

Assembly Guidelines

for



**How to organize a safe event to affirm
equal justice and religious liberty for all**
(No religious affiliation necessary)

EVENT DATE: Sunday, April 29, 2018
COORDINATED START TIME: 4:30 ET, 3:30 CT, 2:30 MT, 1:30 PT



Safe Alliance of Interfaith Leaders, Columbus

INTRODUCTION

We live in a time when racists and fascists are parading in the streets hoping to revive some of history's sickest fantasies. Men have carried weaponized tiki-torches on night-time marches like the Nazis who inspire them; they have fired live rounds at protesters and taken the life of an innocent woman by running her over with a car. Meanwhile, too often, we have stood by staring at our phones, complaining to people who feel the same way we do. We have been like witnesses watching a terrible fire- captivated by the spectacle, but helpless to act. Here is a chance for you, for your community, for ALL OF US to do something about it.

The Interfaith March for Peace & Justice was initiated by a small group of people in Columbus, OH. Here, people of all ages and colors and faiths marched on April 2, 2017, shoulder to shoulder with some who have no religious affiliation but were moved by a sense of urgency and civic pride. Standing six abreast, we covered a city block as we marched. This event, by design, was intended to be non-partisan, positive, and unifying. We hoped to connect people, not shame them; we wanted to find common ground, and we wanted to communicate a message of peace, love, and respect.



Durya Nadeem, of Peace Builders, kicking off the Columbus event.

Photo by Michael Barber.

On April 29, 2018, we will be repeating this march in Columbus and hope to partner with sister marches in as many locations as possible. Already, organizers are beginning to lay the groundwork for marches in over a dozen cities nationwide. If you are reading this and your city has not begun organizing, I ask that you seriously consider being a catalyst yourself and making things happen. It only takes a single person to get things started. From that small beginning, partnerships can be built, plans can be made, and successful events can be organized. Please visit interfaithmarch.com or email betty@interfaithmarch.com if you have questions, and thank you to all who might lend a hand in this effort.

Greg Davis
Safe Alliance of Interfaith Leaders
Columbus, OH

October 29, 2017

1

Start Small.

A gardener cultivating seeds may use a greenhouse rather than tossing seeds over an open field. That's because turning a seed into a sprout is a delicate process. Likewise, the early stages of developing this march idea may best be done in a small setting, not with a large group. Consider starting with a small core committee. Two or three like-minded people are all you'll need to help brainstorm possibilities for your event and nurture its early growth.

2

Pick an end-point and a staging area.

The inspiration for our event in Columbus came when I was riding down a glass elevator and spotted the world's largest gavel in a park by the Ohio Supreme Court Building. I particularly liked this endpoint because of the park's small size. Think about selecting an end-point for your march that will make your group appear larger, not smaller, than it actually is. Public spaces such as Statehouse grounds can make a lot of sense, but they can also tend to dwarf crowds and make them appear small by comparison.

With your end-point in mind, you can then consider possible starting points or "staging areas." Is there a space with bleachers or a natural "stage" available? If so, that will beat a flat space any day. It will allow your event leaders to deliver initial instructions to those who come out to your march.



Genoa Park in Columbus (pictured) turned out to be perfect in this respect. Our march leaders were able to address our marchers from here and be clearly heard by all. (Durya Nadeem, pictured in the intro, was standing at the base of these steps). If no such space is available you can easily create a raised platform by using a stable table that can be quickly removed, the roof of a van that you park temporarily, etc.

Once you've got an idea for your staging area and your end-point, simply pick a route from A to B, and you've got Your March, Version 1.0.

3

Know your “elevator pitch” and the scope of the event.

The purpose of the Interfaith March for Peace & Justice is simple and well-defined. *It is our intention to affirm the freedom of religion (guaranteed by the 1st Amendment of the U.S. Constitution) and to condemn all acts of discrimination, harassment, intimidation, or violence directed at people because of their religion, race, or place of origin.*

Please note that the scope of the event is limited by design. Well-intentioned efforts may be made to expand the scope of the event so that it touches on other important issues. We ask that you resist these efforts, while still building relationships within the community. Such relationships are vital, and it’s good to show up for events by groups supporting other movements. Still, it important to set limits so that your event stays focused and effective. We found that our willingness to stick to these limits was greatly appreciated. This helped people to feel safe in attending our event, knowing that the message would not spill over to issues, like Israel vs. Palestine, that are thorny and divisive. Keep it simple and focused.

