The Miami Model for Jewish-Muslim Interfaith Dialogue: A Framework for Building Understanding Through Authentic Engagement

Abstract

The Miami Model for Jewish-Muslim Interfaith Dialogue represents a comprehensive approach to fostering meaningful relationships between Jewish and Muslim communities through structured, long-term engagement. This model prioritizes institutional autonomy, multigenerational participation, and authentic dialogue that addresses both celebration and conflict. By combining rigorous training in active listening with courageous conversations about contentious issues, the model creates a foundation for sustained interfaith cooperation that extends beyond dialogue into concrete action and community building.

Introduction

In an era of increasing religious polarization and interfaith tension, the need for effective models of dialogue between Jewish and Muslim communities has become urgent. Traditional approaches to interfaith engagement often remain superficial, focusing on commonalities while avoiding the difficult conversations that, when navigated skillfully, can actually deepen trust and understanding. The Miami Model emerged from the recognition that authentic dialogue requires both courage to address hard topics and commitment to sustained relationship-building over time.

This model was developed in Miami's unique multicultural context, where diverse religious communities coexist within a shared civic space. The approach recognizes that effective interfaith dialogue cannot be episodic or event-based but must instead create ongoing relationships that can weather disagreement and conflict while maintaining mutual respect and genuine care.

Core Principles and Framework

1. Institutional Autonomy Through Strategic Participant Selection

The foundation of the Miami Model lies in carefully curating a cohort of participants who possess the institutional freedom to engage authentically in dialogue. This includes retired professionals who are no longer constrained by workplace politics, tenured professors with academic freedom, independent businesspeople, and community leaders with established credibility within their respective communities.

This principle recognizes that effective interfaith dialogue often requires participants to express personal views that may not align perfectly with official institutional positions. By selecting individuals with

sufficient autonomy, the model creates space for the kind of honest conversation that leads to genuine understanding rather than diplomatic platitudes.

2. Multigenerational Engagement and Family Integration

Unlike models that focus solely on individual participants, the Miami Model intentionally creates a multigenerational cohort where families are integrated into the dialogue process. Members regularly host one another in their homes, sharing meals and participating in family celebrations. This approach recognizes that religious identity is often deeply embedded in family and community life, and that lasting change requires engagement at the familial level.

Children and elderly family members participate in appropriate ways, creating natural opportunities for storytelling, cultural transmission, and the kind of informal relationship-building that cannot be replicated in formal settings. This multigenerational aspect also ensures continuity, as younger participants can carry the relationships and understanding forward into future decades.

3. Rigorous Training in Active Listening and Empathy

The model places significant emphasis on developing participants' capacity for genuine dialogue through structured training in active listening and empathy. This is not merely a preliminary workshop but an ongoing component of the program, with regular skill-building sessions and facilitated practice.

Participants learn to distinguish between listening to respond and listening to understand, developing the ability to hold space for perspectives that challenge their own worldview. The training includes role-playing exercises, perspective-taking activities, and guided reflection on personal triggers and assumptions. This foundation of communication skills proves essential when the group engages with more challenging topics.

4. Courageous Conversations on Contentious Issues

Rather than avoiding difficult topics, the Miami Model deliberately creates structured opportunities to discuss the most challenging issues that divide Jewish and Muslim communities. This includes conversations about Israel and Palestine, the right of Israel to exist, experiences of Islamophobia and antisemitism, competing historical narratives, and contemporary political conflicts.

These conversations are not debates aimed at achieving agreement but rather opportunities to understand the depth and complexity of each other's perspectives. Participants learn to separate individuals from institutions, personal experience from political positions, and legitimate concerns from prejudicial assumptions. The goal is not consensus but rather the kind of deep understanding that allows people to maintain relationships even amid disagreement.

5. Documentation and Continuity of Learning

The model includes systematic documentation of the dialogue process, tracking how participants' perspectives evolve over time and identifying key insights that emerge from sustained engagement. This serves multiple purposes: it creates accountability for genuine learning, provides material for reflection and analysis, and generates resources that can be shared with other communities interested in replicating the model.

Regular reflection sessions allow participants to articulate how their understanding has changed, what assumptions have been challenged, and what new questions have emerged. This metacognitive component strengthens the learning process and helps participants become more thoughtful dialogue partners.

6. Translation of Dialogue into Action

Recognizing that dialogue without action can become merely an intellectual exercise, the model incorporates collaborative service projects that allow participants to work together on shared community challenges. These projects are carefully chosen to align with values shared across both communities while addressing real needs in the broader Miami area.

Examples might include joint efforts to address homelessness, educational initiatives for underserved youth, environmental restoration projects, or advocacy for religious freedom. These collaborations allow participants to experience themselves as partners rather than merely dialogue partners, creating bonds that extend beyond conversation into shared purpose and achievement.

