ENGAGING PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN A MULTI FAITH CONTEXT:
Building on Theological Education that Forms and Shapes
Faithful and Sensitive Leaders for a Public Church

Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia
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Background and Rationale for Project
In 2004 the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia instituted a new curriculum for all MDiv/MAR students that included several inter-faith requirements. First, students were introduced to issues of multi-faith engagement from the very beginning of their theological education in a required “Prologue” course entitled “Introduction to Public Theology.” This learning opportunity included a site visit to a Hindu Temple, Synagogue or Mosque, followed by intensive discussions. The goal of this assignment at the commencement of a student’s theological formation at the seminary was to demonstrate that from the very outset of one’s journey as a pastor or lay-leader of a particular community, one was also in public leadership in conjunction with other faith communities. A second inter-faith requirement mandated that students take at least one academic course on an inter-faith related topic. These courses were taught either by full-time faculty or team-taught with qualified members of other faith traditions. These courses were mandated to not only include classroom pedagogy, but an “experiential” element where students were directly engaged with practitioners from another faith tradition outside of the classroom. This requirement has been very successful and has received positive feedback through course assessments and student graduation exit evaluations.

It must be noted that this previous inter-faith component to the LTSP curriculum was encouraged by the work of Dr. J. Paul Rajashekar who came to LTSP in 1991 from the Lutheran World Federation, where he was the Secretary for Church and People of Other Faiths and Ideologies in the Department of Studies. As a theologian, Dr. Rajashekar began to push the Faculty of LTSP to think not only about issues of ecumenism, which had been a major force in Lutheran circles, but also inter-faith engagement. His work as the Dean of the Seminary provided the direction of instituting this forward thinking requirement of theological education.
In 2011, LTSP began a process for a new curriculum, which we hope to implement in the 2013-2014 academic year. Part of the curriculum revision process will be to reflect on this forward thinking inter-faith pedagogy. Based upon the previous requirement, and the changing dynamics of North American Church and society, the ATS grant has allowed LTSP to continue to live into our commitments of forming and shaping Public Leaders for hospitable and sensitive leadership in and among Christian communities where communities of other faiths are also present, active, and dynamically involved.

**Changing Dynamics as the Impetus**

LTSP is an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) denominational seminary fully committed to forming and shaping leaders as Public Theologians. Our mission statement reads:

> Centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia seeks to educate and form public leaders who are committed to developing and nurturing individual believers and communities of faith for engagement in the world

This mission statement, which was adopted in 2010, demonstrates two important shifts in vision. First, the seminary recognizes that it is educating and forming future leaders of the church who will be called upon to be a voice and representative of their faith tradition in public spaces. As a result LTSP is the very first seminary in the United States and Canada to be part of the Global Network for Public Theology.¹ Second, the mission statement recognizes that the Church is broader than congregational ministry, and embraces a wider vision of communities. One of the important aspects of living out this commitment to theological reflection in the public sphere is the Christian engagement with people of other living faiths within the context of American, and indeed, global civil society.² The process of theological education will require graduates to navigate the pluralistic North American context as faithful, sensitive and hospitable public leaders of their own faith communities.

LTSP is fully aware of the changing dynamics of religiosity in North America. This includes the changing contexts of its own traditional “mainline” denomination, the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Whereas, LTSP commenced its mission in 1864, training male pastors for service in predominantly German-Lutheran immigrant congregations, it now trains, shapes, and forms women and men for public ministry in a multitude of denominations and contexts. Whereas the seminary curriculum assumed preparation for congregational/parish ministry, students now go out to serve in a wide variety and range of ministry contexts, where even the role of congregations in society has changed. In addition, as a confessionally Lutheran but ecumenically diverse institution, our student body consists of 35 different Christian traditions, requiring the seminary to be faithful, sensitive and hospitable to its own constituents.

LTSP is also fully aware of the changing social demographics within the United States. Works by Robert Putnam and Diana Eck demonstrate that the United States is the most religiously active and diverse country in the world. Graduates who go out to serve Christian communities will find those communities organized, shaped, and impacted very differently than one hundred years ago. While the role of the Church has shifted from being a central civil institution to one social community among many, the religious identity marker for U.S. citizens has broadened to represent just about every religious tradition on the planet. One generation ago clergy associations had to wrestle with the sensitive issues of relationships between Protestants and Catholics. Now, clergy will have to wrestle with sensitive issues of relationships between different faiths. How does one minister to one’s own religious community in a context in which other religious communities make up the active citizenry and are part of civil society? How does one serve as the “town cleric” or chaplain to the police or fire departments, or within the local hospital, when Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, and Buddhists make up a significant portion of the neighborhood? How does one proclaim the Gospel in which active congregants have family members who are active faithful believers of another faith tradition? Our geographical location in the ethnically, religiously, sociologically, and economically diverse neighborhood of the Mount Airy section of Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia, situates our seminary at the intersection of these realities, and we have fostered initiatives and outreach programs to many groups and organizations, including through East Mount Airy Neighbors, located on the seminary campus.

