Building the Interfaith Youth Movement: Beyond Dialogue to Action


This is the great new problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, we must somehow learn to live with each other in peace. -- Martin Luther King, Jr.¹

As a youth work practitioner and educator living in the melting pot of religious and sectarian division that is Lebanon, this title caught my imagination. Building the Interfaith Youth Movement attempts to highlight the diversity of methodological praxis within the field of interfaith dialogue between young people. The book contains a collection of contributions from practitioners in projects that have different focuses, within the broad area of inter-faith dialogue. The Editors, Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur have been involved in seeking to develop a ‘movement’ founded on the celebration of diversity with the principles and values of dialogue. Eboo Patel is the Founder and Executive Director of the Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based international organization that brings young people from different faith communities together to build understanding and cooperation. Patrice Brodeur is Canada Research Chair on Islam, Pluralism and Globalization at the University of Montreal in the Faculty of Theology and the Science of Religions.

After a helpful introduction the book is separated into seven sections. The first section focuses on the context of interfaith youth work, highlighting some of the ideological values (sociologically and theologically) that are emphasised throughout the various contributions (including religious and personal identity, pluralism, inter-religious solidarity, etc). The remaining six sections each focus on a particular context in which interfaith dialogue may take place, with individual contributors each sharing about specific projects they are involved in. These contexts are; International Interfaith Organisations; Higher Education; Secondary Education; Community-Based Projects: Immersion Projects and finally one chapter about an online interfaith pastoral youth project.

Despite the geographical limitations of the book’s focus, (primarily from a North American perspective) practitioners working with young people from diverse religious

¹
backgrounds and within a variety of contexts will benefit from this book. A variety of academic fields are utilised within the text; religious studies, sociology, education, youth studies etc. The specific chapters also range in style including descriptive, analytical, personal reflective, and methodological, which whilst bringing diversity, can also make understanding of a particular project somewhat ‘patchy’.

Examples of projects from the various sections include: a research based project at Harvard University; campus based interfaith projects; seminars interacting together (faculty and students from various – Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and later Islamic - faith traditions); Secondary religious education programmes; Face to Face/ Faith to Faith – a multi-faith leadership training program for young people from around the world; The Sacred Stories Project of the Ghetto Film School which facilitates urban community based young people from ethnic minorities to tell their stories through film; and a selection of immersion projects ranging in duration and focus. ‘Ask Pastor Paul’, the online interfaith pastoral project on Beliefnet.com is a particularly interesting inclusion. Paul Raushenbush highlights case studies from his experience as an ‘online pastor’ in regards to answering emails with questions and concerns from young people from within and outside his tradition. He includes examples of emails he has received, his response, an analysis and then gives some general, basic and practical good practice guidelines that can be used within youth work settings.

The book bears testimony to a growing number of creative ways in which those working with young people, in a range of settings, can creatively seek to break down division and build a movement based on pluralistic acceptance that celebrates diversity. Ideas and themes can be taken and adapted from many of the examples and contextualised within new settings. Readers will find it easy to delve in and out, using chapters that relate more easily to their own context of ministry.

Although chapters are somewhat disjointed in style, a number of interesting questions emerge from the totality of the book. Whilst the book has a focus in praxis, I felt that some examination on the issue and theoretical understanding of dialogue, in educational, sociological and theological terms would have been a significant addition to the first section of the book. This would have framed the rest of the content helpfully.

Throughout, pluralism, as opposed to diversity alone, was hailed as the ideal in regards to interfaith dialogue. Some critique of this would have been helpful, particularly from youth practitioners who may not see this goal in such positive terms. Another point that was mentioned in the books conclusion was that “God” is seldom talked about within the context of interfaith dialogue. The reasons why this may or may