

2013

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Recommended Citation

Hess, Mary E., "The pastoral practice of Christian hospitality as presence in Muslim-Christian engagement: contextualizing the classroom" (2013). *Faculty Publications*. 12.

http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/12

Published Citation

Hess, Mary E. "The pastoral practice of Christian hospitality as presence in Muslim-Christian engagement: contextualizing the classroom." *Theological Education* 47, no. 2 (2013): 7-12.

The Pastoral Practice of Christian Hospitality as Presence in Muslim-Christian Engagement: Contextualizing the Classroom

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ABSTRACT: This project involved inviting graduate-level classes to contextualize their study in relationship with a specific Lutheran congregation in an urban and multifaith neighborhood. In doing so, the Christian practice of hospitality—especially understood in terms of presence—was particularly pertinent. Learning took place in context, far more efficiently and effectively, through engagement with rather than teaching about each other. Ultimately the project members experienced learning in the presence of other faiths as deepening one’s own faith, while inviting genuine respect for other faiths.

To understand the work of our Christian hospitality project, you need first to understand something of the context in which our project took shape.

Luther Seminary is an Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) seminary with a student body drawn from all over the world. It has a long-standing commitment to ecumenical and interfaith engagement. More than a quarter of our faculty are from traditions other than Lutheran, and we have a large biblical faculty who regularly teach in collaborative ways with Jewish scholars. Until recently we also had a master’s degree in Islamic Studies.

In addition, the Twin Cities of Minnesota are incredibly diverse in terms of religious communities. While the 2008 Pew poll listed 81 percent of *all* Minnesotans as Christian, 13 percent unaffiliated, and thus only 6 percent of other faiths, we have in the Twin Cities the largest Hmong community outside of southeast Asia, the largest Somali community outside of Somalia, and the most diverse African immigrant community of any major metropolitan area.

Students, staff, and faculty at Luther live, work, and worship while they’re at this institution in a context in which you have to work very hard to ignore religious diversity. That some of us do so anyway is one of the challenges we face, and we are working to find ways not only to help us to “see” diversity but also to engage it in productive and thoughtful ways.

The Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices (CHAPP) program emerged for us as a promising way to think about how to do such engagement, and to think about pastoral practice and pastoral imagination in ways that would draw upon our deepest commitments to understanding theology as arising in the midst of congregations.

We developed our project in collaboration with staff and members of Trinity Lutheran Congregation, which is the only Christian congregation in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis—a densely populated

neighborhood of between 7,500 and 10,000 people that has at least three mosques. As a congregation, Trinity is multiethnic, with members of European, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and African American descent; nearly 30 percent of its congregation is persons of color.¹

Our project began with a commitment on the part of Luther faculty and staff to use the funds entirely in the pursuit of demonstrating and exploring what Christian hospitality looks like when practiced as *presence* in a multifaith world. Thus neither of our codirectors drew a stipend from the grant, and we split the funds among the congregation we were working with, various hospitality events we developed in the neighborhood, and partially funding an intern to work in the congregation through our children, youth, and family degree program.

In focusing on *presence*, we built off of Jesus's role of guest. From his encounter with Zaccheus, to engaging the Samaritan woman at the well, he was a recipient of others' hospitality. For many in US culture, to be guest instead of host or teacher is very difficult. It is something we must learn to do. In approaching other cultures, in this case Muslim and (mostly) East African cultures, we knew that we must intentionally place ourselves in the position of listener and guest, not as teacher. By being consciously present as guest, we anticipated that we might learn in a much deeper way.

During the 2011–2012 academic year we practiced *presence* in a number of ways. Three of our faculty—Mary Hess, Chris Scharen, and Terri Elton—built elements into our courses² that required presence in this neighborhood as well as engagement and learning with its inhabitants and with Trinity Lutheran.

Mary Hess teaches a Christian education class, for example, called Learning in the Presence of Other Faiths, and one of the things that class did was to meet at Trinity to learn from Pr. Buckley-Farlee, and then to walk with her over to one of the local mosques to learn from some of its members about their faith and their presence and concerns in the neighborhood. The class also explored at some length the varieties of ways in which Christian theology has “made sense of” the vibrant reality of other faiths, and her students worked on projects that combined this new learning with efforts to create opportunities for sharing such learning in their own pastoral contexts.

