CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY IN A WORLD OF MANY FAITHS:
EQUIPPING THE NEW GENERATION OF
RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN A MULTI-FAITH CONTEXT

Christian Hospitality in a Multi-Faith Context

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities
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Re-stating the project objectives
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities embarked on the project with clear objectives in mind: (1) To name and articulate the qualities and competencies of religious leaders who are capable of leading congregations and institutions in a multi-faith context; (2) to use the profile of qualities and competencies to examine the current curriculum (explicit, implicit, and null) of United Seminary to identify areas of strength and areas that need improvement. It is expected that from the outcome of the project United Seminary will be in a better position to make informed decisions as to the kinds of initiatives or projects that need to be pursued, which may involve faculty training, course development, and other institutional programs. In other words, this project is significant because it lays the foundation for future initiatives in the area of Christian hospitality in a multi-faith context.

Implementation: Activities
To accomplish the objectives of the project, five activities were scheduled and carried out. Each activity had well-articulated expected outcomes against which to measure any accomplishment or progress (or lack thereof). Also, each activity was designed to build, expand, deepen, and connect with other activities and to contribute cumulatively to the overall objectives. The first activity (held during a faculty retreat on September 1-2, 2011) introduced the rationale and objectives of United Seminary’s Christian Hospitality project. With the understanding that chaplains are among those exposed to a multi-faith setting in their ministerial practice, a hospital chaplain (Helen Wells O’Brien) was invited to give a presentation on ministry in a multi-faith context. The invited guest was able to present situations/cases and challenges that chaplains/ministers deal with in a multi-faith setting, as well as identify needed competencies and skills.
The second activity (October 12, 2011) involved a visit to a mosque, followed by a lunch and dialogue with the imam, Hamdy El-Sawaf, and a presentation by Gail Anderson on interfaith relations and practices (Minnesota Council of Churches). After the conversation, faculty members went to visit the Somali mall in Minneapolis, a central place where Somali Muslims gather for conversation, shopping, business, meals, prayer, and the opportunity to learn about the latest news from the homeland. This half-day staff event (12:00 noon till 4:00 p.m.) accomplished a few major goals: it gave United’s faculty the opportunity to encounter and engage in conversation with persons of other faiths, and to experience their hospitality; it deepened the faculty’s awareness and understanding of the issues that Muslim communities are experiencing and grappling with in the U.S., and particularly in Minnesota; it helped identify common concerns that United Seminary and Muslim communities may work on together; and it gave the opportunity for United Seminary’s faculty to start building a relationship with El-Sawaf, a religious leader who could serve as a possible resource person for future interfaith projects. Moreover, Anderson’s presentation introduced the faculty to various interfaith practices and to some competencies that are needed for ministry in a multi-faith context.

The third (November 16, 2011) and fourth (February 29, 2012) faculty activities broadened, deepened, and reinforced the first two. For the third activity, the faculty visited a Tibetan Buddhist temple, had lunch with the monks, and engaged in conversation with them. It was an occasion of learning, receiving, and experiencing hospitality. In addition to learning about the history of Tibetan migration and their plight, the conversation/dialogue with the monks led to matters about formation. It gave the faculty an opportunity to learn how monks get their religious training and about some of their religious practices.

The fourth scheduled activity involved a presentation by Samir Selmanovic of Faith Manhattan, New York, an interfaith community of Christians, Muslims, Jews, and atheists/humanists. Selmanovic shared his rich faith journey from being a Muslim to being an atheist and then to being a Christian (Seventh Day Adventist). His presentation was provocative and insightful. He challenged common assumptions and offered alternative ways of approaching interfaith relations. In ways that were reassuring, Selmanovic anchored interfaith relations from the depth of his Christian faith. Christians are open to people of other faiths not in spite of their being Christians but because of their Christian faith. Selmanovic contended that, with these deep and secure theological and traditional footings, Christians must build a bridge identity...
rather than an isolated identity; they must recognize their need of the other (people of other faiths) as essential to the concept of perfection. Being part of the whole rather than being on top is what is crucial.

