



# Needs Assessment on Religious Diversity within Boys & Girls Clubs of America

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June 2014



**BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS  
OF AMERICA**

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## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Since 2012, the Aspen Institute Justice & Society Program (JSP) has examined religious pluralism through its Inclusive America Project (IAP), a task force made up of distinguished individuals from five key sectors: youth development, higher education, media, religiously affiliated organizations, and government agencies. The group held full-day convenings at the Aspen Institute headquarters in December 2012 and April 2013, and published *Principled Pluralism: Report of the Inclusive America Project* in June 2013.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) is represented on the IAP task force by its Senior Adviser for Youth Advocacy, Judith J. Pickens, who participated in both convenings and contributed to the *Principled Pluralism* report. As an outgrowth of Ms. Pickens's involvement in the Inclusive America Project, BGCA and JSP agreed to cooperate on this needs assessment, which examines how religious diversity affects Clubs across the nation and suggests strategies for positive engagement.

The information in this needs assessment was collected from two sources: surveys and case studies. In December 2013, JSP and BGCA cooperated with other youth development and interfaith organizations to design two versions of a survey on religious diversity, one for regional CEOs (Appendix A) and another for staff and volunteers (Appendix B). In February 2014, this survey was distributed using the web-based SurveyMonkey platform to Boys & Girls Club organizations in ten US cities: Albuquerque, NM; Asheville, NC; Austin, TX; Charleston, WV; Lowell, MA; Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN; Mount Vernon, NY; Portland, OR; Tampa Bay, FL; and Washington, DC. These organizations were selected by Julius Lott, Vice President for Diversity at BGCA, based on three criteria: experience with religious diversity, willingness to participate, and geographic variety. All ten regional CEOs and about 80 staff and volunteers completed the surveys.

Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities, MN; Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon, NY; and Boys & Girls Clubs of the Portland Metropolitan Area, OR were selected as case study locations. During March and April 2014, Joseph DeMott, IAP Project Manager, visited each of these three sites and conducted interviews with local CEOs and select upper-level staff. The case study visits also included tours of Club branches and opportunities for less formal discussions with program staff and participants.



## INTRODUCTION

At present, the United States is growing more religiously diverse in at least two important ways. The first change is driven by a demographic shift: by 2050, nearly 20% of the US population will be foreign-born, compared to about 13% in 2012, and non-Hispanic whites will represent just 47% of the population, compared to 63% in 2012 (Passel and Cohn 2008; “USA Quickfacts” 2014). This will dramatically alter America’s religious landscape, increasing the size of religious minority communities while also increasing diversity within the majority Christian faith. The second change reflects a cultural shift: the percentage of Americans who profess no religious affiliation has rapidly increased over the past two decades, and now totals 20% of the total population and over 30% of adults under 30 years of age (Pew Forum 2012a). Christianity remains the most common American religion—Evangelical Protestants (26%), Catholics (24%), Mainline Protestants (18%), and Historically Black Protestants (7%) are the four largest American religious groups (Pew Forum 2008, 12)—yet the influx of other religious communities through immigration and the steady rise in the number of Americans who do not consider themselves religious represents a major change for our country.

America’s growing religious diversity is relevant to Boys & Girls Clubs of America in several ways. Inclusion is a core value for the movement, and nationwide, the Clubs serve a disproportionate number of minorities and recent immigrants. Many of these communities place great importance on traditions and beliefs that are unfamiliar to most Americans. In order to effectively reach out to young people from these groups and help them to meet their educational and personal goals, Boys & Girls Club staff must develop an understanding of the traditions and beliefs of those they serve. A little bit of religious literacy among staff goes a long way toward creating an inclusive environment for all members, especially in Clubs that serve very diverse constituencies or large minority communities.

Our nation’s growing diversity is also relevant to Clubs since, as a result of the social changes described above, effective engagement with diversity is fast becoming a critical skill for young American citizens. Clubs strive to help young people achieve academic success, develop good character, and become engaged citizens. In order to achieve these goals in the globalized, interconnected world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, young people must learn how to respectfully discuss identity differences, effectively respond to discrimination, and become acquainted with the various cultures and belief systems that contribute to the mosaic of American society.

**In light of these considerations, this needs assessment:**

- **Describes religious diversity within Boys & Girls Clubs of America, providing a detailed look at three sites: Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN; Mount Vernon, NY; and Portland, OR.**
- **Discusses four common ways that religious diversity affects Club activities, with specific examples of best practices and ongoing challenges from the three case study sites.**
- **Makes suggestions for further engagement around religious diversity by the national office of BGCA, based on the three case studies as well as the results of CEO and staff surveys from ten local Boys & Girls Club organizations.**

