

An Interfaith Panel on Shared Values for A Middle School Audience  
February 1<sup>st</sup> at Fischer Middle School, San Jose CA  
World Interfaith Harmony Week

Eighty-five middle school students in San Jose, California, were surprised and pleased to see four people of different religions come together as friends to talk about their faiths to supplement school curriculum on world religions. The occasion was a panel from the Interfaith Speakers Bureau of ING (Islamic Networks Group), a program that trains adherents of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism to speak on panels about the basics of their religion and its role in the modern world. At this event, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism were represented, and the topic was “Shared Values”—the basic moral and ethical values that all religions share. The students, many of whom had not had exposure to any religions other than their own, learned, for instance, that every religion has some version of the Golden Rule, the precept that calls on people to treat others the way that they would want to be treated themselves.

The panel was interactive; the facilitator asked each panelist a number of questions, starting with the basics teachings of their faith and moving on to the day’s topic of shared values. The students were also given opportunities to ask their own questions of interest, which produced a lively back and forth.

The students were evidently impressed with the panel and even surprised by some of what they heard and saw. On the evaluations they filled out after the presentation, many commented with obvious admiration the fact that Muslims pray five times a day. In fact, Islam, perhaps because it is so much in the news and many Americans still know so little about it, particularly drew the students’ interest; several commented that they enjoyed most learning about that world-wide religion. Another popular part of the presentation was the demonstration of the greetings that people of these four traditions use—for instance, the Muslim *salaam alaikum*, “peace be with you,” and the Hindu *Namaste*, “the divinity in me greets the divinity in you.” Students were also clearly moved at the friendship and harmony that the panelists displayed despite the differences in their religious beliefs; as one student put it, “they all believe in each other.” One cannot read through the evaluations without realizing that the panel was itself an act of peacemaking, opening this group of students to people and perspectives they had never had the opportunity to experience before.

The school, which has been a site of several Islamophobic incidents over the past few years, requested this panel as an introduction to their World Religions unit; as a teacher commented, “As part of our on-going work to better educate students and as a component of world religions studied in the 7th grade, we thought the interfaith panel would be a great opportunity.” She expressed complete satisfaction with both the content of the panel and the skill in delivery.

ING's Interfaith Speakers Bureau has presented panels like this to around 1,200 groups since it was founded in 2007, as part of ING's mission of promoting intercultural understanding and harmony. ING is a non-profit organization with affiliates around the country that are pursuing peace, and countering all forms of bigotry, through education and interfaith engagement while working within the framework of the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom and pluralism. ING's other programs include

- Islamic Speakers Bureau: Educational presentations on various topics related to Islam and Muslims, delivered by trained and certified speakers using content developed in cooperation with recognized scholars to supplement state curriculum standards in social studies for middle and high schools. The ISB has presented to over one million people in the San Francisco Bay area and to tens of thousands more through ING's affiliates in 17 states.
- Cultural Diversity Seminars: Training for professionals in law enforcement, education, health care, and business in how to deal sensitively and appropriately with Muslims. These seminars provide valuable information and resources for increasing awareness, enhancing cultural competency skills, and developing relationships with American Muslim communities. Since 1997, ING has conducted about 350 of these to 35,000 leaders in these professions.
- INGYouth: Training young American Muslims as speakers to supplement education about Islam and Muslims through informal conversations and student-run presentations, giving students the tools needed to prevent or respond to bullying and equipping Muslim youth to deal with today's difficult political landscape. Since 2016, INGYouth has trained over 300 Muslim teens and their parents nationwide in bullying prevention and school participation, and over 90 Muslim teens in eight states have been trained and certified as speakers in their schools.
- Know Your Neighbor: A coalition, led by ING, of over 100 faith-based and interfaith organizations across the country that has conducted social media campaigns reaching over five million people and offering inspiration, tools, and resources for individuals, organizations, and youth to create events that bring Americans of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds together for mutual encounter and learning.
- Online Educator Resources: Curriculum packages available free of charge to educators offering the scripts and slides for Islamic and Interfaith Speakers Bureau presentations, plus content and discussion questions, suggested classroom activities, links to relevant videos, and resource lists. Over 360 educators across the country have made use of these resources.

Student responses clearly show that ING made a difference in the thinking and attitudes of these young people. For ING, every week is interfaith harmony week.