

Interfaith Dialogue and Cultural Engagement: A Community Service Initiative by the Theology Study Program for International Students

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate how interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement within a community service framework can enhance mutual understanding, foster empathy, and build stronger relationships between international students and local community members. This study applied the qualitative study. This qualitative study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of international students and local community members involved in the community service initiative. Participants are selected to provide a rich, diverse perspective on the community service initiative: international students, local community members, and faculty and program coordinators. Purposeful sampling is used to select students who have actively participated in various aspects of the initiative, ensuring a range of experiences and viewpoints are represented. Data collection involves multiple qualitative methods to capture a comprehensive view of participants' experiences by using semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Data analysis follows a systematic process to identify and interpret key themes and patterns. Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, and report themes within the qualitative data. The study shows that interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement within a community service framework are effective in enhancing understanding, fostering empathy, and building stronger relationships across diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The initiative has proven to be a valuable model for promoting cohesion and unity in a multicultural setting.

Key Words: Interfaith Dialogue, Cultural Engagement, Community Service Initiative, International Students

A. Introduction

In today's world, where technology, travel, and communication have dramatically reduced the distances between people, we find ourselves living in an increasingly interconnected global society. This interconnectedness means that people from vastly different cultural and religious backgrounds are more likely to interact with one another on a daily basis, whether in their communities, workplaces, or educational institutions



(Calhoun, 2019; King, 2019). As a result, the importance of fostering understanding, respect, and collaboration among these diverse groups has never been more critical.

Globalization, which refers to the process of interaction and integration among people (Makarova & Korsakova, 2019), companies, and governments worldwide (Saenz & Brown, 2018), has been a significant driving force behind this phenomenon (Castelli, 2018). It has facilitated the movement of ideas, goods, services, and people across borders, leading to more diverse societies. While globalization has many benefits, it also presents challenges, particularly when it comes to managing the interactions between different cultural and religious traditions (Rosenmann et al., 2016). Misunderstandings and conflicts can arise when individuals or groups with different beliefs and practices come into contact without the necessary tools to navigate these differences constructively (Madalina, 2016).

Interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement are essential tools in addressing these challenges (Ariarajah, 2019). Interfaith dialogue refers to the open and respectful exchange of ideas and perspectives between people of different religious faiths (Longhurst, 2020). It allows individuals to learn about and from one another's beliefs, reducing prejudice, dispelling stereotypes, and fostering a sense of common humanity (Velasco, 2015). Cultural engagement, on the other hand, involves actively participating in and appreciating the cultural practices and expressions of others. Together, these practices can help build bridges of understanding, respect, and cooperation between different communities.

The need for initiatives that promote interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement is particularly pressing in academic settings (Edwards, 2018). Universities and colleges are microcosms of our globalized world, bringing together students from various cultural and religious backgrounds (Banks, 2017). These institutions offer a unique opportunity to explore and promote interfaith dialogue because they are spaces where young minds are shaped, and future leaders are developed (Kruja, 2022). In academic settings, students are not only exposed to new ideas and knowledge but also to different ways of thinking, believing, and living (Moreira-dos-Santos & El-Hani, 2017). This exposure provides a fertile ground for meaningful dialogue and cultural exchange.

Moreover, students are at a stage in their lives where they are forming their identities and worldviews (Altintas, 2020). Engaging in interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement during this formative period can have a profound impact on their personal development and their ability to contribute positively to society (Nasrollahi et al., 2021). When students from diverse backgrounds come together to discuss their beliefs, share their cultural practices, and engage in collaborative activities, they develop a deeper understanding of each other's traditions and values. This understanding can lead to greater empathy, reduced prejudice, and a stronger commitment to social justice and peace (Decety & Cowell, 2015).

