Final Report: Community Perceptions of Interfaith Engagement and Abilene Interfaith Council Survey

Report prepared for the Abilene Interfaith Council

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Purpose

Established in 1999, the Abilene Interfaith Council (AIC) brings together Abilene residents from various religious, faith, and worldview perspectives to engage in interfaith dialogue and activities that promote the common good. Their motto is "Let us break bread together in peace." Since the establishment of the AIC in 1999, Abilene experienced about an 8% growth in population[1] and Taylor county experienced about an 11% growth in population[2] accompanied by a growth in racial-ethnic diversity[3] as well as changes in the religious and faith based profile of the county[4]. The AIC desired to understand the perspectives of community members about interfaith engagement generally and the types of programs and activities the AIC promotes. The AIC arranged a committee to write the survey and Dr. Jori Sechrist consulted on the survey and recruitment design, implemented the survey administration, and conducted the data analysis.

Description of Study

Data for this study were collected using an online survey through Survey Monkey between October 23, 2024 and December 15, 2023. Individuals who were on the AIC's email contact list received an email invitation to participate in the study. Individuals outside of the AIC were recruited through flyers posted throughout the Abilene community in places of business

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[1] https://www.biggestuscities.com/city/abilene-texas
[2] https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-counties/tx/taylor-county-population
[3] https://www.reporternews.com/story/news/2021/08/14/city-county-leaders-react-abilene-taylor-countys-census-growth/8125537002/
[4] https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/census/congregational-membership?y=2000&y2=2020&t=0&c=48441

and faith gatherings as well as social media posts in Facebook and Instagram. One hundred twenty-four individuals responded to the survey.

Findings

Table 1 includes the basic demographics of the respondents surveyed. Most respondents reported they were Protestant Christians (70.7%), but almost ¼ reported a worldview that was not a Christian tradition (24.4%). Most respondents reside within Abilene city limits (82.1%), are white (74.8%), and speak English as their primary language (88.6%). More feminine-identifying individuals responded to the survey than masculine-identifying (58.5%; 35.0% respectively); most respondents identified as heterosexual (77.2%). A third of respondents are 65 years of age or older. Individuals working in the education sector were the largest proportion of respondents (29.3%) with relatively high proportions of respondents working in not-for-profit agencies (12.2%) and retired individuals (12.2%).

Participation with Abilene Interfaith Council

About 50% of respondents had participated in an AIC activity at some point (Table 2). About 1/3 of those who have attended an AIC event or meeting have done so within the last three months. For those who have attended less frequently, most report this is due to time conflicts (69.0%) as shown on Table 3 row 3.

Faith in the Context of the Abilene Community

Table 5 reports the proportion of respondents who feel there is support for their faith in Abilene and who are connected to a faith-based community. Most respondents surveyed reported having support for their faith within the Abilene community (81.3%) and participating in a faith community (82.1%). However, when examining these questions by worldview category, it is clear that individuals identifying as Protestant Christian, Catholic, and Orthodox are much more likely to feel supported in Abilene (94.3% and 100.0%, respectively) and to have a faith-

based community (93.1% and 100.0%, respectively) compared to those of other worldviews (40.0% reported support in Abilene; 46.7% reported having a faith-based community).

Similarly, Table 5 shows most respondents reported being able to live out their faith well in Abilene (89.4%), yet fewer respondents identifying with worldviews other than Christianity responded in this way (70.0%). Of those who reported they could not live their faith out well (10.6%), explanations for this varied by worldview as well. Though a small number of Protestant Christian respondents (4) said they were unable to live out their faith well, 20.0% (1) said it was due to no faith community and 40.0% (2) of them said it was due to their faith being misunderstood; whereas 75.0% (6) of those from other worldviews indicated their faith was misunderstood and the other 25% (2) expressed their faith was not accepted.

Attitudes toward Other Faith Traditions and Perceptions of Interfaith Engagement

Engagement and Experiences with Other Faith Traditions

Rows 1, 2, and 3 of Table 6 show how much respondents interact with individuals of other faiths. Overall, most reported having some engagement with people of other faiths. Eighty-eight percent of respondents said they had "several friends and acquaintances" of other faith traditions and 65.0% responded they engaged in meaningful activities with those of other faith traditions. In both cases, those of non-Christian worldviews and Catholic and Orthodox respondents had higher proportions reporting this than Protestant Christians. Table 6 row 4 shows a high proportion of respondents report having respect for individuals of other faiths (95.8%) with very little variation on this by worldview. Whereas most respondents report positive experiences with persons of other faiths (85.8%, row 5), a fairly high proportion of respondents report encountering negative behavior or discrimination toward a different faith tradition (62.6%, row 6) and Catholic and Orthodox (83.3%), and respondents of other worldviews (78.6%) are more likely than Protestant Christians (58.1%) to report this. Although a relatively small proportion of respondents report encountering negative behavior or discrimination of their own

faith tradition (33.6%, row 7), those who do not identify as Christian are the most likely to report these encounters (50.0%).

