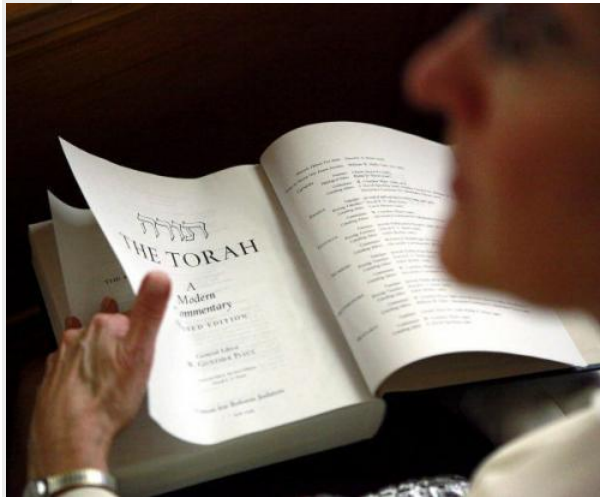


Oklahoma youth learn about religious diversity during interfaith tour

Young people from different faith backgrounds visited three diverse houses of worship Sunday as part of the 2011 Interfaith Youth Tour coordinated by the Oklahoma Conference of Churches.

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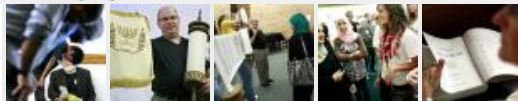
Muslim teen [Areebah Anwar](#), of [Norman](#), had never stepped foot inside a church before her visit Sunday to an Orthodox Christian church.



Pastor Debi Powell-Maxwell, of First Christian Church in Yukon, looks at a copy of The Torah at Temple B'nai Israel, during the 2011 Interfaith Youth Tour in Oklahoma City on Sunday, September 25, 2011. Sponsored by the Oklahoma Conference of Churches, participants visited the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City's mosque, Temple B'nai Israel, and St. George Greek Orthodox Church. Photo by John Clanton, The Oklahoman ORG XMIT: KOD

MULTIMEDIA

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Casey Easter, a Christian youth from [Enid](#) laughed at the jokes Muslim leaders told at an [Oklahoma City](#) mosque.

And Christians [James Lee](#) and [Jacob Gilbert](#) held a sacred Torah scroll at a Jewish temple.

The teens visited different houses of worships Sunday as part of the [Oklahoma Conference of Churches'](#) 2011 Interfaith Youth Tour. The fifth annual event, which spanned about four hours, included visits to the [Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City's](#) mosque at 3815 N St. Clair; [Temple B'nai Israel](#), 4901 N [Pennsylvania](#); and [St. George Greek Orthodox Church](#), 2101 NW 145.

[Dr. George Cooper](#), a member of the Baha'i Faith, said the tour has been presented for the past five years by the conference of churches' [Religions United Committee](#). He said Sunday's group of about 180 youths and their advisers was the largest ever assembled for the tour.

The [Rev. William Tabbernee](#), the conference of churches' executive director, said organizers were thrilled with the large crowd because of the interfaith awareness that could result.

"It's healthy to both educate and break down stereotypes so people understand the diversity of religion rather than simply be afraid of what is different," Tabbernee said.

He said the tour is geared for young people "because they have capacity to understand the differences and celebrate the differences.

"The younger, the better."

Groups represented

Congregations and groups represented at the tour included: The Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City, Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Enid, Emmanuel Episcopal Church in [Shawnee](#), First Christian Church of [Edmond](#) (Disciples of Christ), Mayflower UCC, New Covenant Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), [St. Luke's United Methodist Church](#), Western Oaks Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Ardmore.

Tour participants gathered first at the mosque and watched as Muslim men and women participated in prayer and then answered questions from non-Muslims. The group then traveled by bus and van to Temple B'nai Israel, where [Rabbi Barry Cohen](#) talked about the Jewish faith symbols in the sanctuary and answered questions about Judaism.

The tour concluded at St. George Greek Orthodox Church, where the [Rev. John Tsaras](#) discussed the numerous colorful icons located throughout the sanctuary and presented other information about the Orthodox Christian Church in general.

Many of the Muslim teens like Anwar, 16, said they were grateful for a chance to learn about faiths different from their own and interact with non-Muslim teens.

"Knowing about other people's faiths helps prevent discrimination and ignorance."

Her friend [Zoha Qureshi](#), 16, agreed.

"It opens your eyes and helps with tolerance because you understand where other people are coming from," she said.

'A great learning opportunity'

McKenzie Cowlbeck, 13, a member of St. Philip's Episcopal in Ardmore, said she was particularly interested in how the architecture at each house of worship related to the spiritual beliefs of the congregation.

"This was really an eye-opener," she said of the tour.

"I have really always been interested in other cultures, and this has really been different. I loved it."

Easter, 15, and [Rachel Meyer](#), 15, both from Central Christian Church in Enid, said they were both impressed with the way Muslim leaders described stereotypes about Muslims and how they dispel them.

"They know the stereotypes that people have about them, and they're willing to show that they are not like that," Meyer said.

[Greg Bunton](#), associate minister of student ministries at First Christian-Edmond, said he brought 30 students and four other adults to participate.

"There's so much misunderstanding out there, and this is a great learning opportunity, particularly in light of everything that has gone on in this country over the last 10 years," Bunton said. "It's important to expose the students to something like this so they can learn who are our neighbors."

[Saad Mohommad](#), director of Islamic news and information for the [Islamic Society](#), said he did not expect the tour to draw so many youths but he was happy about it.

"This is a very great day," he said. "I'm glad they're willing to educate themselves and build bridges of education."

[Tim Sean Youmans](#), with Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Shawnee, said he brought six youths to the event.

"Particularly in Shawnee, there's a lack of exposure to religious diversity, so this is a perfect opportunity for kids from Shawnee to be exposed to religious diversity," he said.

Read more: <http://newsok.com/oklahoma-youth-learn-about-religious-diversity-during-interfaith-tour/article/3607760#ixzz1Z5q3bf17>