LISTEN, LEARN, & LIVE

The ETS-Muslim Hospitality Grant Report

Ecumenical Theological Seminary
Urias H. Beverly

Introduction

The Ecumenical Theological Seminary (ETS) takes pride in its role as a leader in metropolitan Detroit not only in providing quality academic instruction to seminarians, local church leaders, chaplains, and clergy, but also in their history and commitment to ecumenism and urban ministry. ETS’s current and future focus, however, is also now grounded in a recognition that it needs to engage in interfaith efforts both as an institution and through its programming. A significant way that ETS can do so is through “Listen, Learn, and Live”—a methodology developed and being implemented by an ETS Alumnus, the Rev. Michail Curro, CEO of a metropolitan Detroit based not-for-profit, Interfaith Center for Racial Justice, ICRJ. At ETS we believe that interfaith collaboration and cooperation is essential in our multifaith society, particularly in working for justice and peace. We understand that hospitality is more than the intellectual information one can learn about another culture; it is more importantly emotional acceptance of difference and the willingness of both a host and a guest to develop a relationship with one another. Relationships, however, are not built through intellectual endeavors; relationships, and true cultural understanding, are developed by bringing people together to listen to, learn from, and live with one another.

Some of us understood this before we applied for the ATS hospitality grant and we had already begun relating to the Muslim community by their request for help with education and training in the area of pastoral care. We developed a two year pastoral care program for Muslims in 2009 and intended to enlist students beginning in September of 2010. We were disappointed but yet gratified in learning that we did not know enough about the Muslim culture to begin the program. We knew what was in the book, but we did not know what was in the hearts of the Muslim people. We were ready to be their hosts, but they were not sure what that would mean. Consequently, they were not sure if they wanted to be our guest, even those who wanted what we offered to them in education.
A good example is: we invited a group of Imams to ETS to talk about the program we designed. An Imam that was highly respected and serving as President of the ICRJ, chair of the Metropolitan Detroit Imam’s Committee, and Treasurer of the InterFaith Leadership Council (IFLC) had helped to put the program together. He served as moderator of the meeting and asked Dr. Beverly to offer a prayer for the meeting and the food we were about to eat. He had never been in a Christian minority in a meeting with such august religious leaders of the Muslim faith. His anxiety turned a good prayer into a tremendous offense when he concluded the intended interfaith prayer in a solely Christian way by grounding the prayer in Jesus’ name. In response not only was he verbally trounced on, but the Imam chairing the meeting was battered even more because he should have known better. Dr. Beverly writes in his book, *The Places You Go*, “A good pastoral relationship will cover a multitude of sins.” It was obvious that we had not yet established a good (trusting) relationship with these Imams. Hence we delayed starting the pastoral care program until the next year and greater understanding of and trust between us could be built. During this interim time we had several opportunities to play host and guest to the Muslim community. The grant was the icing on the cake to help us develop the hospitality we needed to work together. Both communities, ETS and the Muslim were already invested in making this program work for us with or without the financial help.

**Review of Activities**
The first activity we did was a seminar on Understanding the Muslim Culture; this was led by Mustapha Elturk, Imam and President of the Islam Organization of North America (IONA). This took place at ETS in the spring of 2011 and was well attended by students, faculty, and staff of ETS. Other persons in the community also attended; some twenty five to thirty people in all. We had intended to be finished in four to five hours, but we had to call a halt to the process after more than five and a half hours so we could clean the place up. The evaluations from the participants manifested a hunger for information about Muslim people we see and work with and live next door to, but have never really spoken with to ask questions that were answered in the seminar. Many participants stayed around talking and getting to know each other better after the seminar ended as trust and emotional acceptance was being built.

There were several things that we learned from this event: one is that we have to be intentional about interfaith hospitality and relationship building for it to happen all. Second, scheduling is very difficult when two faiths try to come together for an event.
That is true particularly in the academic world because everything is designed around the courses that are being taken by students for a grade. In short, the school has to put the kind of effort and spirit into interfaith hospitality as the institution would put into a capital campaign. After this seminar it became clear that we said the right words and approved the plan, but everyone was only investing some of their time doing what needed to be done just to meet deadlines. We now felt the when people were talking about what we could and should do next. Some participants asked if we would be doing this annually. We will talk about that eventuality a little later.

