in interfaith. We usually talk about faith and share our experiences. We also discuss the two major features, including the faith life experiences; next is the social concerns of the whole year that the interfaith need to discuss." IL2



The participants describe how these dialogues not only broaden their knowledge of various faiths but also deepen their spiritual insights. By participating in meetings and discussions on faith life experiences and social concerns, individuals feel empowered to contribute meaningfully to their communities. This perspective is connected to the study of Sari (2020), which states that interfaith Dialogue undertaken by the community with various beliefs contributes to succeeding society's active Engagement in realizing a harmonious life in the current era of globalization, where they began to realize the importance of people's Engagement in interfaith dialogue.

### **Mutual Respect**

"My personal encounters with interfaith experiences are very enriching because despite the issues thrown at each religion by others, within interfaith interactions, unity and respect for each other persist. There is support and understanding, and our collaboration becomes stronger despite our differences." IL9

"In my experience with interfaith dialogue among the members, there was no discrimination, no matter who you are." IL6

"Through interfaith dialogue, I have come to recognize common values that foster harmony, compassion, and understanding across different religious perspectives, going beyond specific religious boundaries." IL

The participants' statements highlight how these interactions play a key role in promoting unity, respect, and cooperation among different religious groups. Shared values, such as opposing discrimination fostering peace, and emphasizing love and mercy, transcend religious boundaries and unify many spiritual traditions despite difference in belief. This is consistent with the findings of Halafoff (2021), which highlight the value of interfaith engagement in creating inclusive and cohesive societies by highlighting its capacity to lessen religious biases and promote social harmony.

### **Engagement in Interfaith Dialogue and Collaboration**

Through in- depth discussion with individuals that have a strong interest in interfaith endeavour, a number of sub-themes have combine, such as building Relationships, dialogue Techniques, and Nonviolent conflict Settlement, and these sub-themes provides insight into interfaith involvement, stressing the need for constant communication, compassion and teamwork in promoting sincere communication and collaboration among various religious groupings.

### **Establishing Relationship**

"First and foremost, it involves building a friendship and relationship so that we can do more than just converse" about communication but also maintain harmonious and peaceful connection, participating in being open, eradicating in being open, eradicating our prejudices, getting to know one another, and treating one another as friends to the teaching of other religions."IL4

The story illustrates how important it is to establish cordial connection and ties as a basis for fruitful interfaith discussion. The participants highlights how crucial it is to interact with one another as friends, set aside prejudices, and maintain an open mind to the belief and practices of different faiths. This perspective relates to the views of Swidler (2020), which emphasize the significance of personal relationships in overcoming prejudices and promoting social cohesion.

### **Dialogue Practices**

"Listening is crucial. Without listening, nothing can happen. The key factor in Dialogue is that one must learn to value the importance of listening. That's the art of listening. Because without truly listening, there will be no result. And from my perspective, humility is also essential. Without humility and listening, there can be no dialogue." IL3

"The voices of different religious groups are heard because we don't talk about doctrines. We discuss life together on our journey with God. That's why there's no barrier for us: there are no doctrines and no debates. If a Subanen member shares what their practice means to them, we accept it without question." IL5

"Let's not dwell on our differences. We should focus on our similarities because despite coming from different religious backgrounds, we still have commonalities. How? By listening to each other. Being a good listener is key. Additionally, by encouraging others to live life with a spirit of Dialogue and applying it in our daily lives, we can foster understanding and unity despite our diverse beliefs" IL 9

"The strategy I employ to ensure that all voices from various religious backgrounds are heard and respected during our Dialogue is to prioritize organizing a small core group representing different religious communities. This group serves as a basis for facilitating Dialogue and ensuring that diverse religious groups such as Muslims, Lumads, and Catholics are included and respected." IL1

"In our experience with the interfaith movement, especially during the reflection period, we made an effort to listen to everyone as they shared their experiences and testimonies about their religion. We stayed open and engaged, listening with empathy and sincerity to foster Peace. Dialogue is essential for understanding one another and making meaningful plans. When the LGBTQ community opens up, we must understand what kind

of Peace they desire. We should focus on what is common to all of us and unite around that." IL8

In interreligious dialogue, the participants stress the need of listening humility, and concentrating on common experiences rather than doctrinal disagreements. They also highlight how active listening promotes empathy and respect for one another across religious divides, making it crucial component of meaningful dialogue and understanding, Buckland's (2020) study, which examines the function of listening in interfaith dialogue and emphasizes its significance in fostering understanding among various religious communities. According to buckland, sincere in order for participants to comprehend one another's viewpoints, dialogue necessitates careful listening values, and experiences, resulting in a greater degree of respect and understanding between people.

