

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim teens come together in interfaith conference

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A discussion led by Kids4Peace leaders.

Are we growing up in an age of intolerance? This was the question posed by middle school and high school students at an interfaith conference held March 8 at Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College in Newton. Organized by the international group Kids4Peace, the conference, held for the first time this year, brought together Christian, Jewish, and Muslim teens from the Boston area for a day of dialogue. "There is an active interfaith effort in Boston," said Peggy Stevens, program director for Kids4Peace Boston. "But as far as I know, there is no youth-oriented interfaith movement. Since they're the next generation, it seemed like a good idea to have this conference."

Founded in Jerusalem in 2002, Kids4Peace is an interfaith community of more than 1,800 Israeli, Palestinian and North American members. There is one chapter of the organization in Jerusalem, and nine chapters throughout North America, including one in Boston. One chapter is currently being formed in Lyon, France.

Children may join Kids4Peace at the age of 12 and, over the course of six years, until they graduate from high school, the organization provides a summer camp and year-round educational programs focused on interfaith dialogue, community-building, leadership development, and nonviolent action.

"The reason we believe it's important to start at 12 is because that's when they're old enough to have their own opinions, but also young enough to be able to play together," said Stevens. "So they're not as tied up in all the complicated issues that we adults know. In some ways kids can be naïve, but in other ways, they have this youthful exuberance and a willingness to try new things." In 2009, Stevens, then a director of program development for the American Youth Foundation, visited Kids4Peace Jerusalem while on a tour with her Boston area women's interfaith book group. When Stevens returned to Boston, she launched a local chapter two years later, with a group of Muslim, Christian and Jewish volunteers.

Kids4Peace ninth- and tenth-graders planned the conference and opened participation to other students their age, who were invited through their churches, synagogues, and mosques. The goals of the 4-hour conference included building friendships, engaging in dialogue about religious intolerance in the United States, and participating in one workshop.

Students could choose from nine different workshops that varied from "An Introduction to Hebrew and Arabic," to "What we can learn about others' religions through sacred objects and clothing," and "The Israeli/Palestinian Conflict: Two Perspectives." The students themselves led some of the workshops, while other instructors included fellows of different faiths from the Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE) of Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College.

It was important to make friendship one of the goals of the conference because, "depending on where you go to school, you may or may not know kids of other faiths," Stevens said. For instance, many students of Jewish day schools like Maimonides School and Gann Academy, do not have opportunities to regularly interact with Christian and Muslim peers, while some of the public school students from Dorchester and Roxbury have never met Jews in their schools.

"At Kids4 Peace, we like to see religion as a uniter, not a divider. It's so often perceived as a divider," Stevens said. "Our goal is for young people to be strong in their own religion. We don't try on each other's faith practices. We respectfully observe and learn, and we look for similarities and appreciate differences."

After an introductory session, participants heard from journalist Linda K. Wertheimer [not of National Public Radio], author of *Faith Ed: Teaching Religion in an Age of Intolerance*. Wertheimer traveled around the United States, documenting controversies about religion in schools. She presented one of the cases she had encountered, which posed a problem of what kind of a speaker to invite to speak about religion to a world history class. "Whose views do you get to hear," Stevens said. "Do you invite clergy people, college professors, or community members? In all religions, there is a wide variety in people's practices, so whose version of Christianity or Judaism do you hear? That was the controversy." The students then broke into groups to discuss this dilemma.

"We try to look at the ways that religion can unite us. All kids who are active about religion, come from families where parents care about religion," Stevens said. "And that's what they have in common. The families all prioritize religion; otherwise they wouldn't send their kids to a program like Kids4Peace."

Visit www.kids4peaceboston.org to learn more.