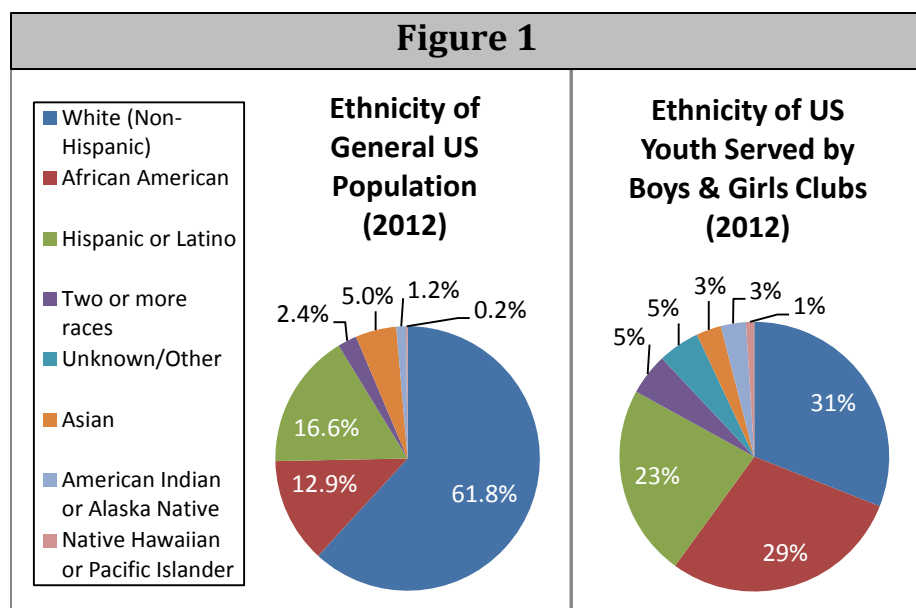


# WHICH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES DO CLUBS SERVE?

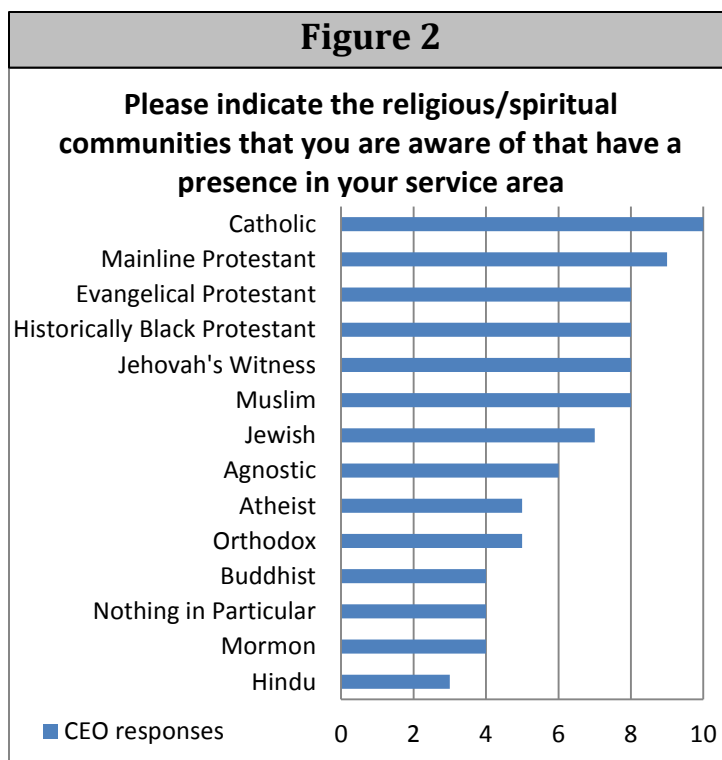
## National Overview

As indicated in **Figure 1**, Boys & Girls Clubs serve a much higher proportion of ethnic minorities than is found in the general population. Boys & Girls Clubs do not collect data about members' religious affiliations, but the statistics on ethnicity suggest that the Clubs also serve disproportionately high numbers of religious minorities, due to a strong correlation

between ethnicity and religious affiliation. For example, although less than 0.5% of Americans are Hindu, just over half of Indian Americans are. Less than 1% of the US population is Buddhist, but 43% of Vietnamese Americans, 25% of Japanese Americans, and 15% of Chinese Americans are (Pew Forum 2008, 36; Pew Forum 2012b, 14-16). Almost two thirds of American Muslims are first-generation immigrants, and 70% of American Muslims are people of color (Pew Forum 2011, 13, 16). US Hispanics, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly Christian, divided between Catholics (55%), evangelical Protestants (16%), and other Christian groups (8%); 18% are unaffiliated and just 1% follow a non-Christian faith (Pew Forum 2014, 5). There are also strong links between African Americans and historically black Protestant churches, and between Native American ethnicity and religion.



The survey data collected from ten Boys & Girls Club organizations shows that the Clubs serve the full range of American religious and spiritual communities. For each religious group, **Figure 2** indicates the number of CEOs, out of ten, who said a given group has a presence in his or her Club's service area. In a separate question, nine of the ten CEOs and nearly two-thirds of the staff and volunteers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Religious/spiritual diversity is an important issue for the communities the Club serves." None of the CEOs and less than 10% of the staff disagreed with the statement. Since one of the criteria used to select these ten Club organizations was their experience with religious diversity, these statistics should not be taken as generally representative of Clubs across the nation. Nevertheless, the surveys confirmed that Clubs from a variety of geographic regions serve members from diverse religious backgrounds and consider religious diversity to be an important issue for their communities.

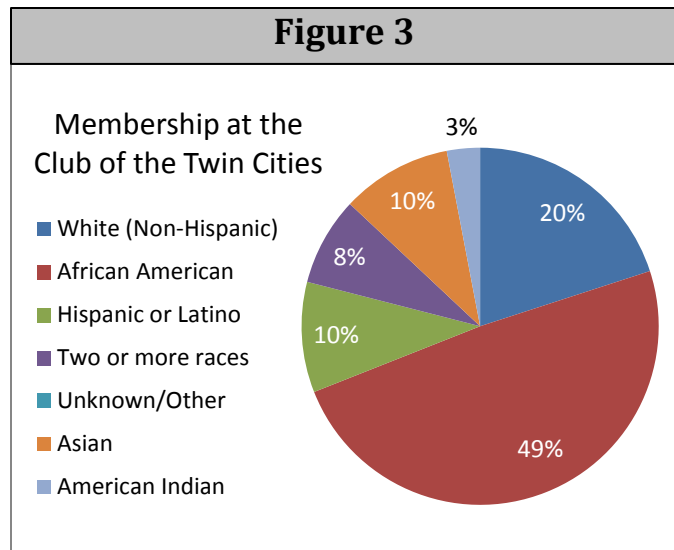


Although the surveys identified religious diversity as an important issue for Clubs, the specific details of *how* religious diversity is an issue vary a great deal from location to location. One of the most striking points that emerged from both the surveys and the case studies is that different sites serve starkly different communities, even within a single metropolitan area. One branch of a Club may have a strong African American majority; another, a white majority; and a third, a Latino majority. Other sites—especially those located near public housing developments that attract new immigrants—display a tremendous degree of internal diversity, with many different ethnicities and religions represented. A detailed look at ethnic and religious diversity at Clubs in three US cities illustrates this point.

## Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities, MN

The Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area is about 75% white, with minority communities of African Americans (8.5%), Asians (6.8%), Hispanics (6.0%), Native Americans (0.6%), and others. However, as **Figure 3** indicates, non-Hispanic whites make up just one-fifth of the members at the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities.

Protestant Christianity, with its various denominations, is the most prevalent religious tradition in the Twin Cities. The region has long been home to a sizable Catholic population and a much smaller Jewish community. More recently, however, waves of immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America have altered the Twin Cities' cultural and religious landscape:



- In the 1970s and 1980s, large numbers of Hmong, a Southeast Asian ethnic group, came to the Twin Cities as refugees. Today, the area is home to more than 60,000 Hmong, the largest Hmong community in the US (Pfeifer et al. 2013). Although a large number of Hmong—perhaps as many as half of those in North America—have converted to Christianity, many continue to follow the traditional Hmong belief system, which centers on the shaman, a spiritual healer (Duffy et al. 2004).
- Over the last two decades, Minneapolis-St. Paul has received many immigrants from East Africa. The cities are now home to the largest Somali community in the US, estimated at about 15,000 (Zimmerman 2014). Much of the Somali community practices a conservative form of Islam.
- Since 2000, the Hispanic population of Minneapolis-St. Paul has doubled from 70,000 to 140,000 (French 2013). This community is mostly Roman Catholic, although it includes some Protestants.

Although Minneapolis-St. Paul is a fairly integrated metropolitan area, these ethnic and religious groups are not evenly spread out across the Boys & Girls Club's eight metro-area locations. Different branches serve different communities:

- The Jerry Gamble and Patrick Henry branches are located in heavily African American parts of North Minneapolis. Their membership is overwhelmingly African American.
- The Olson Beacon site, also in North Minneapolis, serves the Shingle Creek neighborhood. The area is quite mixed, and includes whites (42%), African Americans (24%), Asians (17%), Latinos (10%), and a handful of smaller groups.
- The Southside Village branch serves the South Minneapolis neighborhood of Bryant, which is nearly evenly divided between whites, African Americans, and Latinos.

