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## Group for youth was a response to violence

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As a college student, Eboo Patel was dismayed as he looked around the world and saw young people of different faiths fighting and killing each other.

He was saddened that so few young people attended international conferences that brought together people of various faiths to talk about peace.

Patel and other like-minded young adults founded the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core in 1998. Patel, 31, is executive director. He has a doctorate in the sociology of religion from Oxford University.

Much of the nonprofit group's work involves training grassroots groups to engage youth in interfaith communication. More than 770 organizers trained by IFYC now lead their own interfaith youth service branches on five continents. They've reached more than 10,000 young people.

The IFYC also supports local efforts to further youth interfaith interaction. It works with 40 different faith communities and six universities in the Chicago area.

Thousands of youth have participated. One particular program is the Chicago Youth Core, a group of high school students from different faiths who meet weekly to develop leadership skills and organize social-action programs in their communities.

Tariq Weaver, 16, says his CYC participation has helped him learn about who he is. Now he asks questions, such as: "What am I doing wrong in my religion? What can I do right to help me be a better Muslim?"

It's also helped him clear up misconceptions about his spiritual identity.

"Since I'm African-American and I'm Muslim, a lot of people think that I might be with the Nation of Islam, but I'm not with the Nation of Islam," he says. "I'm a Sunni Muslim."

Talking and having fun with people of different backgrounds is the best part of the Interfaith Youth Core, says CYC member Cassandra Kildow, 18.

"We talk about what people do when they go to mosque, what Ramadan is (the most blessed month of the Islamic year filled with fasting, charity work, praying and celebrating) or different Buddhist changes," she says.

Mariah Neuroth, senior director of leader cultivation for IFYC, has been a lifelong believer in the value of interfaith dialogue. She wishes she could have joined a group like this as a teen.

"I oftentimes felt like I had to leave my spirituality at the door, and the Interfaith Youth Core helps people to find a way to represent their whole self at any time," says Neuroth, 27. "And that was -- and is -- really important to me as a young Christian."

Patel was also called to found the IFYC in response to the violence and bigotry he has witnessed.

For example, in his high school, Patel recalls that thugs scrawled anti-Semitic words on desks and shouted them at his Jewish friend. Patel did nothing to stop the hatefulness that hurt his friend, and he still regrets it.

"I realize now that to believe in pluralism means I need the courage to act on it," says Patel in a commentary for National Public Radio. "Action is what separates a belief from an

opinion."

The IFYC also coordinates service projects, such as today's annual National Days of Interfaith Youth Service.