### **Peaceful Conflict Resolution**

"I am motivated to participate in advocating for peaceful solutions because I believe that the problems we face cannot be resolved through violence. Dialogue is essential and is something we practice within Indigenous Peoples (IPs) communities. No matter how serious the problem or crime is, it should be addressed through Dialogue rather than allowing it to escalate. By discussing issues, we can come up with good solutions." IL 6

Participants emphasized the importance of peaceful conflict resolution through open and respectful Dialogue, advocating for non-violent solutions that involve understanding different perspectives and needs, followed by mediation and negotiation to reach mutually acceptable outcomes. Saleh (2021) examines the impact of interfaith Dialogue in promoting Peace and resolving conflicts in Northern Nigeria, a region marked by religious tensions and violence. This highlights how interfaith dialogue initiatives led by religious leaders have played a key role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, stressing the importance of inclusive dialogue processes in fostering understanding and reconciliation among diverse religious communities.

### **Activities Implemented by the Interfaith Leaders**

After carefully analyzing the gathered information from the participants, the researchers identified several categories of activities carried out by interfaith leaders. These categories include Mindanao Week of Peace, World Harmony Week, Immersion initiatives, Duyog Ramadan Program, and Spreading of Interfaith Dialogue.

### **Mindanao Week of Peace**

"..Involve in planning Mindanao Week of Peace. I think this is the highlight of the interfaith forum activity." IL1

"Ang Mindanao week of peace..." [The Mindanao Week of Peace.] IL2

"...we have Mindanao Week of Peace..." IL3

"We have the Mindanao Week of Peace." IL4

"...is the annual Mindanao Week of Peace, observed every last Thursday of November to Wednesday of December." IL5

"..Or the Mindanao week of peace." IL6

"..Promotion of Mindanao weak of peace." IL7

"We have the week of peace or Mindanao week of peace." IL8

The Mindanao Week of Peace is a significant activity implemented by interfaith leaders in Pagadian City, promoting Peace and Solidarity through collaborative activities and Dialogue. The participants widely recognize and value this event, highlighting its importance in their interfaith efforts. It seems to be an annual occurrence, taking place from the last Thursday in November to the Wednesday in December. A study by Alferex (2021) said that the Mindanao Week of Peace is a key initiative of the Interfaith Dialogue Program in the Archdiocese of Cotabato, aimed at promoting Peace and understanding among diverse religious and cultural groups. This event includes activities like peace rallies, interfaith dialogues, cultural presentations, and educational seminars, engaging stakeholders such as religious leaders, local government units, youth groups, women's organizations, internally displaced persons, and the military.

### **World Interfaith Harmony Week**

".. World interfaith harmony week and also the IP month, October." IL6

"We implemented the World Interfaith Harmony Week." IL4

"One is the world interfaith harmony week." IL5

"...the World Interfaith Harmony Week, celebrated every February 1st to 7th, stands as another notable initiative led by the Interfaith Forum for Solidarity and Peace group." IL9

Interfaith leaders organize World Interfaith Harmony Week to promote mutual understanding and cooperation among people of diverse faiths. This event serves as a significant platform for fostering Peace, Dialogue, and collaboration among diverse communities, encouraging mutual respect and understanding across religious divides. Andrabi (2020) highlights the importance of this annual event, observed in the first week

of February, in promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation globally. The World Interfaith Harmony Week aims to break down prejudices, encourage Engagement in Dialogue, and foster mutual respect and harmony by appreciating the diversity of faiths.

