ISLAMIC SPEAKERS BUREAU AND INTERFAITH SPEAKERS BUREAU

From 2009-2012, about one third of ING’s presentations have been Interfaith panels

Over the past three years, ING has continued and expanded its effort to educate for religious and cultural literacy and mutual understanding and respect. This section examines ING’s output over the period 2009 to 2012.

Since 2008, ING has maintained two bureaus: the Islamic Speakers Bureau (ISB), providing individual speakers on topics related to Muslims and Islamic perspectives; and the Interfaith Speakers Bureau (IFSB), providing panels of up to five participants on five major world religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Over the three-year period, 2009-2012, the ratio of audiences served by ISB to those served by IFSB was 70 to 30.

A Growing Demand among Diverse Audiences

Over this three-year period, the number of presentations and classes served by ING has remained consistent. (A presentation may be given to more than one class at a time, as for instance when classes are consolidated for a presentation or when a presentation is made at a school assembly. The number of classes, therefore, exceeds the number of presentations.)

Audience numbers, however, have increased markedly, from around 12,000 in 2009-10 to over 37,000 in 2011-12, due largely to more vigorous and effective marketing and to ING’s participation in large-scale community events such as the San Francisco commemoration of the tenth anniversary of 9/11.

Over its long-term history, ING has gradually reached out to ever more diverse audiences. ING in its first years presented exclusively to grades 7-12 school audiences. The distribution of ING venues over the past three years can be seen in the chart below.
Over the past three years, the proportion of ING school venues has remained at an average of half of ING’s presentations. The proportion of higher education venues has grown considerably (from 9% to 17%) while community organizations also increased to a lesser degree (from 15% to 18%). Religious venues remained constant at around 17% as did cultural competency trainings which averaged about 7%.

Here is a sampling of some of the Bay Area venues that have hosted an ING presentation or panel, in addition to hundreds of middle and high schools:

**Faith-based venues**: Berkeley Buddhist Temple, Chaplaincy Institute, Family of Abraham, Hillcrest Congregational Church, Interfaith Center at the Presidio, Jain Center of Northern California, Or Shalom Synagogue, San Francisco Interfaith Council, Sikh Gurdwara of San Jose, South Valley Islamic Center, Vedanta Society, Willow Glen United Methodist Church

**Colleges and universities**: City College of San Francisco, Graduate Theological Union, Mills College, Santa Clara University, UC Berkeley, University of San Francisco, Zaytuna College

**Corporations**: Chevron, CISCO, Intuit, Lawrence Livermore Labs, Proctor and Gamble, Wells Fargo

**Healthcare facilities**: Kaiser Permanente, Mt. Diablo Medical Center, San Mateo County Behavioral Health and Recovery Facilities, St. Mary’s Hospital, Stanford Medical School, Sutter Health Center, Tenderloin Outpatient Clinic, UC San Francisco Nursing School

**Law enforcement agencies**: Berkeley Police Department, California Correctional Peace Officers Association, Fremont Police Department, Fresno Police Department, Napa Police Academy, Novato Police Department, Palo Alto Police Department, San Francisco Police Academy, Santa Clara County District Attorney’s Office, UC Davis Police Department

**Community organizations and other venues**: Asian Pacific American Legal Center, Campbell Rotary Club, City of San Francisco, Corte Madera Lions Club, Girl Scouts of Northern California, League of Women Voters, Pacific Union Club, President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, Silicon Valley Reads, The Terraces at Los Altos, World Affairs Council
These and other results show the impact of ING’s presentations in challenging common perceptions and stereotypes. ING will continue to administer these surveys to various audiences and to evaluate responses in its effort to improve its performance and impact.

ING’S INTERFAITH SPEAKERS BUREAU IMPACT:

Modeling Interfaith Harmony and Enhancing Religious Literacy

After an interfaith panel presentation, the audience is asked a series of questions to evaluate the panel’s impact in a number of areas. Except for one question asking for an overall evaluation of the quality of the panel (from “poor” to “excellent”), the questions call for open narrative responses. The questions asked are given below.

Over the three academic years 2009-2012, IFSB panels presented to 468 middle and high school, college, and community audiences comprising around 14,000 people. Audience surveys were made after 85% of the presentations, and the rate of return was around 40%.

Overall Panel Quality

When asked to rate the overall quality of IFSB panels, the great majority of the respondents rated them “Excellent” (53%) or “Good,” the percentage of those doing so averaging 96% over the three years.
Select Quotes from Interfaith Panel Evaluations

Audiences were impressed by commonalities between faiths and the civility between panelists

The following are a sample of audience responses which illustrate the value of this important work in building interreligious understanding and mutual respect, creating more peaceful, harmonious communities, and preventing hate crimes and discrimination.

When asked what moved, interested or surprised you the most from the panel today? the vast majority answered as follows, in order of frequency of answers:

“**How different** and yet similar religions really are and the commonality of positive values such as modesty, compassion, tolerance, kindness, and humility and the emphasis they had on ethical behavior; commonalities of values, ideals, and principles; they had the same goals with the Golden Rule; how they really did have a lot more in common than I thought before.

