

Who Am I to Speak?

I must organize a program for area faith leaders to discuss health inequity related to cardiovascular health. The program is primarily targeted towards Christian leaders in African American and Hispanic communities and will be held at a local community housing center. Many of the leaders in attendance have had negative relationships with outside groups coming into their communities and trying to fix problems. As someone who is white, middle-class, and grew up in a wealthy area suburb I present as a figure that is completely opposite to those in their own communities (yet typical of employees at my organization). While I have a high level of experience working with faith leaders of diverse backgrounds, the tenuous history of white “social justice warriors” failing to meet the needs of these communities leaves me wondering if I should be the leader/spokesperson of the event.

Although the program that I work with provides a number of resources for faith communities, we have not done a large event or introduction of our work to area religious leaders. The hope is that this program will make these leaders aware of the work we are doing as well as brainstorm ideas to help us move forward in reducing problems related to cardiovascular health. Such issues are of particular importance in their communities because they are in areas with little-to-no healthy food or recreational space and do not have access to quality healthcare.

Recently, I have been in a number of the city’s multicultural communities listening to the needs of individuals surrounding health, access to care, food, and recreation. I have repeatedly heard stories of large companies or nonprofit groups attempting to create change but often leaving projects unfinished, becoming frustrated with existing structures, or making changes that create larger problems. It is clear that there is a serious cultural divide between those that are trying to help from the outside and those that live within the community. Often, those from the outside come from extremely different racial and economic social locations and do not take time to understand the sociocultural and structural aspects that are in place.

In my past nonprofit work, I have organized and led a number of faith leader lunches such as this; however, they have not targeted specific racial groups (African Americans and Hispanics). While my intentions are good, my outward appearance and my background (upbringing, education, etc.) may create walls. To give this presentation would mean that I, a white woman and representative of one of the country's largest nonprofits, would be standing in front of a group of African American and Hispanic community leaders, telling them about their communities (statistics related to health inequities and how they can be combated) as well as calling for change and suggesting solutions.

Based on a student’s supervised ministry incident. Used with permission.