Terri Elton teaches a class on children, youth, and family ministry in urban contexts, and her class studied contextual theology through reading, lecture, and classroom discussion, as well as engaging it firsthand through the ministry of Trinity Lutheran. One Saturday class members located themselves in Trinity's context by taking public transportation from seminary to the church, learning about the challenges and joys of ministry in the Riverside neighborhood from their leadership and having lunch at a neighborhood Ethiopian restaurant to taste and smell one of the many cultures present in this context. Traditional classroom learning coupled with this experiential learning added a depth to the class that was not present previously and highlighted the complexity and richness of ministry in a multicultural and multifaith setting.

Chris Scharen coteaches a class called Reading the Audiences, which is an entry-level course on congregational theology and sociological investigation. His class, cotaught with Dwight Zscheile, frames a missional theology for

congregational leadership. In the process, he and Zscheile draw upon a theology of multifaith engagement that understands God to already be present with all we meet. Thus the proper stance is not to “bring God” to others, but to adopt a posture of humility, as Christ would, and expect to listen and to learn how God is already at work in the lives of others. For this part of the course, Scharen and Zscheile invited Pr. Buckley-Farley to come speak to the class about the Trinity Congregation’s journey of listening to its Muslim neighbors. Second, they introduced their students to social research methods and asked them to choose a congregation and community to study in groups of six to eight. Trinity Lutheran was one of the congregations studied. Students interviewed members of the congregation and the surrounding community, attended services, walked the neighborhood, studied census data, and pulled all of this into a report on the ministry context and opportunities for the congregation.

In addition to the various ways in which the project brought specific classes into direct collaboration with Trinity’s presence in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, we also worked with our children, youth, and family degree program—which requires its students to have twenty-hour-a-week placements in local congregations—to place a student at Trinity who would spend part of her time working with the CHAPP project. This intern reflected, in particular, on the ways in which youth make sense of a multifaith reality, and she found herself needing to learn how to articulate Christian faith to people who are unfamiliar with it.

Along the way, members of our team participated in a number of local events—a community worship service in a local community center, which is hosted by Trinity and which invites their suburban congregations into participation; an Iftar dinner held in the neighborhood; a community open house that offered food and fellowship to the neighborhood on the afternoon and evening of September 11; “homework help” events (Trinity offers such support to the youth in the neighborhood); and an evening of refreshment and renewal for the council of Trinity.

Learnings

This project is in no way finished, and in some ways we are hesitant to offer any but the most tentative conclusions. Here are three provisional inferences, by way of sharing what we have learned so far.

First, a practice of Christian hospitality as presence is a practice that requires patience and a discipline of openness. Christine Pohl has written compellingly about the practice of hospitality as one of “making room.” As we have worked with our students and thought about what we are learning in the CHAPP project, this spiritual discipline of opening up—or of what some people might call “holding something lightly” or “with open hands”—has been crucially important.

There are numerous times in Scripture in which Jesus invited engagement with people with whom his immediate followers were not open to being in relationship. In several ways we have struggled with what it means to be “open” in Christian terms. How does one have a strong Christian identity, an

identity robust enough to be deeply centered and loyal to a specific community but still open to learning with and from others?

Here one of the books Hess used in class proved particularly interesting and useful. Paul Knitter's text, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, practices what you might call an "eighth commandment" commitment. That is, in this book Knitter does his best to represent a range of Christian theologies of religious pluralism as respectfully as possible, and in such a way that their own adherents would recognize them. This stance gave our students a way to find themselves somewhere amongst the positions he outlined and to have the patience to ask genuine questions of each other.

Pr. Buckley-Farlee has also been an incredibly effective model of openness and patience. She did not hesitate to talk with us about the challenges involved in trying to lead a congregation that is as diverse as hers—including the challenges that occurred when the national ELCA made decisions regarding sexuality that raised deep conflicts within her congregation. She repeatedly emphasized that Trinity exists at the will of the Holy Spirit, because, as she says in the video interview referenced above, "our role is to listen, to listen to God, to listen to each other, to listen to the people in our neighborhood—and through that hard listening to determine as best we can to discern the course that we take, and that's always changing, that's always morphing, depending on where the Spirit is blowing."

The second big learning for us, at least so far, is that we need to get our students out of the classroom and into tangible relationships with people. This kind of learning cannot take place if it is simply "about" other faiths. We need to learn "through engagement with" other faiths. As noted earlier, our context is very rich in this way, so in addition to the various mosques we visited, Hess took her class to the Hindu Temple of Minnesota (a very large campus complex in Maple Grove that regularly holds tours), and Scharen's class spent a good part of the semester engaged with the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, discussing life with the Somali residents there as part of their study of Trinity Lutheran.

There is something very compelling about entering into someone else's sacred place and hearing from that individual about his or her practices and beliefs.