- The Little Earth branch is located near a public housing complex that is about 95% Native American. Like the complex, this site almost exclusively serves the Native American community.
- The Mt. Airy clubhouse, located just north of downtown St. Paul, lies on the south side of a housing development where many new immigrants live. Once predominantly Hmong, the development is now home to a large community of Somali immigrants as well.
- The Eastside St. Paul unit serves a large Hmong community and significant white, Hispanic, and African American populations.
- The Westside St. Paul branch serves a community that is largely Hispanic and white, with a smaller African American community. Over one third of the population in the area speaks a language other than English at home.

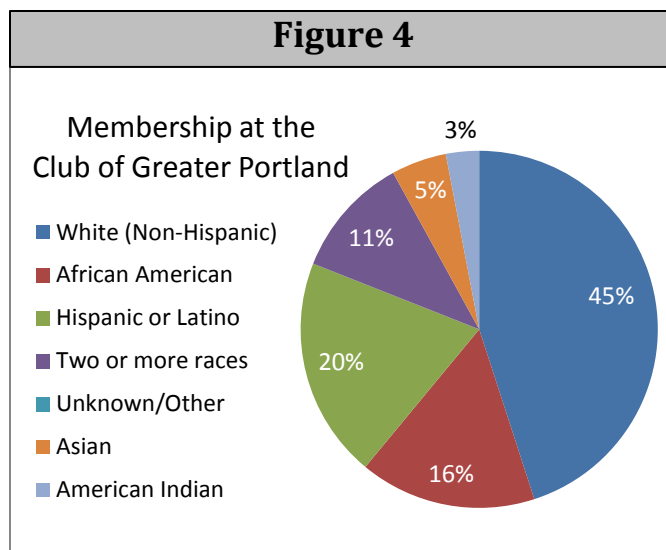
### Boys & Girls Clubs of the Portland Metropolitan Area, OR

Greater Portland, OR is slightly over 75% white, with minority communities of Hispanics (9.4%), Asians (7.1%), African Americans (6.3%), Native Americans (1.5%), and others. As indicated in **Figure 4**, however, more than half of the members of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Portland Metropolitan Area are ethnic minorities.

The seven branches of the organization serve very different populations. For example, the Inukai Family branch, located several miles west of Portland in Hillsboro, serves a predominantly Hispanic community, while the Blazers Unit, located in East Portland, has a high proportion of African American members. The Regence clubhouse, located in the heart of the North Portland neighborhood of New Columbia, exhibits a remarkable amount of internal diversity—both ethnic and religious.

New Columbia is a housing development containing 850 mixed-income units—public housing, rentals, condominiums, and homes for sale—that was built by the Portland-area government housing agency, Home Forward, between 2001 and 2007 (“Welcome to New Columbia” 2014). Because many new immigrants find housing through Home Forward, the New Columbia neighborhood has a very large foreign-born population, including recent immigrants from Latin America and refugees from the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and Africa. Nearly 20 different African dialects are spoken among the families who attend the Club.

Unsurprisingly, this ethnic diversity is accompanied by a high level of religious diversity. Many of the refugees from the Middle East and East Africa are Muslim, while some are Christian. The Slavic community, comprising Romanians, Ukrainians, and Russians, includes a large contingent of evangelical



Christians who fled religious discrimination in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Hardwick 2014). The Latino community is largely Catholic, while the African American community includes evangelicals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Seventh-Day Adventists. Staff reported Buddhist, Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), and Wiccan constituents, too, as well as atheists and agnostics—which is unsurprising, since Portland has one of the lowest religious adherence rates of any US city.

### **Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon, NY**

Mount Vernon, NY is a small, densely populated city that occupies 4.2 square miles of land just outside New York City, immediately north of the Bronx. Home to about 70,000 residents, the city is divided into a heavily African American south side and a more ethnically mixed north side, which includes Brazilian, Portuguese, Caribbean, Latino, and white communities. Citywide, the percentage of people living in poverty is only slightly higher than the New York State average of 15%. However, this statistic is skewed somewhat by an aging, affluent population toward the north end of the city; in parts of the south side, the poverty rate is as high as 33%. At Mount Vernon High School, which is 80% African American and 15% Latino, about 65% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. This poverty is accompanied by low educational achievement, a high crime rate, and significant gang activity.

The Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon is located on the city’s south side. At times, its membership and staff have been completely African American, reflecting the neighborhood in which it is located. Today, over 90% of its members are African American, but there are also a few Latinos and whites. It is difficult for the Club to attract members from the Brazilian and Latino communities on the more ethnically mixed north side of town, because parents are reluctant to let their children walk through high-crime areas on their way to the Club, and other means of transportation are not available.

One of Mount Vernon’s nicknames is “The City that Believes,” a reference to the fact that the city is home to roughly 400 churches—one of the highest ratios of churches per capita and per square mile anywhere in the country (Smalls 1998). The vast majority of these are historically black Protestant churches— Pentecostal, Baptist, and other evangelical denominations—though there are also six Catholic parishes, two Seventh-Day Adventist churches, and a Jehovah’s Witness Kingdom Hall. On the northern end of the city, there is a modern orthodox synagogue, a reform synagogue, and a Theravada Buddhist Temple. These are far from the Club, however, and practically all of the Club’s members come from a Christian background.



# HOW DOES RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AFFECT CLUBS?

Because different clubhouses—even within a single Club organization—serve such different ethnic and religious communities, the way that religious diversity affects Boys & Girls Club programming varies a great deal from location to location. The situation of each Club is unique. Nevertheless, there are several areas—e.g., outreach to minorities, holidays, mealtimes, and activities outside the Club—in which religious diversity tends to be generally relevant to Clubs, albeit in different ways in different areas. The following sections explore these topics through the lens of the Clubs of Mount Vernon, Portland, and the Twin Cities, offering specific examples of challenges, strategies, and successes. All Clubs ought to be aware of these common areas where religious diversity may affect their work and, recognizing that there is no single strategy that will be suitable for all, each individual clubsite should adopt an approach that meets its unique needs, based on its history and the population that it serves.

