

From ignorance to engagement: Scott Anderson on interfaith relations in Wisconsin

by [Amy Frykholm](#)

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A vigil in Wisconsin after the shootings in Oak Creek. [Some rights reserved](#) by [ljlandre](#).

It has been a rough year for the state of Wisconsin. A painful and divisive recall election of governor Scott Walker tore the state apart in the spring. Then last week a lone gunman killed seven people, including himself, and wounded three others at a Sikh temple outside Milwaukee. I spoke to Scott Anderson, director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, which has been active in ecumenical and interfaith work in Wisconsin for five decades.

How did you hear about the shootings?

We heard about it through media sources as soon as it happened, and we did a quick assessment of our short-term response and what our capacities were. Calling for a statewide day of prayer seemed to be a natural outgrowth of our work, something that we could do as an organization. We signaled to churches around the state that we were going to declare Sunday, August 12 a day of prayer. In these situations, people wonder what they can do, and this is a first step.

We also thought this might be an opportunity for Christian congregations to do a little education about who the Sikhs are, what they believe, where they come from and all of that. So we've tried to link churches with some educational materials, and we hope congregations will use it. In the upper Midwest, we have Protestant

hegemony, and interfaith realities do not hit home for people on a daily basis. Once you get out of Milwaukee, Catholics and Lutherans predominate, so a lot of people don't have experience with people from other religious traditions. There is a lot of ignorance because of our context.

How has interfaith and ecumenical work changed in Wisconsin over the last decade?

Most of the interfaith work has been in Milwaukee under the rubric of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee. It is the largest tent for the religious communities in the state. Their mission has focused on interfaith understanding: how do we get to know each other and do some work together—Habitat for Humanity, CROP Walks and other local community service projects.

I've been quite impressed with the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, which has had two significant bilateral conversations going on, one a Jewish-Catholic dialogue and the other a Muslim-Catholic dialogue. That has involved academicians, parish priests, parishioners—educational understanding of one another, getting to know the truth claims of each tradition. Of anything I have seen in the state, that has been the most significant institutional interfaith engagement. There have been efforts in Madison—on interfaith dialogue, that have been ongoing. But we have a long way to go here in Wisconsin.

Did you see any fruits of this interfaith work this last week?

The Islamic Society of Milwaukee issued a wonderful statement of support and solidarity after the shootings, raising money for the victims. They were right there, from my perch, in a really impressive way. As was the Jewish community. The Interfaith Conference has set up a fund for the victims, and the Wisconsin Council of Churches is sending people to their website. As a statewide entity, we see the Interfaith Conference as the frontline, and we are playing a supportive role. As far as the victims' fund, we can help give that fund statewide visibility in a way that they can't.

But institutionally, the Wisconsin Council of Churches has had no direct relationship with the Sikh community before this. That's as much our fault as theirs, I am sad to say.

Tom Heinen of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee said that of the two major Sikh temples in Wisconsin, the Interfaith Conference has had a relationship with the temple in Brookfield—which is a temple in western suburban Milwaukee—but has had no relationship with the Oak Creek temple. We are both saddened by that. It certainly isn't intentional; it just hasn't happened.

Part of it is that the smaller traditions tend to be more sequestered culturally. And especially if they are mostly first-generation immigrants, there tends to be less energy for interfaith engagement. They are focused on meeting their own needs. Once you get beyond the first generation and the religious institutions develop some internal capacity, then you see more opportunity for relationship. That has been true of the Muslim community in Milwaukee and especially the Islamic Society of Milwaukee, which is a community of about 3,000 families. They have a K-12 school, some great ministries in the community, and people who have now been trained to be their interfaith partners. They have a lot more capacity than a group like the Sikhs. In Wisconsin we are still maybe a decade away from full engagement with Sikhs.

Religious minorities in the United States, especially if they come from Asia or Africa, feel vulnerable post-9/11. They are always looking over their shoulders, wondering. I am keenly aware of the problems that the Sikh community has had since 9/11, targeted examples of hate and assault around the country. Obviously nothing as dramatic and deadly as this.

Does the Wisconsin Council of Churches have any long-term plans associated with these shootings?

I hope this will be an opportunity to do some more interfaith education around the state. We did an event with the Islamic Society of Milwaukee last September, the first time that the Wisconsin Council of Churches has done a bilateral event with another religious community. It was on the weekend of the anniversary of September 11. We had 250 people come, 40 percent Muslim and 60 percent Christian, and we met in the cafeteria at the ISM's school. We had a facilitator from Penn State, an expert in helping people talk about their differences. It was just a day of getting acquainted—lunch, round tables and talking about difficult issues as the day progressed, which was our hope. The energy in the room just increased as the day went on. It was a wonderfully life-giving event.

There is a hunger for this kind of engagement. We had a couple of Lutherans who drove all the way down from a small town in northern Wisconsin because they had never met Muslims in their entire lives and they just wanted the experience. We didn't talk theology; we just got acquainted, but out of that has come the question: what are we going to do next? It may be that the situation in Oak Creek is going to fuel that energy.

Before the shootings, we collaborated with the Interfaith Conference to start an initiative called A Season of Civility. Given all the vitriolic rhetoric around the recall last spring and the election cycle this fall, we are using some materials from Parker Palmer's new book *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. We reached out to the Interfaith Conference, and they said, "Can we make this an interfaith initiative as well as an ecumenical one?" Palmer's think tank in Seattle has produced a study guide from the book, so we produced a Christian supplement, and the Interfaith Conference has produced supplements for five other faith traditions. That is a great example of good interfaith work.