Barriers to Interfaith Engagement

Respondents answered an open-ended question asking them to describe barriers that existed to interfaith engagement in Abilene. These responses were analyzed through a standard coding process by a single coder (Dr. Jori Sechrist). Three major types of responses were identified: barriers due to attitudes (47.5%); barriers due to lack of knowledge or exposure to other faith traditions (20.0%); barriers due to opportunities or communication about interfaith activities (15.8%). Each of these major themes had several sub-themes associated with them and the distribution of these within the sample is shown in Table 7.

Attitudes

In examining the sub-categories of attitudes that respondents identified as barriers to interfaith engagement, the most frequent was exclusivism of certain faiths (15.6% of respondents citing attitudes as a barrier identify exclusivism). Responses that were considered exclusivism included things like:

"Us vs them ideology"

"A priori assumption of Christian Faith as the standard"

"Christians are too often tribalistic and appear to only care if you are one of them or not. Many share the mentality, 'if you're not with us, you're against us'"

"I've observed that people generally fall into two main groups: those who subscribe to a 'live and let live' philosophy, and those who firmly believe that their perspective is the only correct one"

"exclusivity taught by some traditions"

The next most frequent barrier to interfaith cited was Christianity (14.4%). This was sometimes mentioned in connection to exclusivism as seen above and other times not. Responses included things like:

"Evangelical 'Christians'"

"heavy presence of Christian churches"

"This is a very traditional, conservative Christian area"

"Dominant conservative Christian beliefs assumed in every setting"

"Christianity is the single most volatile, hastily used weapon of society. Christianity of today oppresses women, people or color, queer people, the homeless, the poor, and children."

Two other major categories were prejudices (12.2%) and politics (11.1%). Prejudices could be toward religious groups, race-ethnic groups, or a general mention of bias. Responses included in this category were like:

"Members of some faith tradition still have sectarian bias."

"Racism"

"Prejudice"

Politics was coded when the term was used or when things like "Christian nationalism" or other terms with political connotations were mentioned. Respondents who mentioned politics as a barrier said things like:

"Right-wing politics"

"a 'woke' attitude"

"A fairly high level of (largely unconscious) Christian nationalism; media- and political-partisan-based misinformation and negative stereotyping of persons of non-Christian traditions and non-religious persons"

"Political polarization"

Knowledge and exposure to diverse faith traditions

There were fewer sub-categories for the other two broad themes within barriers to interfaith engagement. In examining exposure to people of other faiths (10.0%) respondents mentioned things like:

"Lack of exposure"

"Lack of connections with others – tend to live in our own bubbles"

"Interaction and conversation"

"Such a low number of those from faiths other than Christian"

In terms of knowledge, often "ignorance" was cited as the biggest barrier. Other types of statements were:

"Knowing the values of each faith tradition"

"Lack of knowledge about other faith groups (non-Christian)"

"Education/exposure"

Opportunity or interest in interfaith activities

The most frequently cited sub-category in the opportunity or interest about interfaith activities is not knowing about events. About 10.0% of respondents mentioned this as a barrier to interfaith engagement saying things like:

"Not knowing about different events"

"Knowledge of events activities"

"Lack of promotion of Interfaith events, speakers & co promotion within local religious organizations"

Activities of Interest

Table 8 shows the types of activities respondents are most interested in AIC offering. The most frequent response was educational activities (68.3%) with community events (60.8%) closely following. Fewer than 50% of the respondents mention interest in service projects

(45.8%), Arts (45.8%), and family friendly events (31.7). Though there were not sizable differences in these by worldview, age of respondent does matter in terms of preference for activities (see Table 9). Older respondents (65+) were more likely to respond with interest in educational activities (85.4%) compared to about 2/3 of those under 65. Whereas those under 45 were more likely than those over 45 to report a desire for family friendly activities (53.7% compared to 28.6% for 45-64 year olds and 14.6% for 65+).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Abilene residents responding to the survey had an overall positive view of the Abilene community, toward people of other faiths, and toward interfaith engagement. However, there are important differences by religious affiliation as well as some demographic characteristics. For instance, the positive view of the community's support of faith, availability of faith-based community, and ability to live out faith well in Abilene is tempered by the knowledge that the Christian respondents tend to see these as more positive than others. Those of other worldviews suggest it may be more difficult for non-Christians to experience support, find a faith-based community, and feel they can live out their faith well in this area. Further, those who affiliate with worldviews other than Christianity are also more likely to report receiving less positive and more negative engagement from those in other faith traditions.