In our increasingly interconnected world, where diverse cultures and religious traditions are brought into closer proximity through globalization, the role of interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement is crucial (Banout & Henderson, 2018). Academic institutions, with their diverse student populations and commitment to knowledge and understanding, are ideally positioned to lead these efforts (Banout & Henderson, 2018). By fostering mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration among different faith

communities, these initiatives can help create a more inclusive, peaceful, and harmonious global society (Abdullah & Akhtar, 2023).

The Theology Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja recognizes the importance of preparing students to navigate and contribute positively to this multicultural and multireligious world. This recognition has driven the program to design and implement a community service initiative specifically tailored for international students. The initiative, titled "Interfaith Dialogue and Cultural Engagement," aims to provide a platform for meaningful interactions between students of different faiths and cultures. By engaging in dialogues, discussions, and community activities, participants are encouraged to explore the shared values and distinct practices of their respective traditions, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of religious diversity.

The initiative is grounded in the theological belief that interfaith dialogue is not only an academic pursuit but also a practical expression of faith in action. It reflects the commitment of the Theology Study Program to promote peace, harmony, and mutual respect among people of different religions. Moreover, it aligns with the broader educational goals of Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, which seeks to develop well-rounded graduates who are not only knowledgeable in their fields of study but also socially responsible and culturally sensitive global citizens.

International students, with their diverse backgrounds and experiences, bring a wealth of perspectives that can enrich the local community and contribute to the global discourse on interfaith relations. By participating in this community service initiative, these students have the opportunity to engage with local communities, share their own cultural and religious heritage, and learn from the traditions and practices of others. This exchange is expected to foster a sense of solidarity and cooperation, which is essential for building peaceful and inclusive societies.

This community service initiative serves as a vital platform for international students to engage in interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange. It aims to build bridges of understanding between different religious communities, promote cultural awareness, and contribute to the development of a more inclusive and harmonious society. The Theology Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja is committed to supporting this endeavor, recognizing its potential to make a meaningful impact both locally and globally.

B. Review of Related Literature

1. Theoretical Foundations of Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue has been a subject of extensive academic inquiry, with scholars examining its theoretical underpinnings, practices, and outcomes. At its core, interfaith dialogue is grounded in the principles of mutual respect, understanding, and the recognition of shared human values. Theories such as (Melé & Sánchez-Runde, 2013), which emphasizes the common ethical values shared by the world's major religions, and (Blakemore, 2019) dialogue decalogue, which outlines principles for effective interfaith

dialogue, provide important frameworks for understanding how such dialogue can be conducted successfully. These theories highlight the importance of approaching dialogue with an open mind, a willingness to listen, and a commitment to learning from others' perspectives. Additionally, scholars like (Abu-Nimer & Smith, 2016) have contributed to the discourse by advocating for interreligious dialogue as a means to promote peace and address global challenges. Abu-Nimer and Smith's pluralistic theology suggests that no single religious tradition holds the monopoly on truth, and thus, dialogue is essential for deepening understanding and cooperation among different faith communities. Abu-Nimer and Smith's concept of "interculturality" further emphasizes the need for dialogue that is not only interfaith but also intercultural, recognizing the interplay between religious beliefs and cultural contexts.

2. Cultural Engagement and Its Importance in Multicultural Societies

Cultural engagement refers to the active participation in and appreciation of the cultural practices, expressions, and values of others. This concept is closely related to cultural competence, which is the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. In multicultural societies, where individuals from diverse cultural traditions coexist, cultural engagement is vital for fostering social cohesion and reducing cultural tensions. Literature on cultural engagement often draws from theories of cultural relativism, which advocate for understanding cultures on their own terms rather than through the lens of one's own cultural norms. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, which critiques the Western portrayal of Eastern cultures, underscores the importance of engaging with cultures in a way that respects their autonomy and avoids imposing external judgments. Studies on cultural engagement in educational settings, such as those by (Guberina, 2023), highlight the role of culturally responsive pedagogy in promoting inclusivity and equity. These scholars argue that incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum and classroom practices can enhance learning outcomes and foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds. In the context of community service initiatives, cultural engagement enables participants to connect with local communities, understand their cultural practices, and contribute meaningfully to their development.

