Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices in a Multifaith Society
New Brunswick Theological Seminary
Grant Report
September, 2012

The Seminary used its CHAPP grant to further our work on two key commitments of our Strategic Plan:

The first relates to curriculum development and the preparation of students for ministry: “Our commitment to interfaith and inter-religious dialogue will equip our students to foster cooperative relationships and engage in shared public action with our neighbors in synagogues, mosques, temples, and other religious communities;”

The second commitment is “to build strategic relationships with for-profit and non-profit institutions and agencies within our region for the sake of understanding and prophetic engagement.” The grant has allowed us to focus specifically on the development of relationships with persons from multi-faith, multi-religious institutions and agencies with whom we can partner for the common good, and, who can also serve as advisors as we shape our curriculum and students in the area of interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

Our approach to these strategic directions was informed by the extensive work that we have done over the last eight years to become an anti-racist institution. Having been, for nearly 200 years, a Seminary comprised of primarily white and Reformed faculty and students, during the past thirty years, God has blessed the Seminary with a beautiful diversity of people and has wrestled with us to re-create the ways we live our new being and identity. Our own efforts to receive the gift of our diversity have focused on recognizing and confronting white privilege and systemic racism at the Seminary. We have been cultivating dispositions of reflexivity (growing in individual and institutional self-awareness) and receptivity (genuinely offering hospitality and receiving the other) through the practices of “one-on-one” conversations to explore self-interest, and world café models of engaging in essential and sometimes difficult conversations in ways that empower everyone at the table to offer their perspective. It seemed to us that the work we are doing in anti-racism has fitted us with dispositions and practices that will also enable us to be in relationships with persons of other faiths or religions. This CHAPP grant allowed us to test this assumption, and to clarify how interfaith/religious dialogue is both strongly related to and distinct from the kind of dialogues we are having on race and cultural diversity.
1) Developing Faculty and Curriculum for Interfaith/Interreligious Competence

Our stated outcome for this area of our grant activities was that “faculty would begin to develop a shared understanding of how to revise our curriculum so that it better prepares students for ministry in our religiously diverse context.” This outcome was fulfilled, although, as is the case with all curricular reform, concrete steps have yet to be identified and taken.

The faculty participated in a colloquy discussion framed by our reading of *Changing the Way Seminaries Teach: Pedagogies for Interfaith Dialogue* (Hartford Seminary), edited by David A. Roozen and Heidi Hadsell. The book presents a basic taxonomy for relations among persons of different faiths/religions which offered a way for the faculty to frame the range of possibilities to be addressed in our curriculum, and the book also provides case studies of what various seminaries are doing to prepare students for life and ministry in a multi-faith society.¹

The Seminary’s Strategic Plan, which the faculty was instrumental in framing, makes an explicit commitment to a curriculum which prepares students for interfaith and interreligious dialogue. The colloquy was the first opportunity the faculty has had for an extended discussion about what it means for us and our students to keep this commitment to dialogue. We became very mindful of the fact that many of our students are not interested in interfaith dialogue, but rather, are motivated to convert persons of other faiths. The faculty is now clear that, given our student body, the curriculum must provide thorough theological foundations and conversations about Christianity among other faiths and religious traditions. We are also aware that interfaith dialogue requires that our students have a deep understanding of and are articulate about their own Christian faith—something that is not always the case as our students may be relatively new to the faith, or have not benefited from solid education and/or practice of the faith. Only with a solid understanding and non-defensive hold on their own faith and of Christianity among other faiths, will our students be equipped to move toward the practices of interfaith dialogue. We believe such dialogue—understood broadly—has

¹ Included in the taxonomy are: 1) an informational approach focused on acquiring knowledge (through reading) of various religious traditions; 2) a confessional approach in which faith partners speak for and define themselves; 3) an experiential approach focused on dialogue through participation in the faith partner’s tradition, worship, symbols, and rituals; 4) a relational approach to nurture friendships with individuals from other traditions; 5) a practical approach for the sake of promoting together peace and justice.
the potential to increase students’ understanding of both Christianity and other faiths and religions.