## Outreach and Communication

*Boys & Girls Clubs are an ideal place for children of recent immigrants to play, learn, and integrate into American society. However, upon their arrival, many new immigrants are reluctant to send their children to the local Club. Outreach to immigrant communities is a key area where religious literacy and cultural sensitivity can make an impact. If parents fear that what goes on at the Club may undermine their values, traditions, or beliefs, they are unlikely to allow their children to become members. Conversely, when a Club develops a reputation for respecting religious beliefs and celebrating diverse cultural identities, recent immigrants are more inclined to trust the Club with their children.*

### **The Twin Cities: Building Trust with the Somali Community**

The Mt. Airy branch of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities is located on the south side of a public housing development where many refugees and new immigrants live. For years, this area was predominantly Hmong, but it is now about half Hmong and half Somali. Within the Hmong community, which has been present in the area for a few decades, parents are generally comfortable sending their children to the Club. In fact, the membership of the Mt. Airy Unit was once nearly 50% Hmong, though

this number is decreasing as the Hmong population moves to other parts of the city. Within the more recently arrived Somali community, however, many parents are not yet comfortable allowing their children—especially girls—to attend the Club for cultural and religious reasons.

Diana Adamson, Director of the Mt. Airy branch, has adopted a number of outreach strategies to the Somali community. Recognizing that adult men hold considerable decision-making authority within the patriarchal Somali culture, Adamson has invited Somali men from the neighborhood to use the Club's gym for informal soccer games one night per week. Once warmer weather arrives and the games are moved to the outdoor field, she will ask them to bring their families along, expecting that this will help the community view the Club as a safe, healthy place to spend time. Adamson has also made efforts to reach out to Somali women, many of whom observe a conservative form of Islam, by inviting them to existing programs in which they are likely to feel comfortable, such as a weekend women's retreat at the Club's campground.

In addition, Adamson seeks to encourage Somali participation in the Club by bringing Somalis into leadership and staff positions. She plans to reach out to Kadra Mohamed, who in February 2014 became the first woman of Somali descent to join the St. Paul police force, and to ask her to visit the Club as part of the Police Activities League program. Last summer, Adamson hired a teenage Somali girl participating in the JobCorps program as the front desk manager for the Mt. Airy Branch; she hopes that having Somalis on staff will help bring Somali youth—especially girls—into the Club. Recruiting members from the Somali community has been a challenge for the Mt. Airy Club thus far, but Somali youth now represent about 10% of the Mt. Airy Club's membership, and Adamson and her staff are confident that this number will continue to grow.

Erin Carlin, CEO of the Club of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities, is pleased with these efforts to engage the Somali community. Carlin encourages her staff to develop strong relationships with parents and families of Somali youth, supports the Somali camping experiences that the Club provides, and has consulted the local Somali community when developing new program ideas. If a request is made for a new Somali-only program, Carlin and senior management are cautious in supporting any exclusive program because of the Clubs core values of promoting full inclusion in programming for all youth.

This experience illustrates how Clubs balance their desire to reach new immigrant communities through specialized programming with their desire to promote integration and inclusion. While exclusive programs geared at a new immigrant community might succeed in reaching that group, they could exclude children from other backgrounds and leave in place ethnic and religious barriers that Boys & Girls Club programs normally break down. It is important for clubsites to reach out to new immigrants in ways that make them feel comfortable and welcome while also helping immigrants form relationships with people from other backgrounds and become integrated into the broader culture.

### **Portland: Creative Methods of Reaching Immigrant Communities**

At the Regence branch of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Portland Metropolitan Area, located in the remarkably diverse New Columbia neighborhood, language barriers and cultural differences can make it difficult to reach parents with information about Club activities. According to Sarah Fast, former Director



of the Regence Unit, it quickly became apparent when the Club opened in 2007 that the common practice of sending children home with paper handouts—usually printed in English, sometimes with a Spanish translation—was not an effective way to communicate with large segments of the community.

Fast and her colleagues found that verbal announcements were a much more successful way of reaching new immigrant communities. The Club began partnering with other organizations, such as Housing Forward and Guardian Property Management, both of which regularly have in-person interactions with new immigrants, to get its message out. It contacted the Latino Parent-Teacher Association and incorporated announcements about the Club into the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes offered to adults at a nearby school. This proved to be an excellent way of ensuring that the information was translated and conveyed correctly, and it gave new immigrants a chance to ask questions about the Club while practicing their English. The Club also partnered with area churches to hold community activities featuring foods, games, and arts and crafts at the Club after Sunday services. This form of outreach helped families become acquainted with the Club as a safe, fun place for their children to play.

To facilitate ongoing communication, the Regence Club created a “communications specialist” position within the Club. In this role, teenagers from select communities would receive volunteer hours or a modest wage in exchange for conveying messages to specific groups in their native language. This method of communication helped non-English speakers feel connected to the Club and fostered a stronger sense of community.

#### **Mount Vernon: Outreach within a Seemingly Homogeneous Community**

Unlike the Mt. Airy and Regence Units, the Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon, NY does not deal with a large number of immigrants or members of minority religions. To an outside observer, the south side of Mount Vernon might seem like a relatively homogeneous community—made up of African Americans from Christian backgrounds—in which there would be few religious tensions. However, there are plenty of differences and divisions between the roughly 400 churches packed into this small urban area. Mel Campos, CPO of the Mount Vernon organization, feels that some of these churches are overly concerned with protecting their own territory and membership, instead of finding ways to work together to improve the larger community.

Given the extremely high number of churches per capita in Mount Vernon, Campos would like to enhance existing outreach efforts, conducted through the schools, by publicizing the Club’s offerings through churches. However, he is aware that some churches in Mount Vernon view the Club as a competitor since they offer after-school programs of their own. These programs, nearly all of which are far more expensive than the \$60 annual membership fee that the Club charges, are a significant source of revenue for the churches and an important means of connecting with and retaining their members. Recognizing this as a challenge, Campos and his colleagues will look for future opportunities to partner with churches in order to grow the Club’s membership and broaden the scope of the community they serve.

## Holiday and Activity Programming

*Holiday celebrations are an important part of programming for most Boys & Girls Clubs—an opportunity to bring families into the Club, share meaningful traditions, and enhance support for the organization. Clubs often plan celebrations around holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Although most of these holidays have Christian origins, today they have large secular components; few would claim that dressing up in costume on Halloween is a religious celebration of All Saints Day, or that Santa Claus and Christmas trees are directly relevant to the birth of Jesus. Many secular Americans take part in these traditions without correlating them with any particular religious faith.*

*In diverse communities, though, these holidays can bring religious and cultural differences to the forefront. For example, some Christians do not celebrate Halloween because of its connotation with evil spirits and death, and many emphasize the religious elements of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Members of other world religions—e.g., Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs—do not typically celebrate Christmas and Easter, but have their own religious holidays, such as Yom Kippur, Ramadan, Diwali, and Vaisakhi. Many new immigrants are unfamiliar with Halloween and Thanksgiving or do not find them important, but do mark ethnic holidays that many Americans are unfamiliar with. Jehovah’s Witnesses do not observe Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, or Independence Day.*

*When a Club understands which holidays are meaningful to its constituents and organizes inclusive celebrations that respect all the groups present in its community, holidays become a source of unity and learning, rather than a cause of division.*

### **Portland: Inclusive Celebrations and Activities**

During the early years of the Regence Unit in Portland, planning holiday celebrations for its incredibly diverse members was a challenge. While many families in New Columbia celebrate Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, some do not. The Club didn’t want to deprive members who *do* celebrate these holidays of fun traditions, but at the same time they didn’t want to exclude or alienate the significant proportion of their members for whom these holidays are not meaningful.