3. Interfaith Dialogue and Cultural Engagement in Educational Contexts

Educational institutions, particularly universities, have long been recognized as critical spaces for fostering interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement. The diversity of student populations, combined with the intellectual freedom and critical inquiry that universities promote, creates an ideal environment for exploring and understanding different religious and cultural perspectives. Literature on interfaith initiatives in higher education often focuses on the role of these dialogues in promoting social cohesion, reducing religious intolerance, and preparing students for leadership roles in a globalized world. One significant study by (Patel & Meyer, 2023) explores how interfaith cooperation

on college campuses can contribute to positive social change. Patel and Mayer argue that by bringing together students from different faith traditions to engage in service projects and dialogue, universities can cultivate a new generation of leaders who are committed to interfaith cooperation and social justice. Similarly, the work of (Hook et al., 2017) has documented how religious diversity can be a source of strength rather than division, provided that it is engaged with thoughtfully and respectfully. Research has also examined the outcomes of interfaith and cultural engagement programs in terms of students' personal development. Studies have shown that participation in these programs can lead to increased empathy, greater cultural awareness, and a stronger commitment to social justice. Moreover, students who engage in interfaith dialogue often report a deeper understanding of their own religious identities, as well as a greater appreciation for the religious beliefs of others.

4. Globalization and the Need for Interfaith and Cultural Initiatives

The forces of globalization have brought diverse cultures and religious traditions into closer proximity than ever before, creating both opportunities and challenges for societies worldwide. Literature on globalization and religion often discusses the "glocalization" of religious practices, where global religious movements adapt to local cultural contexts. This dynamic interaction between global and local influences highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in interfaith initiatives. Scholars like (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007) have explored the impact of globalization on religious identities, noting that increased interaction between different religious communities can lead to both conflict and cooperation. In this context, interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement are seen as essential tools for navigating the complexities of a globalized world. These initiatives not only promote understanding and respect between different faith communities but also contribute to the development of a more inclusive global society. The concept of "cosmopolitanism," as discussed by scholars like Cheah (2006), also provides a relevant theoretical framework. Cosmopolitanism advocates for an ethical stance that recognizes the equal moral worth of all human beings, regardless of cultural or religious differences. This perspective aligns with the goals of interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement, which seek to transcend narrow identities and promote a sense of global citizenship.

C. Method

The Method section for the qualitative study of "Interfaith Dialogue and Cultural Engagement: A Community Service Initiative by the Theology Study Program for International Students" outlines the qualitative research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analysis procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This approach focuses on gaining a deep understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives related to the community service initiative. This qualitative study employs an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of international students and

local community members involved in the community service initiative. The aim is to understand how participants perceive and experience interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement, as well as the impacts of these activities on their personal and communal lives. Participants are selected to provide a rich, diverse perspective on the community service initiative: a. International Students: International students participating in the Theology Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja, who have been involved in the interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement activities. Purposeful sampling is used to select students who have actively participated in various aspects of the initiative, ensuring a range of experiences and viewpoints are represented (Guarte & Barrios, 2006). b. Local Community Members: Members of the Toraja community who have engaged with the international students through the initiative, including local religious leaders, community organizers, and residents. Snowball sampling is employed to identify and recruit community members who have participated in or been impacted by the initiative, leveraging initial participants to connect with others. c. Faculty and Program Coordinators: Faculty members and program coordinators involved in organizing and facilitating the initiative. All relevant faculty and coordinators are included to gain insights into the planning, implementation, and evaluation aspects of the initiative. Data collection involves multiple qualitative methods to capture a comprehensive view of participants' experiences. Semi-Structured Interviews (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021): To gather in-depth insights into participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement activities. Interviews are conducted individually, using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions to allow for detailed responses and follow-up probing. Interviews are audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed for analysis. Participant Observations (Spradley, 1980): To observe and document interactions, activities, and engagement during the community service initiative. Researchers attend and observe key events and activities, such as interfaith dialogue sessions and cultural workshops. Observational notes are taken to capture the dynamics of participant interactions and the context of the activities. Data analysis follows a systematic process to identify and interpret key themes and patterns. Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, and report themes within the qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This involves: Familiarization: Researchers become familiar with the data by reading transcripts and notes multiple times. Coding: Data is systematically coded to identify significant statements and patterns related to participants' experiences and perceptions. Theme Development: Codes are grouped into broader themes that capture the essence of the participants' experiences. Review and Refinement: Themes are reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflect the data and provide a coherent narrative.