4

Seek event sponsors within the Interfaith Community.

Create a spreadsheet with the names of churches, mosques, synagogues, and other organizations that you would like to have participate. Include the names of contact people in each organization; list their email addresses as I’ve done in the sample spreadsheet below.

With a spreadsheet prepared, you can then copy the column with your contacts’ email addresses, paste that list in the “Bcc” line on an email and reach out to all of your potential sponsors. If you’ve got some sponsoring organizations to begin with, be sure to say so in your initial contact email. You may also want to make a flyer that lists co-sponsors along with other info about the April 29, 2018 event. We made and frequently updated such a flyer and were excited to see our list of co-sponsors grow over time.

	A	B	C
1	First Unitarian Universalist	Ben Gribley	gribley@gmail.com
2	Islamic Society of Grand Rapids	Affan Siddiqui	affan@isgr.org
3	Grand Rapids Quaker Meeting	Sue Leonard	sleonard@yahoo.com
4	Peace Catalyst	Kerrie Deveaux	kd47@peace-catalyst.org
5	Grand Rapids Mennonite Church	Jo Phillips	phillips_josh@quicken.org
6	Temple Shalom	Jeremy Largeman	thebigguy@gmail.com

We asked our sponsors to support the cause in a number of ways. First, we asked that each sponsoring organization contribute \$50, which was handled by a designated treasurer. (That money was used for permits, banners, etc.) We asked organizations to spread the word about the event, posting it on websites or using word of mouth to encourage people to attend. We asked organizations to commit to bringing at least five signs to the march. And finally, we invited sponsoring organizations to send a representative to “Steering Committee” meetings. These meetings every few weeks and then weekly as the event approached.

The involvement of youth was key to the success of our march in Columbus. A youth organization called “Peace Builders” were outstanding partners, contributing (like other co-sponsors) to the planning of the event, showing up to the march with scores of youth activists, and providing nearly 50 signs for our marchers to carry. The energy and optimism of this group created a very positive tone for our march. However possible (through religious organizations or otherwise, be sure to involve the youth members of your community.

5

Apply for permits and work with law enforcement.

One critical step, which must get done at least a month before the event, is to secure a parade permit (or other needed paperwork) through your local government or law enforcement agencies.

You may start by asking the local police or mayor's office; they'll give you some hoops to jump through, but your efforts will be worthwhile. Without such a permit, your marchers will most likely be walking on the sidewalk two-by-two and stopping for traffic signals. With a parade permit, you'll be taking to the streets; if you can pay for police escorts, that's even better. Our total cost was over \$1,000, but this helped our event be safe, positive, and effective, so we would argue that this is time and money well spent.

6 Invest in banners and sound equipment, if you can.

Getting a message across is much easier with clear, visible banners and sound equipment that allows the audience to hear your presenters. We were lucky enough to have sound donated by a skillful and generous sound tech, Gregory Kilcup. The clarity of our entire program at the end of the march resulted directly from the good audio provided by this gentleman.

Our banner, by contrast, we had to pay for, since it was printed at Staples. This we were able to do because of generous donations from some individual donors. (We made a point of thanking all such contributors at the beginning of our program. Their contributions were indispensable).



Our "front line" in Columbus made a great first impression.

Photo by Michael Barber.

7 Make a Site visit.

One thing you *shouldn't* go without is a visit to the site where your march will be taking place. Having a clear lay of the land is absolutely essential when planning the beginning, middle, and end of your event. We visited our end point on a bitterly cold February day, but instantly thanked ourselves for this effort; our original plans for the end of the march would have never worked given the configuration of the park that we used. We never would have recognized this sitting in a meeting room or looking at Google Earth. We had to be out **in** the physical location to get a real handle on how things would work.

8 Petition Attorneys General.

Part of the giddiness of racist groups after the election had to do with their sense that the government would now be "on their side" – just as German government adopted Nazism in the 1930s. Of course, this would be an absolute worst case scenario. We want the machinery of government (at every possible level) to work on behalf of the people, guaranteeing freedom and safety for all.