The Regence Club balances these competing interests by organizing seasonal, nonsectarian holiday celebrations that allow for the expression of multiple traditions. For example, the Club holds a Winter Holiday Celebration in December, rather than a Christmas party. Traditional Christmas activities such as gift-giving and taking photos with Santa Claus are part of the gathering, but Club staff structure the event so as to make it easy for families to opt out. Three Santa Clauses—one African American, one Latino, and one white—are located in one of the side rooms of the Club. Families that don’t celebrate Christmas may elect to have their children receive gifts unwrapped and in advance of the holiday. This respects parents’ beliefs while still allowing their children to receive new toys just like their fellow Club members do.

As Director of the Regence Club, Sarah Fast learned that it is important to consider a variety of religious observances when scheduling Club events. This does not just mean making sure not to hold a major activity, such as a community night or a sporting event, on a religious holiday. It also means considering the weekly activities of local congregations. For example, the Club used to hold its weekly community

nights every Wednesday, but staff noticed a drop-off in the number of attendees from its sizable Eastern European immigrant community. When Fast investigated, she learned that there was a conflict with this community's evangelical Christian worship schedule. Changing the weekly community night to Thursday allowed more of New Columbia's evangelical Christian families to participate. Given the Club's significant number of Muslim members, Regence staff also take into account the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, during which some of the older Muslim youth will fast from food and drink from sunup to sundown. They try to find simple ways to make it easier for Muslim members to participate in Club activities during Ramadan, such as holding an ice cream social just after sundown rather than in the middle of the afternoon, or scheduling an important soccer game so that it will fall outside the month.

The Regence Club strives to create an inclusive environment not only during holidays, but in all its activity programming. For instance, a few years ago the Club was invited to participate in a program called "Read to the Dogs" in which a local non-profit called Pet Partners uses activities with therapy dogs to encourage children to read. When the program came to the Regence Club, Fast noticed that East African members tended to stay away. Upon inquiring with parents, she learned that they did not want their children to be around dogs for religious and cultural reasons. Rather than doing away with the program altogether, Regence moved it out of the central space into a side room so that it was easier for kids to opt out, and held the activity later in the evening so that kids who chose to go home would not miss out on afternoon programs. With this solution, Fast and her staff preserved the opportunity for kids who enjoy being around dogs, without letting it to be a barrier to Club attendance for others.

### **Mount Vernon: Religious Diversity within the Board of Directors**

At the Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon, practically all of the staff and members come from Christian backgrounds. Some do not attend church regularly or consider themselves atheist, agnostic, or religiously unaffiliated, but almost none are associated with other world religions. Although no Jewish or Muslim young people currently attend the Club, there are Jewish and Muslim communities in the Mount Vernon area. The organization's Board of Directors has a handful of Jewish members, and a significant amount of the Club's donations—perhaps 60-70% of the amount raised at its largest annual fundraising event—comes from Jewish donors.

This religious diversity is a relatively newfound development that the Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon is still learning to address. The Club's Executive Director, Lowes Moore, is an ordained Pentecostal minister, and board meetings have always begun with prayer during his twenty-year tenure at the Club. Some board members have recently suggested that they should discontinue this practice, and the issue is currently under discussion. The board's religious diversity may also affect the Club's programming. While the members and staff of the Club feel comfortable holding events around Christmas and Easter—without overtly religious content—some board members feel strongly that Club events should not be associated with Christian holidays. The Club is working to find solutions that respect the concerns of donors and board members as well as the traditions and beliefs of the community on Mount Vernon's south side, and is actively working to increase its overall diversity, including its religious diversity.

## Meals and Snacks

*Mealtime is another area where religious diversity affects Boys & Girls Club programming. Annually, the Clubs provide tens of millions of meals and snacks to low-income children. Many world religions place dietary restrictions on adherents—Hindus abstain from beef, Muslims do not eat pork, Orthodox Jews keep kosher, and Catholics do not eat meat on Fridays during Lent. At Clubs that serve religiously diverse populations, it is important for staff to be informed about and accommodate members' dietary needs.*

### **Portland: Accommodating Religious Dietary Needs**

When the Regence Unit opened in 2007, Sarah Fast and her colleagues noticed that some of the children who attended the Club had religious or cultural reasons for not eating some of the food that they were served. One major issue was pork, which both Jews and Muslims avoid. The Club addressed this by removing all pork products from the menu so that their sizable Muslim community no longer had to worry about whether or not a given dish contained pork. The Club also created a “no thank you table” where kids could place an item of food that they didn’t want to eat and other kids could take it. This reduced the amount of wasted food and allowed kids to easily opt out of eating foods that they do not eat—whether this is due to a religious restriction, personal preference, or allergy. The Club also took care to provide inclusive food options during community events, whether or not those fit with American traditions—at their first Winter Holiday Party, the chef suggested serving ham, but after considering the dietary preferences of their community, the Club opted for beef, turkey, and vegetarian options.

### **The Twin Cities: Developing General Knowledge**

The Club of the Twin Cities has also taken pork products off the menu, primarily in order to accommodate recent immigrants from the Muslim world. Erin Carlin believes that it is important to implement dietary standards that support all religious groups with specific dietary needs. She would like her staff to have a more general framework of knowledge about such needs so that they can appropriately accommodate all the groups they serve.

This point about the need for general knowledge is important. Throughout the surveys and case studies, many staff mentioned pork as a concern for Muslim and Jewish youth, but hardly any mentioned other dietary restrictions, such as the Catholic practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays during Lent. Clubs need to consider the needs of all their members, not only recent immigrants and religious minorities.

## Exposure to Diversity

*It is important for Clubs—especially those that serve relatively homogeneous populations—to expose young people to cultural, religious, and socioeconomic diversity. Imparting knowledge about different ways of life is itself a worthy educational goal. Moreover, encounters with diversity encourage critical thinking and self-reflection, and inspire young people to work for change in their own communities. Such experiences prepare Club members for adult life in our multicultural society, in which being able to communicate effectively with people from varied backgrounds is a crucial skill. Exposing Club members to diversity is an important part of preparing them for success.*

### **Mount Vernon: Broadening Horizons**

Most of the young people who attend the Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon rarely have opportunities to leave the confines of their small city. According to CPO Mel Campos and his staff, many of these children live in a world that is limited to a five- or ten-block radius from their homes and have little firsthand experience of what life is like beyond that border. In early 2014, Halima Penny, the Club's Teen Coordinator, took fifteen of the Club's older teens to visit the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Because the Club does not own a van, they traveled on the subway, which has a station within walking distance of the Club. *Not one* of the fifteen teens had ever taken the subway before, and for several of them it was their first visit to Manhattan.

