

13th Oxford Institute of Theological Studies

Susan T. Henry-Crowe

August 2013

Chaplaincy in a Multi-faith World A Case Study

Like most institutions of higher learning with Methodist foundations, Emory University is a complex and tight microcosm of the larger world providing opportunities to learn to live together with those of many social, cultural, political, ethnic, racial, national and religious identities and differences. Emory no longer primarily attracts Methodist students of yesteryear. The self-declared religious identities of the student population breaks out as follows: 20% Jewish faith families, 6% of Hindu families, 4% of Muslim families, 2% of Buddhist families and 32% of all Christian faith families. The remaining percentage is undeclared. Among the faculty in 8 schools, there is also great religious diversity. Although more difficult to quantify, Emory continues to be an institution where among the faculty and staff there is appreciation for the study of religion and positive recognition and respect for the practices of the many religious communities represented on campus. The institution itself, the faculty and the student body are intentional and dedicated to practices of curiosity and respect for those who are “other”. This is the ethos for the university’s chaplaincy.

A dear friend and esteemed member of the faculty is a convert to Judaism. He grew up in a family that was nominally American Baptist but was dismissed from Sunday school for asking questions. (His maternal grandfather was an American Baptist Minister who went to Utah as a mission zone to bring Protestantism to that area of the country). Later in life my friend converted to Judaism.

My friend is an historian and scholar of Islam and teaches sacred texts of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. He presents the complexities of each tradition with which he is knowledgeable as a scholar. He honors and appreciates the history, the theology and practices of each tradition. He understands and appreciates Methodism’s contributions to higher learning, social holiness, ecumenism, interreligious studies and inter-faith relationships. He does not compromise his academic research, his teaching nor his personal religious practice (formerly in Christianity and now in Judaism). He speaks openly and affirmatively about his life of research and teaching in a prestigious University related to the (United) Methodist Church. The foundations of Methodism engender appreciation for intellectual life within a spiritual and academic context.

In expanding foundational principles (although rarely articulated) of Methodism, he serves as a model for students in the classroom and seminars. He is a scholar of sacred texts, principally Islamic and Jewish. He employs reason and rigor in his scholarly research, sound teaching of religious traditions and practices and encourages scholarly observation and experience. This kind of critical boundary

crossing is increasing in the academy and needs to be explored for the church and society.

From Chaplaincy to Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life

In the late 1990's the University redefined the chaplaincy changing the position title to Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life from University Chaplain. After a controversy over the uses of university chapels, which was resolved in a fashion that honored the integrity and complexity of the university and did not violate the Social Principles of the *Discipline of the (United) Methodist Church* regarding same-sex ceremonies, the title was changed. This understanding marked a significant expansion of ministry in the university and demonstrated the university's commitment to foster and engage diversity in the study and practice of religion. In addition it created new opportunities for a world that increasingly used religion as a way to divide as well as to bridge differences. Retrospectively, this remarkable change of title, identity and expansion of the mission of the position prepared a way into a 21st Century that would often misuse religion to mask geo-political, racial, social and ethnic conflicts.

Historically, the chaplain is a member of the clergy attached to a private chapel, institution, ships or armed services. From Latin *cappellanus*, chaplain, originally denoted a custodian of the cloak of St. Martin. The role of chaplain is to conduct religious services for an institution. (i.e. aristocratic families, hospitals, prisons, armed services and universities). In diverse settings such as universities, military services and prisons chaplains must be literate and learned in the texts, prayers and practices of many faith communities. S/he must be larger than the identity to which s/he belongs so as to provide religious and spiritual care and support to the institution and all members of the community. It requires an open and ecumenical spirit that John and Charles Wesley practiced. The chaplain serves a diverse community providing for the spiritual and religious needs of the whole community. This is not without its tensions and challenges. A Protestant Chaplain cannot be a Catholic priest but often serves the Catholic community in all but liturgical ways. A Catholic priest cannot be a rabbi but serves the Jewish community. The Chaplain can provide for the spiritual support and care of the members of the community either directly or by proxy.

