

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

An interfaith perspective from the life of a student

The realization that everyone's religious path is different and each deserves mutual respect, understanding

By Derek Zuerink
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If someone were to ask me why I do what I do when I started to become involved with interfaith, I would not have been able to answer.

In summer 2014, a friend invited me to attend the Interfaith Leadership Institute through the Interfaith Youth Core.

Not knowing much about interfaith, I decided to see what it was about.

I did not have high expectations — I wanted to keep an open mind. What I found after this confer-

ence is, despite all of the differences between multiple traditions, we have even more things in common. It was, and still is, up to all of us to promote understanding and mutual respect not just in West Michigan, but the world.



Zuerink

At the beginning of my college career at Grand Valley State University, I was actively engaged with my home church. I attended services almost every Sunday, just as I had for my entire life. At the end of my college career, this looks very different. From the surface, it looks like I have become disengaged from the church.

Institutionally, this seems to be a very familiar concept for my generation of millennials. I am able to maintain a relation-

ship with God, despite the fact I rarely attend services anymore. Interfaith understanding has helped me learn that even within my own tradition, things can look very different for everyone. Interfaith is not just the understanding and mutual respect with other traditions, but within our own traditions as well.

As an individual who is involved on my campus outside of the classroom, I have been able to use the tools I've gained through interfaith conferences, and my internship with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, to help make everyone feel included in their student organizations.

Whether it is my own student organization, or a student organization needing help, I have been an educator for the past two years as an interfaith advocate.

With some student organizations that have more than

100 members, there certainly will be differences among those in the group.

With a willingness to learn, we can make a difference in the lives of those who feel excluded in these organizations, and the positive impact made can spread to the entire community.

As a student working to achieve my degree in marketing and management, I know in the future, I will face so much more diversity in the world than what I have experienced in West Michigan.

Interfaith has helped prepare me for that world.

With identity being an incredibly important aspect to so many people, I feel I am prepared to have professional conversations where I can learn from others, and I can grow as an individual as a result.

Looking back at the past four years, I've had so many experienc-

es that make me who I am today.

Becoming engaged in the interfaith movement has helped me make an impact in the community I care about and has helped me shape my future — the same future I share with my fellow Christians, and the same future I share with my friends and strangers of other traditions.

It has certainly been a journey thus far, and what a journey it will continue to be.

If someone were to ask me why I do what I do, I can now respond with an answer. I have seen firsthand just what happens when you sit down next to someone who is different from you. I have seen the blossoming of friendships, trials, victories, hope, and so much more, in this broken, yet beautiful world.

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