Students immersed in faith, peace, and justice in Northeast India

Dialogue that Transforms
Dr. Omar teaches stories of interfaith dialogue page 3

Educating for Peace
Peace Works program serves Milwaukee youth page 6

Answering the Call
Mission Week highlights partnership with CRS page 7
This January marked the seventh anniversary of when we first opened the Center for Peacemaking’s doors. I can remember the buzz across campus and in the community when this news was announced. Students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members quickly came together to support our mission emphasizing the formation of faith-based peacemakers at Marquette.

Now, more than seven years later, there is a renewed buzz throughout campus and the community. Because of your support, what started as an experiment has developed into a model of excellence. The Center for Peacemaking’s expertise is sought after to make Milwaukee’s Near West Side a more safe and desirable place to live and work; principals call our office to request for the Peace Works program to be implemented at their schools; and our students and graduates inspire others by pursuing careers that promote human dignity.

The following articles highlight some of the many ways that we are forming students to be faith-based peacemakers. It happens through classes and research as Dr. Omar shows us. It happens through international immersion opportunities like the delegation that travelled to India over spring break. It happens through events like Mission Week and partnerships like ours with Catholic Relief Services.

And most importantly it happens because of you. It happens because of the values that you hold and that you want to see passed on to a new generation of students.

Thank you for who you are and for the work that you fund and inspire us to pursue.

Patrick Kennelly

The Center for Peacemaking Team

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As a young college student in India, Dr. Irfan Omar participated in an interreligious dialogue program that has shaped the course of his life. Now an associate professor of theology at Marquette, he sparks conversation in his world religions classes by asking his students some of the same questions that were formative for him.

The question Omar is most passionate about is “How can we use interrelationships across religious traditions to create peace today?”

To answer this question he is especially interested in researching stories that provide examples of interreligious dialogue as a tool for spiritual growth and personal transformation. Through these stories students connect with and learn from powerful examples of religious teachings put into action.

The story that has been resonating most with his students this semester comes from the Middle Ages. It is the story of St. Francis of Assisi’s journey to Egypt and encounter with King Malik al-Kamil during the fifth crusade in 1219.

Omar has long been interested in the potential of this story to be interpreted in a way that can connect people of different faiths, different cultures, and different sides of conflict. He finally had the opportunity to research this story when he was awarded a Rynne Faculty Peacemaking Fellowship which is available because of donors like you. Now students are learning anew from this centuries old encounter you helped bring back to life.

St. Francis travelled to Egypt with the intention of meeting with the king. In an event unheard of in the time of the crusades, Francis was invited to stay as the king’s guest for a week. Both Francis and al-Malik walked away from this experience transformed. They learned about each other and acted in ways which we define as peace-making.

Francis was moved by the Muslim spiritual practices he saw and al-Malik was moved by Francis’ courage. By 1229 al-Malik successfully negotiated a peace agreement with Frederick II.

Omar believes that investing in these types of relatively unknown interreligious narratives give students courage to dialogue with people who have different beliefs. The benefits of analyzing these types of stories are valuable to students in any major and can extend beyond the classroom. He said, “These stories can help you in whatever discipline or field of work you are in. These stories can help you be a bridge-builder, a peacemaker, and a good leader.”

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Because of donors like you students are learning anew from the story of a centuries old encounter between St. Francis of Assisi and King Malik al-Kamil.
Over spring break I traveled to Northeast India to spend a week learning about faith-based peacemaking with the community of Jesuits there. Travelling with me was a group that included Center for Peacemaking director, Patrick Kennelly, Center for Peacemaking board member, Fr. Daniel Hendrickson, S.J., Dean of Students, Dr. Stephanie Quade, and fellow Marquette student, Wyatt Massey.

We had two main goals while in India. First, to learn about faith-based peacemaking from the Jesuits. Second, to explore the potential for a partnership that will facilitate a sharing of peacemaking expertise and resources between Marquette and the Jesuits in Northeast India. The trip was successful on both accounts as we were impressed with the faith-based peacemaking projects the Jesuits are leading and there is great potential for a larger partnership.

Northeast India is an area of rich diversity as it consists of predominantly tribal populations and represents the convergence of the Indo-Malayan, Indo-Chinese, and Indian ethnic and cultural traditions. Due to exploitation and a lack of development, the region is marred by poverty, massive unemployment, land grabbing, and other challenges.

Feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment have intensified into ethnic conflict by insurgent groups and security forces, as well as criminal acts by anti-social forces. Because these economic, cultural, and political issues have not been addressed, violence has become an ever present reality.
The Kohomia Province of the Society of Jesus (a sister province of the Wisconsin Province of the Society of Jesus) is responding to the urgent need to address the cycle of violence that has engulfed Northeast Indian society. The Jesuits are devising ways to systemically promote peace in the region.

Two of the projects we visited were particularly impressive and made the trip especially impactful.

The Kohomia Jesuits based in Assam comprise a team of scholar-practitioners with expertise ranging from education to law to economics. They created the North Eastern Social Research Centre (NESRC) to work for systemic change by influencing all levels of society.