Within this social context in mind LTSP has utilized the Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices in a Multifaith Society Project to pursue the questions of shaping and forming

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4 http://www.eastmountairy.org/
hospitable Christian leaders, while thinking through the Christian theological claims and issues of being faithful, sensitive, and hospitable public leaders in a multi-faith republic.

**Activities**

To this end this grant sought to undertake four different activities:

1. **In October 2011** LTSP held an ‘in-house’ Faculty and Staff presentation led by Dean J. Paul Rajashekar on Christian witness in a multi-faith society based upon his work with the *Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue Project at Hartford Seminary* (2009) presented as a lecture on “Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue.” Dr. Rajashekar raised many theological and sociological issues regarding proclaiming one’s faith in North America today. His main point to the seminary faculty and staff was that any faith statement cannot be part of “in house” jargon or speech. Faith claims, statements, and markers are by nature public statements and subject to critique and validation by outside sources—secular, atheist or religious. This has an important effect on the way we think about being Christian communities and how we enact and live out our public statements.

Dr. Rajashekar’s lecture was followed by a lively and productive discussion of attending Faculty and Staff. This initial activity helped us to begin thinking together as an institution about our inter-faith commitments.

2. **In December 2011** we organized a convocation entitled: “Experiences, Challenges, and Opportunities with Christian Communities.” Three local religious leaders and practitioners from active, non-Christian faith communities in the Philadelphia greater area: one Jewish, one Muslim, and one Buddhist, were invited to speak. These guests were accompanied by several other members of the Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim communities, both women and men. Each of the presenters was asked to speak on three different, but interconnected issues:

   - Their positive and painful experiences in dealing with Christian communities;
   - The challenges that these communities have faced and are facing; and

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• The opportunities that might be suggested to us as we train future Christian ministers for public leadership.

The presentations were followed by an open and honest discussion, and then a meal together. (It is important to note that care was taken in the development of the menu for lunch, demonstrating the importance of being hospitable and sensitive hosts.) A note taker was appointed to record in detail the presentations and discussions.⁶

There were several important comments made by these presenters and guests:

• All religious communities have similar issues and problems: maintaining buildings, responding to the needs of particular individuals while being a community, and religious leaders walking with and challenging their communities.
• The American religious landscape is like Joseph and his coat of many colors.
• African American Muslims have a particular role to play in Christian-Muslim relationships as they are the only indigenous Muslim community and understand American society from within.
• As leaders of communities that include many immigrants to the U.S., one has to come to terms with the experience of both being a religious and ethnic minority. While people experience levels of discrimination, they have also received a great deal of kindness. (The speaker who highlighted this made the point that there are always “bad” people in the world, so why focus on their reactions? Why not focus on those who are welcoming and affirming and make a positive difference?)
• Society tends to polarize religion, so that parents are afraid to let their children play with members of another faith tradition. And yet, children are the ones that are able to navigate diverse relationships and friendships better than most adults.
• All religions make claims, but why must that lead to excluding others from relationships?
• It is vital that religious leaders understand their tradition and their beliefs. This can often be strengthened through their positive and direct

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⁶ The presenters and speakers were asked if they would allow us to take notes of the points made, to which they graciously assented.
dialogue with people of different traditions and beliefs, both in the classroom and without.

- Faith communities can become scared that their faith claims will be proved wrong. There is also fear among the dominant faith tradition that they will become a minority, or one of many.
- Christians in North America also know that dominant culture has co-opted their religion in ways that makes them uncomfortable, and themselves can feel like a “beleaguered minority.”

3. **In April 2012** we held a convocation of LTSP graduates in public ministry entitled: “Experiences, Challenges, and Opportunities with Multi-Faith Communities.” Three graduates, serving different contexts, were invited to speak on four main points:

- What are the unexpected multi-faith experiences that pastors now encounter?\(^7\)
- What tools are now required in ministry in order to do ministry in multi-faith contexts?
- Did the seminary prepare its pastors for these challenges and opportunities?
- What suggestions or advice would you offer the seminary about training future leaders of the Church in this pluralistic context?

This convocation followed the same format as the previous one. Once again a note taker was present to record the presentations and discussions.

There were several important comments made by these presenters and guests:

- Even in a highly pluralistic environment like New York, it is easy to stay focused on the needs of one’s own community. There is already so much to do within one’s own community.
- Reflecting feelings from the previous convocation, one pastor reiterated that congregations, especially those from historic immigrant communities, fear being taken over by the next immigrant

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\(^7\) Note: The language of the questions was specifically geared toward “pastors” as the majority of these graduates were trained during a curriculum that focused upon pastoral ministry, and all of the presenters are serving parishes.
community. Another noted that traditional ethnic enclaves have changed, and will change.

