

# Christian hospitality and pastoral practices in a multifaith society

BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

*In response to increasing religious diversity in the United States and Canada, The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) adopted a new area of focus in its 2008–2012 work plan, “Multifaith Dimensions of Theological Education.” In 2009, the Henry Luce Foundation, long a faithful partner and supporter of ATS, granted funding for a three-year project. While other organizations were suited to facilitate interreligious dialogue and theological reflections on interactions among world faiths, ATS chose to focus on pastoral practices.*

Throughout its history, ATS has valued the different theological traditions across its membership and nurtured collegial relationships among them. Pastoral practices represented a common area of ministry instruction that was a concern of all schools, but that was approached from different theological and ecclesial perspectives.

The Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices in a Multifaith Society (CHAPP) project sought both to capture the wisdom of many schools already at work in this area and also to nudge schools to prepare their graduates to serve faithfully and effectively in contexts increasingly shaped by multiple faith traditions. The project would also develop resources that could be adapted and used by schools across the ecclesial spectrum.

## ***Rapidly shifting religious landscape***

It is appropriate to review that project now, because the need for religious leaders to provide guidance in the midst of ongoing, perhaps heightened, tensions among religious groups is vitally important. The steadily increas-



ing multifaith realities both within ATS schools and the contexts within which they and their graduates serve demand such wise leadership.

The percentages of people with world faiths other than Christian continue their slow growth within the US and Canada. In 2008, for example, while about 80 percent of Americans self-identified as Christian, roughly two percent of the population self-identified as Jewish. Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus together accounted for another two percent. By 2023–24, the percentage of those self-identifying as Jewish remained at two percent, and Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus were each about one percent of the population.

In Canada, over the past two decades, the change was more dramatic. Between 2001 and 2021, the proportion of Canada’s population who reported being Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh has more than doubled—from two to nearly five percent for Muslims, from one to nearly two and a half percent for Hindus, and from just under one percent to just over two percent for Sikhs.

In both countries, however, the most significant changes have been decreases in the population self-identified as Christian (in the US from 80 percent in 2011 to

62 percent in 2023; and in Canada from more than two-thirds in 2011 to just over half in 2021) and the growth of those reporting no religious affiliation (in the US from 17 percent to 29 percent between 2008 and 2023, and in Canada from 17 percent to 35 percent between 2001 and 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, it may be the case that many of the findings from the CHAPP study name and address challenges and opportunities for pastoral practices in the environment of this growing non-affiliated population, as well as the contexts of multiple faiths.

### ***Number of non-Christian students and faculty***

Similar to patterns in US and Canadian populations, there have been increases in the numbers of students attending ATS schools who represent faiths other than Christian. While the overall student headcount across ATS has increased by about five percent from 2009 to 2024, during that same period the number of students representing Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist faiths has increased by nearly 250 percent. As is the case with the overall population, the student numbers are relatively small, representing less than one percent of the student headcount in ATS schools. Yet, their presence offers the schools both the opportunities and challenges named in the CHAPP project.<sup>2</sup>

The religious affiliation data for ATS full-time faculty also involves small numbers, but the changes are significant. No Buddhist full-time faculty member was employed in 2010, but in 2024, there were six. The number of full-time Muslim faculty has also increased significantly, from eight in 2010 to 14 in 2024. Meanwhile, the number of Jewish full-time faculty has declined from 28 in 2009 to 21 in 2024.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Phase one: a learning process***

Beginning in April 2010, the CHAPP project's initial phase convened scholars from ATS schools to identify key issues and gather wisdom from current practices, to engage expert practitioners of world faiths, and to hear from chaplains from a variety of institutions. The first consultation included brief reports distributed ahead of time and presentations by participants from

20 schools about each school's activities related to education for ministry within multifaith contexts. Roundtable discussions followed the presentations. The meeting also initiated conversations within the three "ecclesial families" represented in ATS—Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic/Orthodox.

The following September, 39 participants representing each ecclesial family group met to discuss their distinctive approaches to issues of ministry in multifaith contexts. Conversations addressed each family's preferred terminology, documents with particular authority, and curricular resources and faculty. The meeting also included plenary conversations designed to share insights with the other families. Participants appreciated the opportunity to hear differing perspectives and also the collegial tone maintained in the meetings, even in the presence of disagreement. Following the meeting, three-person writing teams were named and assigned to write reports drawing on the conversations. The reports would form the basis for additional ecclesial family conversations planned for the next meeting in April 2011.

A highlight of the September 2010 meeting and subsequent meetings was the expertise of chaplains from hospitals, correctional facilities, and the military. Their daily experience of ministry in multifaith settings grounded the project's discussions in the reality of ongoing work.

Building on the writing teams' draft reports circulated in March 2011, the April meeting continued the ecclesial family conversations and added reflections on the reports by representatives of Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. Input from roundtable conversations contributed to the growing list of findings and recommendations from the project. Final ecclesial family reports were published in the ATS journal, *Theological Education*, in 2012.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the project, ATS staff reported on findings to the task force concurrently at work to revise the *ATS Standards of Accreditation*.