Many of the respondents cited religious exclusivism and Christianity as barriers to interfaith engagement, regardless of their own religious affiliation, though non-Christian respondents cited those at higher rates than did Protestant Christians. Prejudice, politics, exposure to other faiths, and knowledge of other faiths were also identified by respondents as barriers to interfaith engagement by a little over 10% of respondents.

Finally, the activities of most interest to the respondents were educational activities, but community events followed that closely. In order to involve younger adults, family friendly activities should be promoted as well. Although only about 10% of respondents mentioned lack

of awareness of AIC events in the barriers to interfaith engagement, across several questions,

the need for stronger communication and promotion of events came up repeatedly.

Appendices

Tables

Table 1. Survey Respondent Characteristics

	%
Worldview	
Christian (Protestant/Non-Denominational)	70.7%
Catholic or Orthodox	4.9%
Other Worldview	24.4%
Residence	
Abilene	82.1%
Within 100 Miles	8.9%
>100 Miles	4.1%
Race-ethnicity	
Asian	3.3%
Black or African American	4.1%
White	74.8%
Hispanic	4.9%
Two or more races	5.7%
Primary language	
English	88.6%
Non-English	6.5%
Gender	
Feminine	58.5%
Masculine	35.0%
Sexuality	
Asexual	4.1%
Bisexual	3.3%
Gay or lesbian	6.5%
Heterosexual/straight	77.2%
Self-describe	2.4%

	%
Age	
18-24	9.8%
25-34	9.8%
35-44	13.8%
45-54	13.0%
55-64	15.4%
65+	33.3%
Employment Industry	
Not working for pay	1.6%
Commercial Service (Food, Beauty, Clothing, Leisure, etc.)	2.4%
Education (K-12, College, or University Educator or Employee)	29.3%
Finance or Banking	0.8%
Health Care or Hospital	8.9%
Local/State/Federal Government	2.4%
Media, Marketing, or Communications	2.4%
Military	0.8%
Not-for-profit Community Agency	12.2%
Processing and Manufacturing	1.6%
Religion/Faith Organization	6.5%
Self-employed	7.3%
Student (Technical/Vocational, College, or University)	4.9%
Prefer not to answer	0.8%
Retired	12.2%

*Between 6-9 respondents did not report on various demographic items. They are not reported in this table, so the proportions will not add up to 100%

Table 2. Respondents who have Participated with AIC and Frequency of Attendance

	Total (n=120*)	Protestant Christian (n=86)	Catholic or Orthodox (n=6)	Other Worldview (n=28)
Ever Participated in AIC	52.5%	51.2%	66.7%	53.6%
Within the last 3 months	34.9%	33.3%	50.0%	33.3%
At least once in the last year	25.4%	20.0%	25.0%	40.0%
More than a Year ago	41.3%	46.6%	25.0%	26.7%

Table 3. Reasons why Respondents Have Not Participated in AIC for over 3 months

	Total (n=42*)	Protestant Christian (n=30)	Catholic or Orthodox (n=2)	Other Worldview (n=10)
Unaware of activities	19.0%	20.0%	50.0%	20.0%
Activities not of interest	9.5%	10.0%	50.0%	--
Time conflict	69.0%	66.7%	100.0%	70.0%
Discomfort	2.3%	--	--	10.0%
Lived/live out of the area	7.1%	3.3%	--	20.0%

Table 4. Proportion of Sample Receiving Community Support for Beliefs and Practices and Connected to a Faith-based Community by Worldview

	Total (n=123)	Protestant Christian (n=87)	Catholic or Orthodox (n=6)	Other Worldview (n=30)
Have Community Support	81.3%	94.3%	100.0%	40.0%
Do not have Community Support	18.7%	5.7%	0.0% (0)	60.0%
Have a faith-based community	82.1%	93.1%	100.0%	46.7%
Do not have a faith-based community	17.9%	6.9%	0.0%	53.3%

Table 5. Proportion of Sample Able to Live Faith Well in Abilene by Worldview

	Total (n=123)	Protestant Christian (n=87)	Catholic or Orthodox (n=6)	Other Worldview (n=30)
Can Live Faith Well	89.4%	95.4%	100.0%	70.0%
Cannot Live Faith Well	10.6%	4.6%	0.0%	30.0%
No faith community*	7.7%	20.0%	--	0.0%
Faith not accepted*	15.4%	0.0%	--	25.0%
Faith misunderstood*	61.5%	40.0%	--	75.0%
Some other reason*	15.4%	40.0%	--	0.0%

*Proportions for these categories are calculated from *only* those who responded they could not live faith well.