### **Immersion initiatives**

"...that Muslim youth went up on nanga-nanga, in my place, to have an immersion and encounter to the Subanen youth and Christian, of course..." IL4

".. Through immersion experiences, such as those undertaken by Franciscan brothers and sisters who immersed themselves in Muslim communities in Pagadian, significant changes in perception occurred. At first, they harbored feelings of hatred towards Muslims, influenced by negative media portrayals that associated them with kidnapping, terrorism, and violence. However, during their immersion, they encountered the kindness of Muslims through personal interactions and shared experiences. This led to a change in their perceptions, fostering positive relationships and open communication with their foster families. Similarly, successful initiatives involving Dialogue have led to tangible outcomes." IL9

Interfaith leaders arranged immersion programs for Muslim, Subanen, and Christian youth to interact and understand each other better. Franciscan brothers and sisters also immersed themselves in Muslim communities to overcome negative stereotypes and discover the goodness within. These immersions aim to break down biases and discrimination by allowing participants to learn about different beliefs and cultures. According to Alferéz (2021), immersion in the Interfaith Dialogue program fosters empathy, respect, and understanding among Christian and Muslim youth leaders and community members, promoting Peace and unity through continued Dialogue and collaborative efforts.

### **Duyog Ramadan Program**

"... There was a specific program called the 'Duyog Ramadan Program.' When I was assigned to Dimataling, Dinas, and even Margos sa Tubig, I actively participated. For instance, here in Labangan, I put up posters outside the Church. In fact, Christians here were shocked by the Duyog Ramadan Program. Moreover, I was the one who reached out to my Muslim brothers and neighbors. There was Qur'an reading during Ramadan, and we would clean up the mosque to prepare for Ramadan for the Muslims. During Ramadan, when I was assigned to Dimataling, I opened my convent gate 24 hours a day so the children could play basketball during Ramadan. So I personally took the initiative to open the gate and the convent because during Ramadan, my convent had ustads and my elder

Muslim sisters gathering there." IL3

In Pagadian, interfaith leaders launched the 'Duyog Ramadan Program' to promote understanding and unity during Ramadan. Activities like Qur'an readings, mosque clean-ups, and providing a safe space for Muslim children to play basketball were designed to deepen respect for Islamic practices among people of different faiths, fostering genuine friendships between Christians and Muslims. In Quiapo, Manila, Tallara (2023) highlighted the importance of food culture in promoting interreligious harmony, with the Duyog Ramadan initiative as a prime example. This program involves sharing food during Ramadan and the festival of the Black Nazarene, promoting inclusivity, friendship, and unity among Muslims and Catholics.

### **Spreading of Interfaith Dialogue**

" I am one of the leaders in our civil society organization. We call it Umah Fi Salam, so we helped spread interfaith Dialogue in municipalities. We did not just rely on Christians who also promote interfaith; we also helped spread out interfaith Dialogue. That is the only way to show that we are equal partners in the organization. We also helped organize, I think, 10 municipalities that we organized." IL7

IL7 actively promotes interfaith Dialogue across municipalities, involving both Christians and Muslims to foster inclusivity and understanding. Educating Muslims on the true purpose of interfaith Dialogue helps bridge gaps and promote Peace among diverse religious communities. Promoting interfaith dialogue activities is essential for fostering mutual respect, cooperation, and understanding among people from different religious backgrounds. By encouraging open conversations, individuals can break down stereotypes, dispel misconceptions, and build trusting relationships. According to Shoaib and Shabbir (2021), in today's interconnected world, the promotion of interfaith Dialogue is more crucial than ever to foster harmony and unity across diverse religions and cultures.

### **The Primary Challenges that Interfaith Leaders Face in Promoting Interfaith Dialogue**

After carefully analyzing the collected data from the participants, the researchers identified several themes regarding the primary challenges that interfaith leaders face in their effort to promote interfaith Dialogue. These themes include Being Misinterpreted, Facing Prejudice, Insufficient Attendance, Members Attending Meetings with Personal Agendas, Encountering Clan Feud as an Interfaith Leader, Discouragement in Interfaith Leadership, and Limited Financial Sustainability.