Finally, the third thing we would note at this point in our experience of the project is that "learning in the presence of other faiths" tends to deepen one's own faith. Some of our students entered this project with anxiety about how it might stretch or challenge their own beliefs or how it might draw them out of their commitments. We think the project has had the opposite effect. We believe that these students now hold their Christian identity even more strongly. The change, however, and it is a very important change, is that they now have *much more* and *much deeper* respect for the faith held by people in other traditions.

The three learnings thus far may be summarized as follows:

1. The Christian practice of *hospitality*—especially understood in terms of *presence*—is fundamentally about openness.
2. Learning takes place far more efficiently and effectively through *engagement with*, rather than *teaching about*.
3. Learning in the presence of other faiths can deepen one's own faith, while inviting deeper respect for other faiths.

Recommendations

In terms of advice for other schools who might pursue a similar project, we would note that it has been crucial for us to partner with a congregation that has a long-standing commitment to, and presence within, this very diverse and multifaith context. As noted earlier in this report, the Twin Cities are home to a truly varied group of faith communities, and thus it was possible to *practice presence* in very organic ways that grew out of the integrity of the relationships Trinity had already developed as well as the relationships our faculty, staff, and students began to develop through Trinity's mentoring.

Challenges and future work

We will continue to be involved with this neighborhood's faith communities, and our next challenge will be to find ways to broaden, organically, these relationships into connection with a broader cross section of Luther Seminary. Indeed, we need to share more of what we are learning *across* our curriculum, not simply in individual classes. The time is ripe for such engagement, as Luther's faculty have embarked upon a project of curriculum revision. We are not yet able to say how this project will impact that process, but it is clear that those of us who have been involved with the CHAPP project bring our relationships and perspectives to that table.

There are, as we have already intimated, many questions that remain. Perhaps some of the more profound have to do with how we understand Christian theology. Willie James Jennings addresses this in his recent book, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*:

A space built on Jesus of Nazareth and the claim that he is indeed Israel's Messiah, their Christ, is a space that cannot protect itself from any critique or ridicule. It is a space open to the nations and their desire. It announces a kinship network that cannot be verified but only enacted through discipleship and living together in communion with God. On the one side, this network of kinship exists as a painfully weak space that positions itself as a site of Israel and for Israel. It is a network that presents interlopers as family and strangers as kin who claim their connection only through the voice of a single one in Israel, Jesus. His life is the slender thread that holds Gentiles inside Israel as authentic not exclusive inheritors of its legacies.

On the other side, this network of kinship exists in abiding tension with other kinship networks that demand adherence. This new network must face the power of naming and claiming inherent in any world of kinship.³

What does it mean to speak of God in this radically relational way? If we can speak of Christian identity in this way—as “lurkers” or “interlopers,”

if you will, falling in love with another people's God (as Jennings describes the early communities of Gentiles following Jesus)—what might we learn by privileging such an ambiguous identity when we encounter other communities of faith? What practices does such a commitment invite us to take on? Specifically in this context, how might practices of humility, curiosity, and a deep desire for learning become part of our work in a multifaith environment? How might we grow such practices into significant desire for connection with people who love a different God?

This project suggests to us, at least, that simply being *present* is a crucial first step, and that doing so while “holding one's identity lightly” or “with open hands” is an essential spiritual discipline. How do we teach such a practice? What are the systematic theological implications of such? Here again we find Jennings' words apropos:

The new people formed in this space imagine the world differently, beyond the agonistic vision of nations and toward the possibility of love and kinship. Aesthetics preceding ethics, these disciples of Jesus love and desire one another, and that desire for each other is the basis of their ethical actions in the worlds of allegiances and kinships. . . .

What characterizes the communion of this new space is not the absence of strife, contention, or division but its complete capture. Just as Jesus drew into himself the energy of a violent world in order to heal that energy and turn it toward the good, so the communion envisioned by his body draws into itself the agon of peoples in order to turn strife into desire.⁴

It is our hope—a hope that has a clear basis in tangible relationship—that practicing presence, of the sort we explored in this project, contributes toward precisely this form of communion.

Mary Hess is associate professor of education leadership at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. She codirected the project along with Christian Scharen, assistant professor of worship.

ENDNOTES

1. For a lovely introduction to this congregation, please see the interview with Pr. Buckley-Farlee available at Vimeo (<https://vimeo.com/29579166>), produced by Peter Weston Miller, an MDiv student at Luther.
2. Learning in the Presence of Other Faiths (EL3541), Reading the Audiences (IC1615), and CYF Ministry in Urban Contexts (CY4540). All three of these classes fulfill some kind of core requirement in the various master's level degree programs at Luther.
3. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 272.
4. *Ibid.*, 274.