Introduction:

The actions of ISIS (also known as the Islamic State, or ISIL) have begun to shape America’s popular conception of Islam by grabbing headlines in the last year. ISIS most recently claimed responsibility for the coordinated attacks including suicide bombings and a mass shooting in Paris, France, where well over 100 lives were lost and nearly 300 wounded in one of Europe’s largest terrorist attacks.

Because of the global nature of our community, young people see both videos of ISIS and the reactions of our politicians and news broadcasters. What is the youth minister’s role in this conversation? How can we embody Jesus’ love for the world while we yearn for justice and struggle to how that justice could be enacted? How should Christians and Muslims interact?

As youth workers, this conversation can seem way above our pay grade. Yet it is a necessary conversation to have with our young people, in order to understand both Islam and Christianity better. In this issue of Engage, we struggle to make sense of these questions.

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In order for Christians in America to contemplate the significance of the Islamic State for their lives in a post-9/11 world, it is essential to begin with the right question. The question is not what threat ISIS poses to US citizens or what steps our government should take to defeat the Islamic State. Neither is it helpful to ask why Muslim Americans do not speak out against violence done in the name of Islam. The latter question reflects mistaken assumptions about the American Muslim community, while also discouraging Christian self-reflection. Instead, as churches and youth groups grapple with the devastating images of the Islamic State’s activities in Syria and Iraq, I propose a question that begins closer to home: How should I act toward my Muslim neighbor?

In responding this question, American Christians will either challenge the Islamic State’s violent monologue or succumb to the fear, hatred, and misunderstanding that this extremist group aims to generate. With its calculated brutality against religious minorities and Muslims alike, the abduction and rape of women and girls, and the destruction of religious and cultural heritage sites, the Islamic State is transmitting a unilateral message about Islam that threatens to obscure opportunities for Christian-Muslim dialogue and understanding. Allowing ISIS to become the face of Islam for us is the greatest danger the rise of ISIS poses to American Christians. We are at risk of accepting the Islamic State’s claim to be the embodiment of Islam and of permitting that skewed view to provoke suspicion and hostility against our Muslim American neighbors. When Christians take up the Islamophobic rhetoric that so often accompanies reports on ISIS in the news and on social media, we become counter-witnesses to the example of Jesus Christ.

With the guidance of parents, pastors, and youth ministers, Christian young people can help break this pattern and become agents of peace. Toward this end, I offer three suggestions for church leaders:

1. **Build knowledge:** Use reputable news outlets to teach youth about the conflict in Syria and the development of ISIS. You might begin with the BBC article “Syria: The story and the conflict” ([http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868)) or turn to denominational resources, like the Presbyterian Mission Agency ([http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/global/syria](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/global/syria)). You should also tune in to Muslim American sources, like the newsletters of the Council on American Islamic Relations, to see Muslim Americans take a stand against ISIS and to learn how Islamophobia affects the daily lives of Muslims in our communities ([www.cair.com](http://www.cair.com)).

2. **Cultivate empathy:** Take your youth group to observe Friday prayers at a local mosque or invite Muslim leaders to speak at your church. If there is no mosque in your community, then organize a field trip to the closest urban area. Nothing is more powerful for breaking down fear and building understanding than a face-to-face encounter.

3. **Seek justice:** Give young people the opportunity to support refugee aid organizations and to participate in prayers for Syrians and Iraqis of all faiths whose lives have been disrupted by

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1 I use Islamic State and ISIS interchangeably, as two of the most recognizable English names for the group that calls itself al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi-l-Iraq wa-l-Sham (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, the latter term meaning Greater Syria or the Levant).
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ISIS. Find out how your denomination is helping Syrians resettle in the US. Stay informed about the prevalent attacks of vandalism and arson against American mosques and the rise in death threats and violence against Muslim Americans. Build partnerships with Muslims in your community to respond to these and other common concerns for justice and peace.

The “clash of civilizations” narrative has taken a new turn with the emergence of the Islamic State and its violent monologue echoing the direst of predictions. Yet hope for Christian-Muslim understanding remains with our young people, who have the power to define this contemporary period not as the age of ISIS, but as an era of dialogue.

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Response: Eboo Patel

The same religion that justified slavery inspired the Abolitionist and Civil Rights movements. The religion that animated the great Rabbi Abraham Joshuah Heschel gave rise to the terrorist Meir Kahane. The faith that motivated Mahatma Gandhi also motivated his murderer.

And so it is with Islam. The tradition that moved the great poet Rumi to write verses that are cherished by people the world over is claimed by brutes who behead their captives, systematically rape women, and destroy priceless civilizational treasures.