**Being Misinterpreted**

"... That you will be misinterpreted by the churches, then you'll be red-tagged. So, it's really a challenge, but it's not a challenge for you to retreat, but to continue." IL5

One of the primary challenges interfaith leaders face in promoting interfaith Dialogue is the risk of being misinterpreted by religious institutions. As Interfaith Leader 5 mentions, being misinterpreted by churches can lead to being "red-tagged" or unfairly labeled. The participant stresses the importance of not retreating but persevering in their efforts. Andrabi (2020) stated that interfaith Dialogue, essential for fostering mutual understanding and respect among different religions, often suffers from misinterpretations due to cultural differences. These misunderstandings can increase prejudices, escalate conflicts and misinterpretations, and hinder cooperation on common goals such as Peace and human rights.

**Facing Prejudices**

"... prejudice, the Muslims, they really have a prejudice against Christians and other people. They have biases against other people, and this is deeply rooted because they have been there since before. It has been there since the Spaniards, and now that is the case. How do you associate with people who have deep hatred and prejudices? So, this really needs to be approached slowly and resolved, convincing people that this isn't true. What concerns us is the ignorance of the people." IL7

An interfaith leader confronts the challenge of tackling long-standing prejudices among different religious groups, such as biases Muslims may hold against Christians and others. Interfaith leader 7 faces prejudices as a barrier in promoting interfaith Dialogue as it deeply rooted historical biases and ignorance perpetuate mistrust and hatred between religious communities, making it challenging to foster mutual understanding and cooperation. Intan (2024) stated that interfaith Dialogue faces significant challenges related to prejudice, including communal violence, religious intolerance, and social exclusion of minority groups. These prejudices hinder efforts to promote Peace and mutual understanding.

**Insufficient Attendance**

"We usually have problems with attendance and participation in the meetings..."  
IL8

"Also, we have a problem with attendance because sometimes only a few people

attend..." IL2

" Sometimes, maintaining perfect attendance can be challenging." IL9

Interfaith leaders are expressing concerns about attendance and participation in their meetings. They point out challenges such as occasional low turnout and members being too busy to attend consistently. This ongoing issue means that not all members can always participate fully, which impacts the effectiveness of promoting interfaith Dialogue. Mackay (2023) highlights that low attendance in interfaith dialogue meetings is a significant challenge. Despite the goal of fostering negotiation, cooperation, and understanding, insufficient participation limits the ability of interfaith leaders to build positive relationships and attitudes toward other religions. This lack of Engagement undermines the intended shift in perspective and reduces the broader societal benefits of interfaith Dialogue.

### **Members Attending Meetings with Personal Agenda**

".. it's not easy to move forward; it's like taking one step forward and two steps back because there are people with their agendas who sometimes use interfaith efforts for their own purposes, which are contrary to the vision and goals we dream of for here in Pagadian. That's why it's difficult." IL4

"Some may only attend when there are specific issues to address within the interfaith community." IL5

"...They only attended because personal issues were being presented..." IL6

The respondents illustrate challenges within the interfaith community, where some individuals prioritize personal agendas over advancing collective goals. These observations create difficulty of maintaining unity and alignment towards shared goals amidst varying individual priorities and participation. From Andrabi (2020), which stated that personal agendas is a barrier to successful interfaith Dialogue. These self-interests contribute to misunderstandings, conflicts, and the escalation of religious disputes.

### **Encountering Clan Feud as An Interfaith Leader**

"... So what happened there, their clan feud lasted a long time; many people from the other party died, and it wasn't good anymore because there were children involved who were killed. The incident that happened was challenging to solve." IL3

Interfaith Leader 3 faces challenges in promoting interfaith Dialogue, especially when dealing with clan feuds and internal conflicts within communities. Issues like the "rido" in Mindanao create barriers to fostering unity and understanding among different



faith groups. Trajano (2020) emphasizes that clan feuds present a significant obstacle to promoting Solidarity and Peace in the region, stressing the importance of addressing the root causes of these conflicts through interfaith dialogue efforts to achieve lasting Peace and stability.

