



# Young people reflect on interreligious studies

31.08.2016 | World Council of Churches

**Seventeen students completed a Certificate of Advanced Studies in Interreligious Studies in August at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey. The six-week course, credited by the University of Geneva, is evenly split between distance learning and a residential experience.**

The students, ages 20-35, included six Christians, five Jews and six Muslims. Nine were women and eight men.

Reflections from a few of the students show the power of blending cultures, communities and faith traditions in a setting conducive to honest interaction.

Elliot Steinberg, who is Jewish, is from the UK, and serves as a programme officer for the Council of Christians and Jews in London. He attended the course because he “thought it would be interesting to meet people from other cultures and communities...it’s been really powerful, much more than I expected it to be.”

He added that he would now be able to apply a good deal of what he had learned to his current work.

Antony Abi Awad, a Catholic Christian from Lebanon, is volunteering in Christian charities in Lebanon, and hopes to start training soon as a Catholic priest. “We have a massive diversity of religions in Lebanon, but the work that has been done on creating common ground and interaction between different religions is limited.” He noted he had learned a great deal not just about the other two faiths but also the different denominations within Christianity. He said he knew now he would be able help create more common ground and extend the limits of those interactions.

Sajida Mohammed, a Muslim from Nigeria and the UK, attended the course out of “sheer interest,” particularly since the Abrahamic religions had been her area of study as an undergraduate. Having attended the course, however, she now felt that she might pursue interfaith dialogue as a career.

All three students said they learned each religion had a surprisingly similar approach to many issues – even a strong resemblance – not least over migration and statelessness. All three religions urge their followers not to turn away strangers. This approach – of sameness, not otherness, of togetherness, not separateness – was replicated by the students themselves on the course. All three spoke about how well all the students had gotten along with each other – and how much this in itself had taught them.

Mohammed also said that she found the personal interactions both very rewarding and stimulating. “There were no arguments,” she said. “It was more discussion-based and all because we are here with a good opinion of each other.” Likewise, Steinberg made the point “how important the personal interactions had been...getting to know them, getting connected and hopefully staying connected with them. That was the most powerful thing.”

For Mohammed and Awad, the most powerful element of the course was the most unexpected. This came up in the practical section of the course. As part of the course, all students took part in study visits to the church, mosque and synagogue. It was these religious experiences that moved

and surprised them the most. Mohammed found the Shabbat service “really powerful.”  
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