I am not an expert on ISIS. I don't think I would have the stomach for that. But I am a Muslim and I love Islam.

In my interpretation, Islam comes down to a simple story: there is one God who above all else loves mercy, rahma. God has created humans as His abd and Khalifa - His servant and representative - to steward his beloved Creation with mercy. God sent Prophets, from Adam through Muhammad, to remind people to worship Him alone and practice mercy.

This is the interpretation of Islam that motivates heroes from Muhammad Yunus (a Bangladeshi Muslim who founded the field of microfinance) to Malala Yousafzai (the young Pakistani Muslim woman who defied the bullets of the Taliban to champion the education of girls).

One can find in the raw materials of any religious tradition stones to use as barriers of division, bludgeons of domination, or bridges of cooperation. We live at a time when the forces who seek to make of Islam a bludgeon are on the rise. It would be a terrible mistake to generalize from these brutes to all Muslims or the entire tradition. That would mean leaving out the vast majority of Muslims. I think what the rise of ISIS suggests, more than anything else, is that there are a cadre of youth organizers in the Muslim world focused on recruiting young people to see Islam as a bludgeon. Unfortunately, they are too often successful.

How can we help young people build bridges of interfaith cooperation? One answer is by helping them acquire a knowledge base for interfaith cooperation.

This knowledge base requires an appreciative knowledge of other traditions. This would include,
for example, knowing that Islam is not just about the stories that lead the evening news, but also a tradition that includes the heroes I mentioned above.

A knowledge base for interfaith leadership requires an understanding of the history of interfaith cooperation. Knowing, for example, that many inspiring social movements, from civil rights in the United States to the struggle in South Africa, involved people from a range of religious traditions.

Perhaps most important of all, the knowledge base of interfaith bridge-building involves a well-articulated theology of interfaith cooperation drawn from one's own tradition. It means being able to answer the question, 'What are the texts, stories, symbols, and heroes from my own tradition that inspire me to build positive relationships with people from other traditions?'

Young people don't have to be taught about diversity; that is the landscape in which they live. They need to be taught how to relate positively to that diversity, to approach it with a bridge-building ethic drawn from their tradition. If youth ministers fail to help young people view their religious traditions as full of bridge-building possibilities, we risk forfeiting them into the hands of those who look at religion and see only bludgeons.

_Eboo Patel is Founder and President of Interfaith Youth Core ([www.ifyc.org](http://www.ifyc.org)) and author of Acts of Faith and Sacred Ground._

**Response: David LaMotte**

There is not much good news in the daily headlines about ISIS. We can take small comfort that, for those of us here in the United States, this violence is far away from us geographically. But as Christians, we are called to love and pray for people regardless of whether they are near or far, foreign or domestic, friends or enemies. “For God so loved the world…”, the verse goes, not “For God so loved the Americans…”

So where do this horrific violence and the complex political and social forces that produce it intersect with our lives? As a Christian taking in world news, my first question is how I am called to live out the gospel in relation to what is being presented to me. There are no easy answers for this one, and there are so many questions. The ones I want to ask here, though, are 'how do I help to create a world where people are not drawn to this kind of violent extremism?', and 'what does this have to do with religion?'

Several researchers who have studied ISIS and movements like it worldwide believe that the reason young people join up is rarely religious fervor; members of ISIS tend to have very limited knowledge of Islam, and being well-grounded in Muslim faith seems to be an insulating factor rather than a way into the organization.

So what does make young people join? Extensive interviews and research indicate that they are enlisting largely because ISIS speaks to their own frustration, rage, disenfranchisement, and sometimes boredom. A big and supposedly righteous adventure, a group of people who will automatically accept you, and the possibility of a dramatic and heroic life all add to the appeal. If you have studied the dynamics of gang membership, this may ring some bells for you, and if you have read articles about school shooters and their motivations, there may be eerily familiar echoes as well.
ISIS claims to be a Muslim organization, though there is significant debate as to whether or not they can credibly claim that label. Some say that if they quote the Quran and call themselves Muslim, they are Muslim. And others say that if virtually every mainstream Muslim organization in the world has condemned them as being un-Muslim or even anti-Muslim (as they have), then they are simply twisting that scripture to their purposes. Like white supremacist movements that claim to be based on Christian principles, religion is a legitimizing tool and an identity marker rather than a behavioral guide.