We chose to petition our State's Attorney General, Mike DeWine as the top law enforcement official in Ohio and its most visible symbol of legal action. We created an online version of our petition (see QR code) as well as a hard copy version. Although we received less than 500 signatures, it still helped us achieve what we'd hoped for – a statement from our state's A.G. promising aggressive prosecution of hate crimes in our state. While such promises may have little weight legally, they still have symbolic value and may be worth the effort.



9

Create a unified message with your posters.

To speak with one voice, it is helpful to provide marchers with a list of signs that are in keeping with the spirit of the event. The following list was compiled by Michael Greenman of the Interfaith Association of Central Ohio. Images of our April 2 event reflect his work.



Columbus Peace Catalyst Director, Rebecca Brown, with her march signs (and personal assistants).

Love Not Hate • Despair is Not an Option • Unity = Strength
One Human Family • Real Americans Don't Hate
Power of Love Over Love of Power • Refugees Welcome
"You Shall Not Oppress and Alien ..." – Exodus 23:9
Who Would Jesus Deport? • We are All Immigrants
Einstein Was a Refugee • Equal Justice for All
Jews Against Muslim Ban • First Amendment Voter
No One is Free When Others Are Oppressed

While all signs do not need to come from this list (I carried one that said "Refugees, 1620" and had a picture of the Mayflower landing) we felt it was important to be ready to say "no" to signs that ran contrary to the spirit of the event or detracted from its central focus. With help from a youth organization called Peace Builders, who made 49 signs, we had extras on hand and were ready to hand them out as substitutes if necessary.

10

Invite speakers that reflect your diversity.

Our event included men and women of many faiths, ethnicities, and ages, so we made sure that our program of speakers did too. Giving young people an opportunity to speak at such an event sends an important message that they care about these issues and are thoughtful members of our community.

A couple things about pacing and planning: Before our march, we had three short speeches to kick things off. Keeping this part short and to the point helped us to launch our march in an organized fashion without the opening dragging on too long. After the march, we had five speakers. To prepare these presentations we had a conference call a couple of weeks in advance to establish the order of presentation and make sure that speakers' messages would be complementary but not redundant. That was time well spent.

In Columbus, we chose not to have an open-mic portion of the program, and we're glad we stuck to that decision. It can be hard to say no, and I had to personally decline a request by a very qualified speaker on the day of the event. This speaker might have done a great job, but the open mic concept has too many drawbacks in terms of controlling time and message; once that door is open, it can't easily be shut. We have no regrets about standing by this decision or about asking our partners to follow suit.

11

Partner with musicians to create an engaging program.

As marchers arrive to your end point, it's great to have some music to greet them. We were lucky enough to get Arnett Howard, a local legend in Columbus, to perform a trumpet solo to get our program started. This helped to draw everyone's attention to a single point up front before speakers began. A local choral group, Vocal Resistance, sang "I'm gonna march it with you." (The lyrics were shared through a "tinyurl" website so that people could find them on their phone and sing along). The last thing that happened at our event was the singing of "Song of Peace" by an interfaith choir organized by Michael Greenman. This was a great way to give the march a finished feeling before sending everyone away.

12**Spread the word with social media.**

Finding a person or people who can manage social media and get the word out can make all the difference when it comes to turn-out and in many other ways. We relied on facebook and used our page for many reasons: to convey important information about times and locations, to communicate the tone and message of the march in advance (we posted our list of signs there, for example), to post updates about co-sponsors joining us (our ever-evolving flyer was posted there), to share maps related to parking, to encourage people to wear religious vestments, and so on. It probably goes without saying, but running a successful social media campaign can be a make-or-break component of your organizing effort.

13**Contact local media (early and often).**

Misinformation and propaganda have been key to the Far Right's efforts to undermine religious freedom in America. Islam, for example, has been portrayed as a religion bent on violence and on overtaking democratic forms of government (hence the "Anti-Sharia Law" protests). To counter these false portrayals, it is important to spread our message as widely as possible so that it might reach those who don't agree with us already and possibly change some minds. In order to be part of the national conversation (or argument) that's going on, we need to use the media to spread our message of hope, unity, and peace as far as possible.

I must admit to having failed our 2017 effort in this regard. I did issue press releases, but I may have done so too late; I also relied on a single round of press releases; whereas multiple rounds of press releases and media outreach may have been more effective. We did have one local news outlet send a reporter, and we're grateful for their positive coverage, but we hope to do better next year.