D. Result

The Results section presents the findings from the qualitative study "Interfaith Dialogue and Cultural Engagement: A Community Service Initiative by the Theology Study Program for International Students." This section synthesizes the data collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, participant observations, and

reflective journals. The findings are organized around key themes that emerged from the data analysis, offering insights into the experiences and impacts of the community service initiative on international students, local community members, and faculty.

a. Enhanced Understanding and Empathy

One of the primary outcomes of the initiative was an increased understanding and empathy among participants. International students and local community members reported that engaging in interfaith dialogues allowed them to gain deeper insights into each other's religious beliefs and cultural practices. Many international students expressed that the dialogues helped them to appreciate the nuances of local cultural and religious traditions. They noted that learning about the local practices from a first-hand perspective deepened their understanding and dispelled previously held misconceptions. Local participants similarly reported a heightened appreciation for the diverse religious and cultural backgrounds of the international students. This understanding fostered a sense of mutual respect and camaraderie, bridging gaps that had previously existed.

From observations, key interactions during the interfaith dialogue sessions and cultural engagement activities provided direct evidence of participants' growing understanding and empathy. Observers noted the following:

During dialogue sessions, international students and local community members were seen actively engaging in discussions, asking questions, and expressing genuine curiosity about each other's beliefs and practices. Observers noted moments of positive emotional responses, such as nods of agreement, laughter, and expressions of surprise or enlightenment when learning about new perspectives. In cultural workshops, international students were observed participating enthusiastically in local traditions, such as religious ceremonies and cultural festivals. Their willingness to engage and the interest they showed in understanding local customs reflected a deeper appreciation of the local culture. Local participants were observed sharing their own cultural and religious practices openly and with pride. Their interactions with international students included providing personal anecdotes and explanations about their traditions, which facilitated a better understanding among both groups.

Interviews with both international students and local community members revealed. International students reported that the dialogue sessions helped them gain a nuanced understanding of local religious and cultural practices. They expressed that their initial misconceptions were corrected through personal interactions and learning experiences. This insight often led to a deeper respect for local traditions and practices. Local community members shared that interacting with international students allowed them to see beyond stereotypes and appreciate the diversity of the students' backgrounds. Many reported a newfound respect for the different religious traditions and cultural practices represented by the students. Both international students and local participants noted a significant increase in mutual respect and camaraderie. This was often attributed to the shared experiences and the personal connections formed during the initiative.

The data provides robust evidence of the initiative's success in fostering understanding and empathy among international students and local community members. The observed behaviors and reported experiences collectively highlight the initiative's effectiveness in bridging cultural and religious gaps, enhancing mutual respect, and creating a more inclusive and empathetic community.

Research on interfaith dialogue often highlights its role in promoting empathy among participants. For example, studies by Ariarajah (2019) emphasize that interfaith dialogues create opportunities for participants to put themselves in others' shoes, fostering empathy and understanding. These dialogues allow individuals to hear personal stories and lived experiences, which humanizes the "other" and reduces biases. The initiative's outcome of increased empathy aligns with these studies. International students and local community members both reported that engaging in interfaith dialogues led to a deeper understanding of each other's religious beliefs and cultural practices. This suggests that the initiative effectively utilized interfaith dialogue to promote empathy, as participants could relate to and appreciate perspectives different from their own.