“How civil the representatives were toward each other’s views; how they talked respectfully with each other; they were passionate, yet objective and well educated; I was surprised to see a Muslim woman and a Jewish man connecting as good friends; the fact that everyone sitting on the panel was so respectful of one another; sincerity of the speakers and their genuine efforts for peace-making; their ability to get their points across without offending each other; they weren’t just tolerant, they were appreciative of each other; their sense of humor; the accepting approach to dialogue that every speaker took.

“The contrast between the stereotypes and the teachings of these religions; before the panel, I knew very little about the different religions beyond what is portrayed on TV, I now know what their religion is about.

“I was surprised how well the speakers handled the students’ questions; the speakers were very open—they answered every question honestly and openly.

“Thank you so much. This was one of the [most] insightful and resourceful classes I have had the pleasure to attend! Wonderful to learn about this incredible organization. Such an organization, where religions can work toward harmony and coexistence, is incredibly inspiring.”
When asked *have your views changed about any of the religions or people who follow them?* the vast majority of the answers dealt with Islam and Muslims since they are the most commonly stereotyped in the United States, followed by comments about Judaism and Buddhism, in this order of frequency:

“**My views** of Islam have changed completely from what the media created; I learned about the diversity of Muslims who vary widely from country to country; I didn’t know why Muslim women covered, I thought it was about oppression and inferiority, I now know it’s about modesty and humility; I learned that Islam isn’t a religion that causes terrorism, it’s the people who abuse the religion; I thought Muslim women were subservient but the speaker we had was strong; I learned that Islam is not actually against the United States; I have a greater understanding about the difference between radicals and moderates; I used to not understand Islam and think of it as a violent religion, but after seeing how peaceful and holy the ING speaker was, my whole view changed.

“**I used to think** Jews were not good people, but that’s changed in my mind, Judaism is a peaceful religion; I have a much better understanding of Jewish beliefs and practices; I didn’t realize the diversity within Judaism.

“**I’ve gained a much deeper understanding** of Buddhism; they view women as equal; I didn’t realize the similarities in values between Buddhism and Christianity.

“**I was surprised** to learn about a lot of the commonalities and overall ideals shared among all the religions represented; that although people may hold different beliefs, it is still possible to be friends and agree on issues facing today’s world; my views of Islam and Judaism changed greatly—I was fascinated by how both of them had so much similarity to Christianity; the stereotypes I had before have now been debunked; yes, my thoughts have changed because I did not know that all of the religions were so similar; my view has changed to know that everyone really wants peace and love—I am more open to listen and understand about everyone’s culture.
When asked *have your views on religious people changed?* respondents reported changed attitudes which are reflected in the following comments based on their frequency in the answers:

“**I am leaving content** knowing that if we only lived by the religious beliefs and values that are espoused by these speakers, we would all be living happy and in peace.

“**I now understand** that it is lack of religious understanding that causes conflict in the name of religion; this panel taught me that people need to learn more about their own religion; my views of Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism and Islam have changed because I’ve never really known much of what they were about, but through this presentation I have received better perspective on all of these religions; I have more respect for other religions

“**I’ve realized** the humanity in all of us; that we should get to know each better instead of prejudging people; I didn’t really think five very different people could be together and listen to each other so well; I thought each presenter would emphasize differences, not similarities, there is a great sense of peace with all; I didn’t realize how open-minded and open these different religions are to one another and how they respect each other’s beliefs; everyone was so open and caring.

“**I’ve always been skeptical** of deeply religious people but in the course of listening to these people, I was able to see that they were inspired by their religion’s calling for peace, love, and acceptance; these panelists seemed to be truthful and honest individuals who understand their faith, I now know that all religious people are not fundamentalists; I always thought religious people are stern and strict, but this panel was totally chill; I used to think all religious people were crazy or naive but now I know they’re smart and clear about what they believe.

When asked *what did you enjoy the most about this panel?* the vast majority answered as follows, in order of frequency:

“**I was very impressed by the cooperation** among the speakers; their respect and appreciation of each other; diversity of the speakers; openness and tolerance of each other; they complemented and reinforced each other; they were nice, insightful and respectful; they were entertaining and engaging; their sense of humor and friendliness; they were completely honest and straightforward; they made it interesting; their enthusiasm and joy in doing this panel; they were very pleasant; all religions modeled for us today were all one in body and mind; I loved the unity; they were remarkably normal and accepting of other religions; charismatic personalities; they looked like they were having fun up there; the diversity of the panel; they were funny but very informative; they didn’t preach, they informed; they were accepting of one another.

“**Question and answer** session and the time we had to interact with the panelists; you weren’t afraid to ask any question you had on your mind; it was a safe space to talk and ask questions; the dialogue with the audience; I loved the question and answer session-it was a good way to connect.

“**Content of the presentations** they gave; their stories; diversity of views and explanations of different aspects of their religion; their descriptions were easy enough to follow where we can all connect with each of them; despite the limited time, I learned a lot in the few minutes we had; the professionalism that all presenters exhibited, and that all seemed to enjoy presenting their areas of expertise; I think that I was very lucky having this great chance to know about several religions all together; I liked the fact that each person told personal stories relating to their faith.