The expansion of the University's aspiration and expectation of the role of Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life provided for deepening and expanding the understanding of living respectfully, appreciatively, inclusively and hospitably in a multi-religious world.

Here are some tangible ways in which this mission was enhanced.

1. Expanding the mission and visibility of the 28 member Inter-religious Council by:

Increasing Scriptural literacy and understanding of traditions and practices among many traditions,

Discovering ways to built bridges of understanding and peace making,

Involving students and faculty in dialogue around difficult questions

2. Fostering an appreciation of religious and cultural identities and practices by:

Providing educational, artistic, cultural programs and services

Inviting the community to religious services, prayers, meals and practices in order to educate and increase understanding of various cultures

3. Helping prepare the larger community for more honest, critical, civil and thoughtful discourse about difficult questions related to religious identity and difference.

4. Initiating a program to employ PhD candidates in various fields of study of religion to be Religious Life Scholars who model healthy multi-religious relationships and serve as advisors to the Dean of the Chapel and Religious Life. The scholars embody both their own practices and scholarship from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic and Jewish traditions with the following mission:

To embody the highest standards of collaborative scholarship by working across religious traditions to enhance each scholar's work.

To serve as multi-religious public intellectuals dedicated to promoting the study of religion and religious practices.

5. Encouraging the university to deepen it's understanding of cultures and appreciation of diverse religious identities and practices as essential for a healthy life in community.

6. Providing healthy models for living in a complex and multi-religious world.

7. Claiming the ways in which Methodism underpins strong ecumenical and inter-faith relations.

Essential principles guide the mission of strengthening religious identity of each faith family and inter-religious engagement as well as promoting understanding of religious traditions and practices. Addressing irreconcilable theological and philosophical differences essential to the work of chaplaincy. Exploring ways to engage in difficult and challenging conversations is fundamental to advancing authentic and genuine relations.

1. Honoring the identity, the voice and the integrity of each tradition with sensitivity to each traditions particular needs such as dietary, gender issues, modesty and dress
2. Affirming and strengthening religious group identity and affiliation
3. Encouraging authenticity and honesty always guarding against assimilation
4. Carefully articulating and defining difference
5. Promoting literacy and understanding of religious traditions and practices
6. Encouraging positive engagement in social and communal problems
7. Assuring equanimity
8. Building trusting relationships
9. Praying in the presence of the other while not expecting all to pray together

Sharing Sacred Space

These principles are necessary for authentic multi-religious work. The spaces in which we live, learn and pray reflect the authentic multi-religious community.

Cannon Chapel is the most religiously identifiable space where all are welcome and are assured that this is their religious home. I have the good fortune of presiding over space (Cannon Chapel) that was conceived and intended to be multi-religious space. Cannon Chapel was designed in the late 1970's when Paul Rudolph came as a forward thinking architect in the use of concrete and indigenously natural materials. He is one of the early pioneers of what today is known as green architecture. Often he is aligned with the "brutalists", as well. He, along with the

designers, imagined a place where the identities of various faith communities could authentically pray, worship, and meditate with integrity honoring the deepest observance and practices of their own tradition. Rudolph's clean lines, natural light and cavernous spaces create the illusion of spacious simplicity. The lines, acoustics, height, sparseness, natural light, poured concrete, provide expansive room for breathing. It welcomes silence. It invites interiority. It is both hugely communal and at the same time warmly intimate. The reality of working in Rudolph's sparse and vast space is that it allows for astonishing variety of uses.

Originally the Muslim community had a tiny room for daily prayer with no provisions for ablution. We worked to welcome the Muslim community to Cannon Chapel for Jummah where we are now building an ablution space.

The communities known as Hindu or of Vedic traditions have had a strong presence at Emory for nearly two decades. This community has weekly aartis on Fridays at 6:00 p.m. when no other group either needs the space or is even around. Sharing does not usually create conflict. It requires thinking out of the box. Sharing space can bring communities together and can welcome and accommodate the needs of all. People and groups do not always need the same things. It is a matter of listening to needs, figuring out how to make space available.

