



INTERFAITH SPEAKERS BUREAU

Pleasant Hill Adventist Academy is a private K-12 school located in Pleasant Hill, California. It is a coed institution and serves approximately 250 students.

STUDENT COMMENTS

"I learned that it's possible for people of different religions to interact easily and courteously. I've learned to respect each and everyone's choice of religion a little more."

"[The panel] has broadened my understanding of the faiths, helping me to better understand where they are coming from."

"After today I will be able to go into conversations and know how each faith believes, this also gives me a fair and equal way of thinking."

"I have learned an incredible amount of information about each religion and I think it helps having actual people as representatives ... Many of these faith practices are good to take on or just research."

Interfaith Speakers Panel Puts a Personal Face on Religion

by Saleem Azad, ING volunteer

In a quiet suburb in the San Francisco Bay Area, students and educators alike at the Pleasant Hill Adventist Academy were treated to an interfaith panel of speakers. Not only did the panelists represent the world's five largest religions, but also a diverse array of backgrounds and achievement set against a backdrop of faith.

Principal Ally Emmerson filed the students in to listen to the stories of panelists representing Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Islam. The group included approximately 50 students and teachers from the ninth through twelfth classes, in a school that teaches kindergarten through twelfth grades. High school teacher George Wallace presided over the panel, providing a quick introduction and later fielding questions. Each of the five speakers provided a background of their religion, and how it related to their daily life. This would usually include tenets of faith, and its practice in today's modern world.

As Ken Maki, an orthodox Jewish representative, explained the

history of Judaism and what he referred to as the "reverse golden rule," the similarities among the different faiths became more pronounced. However, perhaps more profound in what the students took from the discussion, was his explanation on the pragmatic approach that many Jews take in the application of Jewish philosophy to practice.

"[The interfaith panel] puts a personal face on what is otherwise a big block of religion."

– Michael Spencer, K-12 educator and music director

Devotion to the betterment of the community and help for those in need were indeed commonalities to what are also core teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist faith, a denomination of Christianity which has large populations throughout the world.

The personification for many students and educators on some

“I have a better understanding of other faiths, and I will definitely pass along my newly acquired knowledge with friends and will be eager to learn more.”

-- High school student, Pleasant Hill Adventist Academy

religions had come from what they encountered in pages of textbooks and on the periphery of the news media, peppered in with tales of their adherents. They sat enraptured as Satya Sharma, the Hindu panelist, spoke to the audience about Hinduism and related to them his history in the Bay Area spanning over 40 years. In addition to being a Hindu priest, Sharma is also a yoga instructor and former member of the San Jose Earthquakes soccer team.

"Extremism is a product of fear and uncertainty," remarked Sharma after the talk, in explaining the need for such interfaith panels. "Sometimes we try to level our values on other societies, using our own methods and standards, which is not conducive to a religiously pluralistic society." His teaching of some common fundamentals between his religion and that of the students in many ways serves to eradicate the fear and uncertainty that may lead to the extreme viewpoints, and xenophobia. With a permanently friendly temperament, Sharma spoke of the history of Hinduism and the sacred scriptures. His emphasis of Ahimsa, or the idea of not creating harm, was a strong theme that is also a central philosophy in Buddhism.

Venerable Jian Hu Shifu, the Buddhist representative, captured the attention and imagination of the students perhaps more than anyone, with his ceremonial robes and calm demeanor. Educated in the U.S., but trained as a Buddhism teacher at the Chung Tai Chan Monastery in Taiwan, he explained the Four Noble Truths in which the Buddha pointed out that human sufferings, including those caused by extremism, are based on greed, anger and ignorance, and the removal of these makes harmony in the world possible. Many of the questions students asked involved Venerable Hu's physical countenance, which often dealt with Buddhist ideologies of transcendence and asceticism.

The students were also introduced to Dianne Muller, who represented the Catholic faith. She shared some familiar teachings of the Christian ideology and her thoughts of the similarities of the religions and the golden rule as taught by Christ. She further delved into theological issues such as the immortal soul and the concept of free will.

Muslim panelist, Maha ElGenaidi, spoke to the audience about Islam, the world's second largest religion after Christianity. Her discussion on greetings of peace implied striking parallels among all the religions represented, as they all in some form or another involved the initiation of contact with a fellow person with the intonation of amity.

She also spoke about the special challenges that Muslims are facing today in America post 9/11 as a result of Islamophobia, which is comparable to Anti-Semitism, despite the unique relation of Islam with the west as one of the progenitors of the Renaissance, the fruits of which was the Reformation and Protestantism. The students also learned about the similarities between Islam and Christianity, and the proscription of pork products in the Islamic faith – a practice that mirrors the diet mandated by the Seventh-day Adventist teachings.

"It puts a personal face on what is otherwise a big block of religion," commented Michael Spencer, K-12 Music Director, after hearing the panel discussion. He spoke of the fact that, despite being well read in world religions, he and his students both had learned much during the five-faith interfaith panel.



ING and the Interfaith Speakers Bureau

ING is a non-profit, educational organization founded in 1993 that promotes religious literacy and mutual respect through on-site presentations and interfaith dialogues to academic institutions, community agencies, and other organizations. The Interfaith Speakers Bureau is an educational program that teaches about the world's five major religions, traditions and cultures through onsite, interactive panels with certified speakers. High schools, colleges and universities are invited to host an interfaith panel for their students to enhance learning and teach critical thinking skills. For more information or to schedule a panel, visit www.ing.org

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