

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Voicing our values: How ‘nones’ can enrich interfaith dialogue

By Katie Gordon

Project manager,
Kaufman Interfaith Institute

When I am supporting and promoting interfaith on college campuses, often the first step I work with student organizers on is developing their voice.

The past three Interfaith Insight articles, written by our outgoing interfaith interns, showed the impact interfaith dialogue can have as it helps define and refine our identities and voices.

By learning about others' beliefs, we have a deeper understanding of our own; by engaging with other spiritual communities, we learn new ways of engaging with our community.

As a millennial, this ongoing search for identity and purpose



Gordon

is something that deeply resonates with me.

Further, to speak more personally as a millennial “none” — meaning someone who does not affiliate with a particular religious tradition or identifies with none at all — I appreciate the way interfaith can further complicate, nuance and enrich my understanding of religion and spirituality.

College campuses are filled with young people like me — millennial “nones” that seem to be taking a new approach to their religious identity.

While there are still plenty of people who identify strongly with a particular belief system or religious community, more and more we see the people who fall on the fringes or outside of those institutions or systems. At the same time, with some people identifying as “spiritual but not religious,” or maybe even melding multiple practices together.

these young people offer a unique voice to be heard at the interfaith table.

So, as millennials are broadening and expanding their identities in such a way that might not fit into clear boxes or categories, how can we in the interfaith community keep up? How can we allow space for intentional interfaith, interreligious dialogue in a way that is inclusive of everyone — whether or not they declare a faith tradition?

PRACTICES TO IMPLEMENT

Here are two practices that, in my time working on college campuses in Grand Rapids and talking with interfaith students from across the country, have come up again and again.

First, focus on values as a shared language. When we talk about values — rather than “faith” or “beliefs” — we open up the conversation to any religious, spiritual or secular understand-

ing that might be present.

The usual go-to interfaith opener is something along the lines of “What faith or religious tradition are you?” or “What tradition are you a part of?” But that might leave some — myself included — unsure what to say.

Imagine if we instead open with the question, “What values do you hold dearest, and what inspires those values?” With this, rather than asking students to put themselves in a box, we don’t assume there is a box at all. We ask questions that invite an expansive sense of identity.

The importance of this value-centered conversation leads to the second practice of inclusive interfaith work on college campuses: putting values into action. If we start by talking about values, we automatically engage in a way that identifies where our shared values lie, and what common action projects we might work on together.

In colleges today, service-learning and civic engagement are more than buzz words; they hit at a deep desire in students: a desire to impact the community around them. Collective action and service projects promote dialogue, relationships and understanding.

As our interfaith efforts continue to work with the college generation of our community, we have a chance not only to bring in new voices, but to enrich our own dialogue and service projects by expanding our sense of who our neighbor is.

We might not all share a belief in the divine or a practice of prayer. But if we hold a desire to share our values with one another — though conversation and service — there is plenty of common ground to work off of to establish a more understanding and connected community.

— Contactinterfaith@gvsu.edu