Listen, Learn, & Live (LLL)
Our proposal scheduled five programs and activities over the next twelve months with the ICRJ that would engage the ETS community with the Muslim community in metropolitan Detroit. We envisioned these plans would be developed as a template for future outreach plans to other cultural communities in metro Detroit. We began a Muslim Chaplaincy Program (MCP) in September 2011. It was a two year program; there were eight Muslim students that began this program. One of the courses assigned in the first semester was entitled “Listen, Learn, and Live.” It was included to ground the incoming Muslim students in the understanding that most chaplains will serve an interfaith population and therefore they must both have an intellectual understanding of other cultures and faith traditions, but more importantly an emotional acceptance of those with different beliefs and practices. This course was designed and taught by the CEO of the ICRJ, a Christian and ETS alumnus, who all along had been working with both ETS and the Muslim community to develop and launch the MCP.

The format for the course involved including a number of presenters from different cultures and faith traditions outside of ETS coming in to dialogue with the students from their faith tradition. Hence the students would be learning about other cultures and faiths from leaders within these communities, rather than from an instructor knowledgeable about but not living or practicing within the communities. The significance of this approach cannot be over-stated. For example, one can learn to speak and read Spanish, but he or she cannot fully understand or relate to the Hispanic culture unless completely immersed in the culture for years. Likewise developing a working understanding of other cultures and faith traditions requires building relationships with and gaining understanding from people within other cultures and faith traditions. The visiting presenters included Fr. Manuel Boji, Rev. Tyrone Martin, Rabbi Jason Starr, and Arun Vijan from the Chaldean, African American, Jewish, and Indian communities respectively. In addition, the chaplaincy students attended worship
at St. Francis-St. Maximilian Catholic Church (a Roman Catholic Church in Ray Township) and met after the service for dialogue with the priest (Fr. Chris Talbot) and leaders from within the Hispanic ministry at St. Francis-St. Maximilian.

**Cultural Exercise: BaFa BaFa**

We had done the BaFa BaFa exercise last year as preparation to welcome Muslim students to the MCP program (Muslim Chaplaincy Program). The participants included ETS students, staff, faculty and Muslims from the community. There were several persons who participated as consultants from the ICRJ in facilitating the exercise helping us understand the dynamics of trying to relate as a stranger in a totally different culture. We can’t tell you what happened lest the word gets out and destroys the effect of the exercise. However, it was such a rich experience that we wanted to share it with as many of the seminary community as we could. So we tried to schedule it again, but were unable to do so. We still would like to do it and believe we will have a better opportunity in the fall.

As far as what was experienced by those of us who did it, there were a lot of feelings shared: fear, anxiety, embarrassment, frustration, anger, etc. There were also moments of kindness, grace, smiles, which stimulated hope. But these pleasant experiences were often dashed quickly by making an offensive gesture out of pure ignorance of the “other” culture. There were a few surprises of acceptance that came about for no understandable reason until we processed the exercise at the end. Several participants reported how real the role play felt and others recalled having similar feelings and emotions in prior situations when interacting with people from other cultures and/or faith traditions. In conclusion there was a lot of empathy gained through the simulation for persons in a strange culture trying to make their way and not knowing what to do or say. Most importantly all of the participants felt a vulnerability as a result of BaFa BaFa which is critical in “listening to, learning from, and living with” others in a less judgmental way.

**Interfaith Breakfast Seminar for the Abrahamic Faith**

ICRJ’s Annual International Breakfast Seminar (to be held this past spring with ETS) did not happen mostly because it was the year that we intended to have a Jewish speaker. Normally that would be no problem, but just because things are going well at home does not mean all is right with the world. We were reminded how members of different faiths are so well connected and affected by things that happen in the Middle East or elsewhere.
In place of the intended seminar we instead quickly developed an Interfaith Discussion focusing on Tarek Mehanna’s Sentencing Statement entitled, “Social Justice in a Post 9/11 U.S.” This provocative discussion featured Ron Scott, a local Civil Rights Activist and Emmy Award winning producer as the keynote speaker, and respondents Dr. Jim Perkinson (ETS Professor of Ethics and Systematic Theology) and Imam Abdul Malik Mujahid (Chair of the Board of the World Parliament of Religions). Participating in the event (approximately 50 in total) were faculty and students from ETS, several local leaders within the Muslim community, and others working for social justice.

