

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Creating space to listen while growing in understanding

By Meghan Bogema

Interfaith intern at Calvin College

This past academic year I had the privilege of working with the Kaufman Interfaith Institute as the interfaith intern at Calvin College, promoting interfaith dialogue, education, and service-learning on Calvin's campus.

This unique opportunity initially filled me with excitement and curiosity, for I previously had little interaction with the diverse religious communities in Grand Rapids.

After only a month of interning, I quickly found that my stereotypes and biases toward religious minorities were being dismantled.

During my undergraduate

experience at Calvin, I was pushed to think critically about my Christian identity and how my race, gender and sexual orientation intersect to form my worldview.

I found that engaging with other cultures, religions and diverse communities continuously informed and reshaped my worldview. Through storytelling and interfaith dialogue, I was reminded that every person — whether Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh or Christian — brings a layered identity and complexity to the table. The concept of intersectionality allows me to share my experience as a young, white woman in the church and be known holistically for who I am.

Given my religious and racial privilege in the United States, I acknowledge it is especially important for me to engage in

interfaith discussions.

By forming relationships, listening to stories and humbly learning about other religious traditions, it is apparent to me that peace, hospitality, love of neighbor and similar themes are shared across religions.

INTERFAITH RELATIONSHIPS ARE VITAL

In the wake of terrorist attacks, mass shootings and evil across the world, it is vital that we form interfaith relationships. These relationships allow us to resist hate, including Islamophobia, and instead embrace our peaceful Muslim brothers and sisters.

This past spring, the Plaster Creek Stewards and the Masjid At-Tawheed Islamic Center partnered to host an educational event that explored the history of the Plaster Creek watershed.

This newly formed relationship began in August when the Plaster Creek Stewards installed a rain garden at the Islamic Center. In return, the Islamic Center graciously gave visitors a tour of the mosque, provided delicious food and answered questions regarding Muslim traditions. The event was fruitful and educational. As I reflect on my experience there, I immediately think of hospitality and grace.

My stomach dropped when I heard about the July 3 terrorist attack in Baghdad and I felt outrage, sorrow and devastation. My interactions with the Muslim community in Grand Rapids made the news feel more acute.

I was struck by The New York Times article, "After Attacks on Muslims, Many Ask: Where Is the Outpouring?" I found truth and frustration in the article's

statement:

"This is not the first time that the West seems to have shrugged off massacres in predominantly Muslim countries. But the relative indifference after so many deaths caused by the very groups that have plagued the West is more than a matter of hurt feelings."

This year, as an interfaith intern, I learned how important interfaith relationships are. They allow for differing religious communities to mourn and grieve together; they create space for listening and support in times of need and paralyzing terror.

I am thankful for my exposure to the religious communities in Grand Rapids and how they have expanded my worldview, understanding of diverse traditions, and compassion for my neighbors here and around the world.

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