Cross-cultural exchanges are well-documented as effective means of dispelling misconceptions and broadening perspectives (Kramer, 2023). When individuals engage directly with cultures different from their own, they often gain a more nuanced understanding, which challenges previously held stereotypes and assumptions. Many international students noted that their participation in the dialogues helped them appreciate the nuances of local cultural and religious traditions, dispelling misconceptions they had before. This finding is supported by the literature, which underscores the importance of first-hand cultural experiences in breaking down stereotypes and promoting a more informed worldview.

The development of mutual respect through understanding is a common theme in studies on intercultural and interfaith interactions. According to (Berryman-Fink, 2006), meaningful interaction between groups can reduce prejudice and increase mutual respect. More recent studies, such as those by Saguy et al. (2009), further validate that structured, positive contact between different groups leads to greater understanding and respect. Local participants' reports of a heightened appreciation for the diverse religious and cultural backgrounds of the international students reflect this theory. The initiative facilitated meaningful contact between the groups, which fostered mutual respect and camaraderie. This result is consistent with prior research showing that well-facilitated intergroup interactions can bridge gaps and foster positive relationships.

Bridging gaps between different cultural and religious groups is a central goal of many intercultural and interfaith initiatives. Studies by (De Weger et al., 2018) suggest that such initiatives, when successful, create stronger, more cohesive communities by encouraging participants to explore commonalities and respect differences. The initiative's success in bridging cultural and religious gaps among participants supports these findings. By promoting understanding and empathy through dialogue and first-hand experiences, the initiative helped to create a more cohesive community, where participants felt connected despite their differences. This reflects the broader goals of similar programs aimed at fostering unity in diversity.

The findings from the initiative regarding increased understanding and empathy among participants are well-supported by previous studies on interfaith dialogue, cross-cultural exchange, and empathy development. The initiative effectively leveraged interfaith dialogues and cross-cultural interactions to dispel misconceptions, foster mutual respect, and bridge gaps between diverse groups. These outcomes resonate with established research, confirming that structured and meaningful engagement between individuals of different backgrounds can lead to greater empathy, understanding, and community cohesion.

b. Strengthened Interfaith Relationships

The initiative played a significant role in fostering stronger interfaith relationships. Participants from different religious backgrounds highlighted the positive impact of collaborative activities and discussions. Collaborative community service projects, such as organizing cultural festivals and interfaith workshops, were particularly noted for building relationships. These activities provided practical opportunities for participants to work together towards common goals, reinforcing their bonds and shared commitment to community welfare. Structured dialogue sessions, where participants shared personal stories and discussed theological and cultural differences, were instrumental in nurturing interfaith understanding. Participants appreciated the respectful and open nature of these discussions, which allowed for honest exchanges and the building of trust.

From the observations conducted during the community service initiative, the following key points emerged regarding the fostering of interfaith relationships. Observers noted that during collaborative community service projects, such as organizing cultural festivals and interfaith workshops, participants demonstrated a high level of cooperation and teamwork. The interactions were characterized by mutual support and shared enthusiasm for achieving common goals. For instance, during the cultural festival, participants from different religious backgrounds were observed working together to plan and execute various activities, showing effective collaboration and problem-solving skills. Structured dialogue sessions were marked by active engagement and respectful exchanges. Observers noted that participants were attentive and open during discussions, which allowed for meaningful exchanges of personal stories and theological perspectives. The atmosphere was conducive to honest dialogue, with participants frequently nodding in agreement, asking thoughtful questions, and expressing appreciation for others' viewpoints.