Today worship/prayer/meditation in Cannon Chapel looks something like this. On Friday at [12 o'clock noon] the students, faculty and staff of Candler School of Theology finish celebrating the last Eucharist of the week. They have held two other worship services during the week for the seminary. The cross is taken down. The prayer space is soon divided laterally by magnificent handcrafted screens made from over 1000 tiny oak strips that echo the room. Towels and baskets are placed outside the washrooms. By 2pm, over 125 members of Emory's Islamic community gather for Jummah Prayers. All face east toward Mecca. Brothers pray on the outside, sisters on the inside. The service begins with the Call to Prayer (Adhan). The movements are rhythmic, the tones prayerful and soothing. The colors are soft – browns and grays for the men and multi-colored hijabs for the young women. Someone gives a sermon and the congregation offers their prayers. Following prayer, the congregation will have a community meal in the Commons area.

As Muslim students straighten up the prayer space, an energetic group of Hindu undergraduates prepares for the Aarti (prayer). Not needing the screens separating the women and men, they place handcrafted dividers around the room, embracing the space and making it more intimate. The young Hindu students bring out their altar, which was tenderly designed and crafted by Jack Scheu, Emory's artisan, who also built the screens for the Muslim community. The Hindu Aarti is prayer, offerings, a meditation and a meal following the prayer. The music is rhythmic. Their colors of cloths, fruits, clothes are festive. Reds, oranges, yellows, silver, brass and gold. Sweet aromas like myrrh, frankincense, and anise fill the space.

On Saturday evening, those who care for the building check for misplaced chairs, dropped cloths, and forgotten shoes before the Roman Catholics gather on Sunday for the first Mass of the day. For this service, the cross is prominent, and the original altar is moved to a central place in the asymmetrical sanctuary. The pulpit is also placed before the congregation, and the sacristy is prepared for the Eucharist, vessels, the crucifix, and the altar cloths. The incense and the censor are readily accessible. The smell of incense soon fills the air, and the student-friendly music from the Catholic hymnal *Ritual Song* pours through the vents. The colorful procession with candles, Gospel, and crucifix indicates the beginning of Mass.

Following the morning Mass, Protestants immediately prepare for worship. The pulpit is moved slightly more toward the center of this oddly asymmetrical cavern, indicating preaching is central to Protestant Christian worship. The Eucharist, often neglected by Protestants, takes place each week affirming the identity and historical theology of the ever-changing multi-religious world. The preachers are nationally known, inspiring and well trained in the art of proclamation. The hymns are magnificent, harkening back to the heart of Wesleyan or Lutheran theology. Contemporary music blends into the historical hymnody acknowledging both the contemporary, as well as the historical elements of Christian worship. The colors are more subdued than the colors found in the gathered Catholic community, which reflects the greater cultural and language diversity of a worldwide Roman Catholic Church. Yet, the vitality of proclamation from preachers such as Joseph Lowery or Barbara Brown Taylor inspires and expresses the best of Protestant worship.¹

Living in a multi-faith world is not only a reality but also a treasure. The office of chaplain nourishes an environment in which the mission of strengthening religious identity of each faith family and inter-religious engagement that promotes understanding of religious traditions and practices. This serves as a model for students to carry into the larger world. The hallmark of chaplaincy is to create a culture of understanding, respect, and hospitality and an ethos where faculty, students and staff come to understand and treasure their own identities and practices. Providing both literal and metaphorical space for spiritual nourishment is the heart of the work of the chaplain whether it be in worship/prayer/meditation, pastoral care, the classroom, walking across campus or in planned lectures and events. When this is done well those of all traditions (or of no tradition) are grateful for their own identities, are appreciative the “other”, and begin to see the whole of creation as a gift from God. Year in and year out, as faculty, students and staff move through the heart of the academy with this ecumenical spirit a better world is created where religion builds bridges and all peoples flourish.

¹ Previously published in, *Liturgy*. Volume 26, Issue 3, 2011