INTERFAITH PERSPECTIVES ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Brite Divinity School
at Texas Christian University
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Activities funded by the grant:
Through this grant, Brite Divinity School offered four multi-faith panels (with a fifth planned for the fall of 2012) related to ministerial practices that regularly arise in faith communities: blessing children, weddings and unions, burial practices, and responding to issues of public debate. Each 2 hour panel was held during lunch time on Brite’s campus and involved Jewish, Muslim, and Christian panelists presenting on the topic of the day then engaging the audience in conversation. The four panels were held on October 20, 2011; December 1, 2011, January 26, 2012, and March 1, 2012 (the fifth will be held on October 15, 2012). Grant money funded honoraria for the panelists, a stipend for the project director, lunch food for attendees, and publicity.

Learnings:
We had two goals for the panels. First, we intended for the panels to “increase student readiness to engage in and reflect upon four selected ministerial practices . . . with heightened awareness of the meaning these practices have in Christian communities and informed by an appreciation for the meaning of parallel practices in Jewish and Muslim faith communities.” Our second goal was to “assist Brite faculty in achieving a faculty development goal of increasing the number of courses that include learning outcomes and assignments that enhance student readiness for ministerial leadership in a religiously plural context.”

We achieved only modest success with the first goal because of low student turnout. Brite recently implemented an MDiv curriculum that includes a course requirement in Religious Plurality and a curricular goal that includes students’ informed readiness to engage other religious traditions generously and critically. These curricular emphases

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1 Regarding the fifth panel, we recently discovered that we did not spend the entire amount allocated to us in the grant. Therefore, we are requesting an extension of the grant so that we can use the funds for the panel event in October, described at the end of this document. A proposal for the fifth panel, including a budget report and budget narrative, will be included separately upon submission of this report.

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have been well received by students and prospective students. Increasingly, we find our students interested and engaged in interfaith dialogue and interreligious learning experiences. Why so few students chose to attend the panels funded by this grant is puzzling to those of us who evaluated the experiences. The low student attendance may be due, in part, to the large number of co-curricular learning opportunities offered at Brite and the necessity to choose among them while attending to the whole of life as students. The students who did participate were very engaged with the panel conversations and reported positive impressions of the events.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which we achieved our second goal. Very few faculty chose to attend the panels, despite regular encouragement to do so. This, too, is likely the result of overfilled schedules and choices individual faculty members must make about their time. However, we believe that the panels contributed to our second goal in a few ways. First, the faculty was fully supportive of this initiative. Second, because the events were widely publicized and faculty were frequently reminded of them, the issues addressed by the panels in an interreligious setting were continually set before the faculty’s awareness. Finally, anecdotal evidence suggests that some faculty who did attend the panels intend to incorporate assignments and outcomes related to religious plurality into their courses. One faculty member who attended all of the panels commented that they increased awareness of “my continuing need to “de-center” my own perspectives and experiences.”

While we achieved mixed results on the goals named in the initial project proposal, several other positive outcomes were achieved by the panels. First, we provided a dialogue space for a topic of great public interest. Despite low faculty and student turnout, attendance at each panel was very strong and the audience was comprised primarily of interested persons in the Fort Worth and Dallas communities. A number of Christian clergy and laypersons of various faiths attended the events. The grant enabled Brite to provide public leadership in the community on an issue of critical current interest and importance. Participants encountered persons of religious traditions other than their own and learned new things about those traditions and their practices. A common thread of interest running throughout all of the panels had to do with hospitality and sensitivity with which the panels dealt. Concrete examples include a Christian participant wanting to know whether to offer communion to a Jewish or Muslim person who might attend a Christian wedding and Muslim women explaining appropriate ways for men to greet them in public.
Another positive outcome was that, despite relatively low faculty and student attendance, the panels did, in fact, facilitate direct engagement between Brite Christian students, faculty and staff and Jewish and Muslim persons. The primary significance here is that Christian Divinity students and faculty engaged persons of other faiths seeking to learn from rather than to only talk to.