Although the faculty did not make any specific decisions about how to change the curriculum, we did generate additional ideas about how to keep our strategic commitment to prepare students for interfaith/interreligious dialogue and shared public action:

- Increase the number of field education sites in temples, mosques, synagogues, etc. available to students and encourage them to choose these
- Provide more opportunities for students and faculty to be present for worship in other faith/religious communities
- Find ways for faculty and students to engage in shared public action with persons and groups from other faith/religious communities
- Bring persons from other faith traditions to present to students and faculty
- As a faculty, receive training (and perhaps train students) in the practice of “Scriptural Reasoning”—an organized movement of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, who read their sacred texts in community, as a way to understand and respect each other’s important differences of belief. Unlike some other kinds of interfaith dialogue, the aim is not to pretend a consensus between often divergent religious teachings and practices, “but rather to understand our disagreements more deeply through scripture study and build friendships out of that better quality disagreement.” (www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk, accessed May 24, 2012)
- Use religious art, in addition to texts or religious practices, as a way of understanding other traditions. Stony Point Conference Center (New York) has a large collection of religious art, and supports the on-going work of a resident multi-faith group.

In addition to brainstorming about ways to increase students’ theological understanding and capacity for interfaith/interfaith dialogue, the faculty identified the resources and assets that we already have to help us move toward this goal:

- Our two campuses are situated in the midst of Rutgers and St. John’s University which have strong religion departments and include faculty from multiple faith/religious traditions with whom our faculty and students can be in dialogue, and both universities offer courses in these other traditions for which our students can cross-register.
• The Reformed Church in America, our “parent” church, has a long history of mission and interfaith dialogue under-girded by strong theological foundations, and many persons with expertise in these practices
• A member of our faculty served at the National Council of Churches’ educator and coordinator for interfaith disaster and trauma response that attends to physical, psychological, and spiritual issues. He continues to offer this training to interfaith clergy, and participates in interfaith/interreligious disaster response teams throughout the world
• Two additional members of our faculty are engaged in interfaith/interreligious dialogue, research, and publication
• Several faculty members participate in interfaith clergy associations
• A member of our Board of Trustees served as head of the Al-Amana Center—an educational and interfaith dialogue center in Oman. The Seminary has already identified the Al-Amana Center as an educational partner and intends to organize travel seminars to Oman for students
• Six years ago, the Seminary’s President identified interfaith/interreligious partners and initiated dialogue with these partners—this initiative can be revived

In addition to this special colloquy, faculty continued its conversation about interfaith dialogue and the curriculum at its annual day-long curriculum retreat. Conversations confirmed and strengthened the convictions expressed at the interfaith colloquy, but no specific decisions about curriculum changes have been made. The final faculty “event” focused on interfaith possibilities took place in an extended colloquy on September, 21, 2012.

In this colloquy most of the Seminary’s faculty and a couple of students received training in the practice of “Scriptural Reasoning” in September, 2012. As noted above, Scriptural Reasoning is an organized movement of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, who read their sacred texts in community, as a way to understand and respect each other’s important differences of belief. The goal of the movement is to “understand our disagreements more deeply through scripture study and build friendships out of that better quality disagreement.” (www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk, accessed May 24, 2012).

The training was led by Emily Filler, a member of the Jewish community and a graduate student at the University of Virginia, and Michael Bos, a Christian minister,
member of the Seminary’s Board, and former director of the Al-Amana Center in Oman which is dedicated to promoting Muslim/Christian dialogue. Both Emily and Michael are practitioners of Scriptural Reasoning, and Emily regularly trains others in this practice.

The centerpiece of the practice is to have persons from different faiths focus on very specific portions of their sacred texts that have theological or theological connections. There are ground rules for engaging attentively and respectfully, and permission to question one another. Each portion of scripture is carefully read and responded to by the participants. In the process of asking questions or sharing their own sense of the various texts, participants engage each other in the meaning-making process. There is opportunity to clarify one’s sense of the text from the perspective of one’s own faith tradition, or personal life story. In our own process of learning the method, the meaning-making was respectful and rich. We learned things about each others’ traditions and life stories. Although most of us in the training were Christian, we come from differing church traditions, and obviously, from different life experiences, and as a result we offered our own perspective and benefited from that of others in the dialogue. We did not agree, but we did come to understand our different ways of responding to the texts.

