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# Interfaith Campus Organizing at California Lutheran University

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# Interfaith Campus Organizing at California Lutheran University



Over the past few years, interfaith participation at California Lutheran University has grown from a grassroots movement to a sustainable and integral part of our campus identity. We have integrated several aspects of interfaith into our campus and have created a variety of opportunities into which students to immerse themselves.



## Interfaith at CLU

During the 2015-2016 academic year, interfaith experiences reached approximately 550 individuals, logged about 28 programming hours, and

hosted 15 original programs. The key components of interfaith at California Lutheran University include the following:

### *Intern Program*

Our intern program is integrated into our Student Life Office. Students are able to apply for an on-campus

internship through Student Employment. We hire approximately 3-4 interns per semester to work for the Community Service Center. For the first time in 2016-17, we will also hire a Graduate Assistant. Interns are responsible for interfaith programming and logistics. They put together events, manage social media pages, host weekly meetings, and serve as liaisons with other campus groups.

### *Interfaith Allies*

The Interfaith Allies are a group of students, faculty, and staff that promote interfaith cooperation and dialogue between faiths and non-faith groups. Allies focus on fostering a more inclusive campus community by working across all lines of religious difference.

### *Co-Curricular Programming and Tools*

Interfaith at California Lutheran implements a variety of programs and tools on campus. These include the following:

- **Weekly Meetings:** The Interns host weekly meetings at the coffee shop on campus for the Interfaith Allies. Each week, the group is presented with a discussion topic that can range from current events to dialogue about love.
- **Events:** We host gatherings with food for all to learn about religious festivals, to partner in serving

**Allison Bermann** is a secular Jew and a member of the Class of 2018 at California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, California. **Mehak Sachdev** identifies as a Hindu and is a member of CLU's Class of 2017. Together they led a Campus Organizing Workshop at the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference, June 2016. At the conference, Sachdev also participated in a plenary panel of intercollegiate and interfaith students moderated by the Rev. Elizabeth Eaton, Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

refugees, and to hear students' reflections on their research in religious communities. Past events include a Diwali Dinner, Children of Abraham (which was hosted when the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur coincided with the Muslim holiday of Eid El Adha), and Engaged Buddhism (where students experience a 4 day retreat).

- **Alternative Tablings:** Tabling events are held once or twice a month. There is usually a monthly theme where we have an open question and answer period with the Interfaith Interns. We give away swag, along with informational postcards about our organization, events, and meetings. We also hold tabling events to promote our larger events.
- **Fast-A-Thon/Hunger Banquet:** The Interfaith Hunger Banquet was created through our partnership with Oxfam America. We collect food for a local food bank and invite speakers from local hunger agencies. Their insights leave a lasting impact on participants.
- **Interfaith Prayer for the World:** We host these prayers when tragedies occur around the world. They occur at the main campus flagpole during the ten minute break between classes.
- **Come Together Now:** Campus Ministry and Interfaith Allies collaborate for Come Together Now dinners. They are casual dinners where we have topics (such as rest, sacrifice, love) and dialogue about how religion and our faith/non-faith traditions tie into the topic. A few speakers are invited to speak on the topic, followed by open discussion for all.
- **Resident Assistant/Peer Assistant Training:** Non-religious identities and interfaith cooperation are included regularly in diversity training for student leaders on campus.

Additional programs include staff luncheons, interfaith meditation chapel, and other collaborations and cooperation with other departments and existing programs.

## Students Teaching through Stories

On our campus, every student is required to take Introduction to Christianity. Some students are uncomfortable or even unwilling to be involved with this subject matter. I (Allison) was definitely one of these students at first, mostly because I was worried that as a non-Lutheran student, my religious traditions would be ignored or even viewed as unacceptable. However, because my professor taught us the importance of interfaith cooperation and made the space an inclusive one, the study of religion has become a big part of my college career. I believe that without a focus on creating a safe and comfortable space for interfaith discussion, no one in our class would have been willing to talk about our personal identities and share our stories. Not every professor that teaches this class puts an emphasis on interfaith, but I believe that made all the difference.

In my sophomore year, students from my interfaith seminar taught a lesson on interfaith for the introductory class in religion. We opened the lesson by telling our personal stories, focusing on why we were involved in interfaith. We talked about our own personal struggles with our religious identity, times where we had a memorable experience with a person of a different faith tradition, and how we want to continue interfaith work in our careers and throughout our lives. By sharing our experiences with fellow Millennials, we were all able to connect and empathize with one another and the new students became less apathetic about the subject matter. Regardless of whatever religious or non-religious tradition they adhered to, they were able to find similarities between our stories and their life experiences, which made all of us more comfortable discussing sometimes difficult subject matters.

Through these and other experiences, students in the Interfaith Seminar have realized how essential and helpful storytelling is when connecting with others. We look forward to making our campus an even stronger community by hearing one another's stories.