

Learning to Bridge Faith Traditions

John R. Mabry

Interfaith ministry is no longer an exotic aberration. It is now the norm. What Catholic hospital chaplain has not found himself visiting a Protestant or a Jewish person? What Protestant minister has not found herself giving comfort and counsel to a person of another faith tradition, however much in passing? The world has grown smaller, our communities are much more diverse, and our ministries every day touch people who our grandparents' ministers would rarely have encountered.

Unfortunately, our seminaries and training programs still seem to be, by and large, focused on ministry only to those who are religiously "like us," with hardly a nod to the interfaith reality of modern life. "For those in training now, the current curriculum cannot completely meet their needs, since our training materials have yet to catch up with the reality lived by most of us in the field."¹ It was, in part, to fill this gap that Rev. Dr. Gina Rose Halpern founded the Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministry nearly ten years ago. Since that time, the faculty and administration

John R. Mabry, PhD, director of the Interfaith Spiritual Direction Certificate Program, Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministry, and pastor, Grace North Church, 2138 Cedar St., Berkeley, CA 94709 (E-mail: jmabry@apocryphile.org).

have sought to develop and implement a curriculum that adapts the traditional and foundational elements of ministerial formation to the interfaith reality that ministers encounter in their daily life and work.

It has been an enormously successful experiment, which has led to a model responsible for equipping nearly 100 women and men for interfaith ministry. A sizeable number of them have found employment as hospital or hospice chaplains. Others have pursued callings in community and ceremonial ministry.

While it is impossible to describe the Chaplaincy Institute model in detail in a paper of this length, some of the primary features of the program are summarized below, with an emphasis on the more novel aspects related to interfaith work that may differ from what one would typically encounter in a denominational formation program.

THEOLOGICAL FORMATION

Students begin their theological training with grounding in the history, theology, and liturgical expression of the following faith traditions: earth-based traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism (both Theravada and Mahayana), Judaism, Christianity (in its Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant expressions), Islam, and Sikhism. This is accompanied by specialized study in the traditional categories of systematic theology, specifically soteriology, theodicy, and eschatology.

These classes are taught from an exclusively comparative approach, never a synthetic one.² This comparative approach focuses on the range of theological potentiality, viewing theological positions as points on a wide variety of continua. Students are encouraged to confront their own theological biases, prejudices, and resistances, and to achieve a degree of comfort with theological diversity. Representatives from different faith traditions present to the students a view of life from “inside” their traditions, emphasizing common human themes and concerns without minimizing the theological uniqueness of each religion. Since many students are grounded in a rich variety of faith traditions, they are encouraged to share their own perspectives, further enriching the depth and quality of the learning experience.

In addition, students are required to reflect deeply upon their own personal theology, and to articulate a “systematic theology” of their own. Many students practice in traditional religious contexts, while others have

a more eclectic approach to personal theology. In either case, the ability to think critically in matters of religion, construct a coherent worldview, and comfortably articulate their beliefs to others are core competencies that are required for graduation.

This is difficult work for many students, many of whom have never had to think in a systematic fashion about their theology or spirituality. To assist them, a process class is incorporated into each week of instruction where students may freely discuss and raise issues that have come up in the course of their studies. Students also are asked to articulate their theology as part of the mid-cycle self-assessment paper. Further, they are required to be in regular (usually twice per month) spiritual direction for the duration of their studies, supporting them in reflecting upon their experience and integrating new learning.

PASTORAL CARE AND OTHER MINISTRY SKILLS

Theology is abstract, of course, while ministry is a hands-on endeavor. Chaplaincy Institute students are given tools and required to build skills to meet the pastoral needs of the people they will be encountering in their vocations. They are taught to do spiritual assessments, so that they understand not just the religious traditions of care recipients, but also the different ways that people within those traditions hold faith, differences that may require nuanced approaches to ministry.

Students are trained to provide care for those who are in crisis—with a special focus on those who are dying and their families. This includes being familiar with the ways that people of various traditions pray and cultivating the ability to provide support and comfort using those prayer forms in real world situations. Bedside ritual, the healing arts, or guided imagery may supplement such care. Care for those with cancer is also emphasized. In addition, students are familiarized with prison chaplaincy and with ministry to the marginalized. A course in medical ethics sensitizes students to the moral issues surrounding care in hospital and hospice settings.

While students are not provided a thorough training in spiritual direction, they are required to build basic skills in spiritual guidance, sufficient to their needs as chaplains, pastors, and community ministers.³ This training includes listening skills, training in noticing the movement of the Divine in the lives of care recipients, and an understanding of generational

distinctiveness and the specialized needs of the various generations alive today.