We must also ask where the analogy is for us as Christians. Do the hate mongers of Westboro Baptist represent Christianity because they quote scripture and call themselves Christians? Does the fact that the vast majority of Christians do not think Westboro represents Christianity mean that they are not legitimate? Does the fact that almost all of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims condemn ISIS mean that ISIS is not Muslim? Most of the people fighting against ISIS, and almost all of their victims, are also Muslim. What significance does that have?

Some people say that the Quran is a fundamentally violent text that inevitably leads to the kind of violence we see in ISIS. There is certainly no shortage of violence in the Quran, but what happens when we turn our attention to the Bible? Is one scripture more violent than the other? What happens if we examine these individual texts through the lens of their fundamental teachings, rather than isolating certain parts?

When Jesus walked the streets of the Holy Land, those streets were highly stratified, and he was living under violent foreign occupation. Some people were slaves, and some were free. Some were exalted and some were unclean. Some were marginalized and some were privileged. Some mattered, others didn’t. Jesus challenged that hierarchy over and over again, talking and eating with people who were rejected by his society both because they were powerless (women, foreigners, lepers), and because they were powerful (tax collectors, Roman soldiers). He challenged the violent punishment of a woman by asking who among the stone-throwers is without sin, he touched the unclean, he ate with the oppressors. In short, he humanized everyone who was being dehumanized.

If we do reach out across lines that separate us—as individuals, as the church, as a nation, and as the world, what effect will that have on violent extremism? What is the most effective long-term solution for countering the recruitment of organizations like this, foreign and domestic? And, more importantly, what are we called to do if we really take Jesus’ teaching seriously?

David LaMotte is a Rotary World Peace Fellow with a master's degree in International Relations from the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. He will soon be performing at the World Parliament of Religions as part of Abraham Jam, a trio that includes a Jewish singer/songwriter and a Muslim singer/songwriter. His most recent book is Worldchanging 101: Challenging the Myth of Powerlessness (www.worldchanging101.com).

Response: Terra Winston

Through my work with the Christian Peacemaker Teams in the Kurdish region of Iraq, I have had the privilege of working with youth from a variety of faith traditions who have taught me a great deal about what peace is. These young people had to leave their homes because of the war in Syria and the surge of ISIS in Iraq. In many cases they didn’t even have time to pack their favorite items, but they did bring with them their dreams for the future and ideas of peace.
We encouraged these young people to tell what peace meant to them through writing and artwork. Instead of taking the lead, our team listened to the youth and their stories, and allowed them to educate us on what peace is. One story that really struck me was a young man who had watched one of his neighbors shoot another neighbor as his family was leaving their home. This young man was shocked that these neighbors, who used to be friends, were in this situation. He said, "If we are to have peace, we have to learn to see this as a mistake, we have to learn to forgive, because if humanity never learns to forgive, we will never have peace."

Below are several answers to what youth believe peace to be. Like with any youth group, there were a wide variety of views on what true peace looks like. Here are some of their answers:

For some, peace is when their favorite soccer team (FC Barcelona) is winning, or going to the amusement park with their aunt and cousins.

There is a space behind the mountain. In spring there are a lot of flowers and trees. This is a beautiful area, especially during spring. At night we could hear the sound of the wolves. Then, we used to be very scared. But in the morning, everything used to change. It was bright and we were not scared anymore. I used to go out planting trees and flowers. I loved it. Now, in the camp there are no trees and no flowers. But I believe that sooner or later I will work again, because I love working. And I love peace. And we have a special proverb in Kurdish, “Plant, don’t cut (the flowers).” 14 year old from Arbat IDP Camp

Youth age 14 at Arbat IDP Camp

Youth ages 10-14 from the Kobane School in Iraqi Kurdistan

"Peace is a great leader who stands between the enemies and declares ‘do not fight!’ Until the people decide to put down their guns and there is no war."
Whether their stories were of violence they had witnessed firsthand or about going to the amusement park with their family, when these young people dreamed about peace, it was relational. This is what they taught me. If we are to have peace, we have to do it together, with our loved ones and with those that seem like the “other” to us. The work that the youth of Syria and Iraq are doing envisioning peace through their drawings and words might seem like a small endeavor, and in many ways it is. Yet we learn from scripture not to discount small things—the mustard seeds among us—because it is sometimes those very mustard seeds that move mountains.

As people blessed to lead youth and be led by youth, how do we see peace as more than the absence of violence? We must start by engaging them on the topic. We can have them write about it, sing about it, draw it, and enact it. We need to ask them how they understand peace in the wider world and in their own lives. What do they see as barriers to this peace? What role do they play in bringing about peace in the world, in their home, their schools, their communities? If our youth can begin to envision peace, they can teach us all how to move mountains.