Another positive outcome was completely unintended. During the panel on weddings and unions, one of the panelists answered an audience member’s inquiry about same sex unions within the tradition in an unintentionally hurtful manner. Brite has placed significant emphasis on the study of sexuality, sexual difference, and sexual justice, and on creating a fully inclusive ethos at the school in recent years. The exchange between the questioner (a Brite student) and the panelist created a stir among GLBTQ students and allies who assumed that the panelist’s comments were endorsed by Brite. Their inquiries led to an opportunity for a very fruitful conversation among GLBTQ students and faculty members involved in the planning of the event. We clarified Brite’s stance on inclusion while also conducting a conversation on how we engage difference and diversity of all kinds (including theological diversity). The incident emerged in large part because of the format of the panels: asking panelists to represent an entire religious tradition in all its diversity on any particular issue is inherently limiting. This is an issue for further reflection that we intend to address in future events (see reflections on this below). On this topic, a faculty member who attended this panel commented: “One benefit that came out of our interfaith panels was that it asked our community, including students, faculty, and administration, to consider difficult questions about how we are to represent the Christian faith in a multifaith context. How do we respect and acknowledge the diversity of the Christian faith, for example by allowing a Christian minister speak against same sex unions, while at the same time respecting and affirming the diversity of our community.” Finally, we were reminded of the need for clarity in communicating with panelists what the expectations are for such events, and the context into which they speak (without trying to determine or censor what they have to say).

A final positive outcome for the panels was that we made new friends and solidified relationships with the Multi-Cultural Alliance (MCA)—an interfaith dialogue group in Fort Worth—and with Muslim and Jewish neighbors. A Master of Divinity student, Amanda Henderson, with keen interest in interreligious relationships and with experience and contacts in the MCA, served as part of the planning and coordinating team for the events and served as moderator for the panels. Amanda’s extensive
contacts among religious communities in the area were valuable in our planning and helped us identify and reach out to members of the Jewish and Muslim communities. A faculty member commented: “We not only learned new information, but we encountered persons who had integrated their faith traditions into their lives. The individuals were warm, humorous, and engaging. Experiencing another person opens our minds in ways that reading can’t capture.”

One challenge we faced after the panels ended was what might be termed the “So what?” factor. In other words, the panels were informative, if limited, introductions to religious practices in diverse religious communities. However, there is a lingering sense of wondering what to do with the information exchanged in the panel conversations. Is it simply up to individuals to assimilate the information and practice hospitality? Or are there some further steps that might be taken that could help ministerial leaders and religious communities to practice hospitality in the midst of plurality? This issue is addressed below in the discussion of planning a future event on the environment.

Remaining questions and implications:
The primary remaining question we have is “what next?” This project will serve as a catalyst for further attention to preparing students to engage religious plurality generously and wisely in their ministerial practices and to further interreligious exchange on the Brite / TCU campus. It will have both curricular and co-curricular implications. As the Diversity and Social Justice Committee (the faculty governance committee that managed the events funded by the grant) met at the close of the spring 2012 semester to evaluate the panels, there was obvious enthusiasm for continuing to attend to these issues and for holding more events like the panels. The committee thought it well to recommend seeking funds from other sources to continue sponsoring similar interreligious conversations. We have had conversations with representatives from the Dallas-based Institute of Interfaith Dialog about sponsoring a workshop on Islam, tentatively agreeing to schedule that for the 2012–13 academic year. However, the first follow up event is scheduled for October 15; it will be an interfaith panel on the environment, co-sponsored with Texas Interfaith Power and Light (an interfaith environmental advocacy organization).

The next event will incorporate some changes resulting from reflection on how we organized and structured the previous panels. First, we are holding the event during the evening, believing that this will increase attendance, if not among students, certainly from interested members of the wider Fort Worth / Dallas community. Second,
rather than have each panelist speak broadly for an entire religious tradition and about such broad topics (e.g., having a Christian representative speak for all of Christianity on the initiatory rite of baptism was very limiting because she came from a tradition that practices baptism primarily with infants, whereas many Christian traditions only baptize adolescents or adults), we are asking each panelist to address a narrower topic and from their particular theological or religious perspective within their tradition. Rather than ask panelists to speak about “the environment” in general, we are asking them to speak to the issue of water in Texas and how faith communities might draw upon religious resources within their traditions to address a concrete, particular environmental, agricultural, and political issue that affects everyone’s lives. Third, rather than simply being an informational session, we hope for some concrete action steps to emerge from the panel discussions. This is one reason for partnering with Texas IP&L, an interfaith environmental agency with experience in organizing persons from diverse faith communities and helping them implement steps toward practice within their communities and advocacy in the public realm.

Finally, we recognize the limited scope of the panel format we developed. Only the Abrahamic faiths were represented. In the future, while it is important to continue dialogue among Muslims, Jews, and Christians, we intend to widen the scope of our conversations to include representatives from other faith traditions.