The area that surrounds the Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon is plagued by poverty and violent crime. Children who live their entire lives in this area see few opportunities for a better life. Campos and his staff believe that it is essential to take the children who attend the Club on trips outside the city in order to give them hope for a better future, and they are seeking ways to do so more often. Such experiences cost money, however, and the one-unit organization—which owns no vehicle for transporting kids off-site—has limited resources.

### **The Twin Cities: Exposure as Education**

Like Mount Vernon, North Minneapolis is a heavily African American community plagued by poverty and violence whose children have few chances to experience other environments. Marcus Zackery, Area Director for the three Club branches in North Minneapolis, seeks every opportunity to take Club kids outside the confines of the neighborhood because he feels it is crucial to their education. Children learn from experience, and when they have the chance to interact with peers from other backgrounds, it expands their knowledge of the world and erodes misconceptions they may have. They also learn about themselves—they see their own traditions in a new light, and discover that they don't need to conform to others' preconceived notions about their ethnic or religious group. Zackery and his staff bring about these cross-cultural experiences by taking Club members to visit other Clubs and play sports in other parts of town. They actively discuss with their members what they learn from these excursions.



# WHAT RESOURCES MIGHT BE USEFUL?

## Staff Training Opportunities

### Internal Staff Dialogue

None of the three Boys & Girls Clubs that served as case study locations currently offer diversity training to staff members. At one organization, several employees expressed misgivings about such training, citing a negative experience several years ago of participating in a training that heavily focused on the history of discrimination against women and racial minorities. This made some white male employees feel unfairly blamed for acts of sexism and racism that occurred far before their time. Women and minorities also reported that the discussion made them uncomfortable. It seems that focusing on this history of oppression was counterproductive to the Club's efforts to move forward with positive intergroup relations.

For the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Portland Metropolitan Area, there may be opportunities to add diversity training in the near future. The organization recently began holding four all-staff trainings per year, and the Regence branch now does its own staff training on a monthly basis. Several staff members expressed an interest in training materials that could help staff become more comfortable talking about religious and ethnic differences with one another. They reason that before staff can help young people develop respectful attitudes and learn to effectively communicate across ethnic and religious differences, they must be able to do so themselves. Such conversations can be especially challenging between staff from different branches of the Portland organization; as noted above, the different branches serve very different ethnic and religious communities, and these differences are reflected in the staff.

### Meeting Staff from Other Clubs

The Boys & Girls Club of Mount Vernon recently took advantage of an opportunity to travel to Long Island to participate in an overnight all-staff training retreat with other Boys & Girls Clubs. CPO Mel Campos calls this "the most valuable use of time and money" during his first year at the Club of Mount Vernon. Campos and his staff were able to see another Club, interact with colleagues from other locations who share their mission and face similar challenges, and hear presentations from experienced instructors who are passionate about better serving kids.

Campos strongly believes that there is no substitute for the relationships that can be built and the knowledge and ideas that can be shared in face-to-face meetings. Webinars, conference calls, and remote training sessions, while inexpensive, are not an effective substitute. Fifteen years ago, Campos attended a training retreat for new executives, and he remains in touch with several of the executives he met there and turns to them for advice when his Club encounters a new challenge. He has never built a personal relationship through a virtual training. Campos is adamant that BGCA should continue to create opportunities for staff from different Clubs to interact face-to-face, as this exposes them to diversity of thought and practice and allows them to build valuable support networks.

### **Educating Staff about Religious and Cultural Differences**

At the Mt. Airy Club (Twin Cities) and Regence Club (Portland), many employees said that it would be helpful to provide staff with basic information about the various communities that their Clubs serve. Because Clubs have a fair amount of staff and volunteer turnover at the entry level, as well as employees who move from one Club to another, this could be a useful addition to new hire orientation. An interactive, web-based tool was suggested that would include demographic information about the neighborhood as well as brief summaries of the religions and cultures of the major groups that attend that particular Club. For each of these groups, the resource would highlight practical issues that are relevant to Club activities—e.g., beliefs about diet, holidays, family structure, and gender interactions—to help staff avoid cultural missteps and feel confident heading into interactions with communities with which they are unfamiliar. Ideally, head staff at each site would be able to select, from a comprehensive list, the groups to be included in the orientation for their location. They would want to familiarize new hires with a few key communities, but not to overwhelm them with a textbook-like guide including information about groups that they are unlikely to encounter.

Another suggested approach is to create a program that would educate staff about the ways in which religious and cultural differences can affect their work. This would involve highlighting issues that Clubs should consider and be sensitive to, providing specific examples of how other Clubs have approached these issues, and raising questions that staff should ask and discuss among themselves. This method would raise staff awareness about how to engage cultural and religious differences, and empower each site to decide on the approach that is most suitable for the particular community it serves.

### **Guidelines for Discussing Religion**

In both the surveys and case studies, many CEOs and employees expressed doubts about whether staff and volunteers understand what is acceptable and unacceptable when talking about religion at the Club. For example, at the heavily African American Clubs of North Minneapolis, where Black History Month is a major event, staff may be unsure of how to speak about black churches' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. They want to be accurate about their heritage and identity without making those who do not share it feel marginalized or uncomfortable. Christianity plays a major role in black history. Is it appropriate for kids to learn or perform a traditional African American spiritual that contains Christian language? Should discussions about Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. avoid the overtly Christian content of his speeches and writings? Marcus Zackery, Area Director for North Minneapolis, says it would be "excellent" if Boys & Girls Clubs of America could provide clearer guidelines on discussing religion to help staff confidently navigate such situations.