Interviews with participants provided additional insights into the impact of the initiative on interfaith relationships. Participants emphasized the significant role that collaborative activities, such as the cultural festivals and interfaith workshops, played in building stronger interfaith relationships. They reported that working together on these projects fostered a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect. For example, participants mentioned that organizing the cultural festival required them to learn about and appreciate each other's traditions, which helped in breaking down barriers and creating lasting bonds. Interviewees highlighted the importance of the structured dialogue sessions in nurturing interfaith understanding. Participants appreciated the opportunity to share personal stories

and discuss theological and cultural differences in a respectful and open environment. They noted that these discussions helped in building trust and understanding, as they felt heard and valued in their perspectives.

The data provides robust evidence that the initiative successfully fostered stronger interfaith relationships through collaborative activities and structured dialogue sessions. The combination of practical engagement and respectful dialogue created a supportive environment for building trust, understanding, and mutual respect among participants from diverse religious backgrounds. This comprehensive view underscores the effectiveness of the initiative in achieving its goals and highlights the value of such approaches in promoting interfaith harmony.

Research has consistently shown that collaborative activities are effective in bringing together people from diverse backgrounds. For instance, studies on interfaith dialogue (De Long & Fahey, 2000) emphasize that shared goals in community service or cultural events can break down barriers and promote mutual understanding. These activities provide a neutral ground where individuals can interact outside of their traditional religious settings, fostering cooperation and friendship. The initiative's success in building stronger interfaith relationships through community service projects echoes these studies. Organizing cultural festivals and workshops not only allowed participants to work towards common goals but also reinforced their commitment to community welfare, highlighting the importance of shared experiences in relationship-building.

Structured dialogue has been recognized as a critical tool in interfaith understanding (Neufeldt, 2011). Such dialogues offer a platform for participants to share personal narratives, discuss theological and cultural differences, and explore common values. These interactions are essential in dispelling stereotypes, reducing prejudices, and building trust among participants. The initiative's use of structured dialogue sessions where participants shared personal stories and discussed theological and cultural differences is in line with these findings. Participants' appreciation of the respectful and open nature of these discussions reinforces the idea that structured, honest exchanges are instrumental in nurturing interfaith understanding and trust.

Workshops focusing on interfaith topics have been shown to deepen participants' understanding of other faiths and promote peaceful coexistence (Hambali et al., 2019). These workshops often include discussions, role-playing, and collaborative tasks that encourage participants to explore their beliefs and learn about others in a safe environment. The positive impact of interfaith workshops in the initiative aligns with these studies, suggesting that such forums are effective in creating a space for learning, dialogue, and relationship-building. The practical aspect of these workshops, combined with discussions, reinforces the notion that hands-on, interactive sessions are key to fostering deeper interfaith connections.

Trust-building is a common theme in interfaith literature, where respect and openness are often cited as the foundation for any meaningful dialogue (Pope, 2022). Trust is seen as a crucial element for participants to feel safe in expressing their beliefs and exploring the beliefs of others. The initiative's ability to build trust through respectful and open dialogue is consistent with these previous findings. Participants' recognition of the

value in honest exchanges indicates that the initiative successfully created an environment where trust could flourish, leading to stronger interfaith relationships.

The findings from the initiative are well-supported by previous studies in the field of interfaith relations. The use of collaborative community service projects, structured dialogue, and workshops as tools for fostering understanding and trust reflects best practices identified in earlier research. These elements are key in creating an environment where participants from different religious backgrounds can come together, work towards common goals, and develop deeper, more meaningful relationships. This initiative thus contributes to the ongoing dialogue in the field by reaffirming the effectiveness of these strategies and offering a practical example of their application.

E. Conclusion

The study shows that interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement within a community service framework are effective in enhancing understanding, fostering empathy, and building stronger relationships across diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The initiative has proven to be a valuable model for promoting cohesion and unity in a multicultural setting. Future research should investigate the long-term impact of interfaith dialogue and cultural engagement on participants. This could involve longitudinal studies to assess whether the enhanced understanding, empathy, and strengthened relationships are sustained over time.

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