

Chaplaincy Amidst Religious Diversity

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As part of my work as an Affiliate Researcher of the Pluralism Project of Harvard University, I had the privilege a few weeks ago of engaging Hindu, Muslim, and Jewish students at St. Mary's Episcopal School, Memphis Tennessee, in conversation about their experiences of being students at a school which is predominantly Christian. When asked to describe the religious life of their school they used words such as "strong," "inquisitive," "open-minded," "comforting," "present in everything," "tolerant," "informative, not forcing." Although I expected to find at least some of their experience to be positive, I found it quite remarkable both to listen to the viewpoints these young women had acquired about the school of which they had been a part for as long as 12 years, and to gain a sense from them of their religious identities.

Even though I had earlier served St. Mary's as Chaplain for some six years and know the school well, it was humbling to hear the enlightened ideas these young women had developed and to gain a sense of the appreciation they had for themselves as unique and "special" participants in their Episcopal school community. The discovery of their differences from the other students was described as a process of awareness which was nurtured and supported by their faculty and classmates who were described as being "inquisitive" rather than critical of their religious lives. None of the students presented their religious identity as being gained without growing pains, but each seemed to indicate that coming into their own religious identity was actually aided by faculty and students who cared enough to ask about their religious traditions and practices. In several cases, "caring about" was even equated with "curiosity". What I tapped into was enough to assure me that St. Mary's Episcopal School has provided these students of diverse religious backgrounds with the kind of atmosphere where religious differences are more than tolerated—they are cherished.

However, there was one aspect of these conversations which has left me wondering about the possibility of providing an even richer religious experience for students in Episcopal Schools where there is significant diversity of faith traditions. All but one of the students I interviewed mentioned a desire for even more opportunities to "discuss our differences." Each time this topic came up, there was a reference to how helpful and clarifying it was to engage in dialogue about "religious and cultural differences." As I have looked back on these conversations, I have realized that there is something illuminating in the voice these students gave to affirmation for what is already taking place in our religious curriculum, social studies, or history classes even as they highlight possibilities for what Episcopal Schools might do even more effectively in this vital area of our common life. Their shared concern gives words to the unique cultural moment we now face in the United States. The ability to discuss our religious and cultural differences is more than an "extra-curricular activity," it is a skill which is vital for participants in democracy, especially a democratic society such as our which is filled with people whose differences are deep and complex. As the church is called to continue the work of transforming society, so Episcopal schools are

uniquely situated to become "dialogical communities" in which the principles of religious freedom can be modeled and practiced. These ideals lie at the heart of our country's contribution to the human endeavor. We are so blessed to be working in schools and living in a nation where uniformity of belief is not a requirement for participation. These students reminded me that there is important work going on in Episcopal Schools even as they gave me the impetus and inspiration to help make those schools "just a little bit better."