By working with small portions of sacred texts, this dialogue process avoids attempts to begin with large, complex, somewhat abstract beliefs or doctrines.

Developed specifically for conversation among those of the Abrahamic faiths, or people of the Book, Scriptural Reasoning is also beginning to be used as a resource for dialogue with other religions.

Faculty who participated in the training appreciate the practice of Scriptural Reasoning as a core approach to interfaith/interreligious dialogue because it has so much affinity to the core dispositions we are hoping to foster throughout our curriculum. We are all working to help students to listen with care and attention to multiple texts—scripture, their own lives, the lives of others, the congregations and contexts in which they are engaged in ministry—and to understand disciplined conversation with the “other” as the core practice of ministry, the way to discovery and wisdom. This is our goal in using the World Café methodology with students as well. These approaches, in addition to forming students as hospitable listeners, also enable them to become more articulate about their own belief and understanding. We believe that both are critical in our North American and global contexts. Scriptural Reasoning in an
interfaith/interreligious context introduces new “others,” but draws on core methods for ministry that they are already engaging with our students.

Faculty recognizes that there is other groundwork to be done prior to our students engaging in this method of dialogue, most notably, a theology of Christianity in relation to other faith and religious traditions. We also recognize that the use of Scriptural Reasoning is best surrounded by other study and practices that will promote interfaith cooperation for the common good, allow for participant observation in the context of worship and rituals, and increase historical and sociological understanding. But, Scriptural Reasoning has presented itself as a good, core approach to interfaith/interreligious dialogue.

The CHAPP grant also enabled us to purchase two additional books that will ground the faculty’s conversations about curriculum and the practices of interfaith/interreligious dialogue. The Gospel Among Religions: Christian Ministry, Theology, and Spirituality in a Multifaith World, edited by David R. Brockman and Ruben L.F. Habito (Orbis, 2010), is a collection of primary and secondary sources, from the first century to the present, gathered and published explicitly to support the preparation of religious leaders in a multifaith world. The collection provides multiple Christian theologies of religions, as well as perspectives on ministerial practice, theology, and spirituality for interfaith dialogue. The second book, The Faith Next Door: American Christians and Their New Religious Neighbors by Paul D. Numrich (Oxford, 2009), is a collection of case studies showing how several Christian congregations are “actually engaging religious ‘others’. “ Like all faculties, our faculty likes to read and talk, and we find it very fruitful to read together as a way of framing our conversations. These texts, offering distinct approaches to interfaith/interreligious theology, dialogue, and other practices, will enrich our discussions and invigorate our revision of curriculum.

2) Cultivating Interfaith Partnerships for the Common Good

Our stated outcomes for this area of our grant activities, focused on our second strategic direction, were: “Members of the NBTS community will: 1) have direct experience of interfaith engagement that will benefit faculty, students and other participants; and, 2) strengthen interfaith partnerships and shared public action for the common good in New Jersey and New York.” Both outcomes were fulfilled.
To implement this portion of the grant, professors Warren Dennis and Renee House, organized a Planning Team which included three faculty members, one student, two Jewish rabbis (one a member of the local chapter of the Jewish Federation), two Turkish Muslims from the Interfaith Dialogue Center (now Peace Islands), one Hindu community leader, one Rutgers University faculty member with expertise in urban planning and policy, and the Director of Fellowship in Prayer, a multi-faith organization whose mission is “to sponsor and support programs for adults and youth that promote prayer, meditation and service to foster a more just and peaceful world community” (www.fellowshipinprayer.org, accessed August 10, 2011).

The Planning Team was responsible to organize two world café events2 that would bring together people from multiple faith/religious traditions to engage in conversation about a “question that matters” to all of us. The Team met five times (rather than the two proposed in the grant request) over six months in order to be trained and actually participate in the world café method of dialogue in order to discover together the question that would be used for two larger interfaith world cafés. Although we were focused on these very specific tasks, we always shared a meal as part of our meeting, and we learned from each other about our practices of eating certain foods and of “blessing a meal.” This very simple activity gave us time to know each other, and sparked interesting discussions, and tensions as well. We also regularly provided a hospitable space for our Muslim friends to engage in mid-day prayer.

