

SECTION II

INTERFAITH MINISTERIAL FORMATION



Hospital programs and hospice centers have increasingly been seeking people in spiritual care who are specifically trained to minister effectively among and across diverse religious traditions. This symposium explores how people are prepared for this unique ministry. Everyone agrees that we need to form women and men who honor difference in order to minister in diverse worlds. There are, however, differing perspectives on how best to accomplish that goal.

In order to locate this discussion in the current cultural context, we invited Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun Magazine*, to reflect on how diverse religious traditions seek to maintain identity, honor difference, and foster community. His essay challenges us to reconsider enduring assumptions about self-interest and survival in a culture of consumption. The current global economic crisis provides the opportunity for Rabbi Lerner to articulate how we need to be transformed to refashion an interdependent world around love and generosity. There is a maxim from Zimbabwe that embodies his vision of the new unity **I am well if you are well**. We will need courageous religious leaders to help us make this vision a reality.

At the One Spirit Interfaith Seminary in New York City, as described by Michael Pergola, the aim is to form ministers with a spirit of Oneness and interconnectedness. One fixed religious perspective is no longer enough to make sense of a very interdependent and diverse world. Whether graduates remain rooted in a single tradition or create a personal spirituality from two or more sources of wisdom, an interfaith minister must have the following qualities: an inter-spiritual identity, a deeply integrated sense of the fundamental Oneness of experience, and a vision of an inclusive God.

The faculty at the Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministry in Berkeley, California, has resisted pressure to turn the interfaith movement into another religion. The aim of formation for this Institute, as John Mabry writes, is to foster the capacity to build bridges between “islands of faith.” Students in this program are encouraged to deepen their commitment to their own faith tradition, while at the same time becoming aware of the ways people of various traditions pray and practice their faith.

The observations of Tabitha Walther from Switzerland add a European angle of vision on preparing religious leaders for ministering in diverse contexts. She believes interfaith formation is necessary for anyone who is preparing to minister in a world in which ethnic diversity and religious pluralism are lived realities. Her solution resides in holding together meta-spiritualities and particular religious “profiles.” While proponents of extreme religious positions may not always respect the position of the other, the challenge for future religious leaders is to hold these disparate views in paradoxical tension.

The ideal of holding together the differing impulses of a “meta-spirituality” and old particular belief traditions or “profiles” has consequences for pastoral supervision. In his provocative essay in the twentieth anniversary issue of the *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry*, Robert Fuller credited clinical pastoral education as one source of the “New Spirituality.” By attending closely to the religious impulses that emerge from experience, clinical and counseling approaches to ministry “helped stimulate an active spirituality while simultaneously distancing themselves from those inherited religious ideas and practices that no longer seem to ‘quicken the lives’ of contemporary Americans.”⁴

Because the differences among major religious traditions are not easily homogenized into a meta-spirituality, the gift of religious pluralism for all faith traditions is that everyone is invited to deepen his or her own convictions even as they honor the beliefs and practices of others with whom they differ. In a later essay in this volume, a Muslim chaplain reflects on how clinical pastoral education strengthened her appreciation of the convictions and practices of Islam. *That discovery is more likely to occur when formation and supervision in an inter-religious context attend carefully to religious differences without homogenizing in order to deepen faith while at the same strengthening respect for the faith of others.* The work of pastoral supervision becomes a critical part of achieving that paradox.

Clarifying the distinction promoting meta-spirituality and nourishing particular faith perspectives also has consequences for local congregational efforts to foster new ways for people of diverse faith traditions to understand and honor religious differences. People need to diminish stereotypes, set aside unfounded fears, allow curiosity to inform our respect, and discover both commonalities and differences that matter. In an article in the magazine *Congregations*, entitled “God Beyond Borders: Interfaith Education and Congregations,” Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook wrote this: “Effective interfaith edu-

cation allows us to deepen our understanding of our own traditions, discovering similarities with other traditions as well as acknowledging that which makes each faith distinct.² In this sense, **both** meta-spiritualities that acknowledge our commonalities **and** religious practices or beliefs that particularize faith are true and necessary. Being in communities, even short-term gatherings like a supervisory group in clinical pastoral education that embodies diversity and honors difference, sustains and promotes that paradoxical vision.

The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco is one such gathering. It is an interracial and interfaith religious community, founded in 1944 by Dr. Howard Thurman and Dr. Alfred Fisk. It remains committed to the “profound conviction that meaningful and creative experiences between people can be more compelling than all the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide.” The aim of the Fellowship is to “deepen the common ground and create a sense of unity that can overcome the barriers that separate people who differ.” The following words from Dr. Howard Thurman in his book *The Mood of Christmas* provide encouragement for all efforts to create communities that will transform fear and hostility and foster understanding and respect: “I know that the experiences of unity in human relations are more compelling than the concepts, the fear, the prejudices, which divide.”⁸

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Editor

NOTES

1. Robert Fuller, *Journal of Supervision and Training in Ministry* 20 (2000): 25.
2. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, “God Beyond Borders: Interfaith Education and Congregations,” in *Congregations: Leading Through Change* 35, No. 1 (Winter, 2009): 7.
3. Quoted in the website of The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples: <http://www.fellowshipsf.org>.