

Is Tolerance Enough?
Reflections on the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life
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Betsy Gerdeman, Senior Vice President of Development for KLRU TV and former Vice President for Community Engagement at Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, was chosen as the 2009 Boniuk Center Fellow to the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life held in Birmingham, England.

A group of twenty-two fellows from four continents and representing Christianity (Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox), Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, and Secularism attended the ten-day Summer School, which has been previously held in Israel, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Turkey. As the United Kingdom's most diverse city, Birmingham has developed and grown with very diverse neighborhoods, multi-linguistic and with culturally diverse traditions. There are not just pockets of various ethnic and religious groups, but neighbors, living side by side, coming from all over the world and representing a variety of faith traditions. In a city as diverse as Birmingham, it is essential that neighborhoods and neighbors understand that they may have significantly different views on what "community" and "neighbor" mean. Our study focused on the question: Can common language be developed on what constitutes a neighborhood and what are one's obligations to the local community?

Participants were bound by three rules of engagement: full-time attendance, setting aside feelings of privileged victimhood, and an attitude of respect and listening towards all. The goals were to "see the other" *in his/her otherness*, to "see oneself seeing the other," and to become aware of the "the other seeing us." These three purposes were intended to teach us to see difference, and, according to the school's founder Adam Seligman, Ph.D., the difference that makes a difference is religion. The initial trend in interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence efforts was to work towards mutual respect and understanding, to truly know the other and to minimize the differences. The concept of tolerance was dismissed as too easy, too benign and too passive to be a viable solution to our differences and conflicts. Summer School fellows were asked if it was necessary, or even possible, to truly understand the other in order to live together. Although no specific conclusions were drawn by the end of the ten days, I have come to hold the view that tolerance is actually a powerful concept and may be the best we can hope for and an honorable goal to achieve.