

## An Effort to Foster Tolerance in Religion

Eboo Patel helped the White House develop its Interfaith and Community Service Challenge.

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CHICAGO — For a guy who is only 35 and lives in a walk-up apartment, Eboo Patel has already racked up some impressive accomplishments.



Carlos Ortiz for The New York Times

A Rhodes scholar with a doctorate in the sociology of religion from Oxford University, he has four honorary degrees. His autobiography is required freshman reading on 11 college campuses. He runs a nonprofit organization — the Interfaith Youth Core — with 31 employees and a budget of \$4 million. And he was tapped by the White House as a key architect of an initiative announced in April by President Obama.

Mr. Patel got there by identifying a sticky problem in American civic life and proposing a concrete solution. The problem? Increased religious diversity is causing increasing religious conflict. And too often, religious extremists are driving events.

He figured that if Muslim radicals and extremists of other religions were recruiting young people, then those who believe in religious tolerance should also enlist the youth.

Interfaith activism could be a cause on college campuses, he argued, as much “a norm” as the environmental or women’s rights movements, as ambitious as Teach for America. The crucial ingredient was to gather students of different religions together not just to talk, he said, but to work together to feed the hungry, tutor children or build housing.

“Interfaith cooperation should be more than five people in a book club,” Mr. Patel said, navigating his compact car to a panel discussion at Elmhurst College just west of downtown Chicago, while answering questions and dictating e-mails to an aide. “You need a critical mass of interfaith leaders who know how to build relationships across religious divides, and see it as a lifelong endeavor.”

Until Mr. Patel came along, the interfaith movement in the United States was largely the province of elders and clergy members hosting dialogues and, yes, book clubs — and drafting documents that had little impact at the grass roots.

Meanwhile at the grass roots, inter-religious friction was sparking regularly over public school holidays, zoning permits for houses of worship and religious garb in the workplace. At many universities, there is open hostility over the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the failure to find a peaceful solution.

Mr. Patel, who is Muslim, is not saying that his plan will solve all those conflicts, just that the focus should be on what he calls “the American project.” Immigrants across the generations brought their faiths, their biases and their beefs and “built a new pattern of relationships” over here, he said, pointing out that English Protestants and Irish Catholics eventually overcame their enmity on these shores.

“When I go to a campus where the Muslim Student Association and the Hillel are not talking to each other,” he said (referring to the national Jewish student group) this spring in a lecture at Columbia University, “my question to them is, ‘Who did you feed in Ramallah by not talking to Hillel? Who did you keep safe in the south of Israel by not talking to the M.S.A.?’ ”

There are many interfaith groups, but none like Mr. Patel’s, where youthful idealism and spiritual searching have been channeled by pro bono consultants from McKinsey & Company into strategic plans, templates and spreadsheets. The offices take up a whole floor in a handsomely renovated industrial building. On one end is a small prayer room. On the other is a bulletin board where the manager of foundation development tracks grant applications worth millions of dollars.

At a staff meeting, which started and ended on time, two senior leaders in T-shirts emblazoned “Better Together” walked everybody through a PowerPoint presentation of the group’s recent expansion.

By the end of the school year in June 2010, the Youth Core had trained 18 “interfaith fellows” who each recruited about 40 students on their campuses. By this June, the Youth Core had trained leaders on 97 campuses, who engaged an average of 100 students, for a total of 10,000 participants — more than 10 times over the previous year. The leaders are undergraduates,

religious and nonreligious, who attended summer training sessions led by Youth Core staff members, and then returned to their campuses to organize interfaith events and community service projects using the upbeat slogan, “Better Together.”