

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Fostering understanding at local college campuses

Kevin McIntosh

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As part of Kaufman Interfaith Institute's commitment to engaging the next generation of interfaith leaders, we have worked with four colleges in the area to create an inter-institutional, interfaith intern cohort. These students, from Hope College, Aquinas College, Calvin College and Grand Valley State University, are the champions of interfaith on their campuses. In this past year, these four students worked together to plan an interfaith leadership conference, have brought their classmates to numerous sacred sites, hosted panels and workshops, and have worked to make their campuses more knowledgeable of various religious, secular and spiritual traditions in the West Michigan area.

Eboo Patel, the founder and president of the Interfaith Youth Core, writes that "religion should be a bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division," and that colleges should be the breeding grounds of a new generation of interfaith leaders. Our interns are a part of this growing interfaith movement and have all been amazing partners for me as we think about how we build an interfaith movement.

Manato Jansen, a junior at Calvin College studying sociology, international development studies and geography, is the interfaith intern at Calvin. As part of his role at the Service-Learning Center, he wrote the following end-of-year reflection about why he does interfaith.



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This semester, our interfaith program focused heavily on site visits, starting with our "Meet Your Sikh Neighbor" dinner event in Ada. We made several visits to our local masjid (mosque) and synagogue, as well as a handful of lecture and dialogue events with representatives from the Hindu temple and LDS church. We ended our semester with an on-campus dinner and lecture event on Islam and hospitality, with special guest Justin Meyers, of the Al Amana Centre in Muscat, Oman.

While the general response to interfaith work has been positive among Calvin students and faculty, others remain wary and concerned. So why do we pursue interfaith work at Calvin's Service-Learning Center?

As a Christian, my faith is central, personal and deeply rooted, shaping how I live my life, the decisions that I make every day and how I view the world. What we often easily forget is that this experience is the same for the millions of people of other faith traditions. Interfaith work involves sensitive and difficult dialogue. Christians need to be equipped to understand the traditions and core beliefs of



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Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists and others, in order to truly love them.

Why? Because Christians are not the only ones who experience the "sensus divinitatis" — the sense of the divine — and we should learn about the beliefs that others value deeply. We also think this is important because with a simple glance at the Bible, we see that Jesus broke down walls, whether talking with a Samaritan woman (John 4) or sharing meals with the social rejects of society (Mark 2:13-17), regardless of their ethnic, social or religious identities. Jesus' new, radical teachings should be considered in our current context as well.

To debunk a common misconception of interfaith work, we are not trying to merge and morph our religions together into one universal comfort zone of a diluted, blase, broad mega-faith. Instead, we value the importance of recognizing the diversity around us, and strive to expose people to those of other faith traditions, with whom they would rarely come in contact otherwise. In addition to exposure, we strive to engage in often sensitive and difficult dialogue with people who think differently from us.

One of my experiences of a difficult conversation was while facilitating a table discussion at an interfaith community dinner in mid-March. One of the attendees was visibly upset with the conversation taking place. Fuming, he pointed at me and questioned, "If Calvin College was founded and rooted in core Christian principles, why would they hire you to dilute that?" The man also ranted later about how he doesn't see the problem with segregated neighborhoods, with "whites living with whites" and "Hispanics living with Hispanics."

While his remarks left me speechless for a few moments, I realized that I was glad that he was there. These are precisely the people with whom we need to be especially engaging in dialogue: those who don't want to connect with others, those who don't see the necessity of engaging in interfaith and interracial dialogue. While it's absolutely great for interfaith events to be filled with people who love and support interfaith work, what good is the interfaith community if it doesn't extend beyond its safe bubble and engage in difficult conversations with those who are against our cause? It was through this event that I realized interfaith work, if not done well, can become its own bubble that disregards those who don't agree with this work.

It has been an encouraging and exciting year for interfaith work at Calvin. As we continue to pursue this work on campus, we will continue to learn from and reach out to "the other" through our relationships with them, pushing back against the ill-informed hatred that has no place in our community, state, country and world.

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