### **Discouragement in Interfaith Leadership**

"The primary challenge that I have encountered is discouragement. The perception of other Ulama towards me is as if I am converting to Christianity. According to them, if you participate in their activities, you are a Christian. Like when we entered the Church to observe, I was judged because why one would Ustadz enter a Catholic church, and that is a challenge to me." IL1

The primary challenge encountered by a Muslim interfaith leader is discouragement from some Islamic scholars who misunderstand interfaith Engagement, which serves as a threat to the Islamic faith when leaders interact with other religions, such as Catholicism. This sentiment is reflected in Hussaini's (2020) study, which discusses how historical factors, including colonial impositions of Christianity and existing hesitations among leaders, contribute to discouragement and reluctance towards engaging in Dialogue between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria.

### **Limited Financial Sustainability**

" Because of our will to volunteer, among our members, it's truly financial, but it can be addressed because sometimes there are necessary expenses that you really have to get from your pocket, and you also have to give or those sudden expenses because we don't have a funding agency or we don't have our own money for that. We only have monthly contributions, but it doesn't mean it all goes to one committee." IL2

" Because the activities involve money, and we don't have any." IL8

Interfaith leaders express that despite their willingness to volunteer, financial constraints pose significant challenges. They rely on members' contributions, but these funds are insufficient to cover necessary expenses, including unexpected costs related to their activities. The lack of external funding or substantial financial reserves further complicates their efforts. Interfaith Leader 8 emphasizes that many activities require financial resources they currently lack, highlighting the practical challenges in organizing and sustaining interfaith initiatives without adequate funding. Saleem (2022) points out that limited financial sustainability is a significant challenge in promoting interfaith Solidarity and Peace. This financial constraint hampers the ability to design and implement

practical solutions for resolving tensions, undermining the credibility and representation of religious moderates and other peacebuilding stakeholders.

### **Strategies and Methods in Coping with the Challenges**

The data collected from the interview revealed several themes regarding the strategies and methods in coping challenges. These are the following sub-themes: Promoting Understanding, Remaining Consistent, New Jada, Respecting Dialogue, Thinking Positively, Motivating, Praying, and Remaining Consistent.

#### **Promoting Understanding**

"It requires time, patience, and effort to change the perceptions of those who are close-minded and lack knowledge about interfaith initiatives. But as a Ustadz, despite the challenges I have encountered, I remain committed to promoting understanding, and Dialogue within our community, even in the face of resistance and judgment from some individuals." IL1

"You will continue until you are understood, not backing down. By the grace of God, progress is swift as long as we promote understanding. We won't stray from the organization's vision and mission, facing challenges head-on because we stand firm." (IL5)

"Speak and understand them and establish a deep partnership and relationship".  
IL2

Promoting understanding is a key strategy for interfaith leaders in addressing challenges, such as being misunderstood by religious groups. It plays a vital role in interfaith forums, where fostering mutual understanding helps prevent misinterpretation and promotes more transparent communication. The statement highlights that changing the perceptions of close-minded individuals who lack knowledge about interfaith initiatives requires time, patience, and effort. Despite encountering resistance, misinterpretation, and judgment from specific individuals, the Ustadz (Islamic religious leader) remains steadfast in their commitment to promoting understanding, Dialogue, and harmony within the community. Fostering understanding is a crucial aspect of effective interfaith leadership. It requires perseverance, maintaining composure, and staying committed to promoting understanding and Dialogue among diverse religious communities (Riaz et al., 2023).

#### **Remaining Consistent**

"If we believe that our actions are just and grounded in mutual respect and understanding, we should not be deterred by the challenge of facing prejudices. We must

remain consistent and keep our commitment to slowly resolve these deeply rooted biases." (IL7)

Consistency is crucial for an organization to gain momentum, establish accountability, show commitment, assure progress, and develop trust. Interfaith leaders use consistency to address the challenge of insufficient attendance. It's important to recognize that interfaith dialogues should never be viewed as elitist. By adhering to the principle of "lakum dinukum wa liya din," which emphasizes respect for others' beliefs, genuine interfaith Dialogue fosters mutual respect, empathy, and cooperation among diverse religious communities. This approach transcends elitism, celebrating differences as opportunities for growth and learning rather than barriers (Ismail and Uyuni, 2020).

