

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

A generation shift: Listening to today's college students

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One of the great singers in America opened her beloved song "Greatest Love of All" with the line, "I believe the children are our future." While I agree with Whitney Houston, I also think that this next generation is our present.

In my role as the campus engagement manager at Kaufman Interfaith Institute and the coordinator of campus interfaith resources at Grand Valley State University, I have the privilege and honor of working with the next generation of leaders every day. I get asked a lot about why I decided to work with college students, and the reason is that they inspire me every day.

College students push us to be and do better. They push back against structural inequalities that seek to separate us rather than unite us. In my four years working in higher education, I've thought more about my own role in creating a socially just world than I did in my undergraduate or graduate program, due to the conversations I've had with some of our student leaders.

I'm reminded constantly that, as Eboo Patel puts it, colleges are civic laboratories with people of different races, genders, sexual orientations and, yes, even worldviews, living together in close proximity. I'm reminded that conversations of power, privilege and so much more are happening in the classrooms, but also residence halls, cafeterias, gyms and on the quad. I believe that we should listen to the next generation and use their drive and passion to help us.

Students strive to build bridges of cooperation instead of barriers of division. Since 2011, there has been a research project called the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey, or IDEALS. This survey has asked about 20,000 students at more than 100 diverse schools about their views on religion, secularism, spirituality and interfaith.

In this study, researchers discovered that "two-thirds or more of the IDEALS cohort told us how important it is to them to have opportunities to get to know students of other religious and nonreligious perspectives, opportunities to participate in community service with students of diverse religious and nonreligious perspectives, and the chance to take courses and participate in educational programs to help them learn about different religious traditions around the world."

Interfaith student organizations across the country are hosting community service events, interfaith panels and other forms of demonstrations to show the world that they are better together than divided. Each year, the Interfaith Youth Core hosts hundreds of young people ready to develop and gain interfaith skills that will help them in the future.

We are hearing from young people who use their worldviews to push for clean water, transformed tragedies into moments of reconciliation and create interfaith councils in their communities. While we might lump millennials and Gen Z as the next generation, I'm reminded time and time again that the next generation is our present.

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES

These interfaith leaders teach us how to build bridges. It might come from someone like Alley LoPrete, a senior at Hope College, who so wanted to talk about interfaith that she helped start the interfaith student group at Hope. She continued her drive to do interfaith work by studying in the country of Oman, where she actively looked at Christian-Muslim dialogue. In her time there, she continued to think about how to authentically live in a pluralistic society.

Or, it could be someone like Allie Egrin who, as the president of Hillel at Grand Val-



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IF YOU GO

Abrahamic Dinner

Theme: "Listening to New Voices: The Next Generation Speaks"

When: 6 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 20

Where: St Nicholas Orthodox Church, 2250 E. Paris Ave. SE

Information and registration: interfaithunderstanding.org

ley State University, decided she wanted her organization to respond to the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh. So they sponsored an interfaith Shabbat dinner where people from different traditions could learn more about Judaism. She reached out to Muslims, evangelical Christians, secular humanists and many more, and together they broke bread and learned more about one another so that they could curtail religious oppression at their school.

It could be someone like Tuba Jaherun, a sophomore at Calvin College and one of a few Muslim students at this Christian Reformed college. Recently at an interfaith panel, she spoke out and explained what it meant to be a member of a minority faith at a Christian school. Tuba spoke about trying to carve time out to pray, struggling to find halal food and some of the other challenges and opportunities she has had there.

Time and time again, these students, and many others I work with, have such insight to learn from. I know that the West Michigan and international interfaith community are in amazing hands with folks like them as leaders.

The Kaufman Interfaith Institute's mission is to go beyond tolerance, towards radical hospitality, understanding, respect and acceptance. I truly believe listening to our college students will help us towards this vision.

It could be, in the words of Tuba, that we shouldn't "make someone feel less than you because they are different." Or it could be the words of Allie at the GVSU Tree of Life vigil, where she shared what she told her Sunday school students: "they should be proud of their heritage, have pride in who they are, love their neighbor and fill the world with love." Or in the words of Alley at Hope, when she writes that great interfaith programs help find the "peace amongst university students and the community around them, and teach them to find the same wherever they go."

These college students already know that we need to move from a stage of tolerance to a stage of acceptance. I'm so excited that these three remarkable women will be sharing their insights with us in a couple of weeks at our Abrahamic Dinner. It is a fitting event to celebrate and honor these young leaders.

In our diverse religious, spiritual and secular traditions, we have numerous examples of the next generation leading us. My question to you is, will we listen to them once again?

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