

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# ‘Their young voices will be heard’

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“Change is coming. And it starts now, inspired by and led by the kids who are our hope for the future. Their young voices will be heard.”

These powerful words ring within the mission statement of March for Our Lives.

These prophetic words also illumine for us the eagerness and potential of young people, across cultures, identities and worldviews, to take a stand for the sake of ensuring widespread change.

In this season, our national ear turns toward those “kids who are our hope for the future.” Their voices, along with those of their peers here in West Michigan, are finding platforms to share their dreams for a better world. They are looking to lead us. And what potential they have!

A new study put out by the Aspen Institute’s Justice and Society Program, “Pluralism in Peril,” notes that as of fall 2017, the U.S. had nearly 56 million students in K-12 education — our future learners and leaders! If all of these students had access to the same level of training in engagement, leadership, public speaking, organizing, etc. as did the students behind many of the movements we are witnessing, the future of interfaith cooperation would be in good shape.

However, when we consider what students are learning regarding other cultures



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or worldviews, especially regarding religious literacy, we also must recognize there are some barriers. The study notes, “There is a hesitancy ... because of concerns about the constitutionality and potential discomfort of teaching religious literacy in a public setting.”

In a sense, this concern relates to the familiarity and comfort level of teachers themselves. As the study goes on to say, “One of the greatest challenges of offering instruction about religion in America’s classrooms (or in any environment) is a lack of religious literacy and preparedness with religious-studies-specific pedagogies on the part of teachers themselves.”

While we are certainly mindful of other factors, such as limited staffing, time, funding and resources facing our schools, we acknowledge there is work to be done.

#### LOCAL ENGAGEMENT WITH SCHOOLS

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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