

## **InterFaith Works Defined**

Affirming Dignity, Racial Justice, InterReligious Understanding, Common Ground, Humanitarian Service, Beloved Community...

Many words define the mission and services of this amazing organization that was founded 50 years ago here in Central New York. Emerging through the efforts of civic and faith leaders who had worked together on the American Civil Right Movement, the agency was established in 1976 to serve as a dialogue center, human services organization, and a place where people of all different faiths, or none at all, could work together to affirm the dignity of all.

Today, we live into this profound mission of our founders in ways that would make their hearts and souls sing.

But what does it REALLY mean to be “InterFaith Works”? Multiple answers are required for this question:

### **InterFaith**

**First**, we are part of an international and national movement with the goal of supporting pluralistic and democratic forms of community building. We believe in the inalienable right of people to worship in a faith tradition of their choosing, to be safe while at worship, and to not have their faith questioned or maligned, but rather to be celebrated as one of the important manifestations of what it means to be human.

**Second**, we believe that our own faiths are strengthened, not weakened, by learning from and understanding deeply, the faiths and faith journeys of each other.

**Third**, we believe that the creation of intentional spaces where people of different faiths can come together, work together on common humanitarian missions, and celebrate both our difference and our places of common ground is an enrichment to our community, our democracy, and our lives.

**Fourth**, we learn to be allies to one another, as has been necessary due to attacks on Muslims, Jews, Black Christians, Sikhs, or any other religious group that is maligned, or even the target of violence. We learn about Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and other forms of oppression in order to educate ourselves and others about the importance of an interfaith and civil society.

### **Ending Racism**

These four beliefs, above, also guide our ending racism work. We believe the same answers are true for us as people of different skin colors, ethnicities, and places of origin:

**First**, we are part of a national and international movement to end racism in all its forms. We believe that all people are fully and truly human, and that the diversity of our many humanities is our strength. Further, we subscribe to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, that all people deserve safety, nourishment, shelter, access to medical and mental health care, that all have the right to work at a living wage, to be able to travel freely anywhere, and to enjoy the same benefits and protections under the laws of our community and country.

**Second**, we believe that we are strengthened by being in relationship to one another across our racial, ethnic, and countries of origin differences, and by having opportunities to learn from each other, growing together into deeper and more profound understanding of what it means to be human.

**Third**, we believe, because our societies are often segregated, that it is necessary for us to create intentional spaces for us to meet each other across our differences, to learn about the stereotypes that get in the way of our understanding one another, and to learn about our identities and how these have been used to teach us how to be both oppressors and oppressed. We know that we can learn how to shed these roles and find our deeper humanity and equality together.

**Fourth**, we believe that through this deeper understanding, we can become allies to one another, standing up to systemic and institutional racism while continuing to purge ourselves of the bigotries and stereotypes that get in the way of living, working, and being together as one race, the human race.

These are the beliefs that founded us and that continue to grow our work, expand our understanding, and strengthen our work and community.

## **Human Service**

**Who and How:** Our work as a premier social service agency in Central New York is a gathering place for newly arrived refugees, New Americans, elders, teens seeking leadership and bridge building skills, and people with the many kinds of needs that all humans have. We use volunteers extensively. We work in middle- and high-schools, on college campuses and universities, in nursing homes and correctional facilities, in food pantries and community gardens.

**Our Volunteers:** We have become a gathering place for people from many different faith traditions and/or for people with values of ethical humanism and service to humankind. Our agency is strengthened by many individual volunteers and donors who come from many different backgrounds, faith traditions, and beliefs. Some are active in a faith traditions, some are spiritual but not religious, and some are ethical humanists. People do not have to be religious to serve or be served; they simply want to be able to serve the people of our community so that our clients can achieve self-sufficiency, live safely, and grow and flourish to their capacities. Our Board of Directors reflects the diversity of our community, as well.

***Our Partners:*** Our agency is strengthened by the many different faith partners that participate in service-to-others work as defined by their traditions. This takes the form of providing food and clothing, helping people learn English or how to pass the Citizenship test, taking people to medical appointments, teach people how to drive, donating a car so a New American family has transportation to school or work or for children. It takes the form of a church circle of women knitting baby layettes and mittens for the coming winter, or the local university running an annual coat drive at one of the Dome's football games. It takes the form of Girl Scouts visiting elders in a nursing home to do crafts together or picking up a prescription for a homebound elder and staying for a cup of coffee and a game of cards to provide companionship on what would otherwise be a lonely afternoon. We partner with area law enforcement, both to conduct dialogues to bring understanding across divides and to educate New Americans about how to interact with the police. We are constantly seeking ways to partner with our community to make life better for all.

### **Our Advocacy Work**

We advocate for the beliefs that we hold dear as described above. It takes the form of Sisters of St. Francis participating in a "safe documents" clinic to make sure that New Americans have protected their Green Cards, IOM documents, or passports. A retired teacher can be found asking the 100 questions on the U.S. Citizenship test as a Vietnamese era refugee endeavors to pass the test at the age of 70. Our advocacy work during COVID helped isolated elders find ways to learn how to use digital technology to stay socially connected and connected to services. These are but a few examples of our advocacy work.

### **Dialogue**

A dialogue is a courageous conversation that facilitated to create an open and honest discussion that often involves confronting difficult or sensitive issues. It requires bravery to engage in these conversations, as they may involve discomfort, vulnerability, and the potential for conflict. Such conversations can address challenging subjects and aim to

bring about real change, fostering understanding and breaking down barriers. They are essential for creating meaningful dialogue, especially in contexts like social justice and privilege. We are known for our dialogue to work on many different aspects of ending racism, building bridges of understanding between police and neighborhoods, addressing campus divisions, bringing together faith leaders from many different traditions to participate in sustained dialogues, and bridging divides between suburban and city youth through our school exchange programs.

We invite the whole community to our table. You will be changed, and you will change others.

“The job of a human being is to grow our hearts as big as the world.”

Written by Beth A. Broadway, President/CEO, InterFaith Works  
May 25, 2025