## Phase two: grants awarded, reports shared

Along with the consultations and conversations, the CHAPP project's second phase provided small grants to schools to explore ways of integrating multifaith elements into their curricula and co-curricular practices. The project awarded 18 grants in four general categories: integrating curriculum and communities of faith, faculty development, pastoral practices, and crossing cultural barriers.

Project reports ranging from six to twelve pages that included learning, best practices, and resources, were distributed to participants for a wrap-up consultation in September 2012. At that meeting, each school presented findings from its project. Three of the chaplains, one from a hospital, another from a correctional facility, and the third from the military, offered their reflections and recommendations about the CHAPP project. Presentations on related projects by Auburn Theological Seminary and the American Academy of Religion concluded the program. Nine of the project reports were published in Theological Education along with reflections on the projects of Jewish and Muslim scholar practitioners.<sup>5</sup>

## Summary of the project's findings

Among the project's findings and recommendations were the following:

- Given that the curricula of most theological schools are already full, it is best to find ways to weave interfaith issues into existing courses and co-curricular activities.
- In contrast to the expectations (and fears) of some, interfaith conversations normally strengthen the faith commitments of those involved rather than erode them. Project participants agreed that it is important to know and be committed to one's own faith while finding ways to be open to learning about the faith of others.
- It is best to let practitioners of a faith present it themselves rather than relying on outside experts.

- Relationship-building, including close listening and patience, are essential for ministry in multifaith contexts.
- It is best to be up front and honest about differences.
- Self-reflection and self-assessment are important.
- There is great value of interfaith dialogue for peace-making.
- Quoting the former Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl, one should not "bear false witness against another's faith—or one's own."
- The chaplains were an outstanding resource as regular practitioners of Christian hospitality in multifaith contexts.
- A significant challenge for the project was the wide diversity within the ecclesial families.
- Another challenge was the reality of diverse expressions within every religious tradition.

Though completed more than a decade ago, the CHAPP project produced relationships that continue to bear fruit and resources relevant to present and future ministries.

**Editor's note:** See the following page for links to the remainder of the project reports.

<sup>1</sup>Sources for these data are: Mark Chaves, American Religion: Contemporary Trends, Princeton University Press, 2011; <https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/> and <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/census/census-engagement/community-supporter/ethnocultural-and-religious-diversity>, both accessed 7.14.25.

<sup>2</sup>ATS Annual Data Tables, table 2.16 from 2009 and table 2.13 from 2024.

<sup>3</sup>In addition to the full-time faculty, there are 11 part-time Jewish faculty (teaching less than a 50 percent load). The Academy of Jewish Religion, which joined ATS in 2018 and was accredited in 2020, employs eight of them.

<sup>4</sup>*Theological Education*, vol. 47, number 1 (2012).

<sup>5</sup>*Theological Education*, vol. 47, number 2 (2013).



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## Access the individual CHAPP reports

### ***Integrating Curriculum and Communities of Faith***

#### Andover Newton Theological School

Taking Interfaith Off the Hill:  
Engaging Local Faith Communities

#### Hartford Theological Seminary

Developing Curriculum to Educate Parish  
Clergy for a Multifaith World

#### Luther Seminary

The Pastoral Practice of Christian Hospitality  
as Presence in Muslim-Christian Engagement:  
Contextualizing the Classroom

#### Pentecostal Theological Seminary

Christian Hospitality and Neighborliness:  
A Wesleyan-Pentecostal Ministry Paradigm  
for the Multifaith Context

### ***Pastoral Practices***

#### Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary

Caring Hospitably in Multifaith Situations

#### Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University

Interfaith Perspectives  
on Religious Practices

#### Iliff School of Theology

Putting into Practice an Intercultural Approach  
to Spiritual Care with Veterans

#### Wake Forest University School of Divinity

Creating Places of Welcome: Pastoral Care  
and Worship in a Multifaith Society

### ***Faculty Development***

#### Ashland Theological Seminary

Challenge and Opportunity: Preparing  
Students to Minister in a Multifaith Society

#### Bethany Theological Seminary

Practicing God's Shalom and Christ's  
Peace in Pastoral Ministry

#### New Brunswick Theological Seminary

Pedagogies and Partnerships for  
Ministry in a Multifaith World

#### St. John's University School of Theology-Seminary

Raising Awareness of Christian Hospitality  
and Pastoral Practices in a Multifaith Society

#### United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

Christian Hospitality in a World of Many Faiths:  
Equipping the New Generation of Religious  
Leaders in a Multifaith Context

### ***Crossing Cultural Barriers***

#### Boston University School of Theology

Teaching Religion, Conflict, and Peace-Building  
in a Multifaith World: An Interreligious  
Consultation on Theological Education

#### Ecumenical Theological Seminary

Listen, Learn, and Live: Building Bridges of  
Understanding Among People of Different  
Cultures and Faith Traditions

#### Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

Engaging Public Theology in a Multifaith  
Context: Building on Theological Education  
that Forms and Shapes Faithful and Sensitive  
Leaders for a Public Church

#### Multnomah Biblical Seminary of Multnomah University

Table Fellowship with Our Buddhist Neighbors  
for Beloved Community

#### North Park Theological Seminary

Developing a Cultural Competency Module (CCM)  
to Facilitate Christian Hospitality and Promote  
Pastoral Practices in a Multifaith Society