- Religious holidays are good opportunities to interact, where communities can share their practices, as opposed to their faith claims.
- When attempting to undertake inter-faith events, make sure that members of all participating faith traditions are part of the planning, and let them do “what they do.” Inter-faith events need to be genuine.
- Knowing the religious leaders of other faith communities is vital for responding to local social issues, pastoral crises, or natural disasters. It is vital that pastors have a “well-thumbed rolodex” of ecumenical and inter-faith contacts.
- Both ecumenical opportunities can lead to inter-faith opportunities, and vice versa.
- As public ministers, pastors are called upon to represent their tradition in a variety of ways and they need to be able to “step up to the plate.” This is not only in inter-faith settings, but dominant culture provides avenues to express a “moralistic therapeutic deism” rather than specific denominationally or religiously specific claims.⁸
- Pastors will eventually step into pastoral moments that include multi-religious families. How does one navigate a multi-faith wedding, or a Vacation Bible School program where children bring their friends from other faith traditions?
- Seminarians need to know that they are being sent out into a fractious society.
- Being a pastor in the U.S. now is in many ways like serving as a missionary abroad, there are many cultural and religious contexts that are outside the cultural comfort zones of our own congregations.
- The seminary will not be able to train seminarians for every multi faith encounter or public event, but it can model how to approach these opportunities with genuine openness and sensitivity.

4. **In May 2012** the original outline of the project called for a second faculty and staff gathering to share the learnings from the previous two convocations, and to invite faculty to submit new syllabi for team taught courses, developed collaboratively between Areas, and in a variety of fields, that encompassed the learnings from this

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grant. However, as LTSP’s curriculum revision process began to take shape throughout the 2011-2012 academic year, it became clear that seeking syllabi for new courses would be premature, and would subvert that revision process itself. Rather, a report was submitted to the Curriculum Revision Committee for information and consideration in the new LTSP curriculum. (See attached Report as Appendix A.) This report was well received by the committee, and it was noted this would have broader implications on the curriculum beyond multi-faith matters, specifically relating to the training of seminarians for public contexts.

**Important Insights for Educating and Forming Public Leaders**

This ATS-CHAPP grant has provided LTSP the opportunity to reflect upon its own identity in educating and forming public leaders for the Church in North America in the 21st century. The process not only included internal theological and ecclesiastical reflection, but also included multiple voices from outside the seminary; including religious leaders of other faith traditions, and those graduates whom LTSP previously trained who are now doing ministry in multi-faith contexts.

- Christian ministers are not only ministering to their “ghettoized” community, but are representatives of their community in the public sphere. They must interact with other religious communities for the common good.
- The previous multicultural training of missionaries for Global ministries might be a helpful model for understanding ministry in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious United States; where mission personnel were trained to expect to be outside of their communal zones of comfort.
- Ministers and leaders must recognize the fear that is prevalent within dominant U.S. culture and their own faith communities regarding the ethnic and religious demographic changes of U.S. society, and address this fear with sensitivity and courage, recognizing that the church is in a different place, and now has a different voice and role to play in U.S. society, moving from dominance to ministry with and alongside fellow pilgrims of other living faith traditions. This has implications for how one enacts multi-faith events in community.
- It is important that Christian ministers know who are the other religious leaders and communities in their area in order to respond any number of issues: local social issues, including violence, natural disasters, pastoral emergencies, or normal ministerial duties.
Christian ministers will encounter multifaith issues in the course of normal pastoral duties due to the multifaith nature of American families. Thus, interfaith engagement cannot be an “add-on” concentration. Multifaith events (weddings, funerals, family, and social events) are now a part of the ebb and flow of U.S. ministerial life.

While the seminary cannot train students for all practical ministerial circumstances, Christian ministers need to be able to “think on their feet” and be articulate about their communal identity, theological perspectives, and convictions; especially in response to questions from other faith communities.

Worship is a public act where members of other faiths can be and are present. Such acts and claims are subject to genuine critique.

Other religious leaders expect Christian religious leaders to be faithful to their Christian claims. Thus, being able to reflect on, deepen, and articulate one’s own faith tradition honestly and sincerely can happen in response to questions raised from those outside one’s faith tradition.

Remaining Questions and Sustaining the Progress

At this point, this ATS-CHAPP project has come to completion. It is the hope and expectation of the authors of this grant that LTSP’s new curriculum will be able to “model” faithful, sensitive, and hospitable public leaders for ministry in the 21st century multi-faith republic. While we assume that such modeling will at least include the continuation of the previous inter-faith requirements of the previous curriculum, our hope is that the curriculum would include the following:

1. Introduction to multi-faith public leadership in the Introduction to Public Theology Course required for all first year students.
2. One full inter-faith course requirement that includes an experiential component.
3. The development of multifaith communities/contexts for MDiv/MAR field education.
4. The further development of inter-faith team-taught courses.
5. Encouragement of cross registration to and from other religious seminaries or institutions.

-HTH373 Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations has been team-taught, and BOT391 Jewish-Christian Encounter Through Text Study is currently offered jointly with Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Glenside, PA (http://www.rrc.edu/)
6. The inclusion of at least one goal that includes Multi-Faith components (based upon the mission statement that recognizes Public Leadership in a multifaith World) within the required foundational courses of the seminary.

Appendix:

Report to the Curriculum Review Committee on “Engaging Public Theology in a Multi-Faith Context: Building on Theological Education that Forms and Shapes Faithful and Sensitive Leaders for a Public Church” (2 May 2012)