### **New Jada**

"(New Jada) it is a process where you must first comprehend the problem to solve it. Examine your own and other people's experiences, get insight from them, use your judgment "To weigh the pros and cons before making a decision is essential. This method helps in addressing problems systematically." IL5

"Within the framework of interfaith communication, the NEWJADA concept portrays problem-solving as a methodical procedure. It emphasizes the importance of first understanding the issue, learning from personal and collective experiences, and applying insights to find solutions. "IL 5

Following this methodical process helps people overcome obstacles and promotes cooperation amongst people of different religious backgrounds. The study recommends adopting these methods by government, religious leaders, traditional rulers, teachers, and security personnel to manage and prevent conflicts, highlighting the new jada of applying historical conflict resolution techniques to modern inter-religious issues (Umaru and Sharif, 2020).

### **Respecting Dialogue**

"Respect and Dialogue requires, at the very least, the quality of respect. Respect is the key aspect for successful Dialogue." IL3

Respect is crucial for meaningful conversations, as it fosters honesty, compassion, and genuine Engagement without undermining the Dialogue. It encourages open expression, active listening, and recognition of diverse perspectives, creating a solid foundation for effective communication and mutual understanding. Ismail and Uyuni

(2021) propose a new approach to interfaith Dialogue in Indonesia, viewing it as a form of da'wa in the global era. This shift emphasizes cooperation and unity in both actions and thoughts, addressing societal challenges like clan disputes, poverty, health, and environmental issues. Central values include openness, freedom, mutual respect, tolerance, and a willingness to share knowledge and learn from one another.

### **Thinking positively**

"Think positive, just keep smiling, and take all challenges as positives, even the difficult ones, because they are part of leadership growth. A leader is a good follower." IL1

It implies that challenges should be welcomed as chances for leadership and personal development rather than being discouraged and dreaded or avoided. Interfaith leader can gain important lessons and the abilities needed to become successful leaders by tackling challenges with optimism and resilience. Excellent leaders must also be able to communicate, learn from, and work with others rather than being discouraged. The importance of thinking positively in promoting interfaith dialogue underscores the role of interfaith leaders as key actors in dialogue and change with their positive outlook (Ojala, 2021).

### **Motivating**

"...motivate others to live with a spirit of Dialogue and apply it in their daily lives." IL9

By emphasizing shared commonalities over differences, it underscores the power of Dialogue in bridging divides and promoting unity. Motivating people, a key component of meaningful Dialogue is highlighted as a way to understand each other's perspectives and foster empathy genuinely. Dialogue between followers of different faiths allows them to talk to and listen to each other, getting to know and learning to understand the 'other' (Andrabi, 2020).

### **Praying**

" We need to work more to interrelate to understand each other and see something larger than life itself. It's not easy and takes a lot of commitment, patience, prayer and understanding even though we do not have enough money." IL8

This sub-theme emphasizes the participant's statement and highlights the

importance of prayer in coping with challenges such as limited financial sustainability. They view their involvement as a calling from God and emphasize the importance of unity and understanding. Acknowledging the challenges along the way, they stress commitment, patience, prayer, and compassion. Despite obstacles, they find support within their community and believe in planting seeds of hope for the future. Prayer, as they see it, offers comfort, guidance, and strength during tough times. It connects individuals to a higher power, providing solace and a sense of purpose. Prayer demands dedication, patience, and understanding, nurturing hope and trust in a higher power (Dandekar, 2024).

### Conclusion

The experiences of interfaith leaders in Pagadian City play a key role in their work to bring together people from different faiths and promote Peace. These leaders draw from their own struggles with conflict and prejudice, inspiring them to participate in peacebuilding efforts. Through their involvement in interfaith dialogues and community activities, they grow personally and help their communities become more inclusive and united. Their journey highlights the importance of understanding, cooperation, and respect among religious groups, especially when facing everyday challenges. By dedicating themselves to building trust and unity, interfaith leaders show how their experiences shape their approach to fostering Peace.

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