The event included a Question and Answer session with the speakers and concluded with a meal catered from a local Middle Eastern restaurant to allow the participants a deeper cultural experience and ETS to once again extend hospitality to our Muslim brothers and sisters. With the success of such a quickly organized event we are planning to hold similar events/seminars in the future. We collected evaluations and collated them. The response was very positive and the hope that we would do this annually was expressed several times. One of the MCP students remarked, “If we keep doing thing like this the Muslim community will begin to trust ETS and then everybody will be here. We ordered too much food and gave it to the a women’s shelter in the name of ETS/Muslim Dialogue.

**DMin Emergent Week Theme Course**
Our DMin program at ETS is grounded in two major weeks each year which we call Emergent Weeks (Intensive Study). Each Emergent Week has a Theme Course that sets the tone for the entire week. We selected a theme for the course *Hospitality Is Required* using the biblical text of Heb. 13:2. The presenters were two Muslims: Dr. Munawar Haque, a layman and Najah Bazzy, a female Cultural Specialist. They were in charge for five days, a total of 13 ½ hours. According to the evaluations we received and the verbal comments on the last day, the experience was overwhelmingly positive. There were some sticky places in the discussion during the week and there are still people who think that is was a waste of time, but they are very few. There was touching and healing for many of the participants and the presenters. Some people wanted more information. Others wanted to visit a mosque. Several people were in tears, including one of the presenters. And there was a lot of hugging even when it broke some social rules. Dr. Haque was immensely humble and appreciative for the experience.
**Arab American Museum Tour, Interfaith Swoop, and Celebration**

We learned over the past year that the number of activities we proposed in the first year of the Muslim Hospitality Project was too many. The demands of launching the Muslim Chaplaincy Program, the academic teaching and class load on ETS faculty and students, and the challenges for key project leaders (Imam Mustapha Elturk and Rev. Michail Curro) of leading a congregation and not-for-profit organizations meant that some items: the Arab American Museum Tour, Interfaith Swoop, and Celebration would have to be pushed out into the next academic year.

Our current plan now is to first offer another BaFa BaFa session at ETS in Fall 2012 and to follow this with a weekend that would include on Friday congregational prayers at a local mosque, touring the Arab American Museum in Dearborn, visiting the Islamic Center of America (the largest mosque in the U.S.), and conversation over dinner at a Middle Eastern restaurant, and then on Saturday attending a Catholic Church for a Saturday afternoon mass, and finally a celebration dinner/discussion at the church.

Finally, the following spring (2013) we are looking to hold another Interfaith Discussion as follow-up to this past June’s event that focused on Tarek Mehanna’s sentencing statement. Planning for this spring event will begin in the fall of this year to give us more time to structure the event, recruit and secure the “main” speaker(s), and fully market things.

**Conclusion**

The recent tragedy at the Sikh Gurdwara in Wisconsin, rampant Islamaphobia, and continued scapegoating and discrimination of people of color makes clear the need for this project. ETS has a long and proud history of commitment to and involvement in ecumenism and urban ministry. With the Muslim Hospitality Project and Muslim Chaplaincy Program ETS is building a critical role in interfaith collaboration, including interfaith partnerships that are not solely academic or intellectual, but steeped in developing relationships and trust. These relationships are being formed by listening to, learning from, and living with our neighbors from other cultures and faith traditions. The grant award from ATS has played a significant role in giving us resources to help promote such important work. Hopefully we can continue to receive support as we try to both further develop the Muslim Hospitality Project while launching like ventures with other area cultures and/or faith traditions.

---

This document was produced by Ecumenical Theological Seminary for a project administered by ATS with generous funding from the Henry Luce Foundation. © 2012, The Association of Theological Schools.