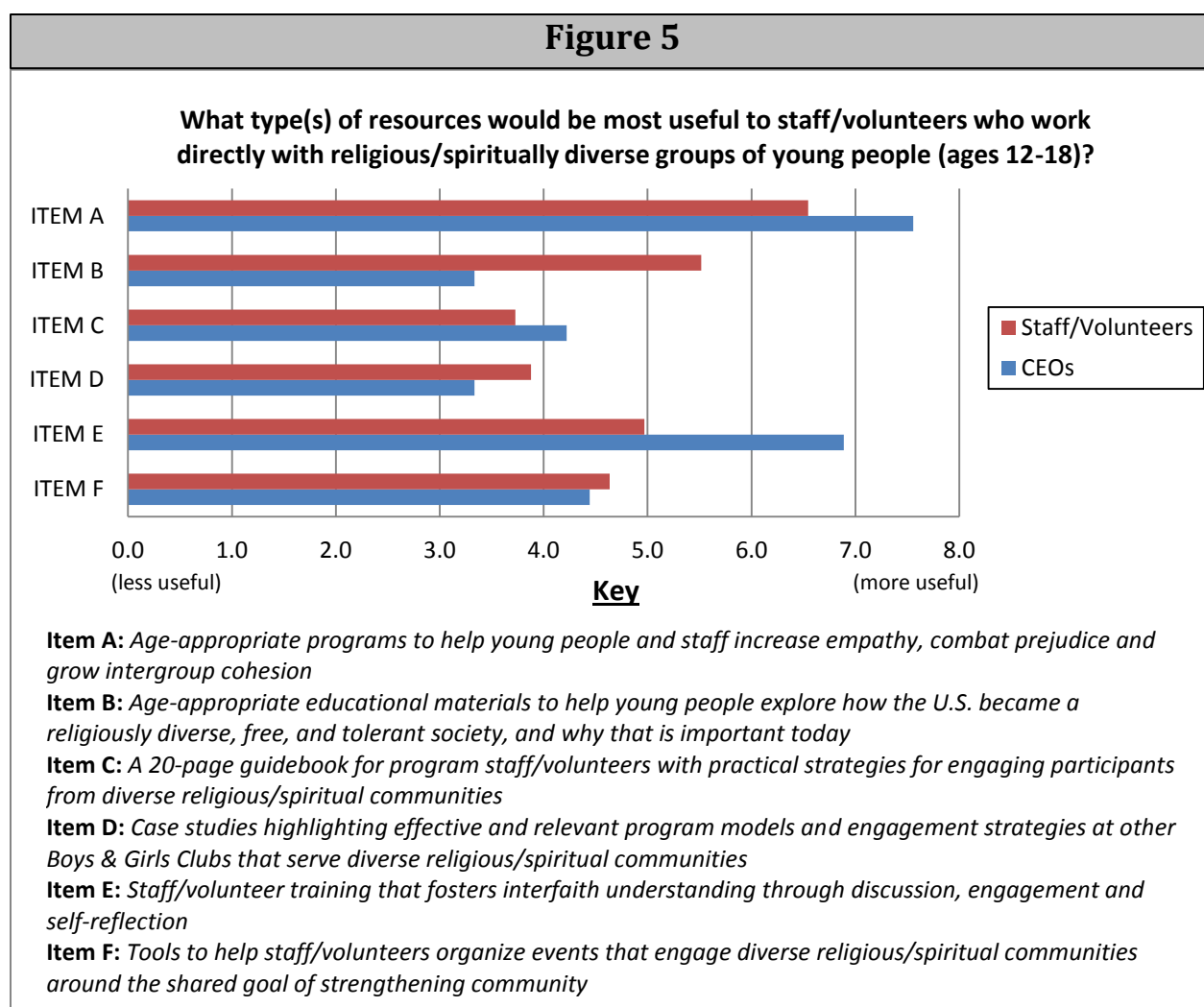


Erin Carlin, CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Twin Cities, believes it may be helpful for BGCA to provide staff training around diversity and acceptance, with examples of how to highlight differences in positive ways. Staff should be equipped to convey the conviction that the Clubs' diversity is a strength, rather than a cause of division, and should understand not only the beliefs and practices of different cultures, but what the Boys & Girls Club movement believes about diversity, inclusion, and equality. This would be useful not only for staff, but for members' parents and for non-members who want to know more about the Clubs' stance on such issues.

## Other Resources

## Potential Tools

In February 2014, CEOs and staff from ten local Boys & Girls Club organizations across the country completed surveys in which they rated the usefulness of six tools to assist staff who work with adolescents and young adults to more effectively engage religious diversity. Each of the suggested tools was labeled “useful” by between 80% and 100% of respondents, but there were significant differences in the tools’ popularity, as **Figure 5** indicates.



Both CEOs and staff showed the most interest in programs to help increase empathy, combat prejudice, and grow intergroup cohesion. CEOs and staff also showed strong interest in staff/volunteer training to facilitate interfaith discussion, although staff were less enthusiastic about this than CEOs, possibly due to reluctance to spend time on training, or unpleasant experiences with diversity training in the past. Staff also expressed a strong interest in educational materials to help young people explore how the US became a religiously diverse, free, and tolerant society, which is consistent with the Clubs' current focus on education.

### **Preparing Kids for Life beyond the Club**

The responses to the surveys and case studies make it abundantly clear that Boys & Girls Clubs do not tolerate discrimination based on religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences. To be sure, young children sometimes say insensitive things about other groups, but staff generally do a great job of teaching respectful behavior, and reports of bullying and discrimination are rare.

However, several CEOs and staff worry that their members are not adequately prepared for the ignorance, misperceptions, and discrimination they may face once they grow up and leave the Club. Erin Carlin related stories of kids who have a great experience at the Club and receive college scholarships, but are also somewhat sheltered by the Club; once the Club's support structure is taken away, they really struggle with the high academic expectations and unfamiliar social setting that they encounter at college. When these young people encounter systematic inequalities and discrimination, are they prepared to constructively address them, or do they lash out with anger? Are they resilient, or merely hardened? Carlin hopes that Clubs can find more ways to make students aware of the challenges they may face once they graduate from high school and leave the Club, and to prepare them to respond effectively.

Mel Campos expressed a similar belief that preparing Club members to respond to discrimination is a critical part of teaching them to be good citizens. To illustrate the challenges the youth of Mount Vernon face, Campos pointed to a February 2014 high school basketball game between Mount Vernon and Mahopac, after which there were racially-charged altercations between fans from the two communities and eight Mahopac students were suspended for posting racist Tweets directed at the Mount Vernon community. Campos sees a role for the Club when such incidents occur, in terms of both preparing its members to respond constructively and addressing prejudice in neighboring communities.

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# APPENDIX A: RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY SURVEY, CEO VERSION

Boys & Girls Clubs across the nation strive to enhance the lives of young people who need us most by providing an Outcome Driven Club experience that helps them achieve high levels of Academic Success, Good Character and Citizenship and Healthy Lifestyles.

This survey will help Boys & Girls Clubs of America assess needs and potential support for programs that positively engage religious diversity. Please note that when we use the term "religious/spiritual," we are including individuals who practice all types of religions, faiths, spiritualities, and belief systems.

