



Impact Research: The Interfaith Experience

Uganda, 2023

Introduction

The pilot study of the Interfaith Experience (IFE) conducted in Uganda in July 2023 was spearheaded by Mensen met een Missie in partnership with EyeOpenerWorks. This study was initiated to assess and enhance the effectiveness of the IFE programs designed to foster interfaith understanding and cooperation. The research was aimed at understanding changes in attitudes towards individuals from different faiths, providing a basis for improving future iterations of the IFE.

[Click here to read more about what the Interfaith Experience entails.](#)

Research Methodology

The study focused merely on the initial multi-day workshop of the Interfaith Experience and employed a mixed-methods approach:

- **Quantitative Analysis:** A questionnaire was distributed to 19 participants, processed manually by researcher Elias.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Interviews were conducted before (9 participants) and after (11 participants) the IFE by researchers Hans and Eva, providing insights into personal experiences and shifts in perceptions.

Participants

Participants were drawn from various religious backgrounds across Uganda, involving:

- Roman Catholic: 10 participants (7 males, 3 females)
- Muslim: 6 participants (2 males, 4 females)
- Anglican: 7 participants (3 males, 4 females)
- Pentecostal: 4 participants (all males)

These participants included informal leaders and representatives from Ugandan organizations that work with Mensen met een Missie, highlighting a diverse inter-denominational and interfaith mix.

Findings

The Interfaith Experience (IFE) study in Uganda revealed several key results across different dimensions of interfaith interactions. Here's a deeper look into the specific findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the study:

Quantitative Results

- **Shift Scores:** Quantitative measures showed a significant change in the willingness of participants to engage across faith lines. For instance, the questions related to social intimacy, such as lending money, being friends, or accepting interfaith marriages, demonstrated notable shifts. Also the willingness to accept interfaith marriages showed a dramatic increase, particularly among participants from traditionally more conservative faiths.
- **Prejudice and Trust:** Initial data indicated moderate trust levels towards people of other faiths, with an average score of 2.5 out of 5. This improved post-IFE, particularly in terms of reduced prejudices and enhanced trust.

Notably, participants who had initially harbored stronger prejudices reported significant reductions, suggesting effective exposure and interaction during the IFE.

- **Perceptions of Conflict:** The majority of participants acknowledged that conflict is inevitable in pluralistic religious settings. However, the study noted a decrease in the intensity of this belief post-IFE, indicating that participants saw more pathways to peaceful coexistence after the program.

Qualitative Findings

- **Experiences of Interfaith Interactions:** Many participants shared transformative experiences that altered their perceptions of other faiths. A Muslim participant expressed newfound openness and acceptance after visiting places of worship of other faiths, contradicting his previous misconceptions.
- **Introspective Shifts:** The IFE facilitated introspective dialogues that allowed participants to reflect deeply on their own beliefs and biases. This introspection led to personal growth and a more empathetic understanding of others, which was frequently mentioned as a highlight of the experience.
- **Networking and Skill-Building:** Participants valued the opportunity to build networks and develop skills that were not strictly religious but essential for community building and peacekeeping. The IFE provided tools for nonviolent communication, conflict resolution, and collaborative community projects.

Quotes from Participants

"It brought us closer. Seeing the good in others and learning about their faith has changed how I see our differences — not as barriers but as bridges we can cross together." — Anglican participant.

"I used to see other religions through the lens of our differences. Now, I see how much we share, how we all seek peace and understanding. This has been an eye-opening journey." — Pentecostal participant.

Overall Impact and Implications

The research suggests that the IFE effectively promotes interfaith understanding by:

- **Reducing prejudices:** Participants reported fewer prejudices and a more inclusive attitude towards those of different faiths.
- **Increasing social intimacy:** There was a marked improvement in participants' willingness to engage in close social relationships with those of different faith backgrounds.
- **Enhancing conflict resolution skills:** The training and interactions during the IFE equipped participants with better tools to handle conflicts amicably.

Learnings and Notes

The study highlighted the critical role of personal encounters and shared experiences in changing perceptions and building interfaith harmony. It also emphasized the importance of self-reflection in overcoming inherent biases and prejudices. The biggest attitudinal shifts were noted in relationships considered "most remote," suggesting that direct engagement significantly impacts perceptions and interactions.

The findings also prompted several questions for future IFEs, particularly concerning the selection of participants and the specific impacts on inter-religious attitudes versus inter-denominational interactions. The research underscores the need for sustained and targeted follow-up actions to embed the changes observed during the IFE.

Conclusion

The pilot study on the IFE in Uganda provides valuable insights into the transformative potential of interfaith programs. By fostering deeper understanding and cooperation among diverse religious groups, such initiatives can significantly contribute to more inclusive and peaceful societies. The data from this research will be instrumental in refining future IFEs, ensuring they are more impactful and responsive to the nuances of interfaith dynamics.