_Terra Winston is the Delegations Coordinator for Christian Peacemaker Teams, an organization that builds partnerships to transform violence and oppression. She has worked with refugees in the Kurdish region of Iraq, working for peace through storytelling with young people._

**Response: Safwat Marzouk**

Empowering young people to engage with difficult questions concerning the events of the world around them is a challenging task but a very necessary one. Limited time, energy, and knowledge are huge obstacles to understanding these issues, and most global issues are extremely complex, making analysis and discussion difficult. In addition, complex situations and painful realities sometimes leave leaders and youth feeling helpless and hopeless—not knowing what to do or whether the little work that their community can do will make a difference.

The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its aggression and violence toward religious minorities is one such complex, global issue. ISIS has risen on the scene as a result of a regional power struggle between different political and religious parties. This struggle has kept local regimes from paying enough attention to improving education, health care, and the living standards of their citizens. But the rise of ISIS is also a result of western colonial and imperial policies that have controlled these countries for a long time. Even after the end of formalized colonialism, western countries continued to intrude politically and militarily to protect their own interest at the expense of the stability of these countries—evidenced, for instance, in the 2003 war in Iraq initiated by the USA. Struggles over political power and economic greed has left ordinary citizens in
vulnerable situations in which they are deprived of the means of a good life.

Recall ISIS’s brutal killing of 21 Christian Egyptians by the Libyan shore in Spring of 2015. You might have wondered why these Egyptians chose to live in Libya, since Libya is in a state of civil war between different militia. The reality is that many people have no options other than dying slowly in poverty or taking risky chances like living in Libya (thinking that there might be some hope out there.) All they found back home or over there was death and despair.

But oppression and despair are not last word. The Bible provides us with words of lament that both acknowledge haunting realities and look beyond gloomy conditions. Words of lament urge God to act and empower humans to become agents of change as they refuse to settle for a choice between the bad and the worst. Words of lament are words of trust that God is at work renewing and redeeming creation.

Habakkuk contains bitter prayers of lament to God concerning the vicious cycle of injustice. Via lament, the prophet pleads to God to intervene against the injustice conducted by both the local Judean and the imperial Babylonian oppressive systems. The prophet challenges God as he cries out, “O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” (Hab 1:2). The prophet is perplexed: why does the world seem to be caught between the oppressive systems of both the local Judean government and the imperial Babylonian power structures?

The book of Habakkuk laments injustice at home and abroad and refuses to stop demanding that God establish a reign that brings shalom as an alternative to oppression. What gives hope and assures the righteous in the midst of chaos is that God reigns. "But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (2:20). In this liturgical setting, with all eyes fixed on the temple, the microcosm of the divine rule, the Lord appears as a warrior who is coming to put an end to disorder (3:1–16). Such a vision moves the prophet to rejoice in the Lord despite shortcomings and lack of prosperity (3:17–19). This vision of divine sovereignty and the hope in the midst of chaos would not have taken place without the human initiative of lament.

Lament is a solution all people, young or old, can turn to when the issues of the world feel helpless and hopeless. Any Christian education that helps young people construct a complex understanding of the painful realities of the world must embrace lament as a faithful method of engagement with God and the world. As Habakkuk witnessed, lament makes a difference in a world yearning for love, reconciliation, and hope.

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Discussion Questions

1. What was your reaction to the attacks in Paris? When you learned that the Islamic State (or ISIS) was claiming responsibility for the attacks, how did you feel? What did you think?
2. What relationships do you have with people of other religions? Does this affect your perception of ISIS?
3. What does real peace look like? Why is peace so hard to realize?
4. In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Jesus tells his followers to love their enemies, and when Jesus was on the cross, he prayed for those who were crucifying him. Why did he do this? How do these passages help Christians think about ISIS?
5. Do you think it is possible to find God in the Syrian refugee crisis? In the Paris attacks?
Additional Resources

**ISIS and the Lonely Young American** – This article and video tell a gripping story of a young woman recruited to join ISIS online. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html?_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html?_r=0)

**What ISIS Really Wants** - This article in *The Atlantic* provides an in depth exploration of ISIS, including its eschatological underpinnings. It includes a helpful map as well. [http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/)

**How Islamic Is the Islamic State? Not at All.** – This *New Republic* article refutes some of the points in *The Atlantic* article above. [https://newrepublic.com/article/121286/how-islamic-islamic-state](https://newrepublic.com/article/121286/how-islamic-islamic-state)