Please complete the survey no later than Wednesday, February 12th, 2014. Should you have any questions or wish to learn more, please contact Julius Lott ([jlott@bgca.org](mailto:jlott@bgca.org))

**1) Your name:**

**2) Your Boys & Girls Club Organization Name:**

**3) Please indicate the religious/spiritual communities that you are aware of that have a presence in your service area.**

Agnostic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mainline Protestant	<input type="checkbox"/>
Atheist	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mormon	<input type="checkbox"/>
Buddhist	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hindu	<input type="checkbox"/>
Catholic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Jewish	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evangelical Protestant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Muslim	<input type="checkbox"/>
Historically Black Protestant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nothing in particular	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jehovah's Witness	<input type="checkbox"/>	Orthodox	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Other (list below)	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Comments:**

**4) Religious/spiritual diversity is an important issue for the communities the Club serves.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Unsure      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Comments:**

**5) How would you describe religious/spiritual diversity within communities your Clubs serve?**

Major source of cohesion	Somewhat a source of cohesion	Somewhat a source of tension	Major source of tension	I don't know	Other _____
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**Comments:**

**6) Our membership reflects the religious/spiritual diversity of our service area.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Unsure      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Comments:**

**7) Our staff and volunteers reflect the religious/spiritual diversity of our service area.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Unsure      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Comments:**

**8) Staff and volunteers at my Clubs are adequately aware of the key beliefs and practices of the religious/spiritual communities that have a presence in our service area.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Unsure      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Comments:**

**9) Staff and volunteers at my Clubs are comfortable having open conversations about religious/spiritual identity with the individuals whom they serve.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Unsure      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Comments:**

**10) Have you had experiences in which religious/spiritual diversity was used to bring together members of your community for learning, shared growth, and/or common goals?**

Yes      No

**If yes, please explain:**

- 11) Have you had experiences in which an individual was uncomfortable participating in programs or activities at your Clubs due to religious/spiritual identity?**

Yes

No

**If yes, please explain:**

- 12) Are you aware of any incidents of young people at your Clubs being teased, bullied, excluded, or otherwise discriminated against because of their religion/spirituality?**

Yes- Three or more

Yes- One or two

No

**Please explain:**

- 13) What type(s) of resources would be useful to staff/volunteers who work directly with religious/spiritually diverse groups of young people (ages 12-18)? Please circle yes or no, and rank the "yes" answers in order of importance.**

**USEFUL? RANK**

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Age-appropriate programs to help young people and staff increase empathy, combat prejudice, and grow intergroup cohesion

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Age-appropriate educational materials to help young people explore how the U.S. became a religiously diverse, free, and tolerant society, and why that is important today

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ A 20-page guidebook for program and activity staff/volunteers with practical strategies for engaging diverse religious and faith-based groups

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Case studies highlighting effective and relevant program models and engagement strategies at other Clubs that serve diverse religious/spiritual communities

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Staff/volunteer training that fosters interfaith understanding and skills through discussion, engagement and self-reflection

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Tools to help staff/volunteers organize events that engage diverse religious/spiritual communities around the shared goal of strengthening the community

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Comments:**

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- 14) Is engagement around religion/spirituality articulated in your organization's strategic plan, diversity & inclusion statement, or other guiding documents?**

Yes

No

Unsure

**Comments:**

- 15) Please describe any programs or services your Clubs currently provide that help create a welcoming, inclusive environment for people of all religious/spiritual identities.**

# APPENDIX B: RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY SURVEY, STAFF/VOLUNTEER VERSION

Boys & Girls Clubs across the nation strive to enhance the lives of young people who need us most by providing an Outcome Driven Club experience that helps them achieve high levels of Academic Success, Good Character and Citizenship and Healthy Lifestyles.

This survey will help Boys & Girls Clubs of America assess needs and potential support for programs that positively engage religious diversity. Please note that when we use the term "religious/spiritual," we are including individuals who practice all types of religions, faiths, spiritualities, and belief systems.

Please complete the survey no later than Wednesday, February 12th, 2014. Should you have any questions or wish to learn more, please contact Julius Lott ([jlott@bgca.org](mailto:jlott@bgca.org))

## 1) Your Boys & Girls Club's Organizational Name:

## 2) Please indicate the religious/spiritual communities that you are aware of that have a presence in your service area.

Agnostic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mainline Protestant	<input type="checkbox"/>
Atheist	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mormon	<input type="checkbox"/>
Buddhist	<input type="checkbox"/>	Hindu	<input type="checkbox"/>
Catholic	<input type="checkbox"/>	Jewish	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evangelical Protestant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Muslim	<input type="checkbox"/>
Historically Black Protestant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nothing in particular	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jehovah's Witness	<input type="checkbox"/>	Orthodox	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Other (list below)	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Comments:**

---



**3) Religious/spiritual diversity is an important issue for the communities your Club serves.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Unsure      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Comments:**

**4) How would you describe religious/spiritual diversity within communities your Clubs serve?**

Major source of cohesion	Somewhat a source of cohesion	Somewhat a source of tension	Major source of tension	I don't know	Other _____
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**Comments:**

**5) I am adequately aware of the key beliefs and practices of the religious/spiritual communities that have a presence in our service area.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Unsure      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Comments:**

**6) I am comfortable having open conversations about religious/spiritual identity with the individuals who are served at the Club.**

Strongly Agree      Agree      Unsure      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

**Comments:**

**7) Have you had experiences in which religious/spiritual diversity was used to bring together members of your community for learning, shared growth, and/or common goals?**

Yes      No

**If yes, please explain:**

**8) Have you had experiences in which an individual was uncomfortable participating in programs or activities at your Clubs due to religious/spiritual identity?**

Yes      No

**If yes, please explain:**

**9) Are you aware of any incidents of young people at your Clubs being teased, bullied, excluded, or otherwise discriminated against because of their religion/spirituality?**

Yes- Three or more      Yes- One or two      No

**Please explain:**

**10) What type(s) of resources would be useful to staff/volunteers who work directly with religious/spiritually diverse groups of young people (ages 12-18)?** Please circle yes or no, and rank the "yes" answers in order of importance.

**USEFUL? RANK**

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Age-appropriate programs to help young people and staff increase empathy, combat prejudice, and grow intergroup cohesion

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Age-appropriate educational materials to help young people explore how the U.S. became a religiously diverse, free, and tolerant society, and why that is important today

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ A 20-page guidebook for program and activity staff/volunteers with practical strategies for engaging diverse religious and faith-based groups

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Case studies highlighting effective and relevant program models and engagement strategies at other Clubs that serve diverse religious/spiritual communities

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Staff/volunteer training that fosters interfaith understanding and skills through discussion, engagement and self-reflection

Y / N \_\_\_\_\_ Tools to help staff/volunteers organize events that engage diverse religious/spiritual communities around the shared goal of strengthening the community

Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Comments:**

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**11) Which of the following best describes your religious/spiritual identity?**

- |                               |                          |                       |                          |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Agnostic                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | Mormon                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Atheist                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | Hindu                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Buddhist                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | Jewish                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Catholic                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | Muslim                | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Evangelical Protestant        | <input type="checkbox"/> | Nothing in particular | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Historically Black Protestant | <input type="checkbox"/> | Orthodox              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Jehovah's Witness             | <input type="checkbox"/> | Other (list below)    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Mainline Protestant           | <input type="checkbox"/> | _____                 |                          |

**Comments:**

**12) Please provide any additional comments on how religious diversity affects the community that your Club serves and any engagement strategies that you would recommend**

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- **Public conferences and events**, which provide a commons for people to share ideas.

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