



September 17th, 2025

**Proposal To:** Commissioner Michelle Long Spears, DeKalb County, District 2

**Funding Request:** \$25,000

**Subject:** Proposal for Building Belonging and Understanding Across Faith Traditions in DeKalb County

Dear Commissioner Long Spears,

Compassionate Atlanta deeply values our collaborative relationship with the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners (BoC.) Together, we have cultivated community connection, trust, and resilience. We now invite the BoC to embark on a new initiative designed to deepen mutual understanding across diverse religious and cultural communities through what we are calling *The Faith & Belonging Community Tour*.

## Why This Matters

DeKalb County is home to a rich tapestry of faith communities, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and more. The BoC vision statement includes "embracing and valuing the diversity of the community." For county commissioners and staff, understanding these traditions is essential—not only for cultural awareness but for equitable governance, safety, and fostering belonging. According to the [DeKalb County School District \(DCSD\)](#), students and parents speak over 166+ languages and represent over 155+ nations highlighting Dekalb's diverse student and parent population. The *Faith & Belonging Community Tour* will enhance the BoC's commitment to inclusivity, cultural development and understanding.

Across the country, and here in Georgia, hate crimes related to religion and cultural identity are on the rise. Residents who feel unsafe, unheard, or misunderstood often lose trust in local systems. It is vital for leaders to understand and respond to these realities, ensuring all constituents feel protected and respected.

## Reducing Prejudice through Contact

Social science research affirms that structured intergroup contact, like visits and dialogue, is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice. Over 500 studies show that face-to-face contact, under the right conditions, significantly reduces stereotyping and discrimination.

## Fostering Tolerance and Empowerment

Interfaith dialogue with adults, especially those in civic or leadership roles, has been shown to foster clarity in personal identity, cultivate spiritual humility, dismantle misconceptions, and strengthen communication across differences. Interfaith learning can shape more empathetic, inclusive, and grounded leadership. Structured engagement, with conversation, reflection, and exposure to others' faiths supports meaningful adult learning and more effective and inclusive leadership.

## Building Trust through Exposure

In educational settings, students from religiously homogeneous backgrounds who were exposed to peers from different religious traditions demonstrated increased trust toward those others. Together, these findings underscore that interfaith engagement builds connection, empathy and trust. These are the foundations essential for civic cohesion.

## Compassionate Atlanta's Interfaith Roots

Compassionate Atlanta is part of the Global Charter for Compassion movement, founded by renowned world religious scholar Karen Armstrong. The Charter centers on the Golden Rule, a principle shared by 21 world religions: *Treat others as you wish to be treated.*

Since our inception, Compassionate Atlanta has been rooted in interfaith collaboration. Our board has included leaders from the Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, and secular communities. Our Co-Directors, Iyabo Onipede and Leanne Rubenstein, model this commitment daily. Iyabo is a Christian leader with an MDiv from Candler School of Theology at Emory University and Leanne is a Jewish professional with a long history of leadership and service in Atlanta's Jewish community. Along with the CA Board Chair, Ikram Ali Mohammed, a member of the Ismaili Muslim community, they embody the interfaith dialogue and collaboration that this initiative seeks to advance.

## Faith & Belonging Community Tour

Compassionate Atlanta will work with our Dekalb County faith community leaders, as well as our partner, Interfaith Atlanta to create a full circle tour with site visits, speakers and hands on experiences. This initiative includes five immersive visits to selected houses of worship across faith traditions, featuring:

- On-Site Learning at diverse religious institutions (e.g., a mosque, temple, church, synagogue, meditation center).
- Guest Speakers offering insights into faith, history, and community concerns.
- Lunchtime Dialogue to foster open, humanizing conversation and mutual appreciation.
- Bus-Based Reflection with facilitators providing brave spaces for reflection, connection, and questions.

Participants will experience enriched learning and relationship-building. While the final list of faith spaces to visit will be determined by discussion with District 2 staff and availability of faith leaders, we are proposing an initial list of houses of worship to discuss. For some religions, we have presented two options as there can be vast differences between two cultural approaches to the same religion.

**Proposed sites to discuss:**

1. **African American Christian** - St. Phillips AME Church, 240 Candler Rd. S.E., Atlanta, GA 30317
2. **Jewish** - Congregation Sherith Israel Synagogue, 1180 University Dr NE • Atlanta, GA 30306
3. **LDS** - The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1947 Brockett Road, Tucker, GA 30084-6428
4. **Orthodox Ethiopian Christian** - Debre Bisrat St Gabriel Ethiopian Orthodox Church, 3518 Clarkston Industrial Blvd, Clarkston, GA 30021
5. **African and Arab Muslim** (70 countries) Masjid El-Monimeem, 837 North Indian Creek Drive, Clarkston, Georgia 30021
6. **South Asian Muslim - Ismail Community** - Headquarters Jamatkhana, 685 Dekalb Industrial Way, Decatur, GA 30033
7. **Hindu** - BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, 460 Rockbridge Road NW Lilburn, GA 30047
8. **American Buddhist** - Shambala 1447 Church St., Decatur, GA 30030
9. **Tibetan Buddhist** - Drepung Loseling Monastery, 1781 Dresden Dr, Atlanta, GA 30319

## Outcomes We Envision

1. Increased empathy and nuanced understanding of DeKalb's faith diversity.
2. Strengthened relationships and trust between county leadership and religious communities.
3. A replicable model of interfaith learning for broader adoption.
4. A public expression of DeKalb County's commitment to protecting, honoring, and including all its residents.

## Proposed Budget & Logistics

- **Total Proposed Budget:** \$25,000 covers planning, coordination, meals, and speaker honoraria.
- **Transportation:** We hope to utilize DeKalb County vehicles, minimizing costs while encouraging team cohesion during transit.

In conclusion, faith traditions are at the heart of many DeKalb residents' lives. Through this program, commissioners and staff will engage meaningfully by learning, listening, and building bridges. Compassionate Atlanta is honored to partner with Commissioner Michelle Long Spears and District 2 in co-creating a more connected, respectful, and compassionate county.

With gratitude,



Leanne Rubenstein  
Co-Executive Director



Iyabo Onipede  
Co-Executive Director