

NAIN-Connect Reflections
“A Glimpse into the Future of Interfaith”
- Sarah Talcott Blair -

Participating in the North American Interfaith Network Connect was a unique and rewarding experience for me in a number of ways. This was my second time attending a NAIN-Connect, but it was very different than the first one I went to in Las Vegas, partly due to the peaceful, pastoral setting (set against a backdrop of lightning bugs, thunderstorms, deer, skunks and other wildlife who graced the natural preserve paths) and the warm Midwestern hospitality of our hosts from Unity Village, but also due to the emphasis on the “role of education” throughout the program.

I was inspired by being in the company of a group of experienced practitioners and organizers, academicians, educators and students, and having this cross-sector of the country come together as a learning network to examine and explore the question of education in an interreligious context. The panel on which I had the opportunity to share, regarding the current state of the interfaith movement and where it’s heading, and the role that education has to play, was very interesting - both to have this opportunity to compose my thoughts and reflect on these topics from my perspective as an interfaith youth organizer, but also to hear the articulations of my fellow peers on the panel. What stood out to me from what was shared was that, though the interfaith movement is evolving in leaps and bounds, especially in contrast to where it began, we have a long way to go to live into our ideal vision of religious pluralism and including all the necessary voices at the table. We can work on this by doing a better job at reaching out to people from minority communities, disadvantaged youth and young people overall, and by using the interfaith lens to shine the light on issues of racial and social justice in this country especially. In terms of our collective vision on the panel regarding education and the role it has to play, I appreciated our shared articulation of the need for education to engage not just the head, but also the heart and the soul, and the hands. Interfaith service is one vehicle of value and potential for educating the community about itself, exploring one’s own religious identity and “engaging the other.”

Highlights to me from the conference included in particular meeting the incredible young women of Sharon Interfaith Action and the founder of this groundbreaking program, Janet Penn. I attended a workshop designed and led by the four young women, all 16 and 17 years old, and their energy and enthusiasm for interfaith dialogue and interfaith-based action was infectious. I was impressed by the maturity in which they carried themselves, the wisdom behind the questions they proposed for our group sharing (“when was a time in your life where your values came into conflict with someone you care about? How did you respond?”) and the care with which they facilitated each activity. It was also eye-opening for all of us “olders” in the room to discover that they had come up with all of the activities and material on their own, and it wasn’t written down anywhere; they had brainstormed it together and designed it purposefully for this conference. I found the freshness and originality of the activities very inspiring, and also their commitment to being a truly youth-led program. They told us that in Sharon Interfaith Action, once one of their youth leaders turns the age of 18, they can no longer have a vote in the decision-making for the organization. Another powerful moment was when us “olders” realized, with some sadness, that many of us lacked having a mentor when we were growing up in contrast to these young women, and, for some of us, our life work had grown out of that ache in us to be the mentor for others that we never had. My hat is off to Janet for her brilliant, courageous work, and to these young pioneers for their inspiring example! They truly are the future of the interfaith movement...

I also got a lot out of talking with Ralph Singh about his groundbreaking work in interfaith education which he has pioneered and is taking into secondary schools in New York. I enjoyed his clever and creative responses to the typical questions that would come up in introducing the subject of religion in public schools. I loved his approach in clarifying the true meaning of

“idol worship” - using the metaphor of an “icon” on a computer and what it provides you access to - the program that runs as a result of clicking on the icon. Worship could be seen as accessing the greater, divine “program” through the initiation of contact with an initial image. The image or icon is not the program itself, merely an entry point. He has constructed a curriculum where he focuses in on one core aspect of each of the world religions, and he approaches teaching from a dynamic, humorous and modern perspective custom-made for the keen, probing minds he is interacting with.

It was also a pleasure for me to be able to share about the Young Leaders Program in URI that we are building with a team of youth from around the world - including an intergenerational mentorship program connecting youth and elders one-on-one in a dynamic conversation and two-way exchange; live online chats on topics such as social justice, health and healing, interfaith education, faith and the environment; and youth leadership retreats integrating spirituality and service and practical workshops in NonViolent Communication, advocacy and dialogue. It was a wonderful opportunity to step back from the momentous year and a half of organizing, reflect on the principles behind this work and identify the key essential elements of our program and what makes it unique. To see the powerpoint presentation I gave in my workshop, you can go to: www.ga08youth.com/finance.aspx . Click on [URI Young Leaders Program Overview and Methodology](#) to download and view.

I am very grateful to the NAIN Board members for selecting me to be a Young Adult Scholar; I have gained hope, inspiration, practical knowledge and good friends that I am sure I will stay in close contact with for years to come!