

Dialogue for understanding

Interfaith conversation group helps young people learn about diverse religions

Stories by Jeannette Greven, 17; Christine Beyer, 17; and Chelsea Peterson, 16

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Youth from several schools in Indianapolis representing mosques, synagogues and churches are gathering regularly at each other's schools to talk and learn more about diverse faiths.

The program is part of the International Interfaith Initiative based in Indianapolis and is an extension of "Bridging the Gap," an adult interfaith conversation group in the city.

The youth program involves mostly eighth-graders and is a collaborative effort of community groups including the Center for Urban and Multicultural Education at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and the Peace Learning Center.

The safe environment of the youth events has allowed the kids to "broaden their ideas of each religion," says Levi Vonnegut-Gabovitch, a 14-year-old Jewish participant who is a student at The Hasten Hebrew Academy of Indianapolis and a member of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck.

"Before I came to youth dialogue, I thought I knew a lot about other religions," says Zoe Turi, 14, a Catholic who attends St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church and School.

"But now I see other religions in a whole different way because my friends here explained them to me firsthand because they've been around their religions their whole lives."

In addition to St. Thomas and the Hebrew Academy, other schools in the program include Indianapolis Public Schools' School 91, a Montessori public school; School of Knowledge, a private Muslim school; and The Oaks Academy, a diverse private Christian school.

The schools take turns hosting meetings. The hosts decide on a topic that impacts faith and society.

Wafa Zyadah, 14, a Muslim who attends the School of Knowledge, says that teaching her peers about her faith has helped her to learn how to "really communicate with other people from different religions."

Maryam Muhammad, 13, a Muslim also at the School of Knowledge, says she learned much from other students about Christmas and Christianity and the celebration of the birth of Christ.

Many students have found the forums to be an excellent way to provide new perspective on their own faith.

Zakarya Mitiche, 13, has tried to clear up misunderstandings about Islam.

"The media says a lot of things about some religions that aren't necessarily true," says the School of Knowledge student.

"And sometimes they base the whole group of people on one person's actions."

The youth hope their experiences will be helpful later in life.

"Down the road when I meet people of new different faiths again, I hope to better understand the way they think," says Zoe.

For more information, call youth program coordinator Charlie Wiles at (317) 466-0114.

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