After months of meeting, eating, and talking, our interfaith Planning Team finally framed the question to be used in the larger interfaith world cafés. In process of arriving at the question that would frame the café, members of the Team pushed and probed our unique perspectives on the meaning of justice, the tap root of our ethical commitments, the reality of American political processes which tend to exclude and

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2 For more information on “The World Café” visit www.theworldcafe.com/leadership.html. As noted in our grant proposal “world café” uses conversation, or dialogue as a core process for effecting systemic change. At NBTS, we use this method frequently in recognition that conversations are themselves action. “Rather than rely on “experts,” world café is designed to tap the expertise and interest of the people who are in the room and who bring a wealth of knowledge and understanding. The world café model provides a highly effective way to engage diverse persons in generative conversations about things that truly “matter.” The result of all this talking together is that genuine relationships form, the group discovers and documents its own collective wisdom, and decides how it will continue to cultivate this wisdom toward sharper shared vision and further action. The “world café” approach seems especially well-suited to the goal of developing interfaith partnerships for communal action—the conversations themselves already move us toward the goal of building relationships through dialogue, and provide a trustworthy path toward deepened cooperation.” (NBTS CHAPPS Grant Proposal, p. 3).
discount the perspectives of certain religious groups, and, explored the very basic question of whether or not people with faith in a transcendent being are necessarily more motivated than others to seek the common good? We also agreed that we would not talk about the state of Israel—that there was not yet enough trust to make such a difficult conversation possible. As a Planning Team, we were engaged in a multi-layered interfaith dialogue and developing relationships with genuine depth. After many months, the Team agreed that we would put this question before the anticipated world cafés: “How can we as diverse religious communities develop shared values that will support ongoing dialogue and public action for the common good?”

In May and June of 2012, we hosted a two-part multi-faith gathering under the banner, “Acting Faithfully Together: A World Café on Religion and Public Life.” Two artists supported our efforts to create a welcoming and gladdening space, and we set the café tables with flowers and colored markers and paper for creative doodling and tracking table conversations. Roughly twenty people from various religious traditions participated in each café. Included were members of the faculty, students, and other religious leaders from throughout New Jersey. We had intended to have balance between Christians and persons from other religious traditions, but this was difficult to achieve—in part because many of the participants were from the Seminary and we didn’t wish to exclude them, but also because the Seminary is new at inviting and welcoming people of other faiths. We had also hoped to have forty persons present for each gathering, but, given the fact that people’s lives are too full, we celebrate the twenty who did come to each café and who worked hard at having the conversation.

The world cafés on religion and public life produced insight, wisdom, and energy to continue the conversation. Included with this report are the full “harvests” from these cafés—questions, clarities, and hopes. A major contribution is the participants’ identification of these core dispositions needed for interfaith dialogue and action: “a) the desire to “go out” of oneself, to learn and discover; b) a groundedness in one’s own religious tradition; c) readiness to honor the expertise of other interfaith/religious partners; d) a willingness to be vulnerable and risk oneself; e) a being “in community with oneself,” being comfortable in your own skin as prelude to entering community with others—the journey inward as necessary prelude to moving out, moving toward action; f) a willingness to attend to feeling and thinking.” In addition, the world cafés reveals a desire among participants to engage in interfaith dialogue and action in ways that are true and genuine, ways that do not ignore the very real differences between us.

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It is clear that if the Seminary can find the time, energy, and other resources needed to stay in this dialogue, there are people who are eager to stay with us.

From the outset, we envisioned that the first aim of the grant, focused on faculty and curriculum development, would be supported by the second aim of the grant, focused on developing interfaith/interreligious partnerships. As a result of our CHAPP grant, the faculty has made progress in thinking about preparing students for ministry in a multi-faith society, and has had good experience of actual interfaith/interreligious dialogue for the sake of the common good. The process of revising our curriculum will continue as we look forward to working with a consultant in September of 2012, and engaging in further discussion and decision-making informed by our reading together. Beyond these benefits we have found significant, experienced interfaith/interreligious partners who are eager to contribute to our educational mission—they have ideas about what the curriculum might include and they want to keep talking—and, many would happily stay engaged with us in a process of finding out how we can all act more faithfully together. It is our intention to strengthen these nascent partnerships.
Appendix A: Budget Report

New Brunswick Theological Seminary
Christian Hospitality & Pastoral Practices
Project 1605
July 2011 - September 2012

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Appendix B

World Café “Harvests”
Discussion Sheet from Faculty Colloquy

Acting Faithfully Together: A World Café On Religion & Public Life
May 4, 2012

The Café Question

How can we as diverse religious communities develop shared values that will support ongoing dialogue and public action for the common good?