During our visit to the NESRC, we met experts in peace education who tailor their lessons with content that weans youth away from the path of violence; we met legal experts who try human rights cases and equip paralegals with the legal skills to protect community members; and we met economic experts who provide audits of the national budget and advocate for the rights of children and indigenous persons in this process.

Wyatt said that one important thing he learned was how the NESRC approaches systemic change by using “the Jesuit models for education and legal protection that seek to empower without imposing.”

The Jesuits are also involved in the Shalom Meghalaya peace movement in the Garo Hills region where insurgent groups vie for power and authority among tribes. Here the Jesuits are using their status as religious leaders to spread a message of peace.

The Jesuits knew from the many conversations they had with people living in Garo Hills that there is a collective desire for peace. In response they have helped civilians organize rallies, facilitate conversations with leaders, and affirm their dignity in the face of violence.

Wyatt had this to say of Shalom Meghalaya, “Meeting Jesuits committed to an area where their lives are at risk in order to bridge such divides was inspiring. [In Garo Hills] the ideal of cura personalis, caring for the entire person, is held above all else.”

As we work to finalize what this partnership will look like moving forward, we are very excited about its potential.

I am thankful that the Center for Peacemaking has supporters like you who value providing experiences that form and inspire students like me to become faith-based peacemakers.

Meeting Jesuits committed to an area where their lives are at risk in order to bridge such divides was inspiring. Thank you for the experience of a lifetime! ~Wyatt (Comm ’16)

I am thankful that the Center for Peacemaking has donors like you who value providing experiences that form and inspire students like me to become faith-based peacemakers. ~Allison (Arts ’17)
At first glance, it might just look like fun and games in the office, but when the ten Peace Works student-workers gather at the Center for Peacemaking each week, what they’re really doing is preparing to lead after school activities that teach local youth peacemaking and conflict resolution skills.

The Peace Works program utilizes a curriculum of games, interactive exercises, and group reflection to increase young people's capacity to identify and resolve conflicts nonviolently. Each week, the undergraduate students we have hired as Nonviolence Educators go to after school programs across Milwaukee to lead these activities.

Bridget Land, a freshman in the College of Education, sees working for Peace Works as an opportunity to supply youth with the skills and tools they need to achieve success at home, at school, and in the community. Through Peace Works, students build skills such as positive communication, active listening, mediation, self-reflection, self-centering, and problem-solving.

Bridget recalls her most memorable moment from this semester happening during a lesson about the difference between sympathy and empathy at Notre Dame Middle School. During the lesson, one of the girls in her class shared a story about her grandfather who recently passed away. As Bridget describes, “She burst into tears in the middle of the classroom. Many of the girls got up from their chairs right away and were hugging her and telling her it was okay to cry.”

This moment was significant for two reasons. First because it was the first time that the girl felt it was okay to be vulnerable in front of her peers. Second, she felt immediate affirmation when her classmates responded by giving hugs and showing support. Bridget was then able to use this interaction as an example of the difference between sympathy and empathy.

Peace Works is specifically designed so that it resonates with the lived experiences of Peace Works youth. This is one of the reasons why Peace Works consistently receives positive reviews from students. A common sentiment expressed on surveys is, “I like Peace Works because we get to talk about things that actually matter.”

As Land expresses, “Peace Works is an amazing program and I am so honored to be a part of it... my students are learning important life lessons.”
For a week in February, global experts from Catholic Relief Services (CRS) convened at Marquette to share how knowledge and research can be used to serve the poorest of the poor and address the world’s greatest challenges.

Dr. Carolyn Woo, President and CEO of CRS, delivered an address that set the tone for the week. First and foremost, she challenged students to use the tools and privileges that a university education provides.

Woo said, “Have big dreams for the big problems in the world.” She encouraged students to not turn away from complex issues, but rather to ask the question, “How do I want to be a part of this world?”

Throughout the week we explored this question through a wide range of activities. More than 250 students gathered to pack 25,000 meals that were sent to Burkina Faso through CRS’ Helping Hands project. Students, staff, and community members participated in interfaith dialogue dinners focusing on the topics of charity and service. Students joined community leaders and organizations for a conference on how to use social innovation to address racism and discrimination in Milwaukee.

The most powerful part of the week was having global experts from CRS spread their passion across campus by visiting classrooms, giving presentations, and meeting with individual students and faculty. Two of CRS’ key leaders, Dr. Mwayabo Jean Claude Kazadi (HIV Care and Treatment) and Vanessa Tobin (Water Supply and Sanitation) participated in a panel discussion to conclude the week’s activities.

Dr. Michael Lovell, President of Marquette University, expressed his appreciation for CRS’ work, saying that, “CRS is a witness to how we can respond to our neighbors compassionately, both locally and globally.”

The week also left a lasting impression. Clara Hatcher, a freshman in the College of Communication said, “I think that the Mission Week theme is a call to action in itself. Asking who cares is calling out others to say I care, I can make a difference.”
More than 200 students volunteered with CRS Helping Hands to kick off Mission Week. They packaged 25,056 meals that were sent to Burkina Faso in West Africa.

Mission Week 2015 was coordinated through the Office of Mission & Ministry and the Center for Peacemaking in partnership with Catholic Relief Services.