7. Inclusion of Additional Interfaith Partners

While maintaining its core focus on Jewish-Muslim dialogue, the model strategically includes other faith communities whose values align with the project's goals. The inclusion of Jain participants, for example, brings the principle of ahimsa (nonviolence) into the conversation, providing both a different perspective on conflict resolution and a bridge between Abrahamic and dharmic traditions.

This expansion is done thoughtfully, ensuring that additional voices enhance rather than dilute the core Jewish-Muslim dialogue while creating opportunities for broader interfaith coalition-building.

8. Public Speech Acts and Civil Society Engagement

The model recognizes that interfaith dialogue has both private and public dimensions. Participants collaborate to issue carefully crafted statements of concern, solidarity, and sympathy in response to current events affecting either community. These statements serve as speech acts that strengthen pluralism and religious freedom as civil society institutions.

Rather than generic calls for peace, these statements demonstrate the kind of nuanced understanding that emerges from sustained dialogue. They model for the broader community how people of different

faiths can stand with one another while maintaining their distinct identities and perspectives.

9. Ritual and Celebration Integration

The model incorporates regular participation in each other's religious celebrations and observances. Muslims participate in Shabbat dinners, Jews join iftar meals during Ramadan, and families invite one another to lifecycle celebrations such as bar/bat mitzvahs and Eid festivities.

This participation goes beyond mere attendance to include learning about the spiritual and cultural significance of these observances. Over time, participants develop appreciation for the beauty and meaning in each other's traditions while maintaining their own religious commitments.

10. Network Expansion and Model Replication

The final component involves deliberate efforts to expand the network and adapt the model for implementation in other venues. Universities represent particularly promising sites for replication, given their mission of education and their diverse student and faculty populations.

The model includes protocols for training new facilitators, adapting the framework to different cultural contexts, and maintaining quality and fidelity to core principles while allowing for local customization.

Implementation Considerations

Facilitator Training and Selection

Successful implementation requires skilled facilitators who can navigate complex emotional and political terrain while maintaining group safety and cohesion. Facilitators must be trained not only in dialogue techniques but also in the specific historical and contemporary issues that affect Jewish-Muslim relations.

Participant Screening and Preparation

While the model seeks diverse perspectives, participants must demonstrate genuine openness to learning and relationship-building. Pre-program interviews help identify individuals who, while holding strong convictions, remain curious about other perspectives and committed to respectful engagement.

Crisis Management and Conflict Resolution

The model includes protocols for addressing moments when dialogue becomes heated or when external events create tension within the group. These protocols emphasize maintaining relationships while acknowledging legitimate hurt and disagreement.

Evaluation and Assessment

Regular assessment helps ensure the model is achieving its goals while identifying areas for improvement. Evaluation includes both quantitative measures (attitude surveys, relationship mapping)

and qualitative assessment (reflective interviews, case studies).

Outcomes and Impact

The Miami Model aims to produce several types of outcomes:

Individual Transformation: Participants develop greater empathy, more nuanced understanding of complex issues, and enhanced capacity for dialogue across difference.

Relationship Building: Lasting friendships and professional relationships form across religious lines, creating networks that can be activated for future collaboration.

Community Impact: The broader Jewish and Muslim communities benefit from having members who can serve as bridges and interpreters, reducing stereotyping and increasing understanding.

Model Development: The systematic documentation creates resources for other communities seeking to implement similar programs.

Civil Society Strengthening: The model contributes to the broader project of maintaining pluralistic democracy by demonstrating how people of different faiths can engage constructively with deep disagreement.

Challenges and Limitations

The model faces several inherent challenges. The intensive nature of the program limits scalability, and the requirement for participant autonomy may exclude individuals who might benefit most from the experience. External political events can create tension that tests the group's cohesion, and the focus on Jewish-Muslim relations may not fully address the complexity of interfaith relations in highly diverse communities.

Additionally, the model's success depends heavily on skilled facilitation and committed participants, resources that may not be available in all communities. The emphasis on difficult conversations also requires careful attention to psychological safety and trauma-informed practices.

Conclusion

The Miami Model for Jewish-Muslim Interfaith Dialogue offers a comprehensive framework for building authentic relationships across religious difference. By combining rigorous preparation, courageous conversation, and sustained commitment, the model creates opportunities for the kind of deep understanding that can weather disagreement and conflict.

While not every community will be able to implement all aspects of the model, its principles and practices offer valuable insights for anyone seeking to foster genuine interfaith dialogue. The model's emphasis on

moving beyond superficial commonalities to engage with real differences, while maintaining commitment to relationship and mutual respect, provides a roadmap for building the kinds of interfaith partnerships that strengthen both religious communities and democratic society.

The success of this model ultimately depends not on achieving agreement but on creating the conditions for sustained relationship across difference. In a world marked by religious polarization and conflict, such relationships represent both a precious achievement and an essential foundation for a more peaceful and just future.