



## ASA NEWS

**Contact:** Daniel Fowler, American Sociological Association, (202) 527-7885, [pubinfo@asanet.org](mailto:pubinfo@asanet.org)

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## Study Suggests Prayer Can Build Unity in Diverse Organizations

WASHINGTON, DC, June 24, 2014 — As the United States grows more diverse than ever, organizations from Fortune 500 companies to political parties are scrambling to keep pace. But in doing so, they face the challenge of uniting people from very different backgrounds in a single purpose.

A new study led by a University of Connecticut sociologist suggests that if they want to succeed, they could learn a lot from how an unlikely practice — prayer — is used in one set of diverse organizations.

Specifically, the study finds that interfaith group prayer serves as a “bridging cultural practice” in the kinds of multi-faith community organizations examined by UConn sociology professor Ruth Braunstein and her fellow sociologists, Richard L. Wood from the University of New Mexico and Brad R. Fulton from Duke University.

“The prayer practices we observed appear to play a crucial role in binding participants together across significant racial and socioeconomic differences,” Braunstein said. “They do this by being inclusive of multiple faith traditions, celebrating the diversity of the group, and encouraging individuals to interact with each other.”

The study, published online this month and scheduled to appear in the August print edition of the *American Sociological Review*, consists of data from a national study of multi-faith community organizing groups, and extended fieldwork within one such group by Braunstein. These groups organize primarily through religious congregations in an effort to build civic coalitions that address a variety of issues, from health care access to crime.

Such groups tend to be both racially and socioeconomically diverse. Nationally, more than 50 percent of board members of these organizations are non-white, compared to 19 percent of all nonprofit board members and 13 percent of Fortune 500 board members. Additionally, more than half the board members of the faith-based groups earn less than \$50,000 a year.

What Braunstein and her fellow researchers discovered is that, far from being a source of division, religious practices play a unifying role in such groups, even in those — like the one where Braunstein did her fieldwork — that include members from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith traditions.

Interfaith group prayers took place in about 75 percent of the diverse gatherings Braunstein observed over two years. Such prayers are defined by the authors of the study as a “bridging cultural practice,” meaning an activity that’s used to build shared identities across differences.

By analyzing data from the National Study of Faith-Based Community Organizing Coalitions, the researchers found that the greater a group’s diversity, the more likely they were to incorporate “bridging prayer practices” like prayer vigils into their regular activities.

“American society can learn a lot from organizations that are struggling honestly to embrace diversity — especially as we become a majority-minority society in the coming decades, with high levels of income inequality,” said Wood.

Obviously, group prayer is not going to work for every organization. The authors note that conservative religious groups uncomfortable with interfaith prayer, as well as secular organizations, are unlikely to embrace the types of practices observed in the study.

However, the kinds of “bridging” practices identified by Braunstein and her fellow researchers don’t have to be faith-based to be valuable. The researchers suggest that sharing meals, playing sports, or reading literature together could be similarly valuable to different types of organizations seeking to realize the benefits of member diversity.

“Organizations tend to be more effective when they engage, rather than avoid, the varied backgrounds represented among their members,” Fulton said.

The key seems to be organizational flexibility and a willingness to embrace activities that emphasize shared identities through meaningful collective practices, according to Braunstein.

“We aren’t talking about superficial team-building exercises,” she said. “These are practices that are central to groups’ cultures, and emerge over time as participants reflect on the qualities that unite everyone in the group and develop shared rituals that are meaningful to everyone.”

Primary funding for the national study was provided by Interfaith Funders, along with secondary grants from the Hearst Foundation, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, the Religious Research Association, the Louisville Institute, and Duke University.

###

#### **About the American Sociological Association and the *American Sociological Review***

The American Sociological Association ([www.asanet.org](http://www.asanet.org)), founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions to and use of sociology by society. The *American Sociological Review* is the ASA’s flagship journal.

The research article described above is available by request for members of the media. For a copy of the full study, contact Daniel Fowler, ASA Media Relations Manager, at (202) 527-7885 or [pubinfo@asanet.org](mailto:pubinfo@asanet.org).

For more information about the study, members of the media can also contact Tom Breen, University of Connecticut, at (860) 486-0890 or [tom.breen@uconn.edu](mailto:tom.breen@uconn.edu).