A final word on working with the media: we established a "media contact team" of three individuals from various faith backgrounds. It was the job of this team to actively try to connect with broadcasters who show up in order to communicate the intended purpose of the march (see Step 3). We certainly wouldn't forbid a reporter from speaking to rank-and-file marchers, but having a designated contact team is an effective way to control the message that you're sending out to the world.

14**Get a good megaphone.**

I'd thought finding a megaphone would be easy and took this step for granted. It turned out to not be easy at all. Good megaphones are pretty costly, and we didn't have the budget for added expenses. I am eternally grateful to Sue Carter of the Ohio Fair Food Alliance who let us borrow her organization's megaphone in an extreme pinch. (Due to poor planning I was actually in panic mode trying to find one on the morning of the event and she hooked us up. God bless you, Sue!) You'll save yourself a lot of stress if you take care of this step early, and not on the day of your event!

15**Set a time to gather and a time to start.**

It seems that the timing of marches works differently from other events. I attended an event this spring that was advertised for 1 p.m., but when I arrived very few people were there. As it turned out 1 p.m. was just the time to gather; the event didn't begin until roughly an hour later. To avoid this problem, we set a "Beginning to Gather Time" and a "March Kick-off" time. We did our best to clarify that our actual program would begin at the March Kick-off time and then we tried to stick to that schedule as closely as possible. We received a lot of positive feedback about our event seeming "well-organized"; I believe this approach to clarifying our start time helped to make that impression, since it allowed us to begin on time.

16**On the day of the event, be first to arrive.**

Dr. Pranav Jani, a very experienced organizer who advised me about how to carry out an effective action, discussed the importance of understanding “tactics.” To my understanding, this term relates to the on-the-ground moves made in a specific situation to achieve a specific objective (as opposed to the term “strategy,” which refers to a broader overarching plan). The reason I mention *tactics* here is that (I must confess) my understanding of the tactics for our march was developing right up through the morning of our event. Arriving early gave me the opportunity to work out some last-minute tactics- specifically, it gave me the chance to figure out how to get our marchers organized when going from our staging area to the street. Whether the extra time helps you to get final details arranged or simply to get centered and ready, an extra thirty minutes to an hour on the day of the event will most likely be useful and beneficial for you and your marchers.

17**Ask for volunteer “marshals.”**

The use of “marshals” to help organize marchers is another concept that was recommended by experienced activists, and I was thankful for the marshals that volunteered to help our group. We had a good police escort, so our marshals didn’t need to worry about directing traffic, but they were very helpful in getting our participants organized and ready to go. After our brief opening speeches, our marshals helped our marchers form rows of six, shoulder to shoulder on a sidewalk that led from the staging area to the street. (We asked that each row have people from different faiths and backgrounds – a move meant to show our unity and to reflect our motto: *e pluribus unum*). In the end, we had roughly 50 rows forming a well-organized column when we finally took to the streets. At first our marshals flanked this column; as the march proceeded our rows dissolved a bit and our marshals dropped in with the group. Still getting off to a well-orchestrated...

18**Be positive, even in the face of counter-protestors.**

As our event gains publicity, it will likely attract negative attention as well. The world is filled with misinformation, and there are many people with agendas radically different than our own who will be quick to attack us. Already, a troll who saw our April 2 march on the news visited our facebook page to comment that our event was a “farce” that supported terrorism. As our event grows and spreads into new places, it would be surprising if similar attacks did not occur online. It is also quite possible that some semi-organized “anti-Sharia” types may show up and mount a counter-protest to our peaceful march.

Please remember that the ignorance of people whose minds have been poisoned by racism and prejudice is never more evident than when it is directed against the innocent and the peaceful. Tempting as it may be to engage in a shouting match with vicious, mean-spirited hecklers, we hope that all of those representing the Interfaith March for Peace & Justice will “go high” and not be baited. Such a confrontation, handled peacefully by us becomes a golden opportunity to put our message of peace on display and throw the bigotry of our opponents into stark relief. For your restraint in this regard, and for your efforts in every other facet of planning and carrying out this march, thank you! And best of luck for a successful event!



The 2017 Columbus event with full police escort. Our marchers, five abreast, covered a full city block. Photo courtesy of Jon Groner.

What did we miss? How is it going?

Please feel free to give feedback, ask questions, or send updates to betty@interfaithmarch.com