The fifth and final activity of the project was a faculty conversation for the purpose of examining areas in the curriculum and courses taught where interfaith education/formation is happening (or not), and of exploring ways to strengthen the curriculum with regard to interfaith formation. To prepare for this conversation, the project director gathered the significant learning experiences and insights from the previous activities and organized a list of competencies that Christian leaders need to have to minister responsibly and effectively in a multi-faith setting. What does a competent Christian leader in a multi-faith context look like? What qualities and competencies must he or she possess? The list of competencies was distributed to the faculty so they could come prepared for the conversation. The items on the list served as benchmarks against which to measure areas of strength and areas that need improvement.

**Some Specific Results of the Project**

A. List of competencies

One tangible result of the project is a list of fifteen competencies that were identified as important for ministry in a multi-faith setting. *Awareness and recognition of our religiously plural setting* stands as number one (1). Religious leaders must have basic awareness of the growing religious pluralism in the U.S., the importance of religious identity, and the role that religion plays in the interweaving of various social issues. Religious leaders in a religiously plural setting must strive as much as possible to learn the religious world of others. Recognizing the limits to what they can know, it is important that religious leaders develop an attitude, a sense of presence, and a set of skills that prepare them for ministry in a multi-faith setting.

The list proceeds to articulate the rest of the competencies that embrace multiple dimensions involving attitude, sensibility, ways of framing, skills, etc. Competency two (2) flows from competency one (1): *appreciative understanding of other religious traditions*. As much as Christian religious leaders want others to have an appreciative understanding of their own religious traditions, they also must learn to have an appreciative understanding of other religious traditions. Competency three (3) dovetails well with the second: *relating to other religious traditions on their own terms*. Related to an appreciative understanding of other religious faiths, religious leaders in a multi-faith...
world must recognize and understand that each religious tradition has its own inner structure and dynamics.

Competency four (4)—recognition of the religious stranger as a subject-companion in meaning-making and world-making—goes further while building on competencies two and three. Recognizing integrity in other faiths means granting believers of other faiths the subjecthood that belongs to them. They are subjects, particularly subject-companions, in our meaning-making and world-making. If they are considered subject-companions in our meaning-making, then we must (5) consider them as hermeneutic companions and engage with them in interfaith reading of texts and contexts.

Competency six (6) speaks of being at home in one’s house. Only those who have found their religious/theological voice can understand the need of others to claim their theological voice. Religious leaders who can appreciate others are those who understand the depths of their own religious traditions. Competency seven (7)—reaching out and being open by going deep—extends the previous point: It is in and through the depths of our religious tradition that we must see its openness.

The eighth (8) competency deals with Christian identity. In the spirit of Christian hospitality to people of other faiths, religious identity must be understood in right relationship to the whole rather than being defined as over-against or being on top. Supremacy is not really what we need but connection and right relationship. When a person does not put himself or herself above others, she or he is able to (9) practice the hospitality of receiving. Moreover, she or he is able to (10) offer hospitable space and hospitable presence. By no means does this hospitable relationship require sacrifice of one’s deep religious convictions. On the contrary, hospitable relationship demands the (11) expression of one’s deep convictions with honesty, respect, and openness.

Competencies twelve through fifteen involve the (12) ability to build trust, solidarity, shared ministry, and interfaith actions; (13) ability to make normative/ethical decisions in the midst of competing moral and religious claims; (14) and the ability to integrate multi-faith traditions and normative claims in relation to socio-political institutional dynamics. There is the wider and prevailing multi-faith climate, government laws, and health care systems in which one’s ministry must be interpreted. The minister must have the competencies to see his or her work/ministry within this larger setting. Finally, a Christian leader must (15) know how to live with unanswered questions.
B. Examination of the curriculum in light of competencies

Building on the list of competencies, the second identifiable result of the project is that faculty members have been encouraged to examine the current curriculum in light of the list of competencies. Is United Seminary preparing its students for ministry in a multi-faith context? Where and how is interfaith competency taking place (or not) in the curriculum? Which area of studies it is doing well and which area needs improvement? Does United Seminary have the resources (faculty, finances, facilities, etc) that it needs to train students for a multi-faith context? What training or retooling does the faculty need to have to teach effectively for multi-faith ministry? Are there resources in the Twin Cities area that United Seminary can tap? Are there other institutions in the area that it can collaborate or work with?