Art and music are important media for prayer and meditation, and, as such, they are emphasized in the Chaplaincy Institute curriculum. Among other things, art can help people articulate the ineffable, identify hard-to-access feelings and fears, and integrate painful experiences. Music can comfort the sick, assist in healing, and help students connect with their prophetic voice. Art, music, poetry and other forms of creative expression are powerful tools for discernment that students are encouraged to employ for their own benefit, as well as for the benefit of others. In all pastoral situations, students are taught to pay attention to the feelings and needs of the care recipient, to listen with empathy and intention, to notice what the Divine may be trying to do in a given situation, and to offer support, comfort, and counsel as appropriate.

In addition to Pastoral Care, interfaith ministers are often called upon to perform other duties in the course of their ministries, such as preaching, teaching, and leading rituals and ceremonies. As part of their homiletical training, students are given simple and effective homiletical models and are required to write and deliver numerous sermons pertinent to diverse occasions. While a few students may go on to congregational ministry within a specific religious context, most will find themselves speaking to people of varied faith traditions; special attention is given to crafting sermons that feature exhortations appropriate for listeners of myriad traditions.

Similarly, although students will of course find themselves ministering to people of specific religious expressions, they will frequently be serving mixed-faith families, people of no faith tradition, and those who have eclectic approaches to spirituality. Students gain skills that prepare them to offer life passage rituals such as weddings, baptisms and baby blessings, funeral and memorial services, as well as specialized rituals as they are called upon to do so.⁴ Students are also taught leadership skills and trained in spiritual care, community-building, and interfaith dialogue—all of which are put to the test in their supervised field education, where they apply their training in real-world interfaith ministry.

PSYCHOLOGY AND ETHICS

Finally, students are given a good grounding in pastoral ethics. They are taught their responsibilities as mandated reporters, and they are trained to hold healthy and prudent professional boundaries. Not least among such boundaries is the very necessary task of self-care, something that clergy in general do poorly. Like other clergy, those studying at the Chaplaincy Institute feel called to help others, and taking care of themselves may fall low on their list of priorities. Great care is taken in helping students understand that they can only help others so long as they themselves are healthy in mind, body, and spirit. Students are asked to make it a priority to get adequate rest, play, and renewal of their spirits.

As part of their responsibility to care for their own mental health, and also to help them understand the psychological dynamics that they will encounter in ministries, a foundational course in spiritual psychology is also part of the Chaplaincy Institute curriculum. Addressing family dynamics, inner council work, archetypes and personal myth, and personal wounding and recovery, students are encouraged to confront the early wounding and neurotic impulses that drive them and that may impede their success in ministry, as well as helping them understand those they will be serving.

The need for interfaith ministry will not be abating anytime soon. As our communities continue to become more diverse, as people “come out of the closet” about their spiritualities, especially those that do not conform to the dominant culture, the need for those who can meet them at the point of their need will continue to increase. A California law requires hospitals and other facilities receiving public funding to provide spiritual care for all patients and guests. Obviously, it is more fiscally responsible to hire one chaplain trained to minister to everyone rather than hiring five clergy-persons, each trained only in their specific tradition. As more states require similar care, the need for clergy trained in interfaith ministry is going to increase exponentially.

The Chaplaincy Institute model is evolving and adapting in response to the needs of its students, the realities of the field, the expectations of the Association of Professional Chaplains and other professional organizations, and the creative and diligent care of its faculty and administration. Our goal is not, primarily, financial success, nor are we concerned with constructing a

New Age utopian paradigm for twenty-first century ministry. We are, simply and to the best of our collective abilities, attempting to craft a model that will ensure our graduates an excellent education and that will sufficiently ready them for ministry in a variety of contexts, to a wide variety of people, attuned to the realities of the marketplace they will be entering.

NOTES

1. John R. Mabry, *Noticing the Divine: An Introduction to Interfaith Spiritual Guidance* (New York: Morehouse, 2006), ii

2. Students have long pressed our faculty to provide a coherent “interfaith theology.” We have denied this request in the strongest possible terms, since to do so would be to formulate another dogma—essentially to turn the interfaith movement into yet another religion and, in so doing, rob the movement of its power to minister across traditions. Individual faith traditions are analogous to islands; interfaith ministry builds bridges between those islands. To synthesize a new “interfaith theology” would turn the interfaith movement into another island, effectively neutralizing our very reason for being. Two examples will serve to illustrate this. Both Sikhism and the Theosophical Society began as essentially interfaith movements, and each had a profound effect on the cultures they touched, promoting good will, empathy, and harmony between people of varied faith traditions. Both, however, eventually developed their own dogma, scriptures, hierarchy, and liturgical expressions. Both became religions in their own right and lost their ability to unite and minister to people of diverse expressions.

3. The Chaplaincy Institute also has a dedicated Interfaith Spiritual Direction Certificate Program that prepares students for private practice. It is one of the few schools teaching spiritual direction from a specifically interfaith perspective.

4. Students are ordained as interfaith clergy at their graduation, empowering them and readying them for such ritual ministries.