Table 6. Proportion of Respondents who Agree or Strongly Agree with Statements Pertaining to Engagement and Attitudes toward Persons of Other Faiths by Worldview

	Total (n=120*)	Protestant Christian (n=87)	Catholic or Orthodox (n=6)	Other Worldview (n=30)
I have not engaged with others who have a different faith tradition than mine.	4.2%	3.5%	16.7%	3.6%
I have several friends and acquaintances with different faith traditions than my own	88.3%	83.7%	100.0%	100.0%
I frequently engage in meaningful activities (i.e. volunteer and service activities) with individuals of various faith traditions	65.0%	61.6%	66.7%	75.0%
I have a high level of respect for individuals with faith traditions other than my own	95.8%	96.5%	100.0%	92.9%
My experiences with individuals of different faiths has been positive	85.8%	89.5%	100.0%	71.4%
I have encountered negative behavior/discrimination from the general public toward another faith tradition	62.6%	58.1%	83.3%	78.6%
I have encountered negative behavior/discrimination from the general public toward my own faith tradition	33.6%	28.2%	33.3%	50.0%

*3 individuals stopped answering questions at this point of the survey

Table 7. Barriers to Interfaith Engagement by Worldview

	Total (n=90)	Protestant Christian (n=66)	Catholic or Orthodox (n=4)	Other Worldview (n=20)
Attitudes	47.5%	59.1%	50.0%	75.0%
Exclusivism	15.6%	10.6%	--	35.0%
Christianity	14.4%	10.6%	--	30.0%
Prejudice	12.2%	10.6%	25.0%	15.0%
Politics	11.1%	13.6%	--	5.0%
Conservativism or Traditionalism	8.9%	7.6%	--	15.0%
Closed-mindedness	5.6%	3.0%	--	15.0%
Evangelism	5.6%	6.1%	--	5.0%
Fear	5.6%	7.6%	--	--
Intolerance	4.4%	1.5%	--	15.0%
Pride	2.4%	4.5%	--	--
Apathy	2.2%	3.0%	--	--
Respect	1.6%	1.5%	25.0%	--
Knowledge about or Exposure to other faiths	20.0%	48.7%	25.0%	20.0%
Exposure to	10.0%	10.6%	25.0%	5.0%
Ignorance or no knowledge of	10.0%	10.6%	--	10.0%
Misunderstanding	5.6%	6.1%	--	5.0%

Table 7 (cont'd). Barriers to Interfaith Engagement by Worldview

	Total (n=90)	Protestant Christian (n=66)	Catholic or Orthodox (n=4)	Other Worldview (n=20)
Opportunity or Interest in Interfaith Activities	15.8%	43.6%	25.0%	5.0%
Awareness of events/activities	10.0%	12.1%	--	5.0%
Busy	7.8%	10.6%	--	--
Disinterest or unwillingness	6.7%	7.6%	25.0%	--

*93 respondents answered this open-ended question, 3 said unsure or none; answers were analyzed through a standard coding process by a single coder. Major categories of attitudes; knowledge about or engagement with other faiths; and opportunity for or interest in interfaith activities include sub-categories as shown. Proportions of sub-categories are from the total number who answered the open-ended question.

Table 8. Activities of Interest to Respondents by Worldview

	Total (n=120*)	Protestant Christian (n=86)	Catholic or Orthodox (n=6)	Other Worldview (n=28)
Educational Activities	68.3%	70.9%	66.7%	60.7%
Community Events	60.8%	58.1%	66.7%	67.9%
Service Projects	45.8%	46.5%	50.0%	42.9%
Arts	45.8%	46.5%	50.0%	42.9%
Family Friendly Events	31.7%	30.2%	--	42.9%
Other	5.8%	3.5%	--	14.3%
No interest in Interfaith Activities	4.2%	4.7%	--	36.%

Table 9. Activities of Interest to Respondents by Age

	Total (n=120*)	Under 45 (n=41)	45-64 (n=35)	65 and over (n=41)
Educational Activities	68.3%	61.0%	62.9%	85.4%
Community Events	60.8%	63.4%	65.7%	58.5%
Service Projects	45.8%	51.2%	45.7%	43.9%
Arts	45.8%	51.2%	37.1%	51.2%
Family Friendly Events	31.7%	53.7%	28.6%	14.6%
Other	5.8%	7.3%	8.6%	2.4%
No interest in Interfaith Activities	4.2%	2.4%	8.6%	2.4%

*Analyzed other demographics, but very small or no differences existed in those