On a local level, we are very fortunate. Our own Interfaith Dialogue Association Speaker’s Bureau brings different faith and non-faith leaders into West Michigan’s classrooms and welcomes teachers and their classes to visit centers of worship. Several of our local schools have developed extracurricular clubs, focusing on areas of culture, diversity, engagement, social justice and service where this kind of learning is occurring. Even youth groups of different congregations partner on service projects and site visits as a way for young leaders to connect to make our world a better place.

The Kaufman Institute’s agenda of promoting interfaith understanding and mutual respect has been exploring how to be a catalyst for helping middle and high school leaders shape the way ahead. How might we empower young people in West Michigan? How might we allow them to lead and shape the interfaith conversation into the future?

PERSONAL STORIES OF FAITH
Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur’s book, “Building the Interfaith Youth Movement,” shares the story of a program established in metropolitan Washington. They occasionally hold dialogues with their high school students titled “Why I Love to Be ...” This is “an informal opportunity for teens to get together over pizza for a heart-to-heart conversation about their faith.” The conversation stresses the positive aspects of all of our faith traditions. This is not a forum for debate about the politics of our religions; nor is it an academic exercise more appropriate for a classroom. Rather, it is an opportunity for the young people to tell their own story about what they love about being Sikh, Muslim, Unitarian Universalist, etc.”

These spaces provide a fruitful environment empowering young people to ask good questions, elevating their voices and stories and giving them tools to lead and shape the next chapter of the interfaith conversation.

Kaufman Institute, in partnership with Kent Career Tech Center, is launching a Youth Interfaith Service Day Camp in Grand Rapids for students grades eight through 11, led by interfaith counselors/facilitators. The group will spend four days engaging with local centers of worship and service organizations building new friendships, learning about other worldviews and cultures, and serving alongside people who are doing incredible work in our community. The hope is that, out of this week, we will form a Youth Interfaith Council so that middle and high school voices also have a place at the interfaith table as Kaufman looks to the future.

We believe middle and high school students are the next generation of interfaith leaders who offer the world a rich perspective and energy. They have a longing to lead in the work of dismantling bias, fear and hate in order that our schools and communities may become places where everyone is valued, respected, and loved.

Their young voices will be heard. Are we ready to listen?

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