Responses to the Question

- Where do we start? With discussion of values? With discerning “the common good”? With acting together? With thinking together?
- How do we understand the relationship between transcendence (what God wants) and the here and now (something more than humanism)?
- How do we navigate difference?
- What is needed is a grassroots conversation about human values, common moral and ethical commitments, and this already exists (for example: compassion, justice, a conviction that we are all human and all equal; recognition that our common humanity is greater than our difference….)
- There is a need for basic education about other faiths (in the Seminary setting, but not only in the Seminary)
- Dedication to truth in the sense of understanding what others believe and do
- Do we need to repent? Who needs to repent?
- Are matters of interfaith/religious partnership different for the different generations now living?
- There are already some practices, while peculiar to each religious tradition, also have commonality, for example, prayer
- How can I be true to my faith without being false to yours?
- At the heart, there must be relationships with persons of other faiths/religions—basic, genuine, on-going—there is need to be “at table” together, sharing life, food, perspective, belief
- Can religion and politics be separated?
- Are we involved in public life by being involved with each other?
- Why talk? Why come together?
- Can we truly know each other, not just know about each other
• We must ask to be invited into conversation with another—we risk being received, being given hospitality
• We identify some core dispositions that are needed:
  
a) the desire to “go out” of oneself, to learn and discover; b) a groundedness in one’s own religious tradition; c) readiness to honor the expertise of other interfaith/religious partners; d) a willingness to be vulnerable—is injury unavoidable?; e) a being “in community with oneself” being comfortable in your own skin as prelude to entering community with others—the journey inward as necessary prelude to moving out, moving toward action; f) a willingness to attend to feeling and thinking
• What next???

Acting Faithfully Together: A World Café On Religion & Public Life
June 15, 2012

The Café Question

How can we as diverse religious communities develop shared values that will support ongoing dialogue and public action for the common good?

Responses from the tables:

• Interfaith conversation seeks common ground—how has our past shaped us? Does it impede finding common ground? Might it support?
• Where do we start? We need an Interfaith 101 course for seminarians
• The younger generations (millenials) seem to be “prejudice free”—open to peoples from all nations, races, religions, faiths, spiritualities….
• We are part of global families, if not literally, then in terms of connections.
• Religion and politics inseparable – All levels are at play
• There are common values on surface – but if you drill down you’ll find difference. How can we do this?
• Crises can create unity for the sake of shared action shared action.
• Just talking together is good for the common good
• If we choose something to act on – we will be forced to alternate shared values
• There will always be tensions
• One possibility is to create an interfaith class- taught by practitioners of the various faiths who are actually engaged in the practices
• If we continue – who do we invite to the table? Folks less open? Folks on the margins
• We can and must find our commonality as human beings
• There is power of writing [Merton]—is this a good way to be engaged and to speak?
• We are mindful of the politics of power (economics)—what can we talk about?
• Critique idea of commonality – need to talk about differences
• Need to realize – we all bring assumptions, world views that need to be explored
• Is there something in our “God-Love” that drives our desire to seek life for all
• What happens next? Will the Seminary keep these conversations going after the grant has ended?

Faculty Conversation about Interfaith/Inter-religious Dialogue in the Curriculum

Strategic Direction 8: Our commitment to interfaith and inter-religious dialogue will equip our graduates to foster cooperative relationships and engage in shared public action with our neighbors in synagogues, mosques, temples, and other religious communities.

How do you understand this commitment? What does it mean for us to say this?

What do you value and appreciate in the commitment?

Do you feel hesitation or resistance?

Consider the taxonomy, p. 5 Helpful? More possibilities? Response to cases?

Where are interfaith/interreligious realities addressed in our current curriculum?

What are the key questions for us as we continue this exploration?

Are you envisioning possible ways for us to keep this commitment?