

American Muslim Models Interfaith Group on Peace Corps

By Susan Logue
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Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core

As a Muslim American, Eboo Patel takes to heart the line in Sura 49 of the Koran, which says, "God made us different nations and tribes that we may come to know one another." Through his [Interfaith Youth Core](#), which is based in Chicago, he seeks to counter the violent religious strife that fills our daily newscasts with news instead of young people of different faiths working side-by-side, building houses for the homeless, or tutoring refugee children.

Patel was born in 1975 to Indian parents, and emigrated with them from Bombay to Chicago when he was an infant. He grew up with friends of different religious backgrounds, and at the age of 12 or 13 became more aware of those differences. "I found myself asking 'What does it mean to be a Muslim when your friends are a Hindu, a Jew, a Nigerian evangelical, a Mormon, a Lutheran, a Catholic, what does that mean?'"

As he and his friends became older, Patel says they began to have more serious discussions regarding religion. But his idea for an Interfaith Youth Core, which was inspired by other service organizations like the Peace Corps, didn't develop until he was a graduate student at Oxford University in England, where, as a Rhodes scholar, Patel received a doctorate in sociology of religion.

Patel says the first service projects of the Interfaith Youth Core, conducted while he was still a student, took place in South Africa, Kenya, Sri Lanka and India. They were, he says, all great learning experiences. "I studied the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka. I learned about Ubuntu from African traditionalists in South Africa. I helped run an interfaith service learning project with Habitat for Humanity in Hyderabad, India."

In 2002, he returned to Chicago, and with a grant from the Ford Foundation, established a permanent home base for the Interfaith Youth Core.

"The basic idea of the Interfaith Youth Core is young people from different religions should be volunteering together, cleaning rivers, tutoring children, building houses," Patel says. "They should use that as an entrée into having a conversation about how their different religions inspire them

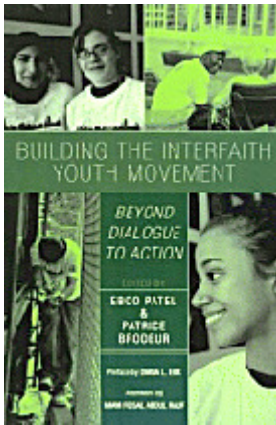
to serve others."

The founder and executive director of the group says he chose to use the word "core" instead of "corps" in the name, "because we in Chicago see ourselves as simply the core of a growing global movement."

In 2006, the Interfaith Youth Core, which has worked with refugees and the homeless in Chicago, did go global, participating in an exchange with young interfaith leaders in Jordan.



Mariah Neuroth (left) leads the Monday afternoon meetings of the Interfaith Youth Core



Eboo Patel co-edited 'Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action'

Last year was a big year for Eboo Patel in other ways as well. He participated in the Clinton Global Initiative on Mitigating Religious and Ethnic Conflict and co-edited a book, *Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action*.

"People are realizing that this issue of interfaith cooperation, it matters in a huge way," says Patel, who believes that the most divisive issue in the 21st century will be religion, or as he puts it, "the faith line."

"But the faith line doesn't divide Christians and Muslims, Jews and Buddhists. The faith line divides religious totalitarians and religious pluralists." Patel defines religious totalitarians as those who condemn every religion other than their own. At their most extreme, religious totalitarians, like the suicide bombers of today, will kill anyone who doesn't share their beliefs.

On the other side, Patel says, are the religious pluralists. They are also deeply religious, he says but understand that others' ways of believing are right for them. They want to cultivate a sense of understanding and cooperation, and Patel says, "want to figure out how you and I, Christian and Muslim, Jew and Buddhist, Baha'i and Hindu, how we can collectively serve the common good."

In a world rocked by sectarian religious strife, that is a significant challenge for Eboo Patel and his campaign for religious pluralism.

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