With its emphasis on an integrated curriculum (with three integration courses throughout the curriculum) in mind, the faculty started looking at areas where the integration of multi-faith sensibilities and skills are taking place (or not), and where it should be taking place. Faculty members shared that the interfaith dimension is already happening in the courses they are teaching, though something more can be done. It happens in historical theology, according to the professor who is teaching in this area, when Christian historical theology is presented and critiqued in relation to or in light of the context and claims of other faiths, such as Judaism, Islam, and humanism or atheism. Integration of the interfaith dimension occurs in biblical studies when the Christian Scriptures are placed along with the Hebrew Scriptures or when a critical reading of text is rendered in relation to anti-Semitism. It is present in ethics studies, particularly comparative, when Scriptures or writings from other faith traditions (Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc.) are used to inform a reading of, for example, human rights, social justice, and ecology. It happens in systematic or constructive theology when re/sources from other faiths are considered to inform one’s theological views.

Another area in which a robust integration of interfaith dimension is happening is the arts. The Director of Community Programming in the Arts, Religion and Spirituality has received funding for the integration of art from various faith traditions into the curriculum. Pastoral care is yet another area in which robust integration of interfaith concerns is happening; a faculty colleague teaches pastoral care in a multi-faith setting. Other courses, such as Worship of the Church, Preaching, and Foundations of Christian Education, may need to be examined closely to determine how to incorporate interfaith
perspective. These are areas that seem to need more careful study on how to expand their interfaith dimension.

It is in relation to the emphasis on integration that individual courses designed to teach about interfaith relation need to be examined and evaluated. United Seminary offers some of these courses. For example, to complete their degree program, students are required to take a course in which they study one major non-Christian religion. The director of this project—Christian Hospitality—teaches a course with the title “Theologies of Religions.” This course introduces students to the theologies of interfaith engagement and to some ways to engage in dialogue. This focus could be modified to emphasize not just the various theologies of religions but practices of doing interfaith works. Then a more appropriate title for this course would be “Theologies of Religions and Interfaith Practices.”

C. Projects or initiatives to be explored
The conversation on the curriculum has led to some ideas to strengthen interfaith works. First, United Seminary is exploring the possibility of creating a new area concentration: interfaith relations and practices. Gail Anderson, Director of Unity and Relationships at Minnesota Council of Churches, has been part of this conversation. Working collaboratively with Minnesota Council of Churches would be beneficial for United Seminary. Second, another idea that is being explored is the integration of interfaith relations and justice with the help of The Center for Public Ministry, which is based at United Seminary. Third, another part of the conversation is the idea of creating a certificate program that would serve not only Christians but members of other religious communities. This is still very much fluid, as no specific content and form have been identified yet. Fourth, on the table for discussion is the idea of designing a Global Justice course (students are required to take one Global Justice course) that integrates interfaith and justice. Fifth, an idea articulated by the director of this Christian Hospitality project is a pilot course that would integrate interfaith relations and various areas of the curriculum. Maybe, as a result of this pilot course, the faculty will be encouraged to take bolder steps in adapting interfaith relations for the wider curriculum. Sixth, another option would be to offer a course—“Interfaith Engaged Congregations”—in support of an initiative of the Interfaith Relations Commission (IRC) of the National Council of Churches, U.S.A. This initiative of the IRC offers guidelines and presents examples of how to become interfaith-engaged congregations. Some congregations have received awards from the IRC as interfaith-engaged congregations.
The Next Steps

The Christian Hospitality project provided an opportunity for the faculty to brainstorm ideas and think of possible options, but a more thorough conversation and study needs to be done to come to a decision on the next steps or initiatives to be taken. Ideas generated by the project have converged with an initiative taken by the former president of the seminary along lines of interfaith concern, but this initiative is on hold until the faculty comes to a decision on the place of interfaith relations in the curriculum and the educational projects to be pursued. The faculty is starting to see some exciting possibilities for interfaith initiatives, but there is a shared feeling within the faculty that, given its current size and expertise, it does not have the capability to explore and initiate some of the great ideas, as faculty members cannot add more to the workload they already have. It seems that a project needs to be explored to bring in another person if United Seminary is to do excellent work in incorporating an interfaith dimension into the educational formation of students. This idea can be pursued along with exploring cooperative ventures with institutions in the area that are similarly concerned with interfaith works.

Officially, the Christian Hospitality project has ended, but United Seminary is committed to pursue the conversation to sort out, identify, and fine tune ideas so as to make determinations on future programs/projects it wishes to take on.