

Strategic Initiative 4.2, “Develop and sustain a culture and habit of interfaith* dialogue.”

A Report by the Inter-religious Dialog Working Group , January 12, 2009

Co-chairs: John Cha (Religion) Fall 2008, Deborah Goodwin (Religion) Spring 2008, Brian Johnson (Chaplain’s Office) Spring/ Fall 2008, Virgil Jones (Diversity Center) Spring 2008

Working Group Participants: Florence Amamoto, Chelsey Cook, Thia Cooper, Sarah Dille, Sean Easton, Sandi Francis, Mimi Gerstbauer, Donna Hewitt, Asitha Jayawardena, Darrell Jodock, Sarah Johnson, Rachel Larson, Chuck Niederriter, Jerry Nowell, Alisa Rosenthal, Grady St. Dennis, Jenkuan Shih, Andi Twiton, Gita Varner, Bob Weisenfeld, and Linnea Wren

Consultation with Campus Constituencies: Office of the President, Residential Life, Office of Admissions and Enrollment Management, Office of Marketing and Public Relations, Office for International and Cultural Education, Representatives of students, faculty, and staff that represent various religious traditions, Apprentices of Christ Chapel (representing 12 religious groups on campus), Religion Department, and Chaplains’ Office Staff

Report Editor: Mary Gaebler

* The language of interfaith has been intentionally changed to inter-religious which includes those religious traditions that do not self-describe as oriented toward faith.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2007, Provost Mary Morton Strey charged the committee, the Inter-religious Dialog Working Group, with formulating tactics to implement Strategic Initiative 4.2, “Develop and sustain a culture and habit of interfaith dialogue.” This report proposes a set of tactics that will, we believe, sustain and develop further the existing inter-religious culture at Gustavus. The report is the product of a four step process: 1) conversations among the members of the strategic initiative’s working group over a two semester period that resulted in a menu of possible tactics; 2) discussions with the wider community about the strengths and weaknesses of these tactics; 3) collating and evaluating the feedback from those discussions; 4) finalizing a set of tactics for presentation to the Provost.

One of the strengths of the Gustavus community is that it initially welcomes people from a variety of faith perspectives and at the present time hosts a number of events celebrating different religious traditions. However, it has become clear over the course of numerous discussions that there needs to be an institutionally embedded set of academic, intellectual and cultural practices if we as a community are to strengthen, develop and move beyond the “informal” Gustavus tradition of hospitality and celebration of diverse faiths. For this initial hospitable welcome and celebration do not necessarily ensure that a “culture and habit of interfaith dialogue” will ensue, since “hospitality” and

“celebration” suggests that its recipients are guests and not full members of our community. Furthermore, implicit in implementing this strategy is an invitation to religious diversity in the form of recruiting potential students, staff, administrators and faculty of diverse faith backgrounds. The college, therefore, needs to help people of other faiths to live out their religious commitments within this community at the institutional level, and be more intentional in student recruiting to seek out religious diversity. A visible and active program to do this will, of necessity, foster mutuality and dialogue leading to habits conducive to developing inter-religious literacy within the entire community.

We firmly believe that Gustavus’ history as a liberal arts college rooted in a Swedish heritage and Lutheran identity provides a strong foundation for members of the community to foster a mature understanding of faith and vocation, and a constructive engagement with those whose faiths differ from their own. In the context of social, political and cultural challenges posed in the twenty-first century, not the least of which is a plurality of faith claims, the cultivation of inter-religious literacy will well serve Gustavus’ commitment to educate students to lead lives of leadership and service.

I. The Liberal Arts Mandate and Church-Relatedness

The College Mission Statement defines Gustavus as a liberal arts college, “aspir[ing] to be a community of persons from diverse backgrounds who respect and affirm the dignity of all people.” Gustavus students are therefore encouraged “to learn about themselves and others... (Strategic Plan, p. 4)”

This kind of free inquiry, to learn about one’s self and others, requires both identifying commitments to specific communities and the independence of thought and action encouraged by a rationally critical analysis of self and world. Gustavus seeks to encourage this freedom, both by encouraging critical self-reflection, and by challenging students to receive “new truths and perspectives.”

In a follow-up to the May 2004 Task Force Report on Diversity, the President’s Advisory Committee on Diversity (PACD) called for Gustavus to “incorporate diversity more fully into the fabric of campus programs and life (Objective 2, p. 3).” In our discussions many voiced the sentiment that this includes religious diversity. We believe this call requires institutional habits of being that invite and incorporate religious and other forms of diversity, not only at the level of principle, but of practice. These habits of being will well serve the mission to educate students to lead lives of leadership and service.

It is our belief that a church-related college like that of Gustavus, with its purpose deeply rooted in both the liberal arts and Lutheran theology, can and should cultivate an environment where “new truths and perspectives” are sought and encouraged. With its grounding in both faith (rootedness) and engagement (inclusivity)—the “third path” as expressed by Darrell Jodock (see below)—this paradox of identity and difference, “rootedness and inclusivity,” provides the creative tension whereby the engagement with others and the exploration of new truths and perspectives flourish:

The Lutheran tradition recognizes that whenever a college takes seriously the biblical teaching that every human is a creature of God, it cannot withdraw into non-sectarian empty tolerance (on the one hand) or sectarian tribalism (on the other). It must be engaged and its engagement must be inclusive. Without rootedness, accommodation occurs, societal assumptions are not questioned, and people are not served (at least not on the deeper levels of their human need). Without engagement, isolation occurs, the church's formulation of the religious tradition is not questioned, and no one is challenged to investigate deeply.... The Lutheran tradition summons a college to work out a "both ... and," both affirming the religious identity and engaging with today's world. The underlying conviction is that this tension is a productive one (Jodock, *The Third Path*, pp. 2-3).

II. Further Explanation of Underlying Lutheran Theological Warrants

What makes the Lutheran tradition unique in regard to diversity?

Lutheran theology understands that God's work in the world is expressed through two distinctive dimensions or "realms"; a Christ-elicited faith in the first realm takes the form of Spirit-empowered love in the second. Luther's theology of the two realms refers, in part, to two different ways of being. The first way describes self-identity convictions. The second way describes the actions that constitute one's participation in the world. What is unique about Lutheran theology is that it insists that what one does cannot effect who one is in the deepest sense. Works do not produce faith.

The Role of Gustavus Adolphus College as a Lutheran Institution of Higher Learning

How does this distinction between works and faith affect the vocation of this college?

Gustavus' context is one of radical freedom, secured by faith, where the individual must weigh particular contextual needs against particular resources. Each person will bring particular experiences to bear, by way of his or her own particular knowledge and judgment. But works cannot produce faith, and no particular work of law is ever absolutely binding. Since persons cannot then engage the world on the basis of predetermined rules, women and men must engage their neighbors directly, asking again and again, "what do they need?" Here, a person of any faith (religious and/or humanistic) is called to make up her own mind and cultivate her own mental capacities so as to faithfully discern what each situation requires. Gustavus aims to prepare people to serve the world, first, by being able to wisely discern the world's need, and second, by equipping persons to answer that need.

Gustavus Adolphus College and Its Vocation

What is the relation between faith and academic freedom?

Because Lutheran theology does not tie faith to any particular work, faith is free to explore God's world without fear of discovering something self-destructive. The faith that grounds Gustavus is itself protected by the founders' intentions and by the living faith that flourishes here. The Lutheran understanding of faith is an identifiable core as

an institution. But by protecting this identity the college simultaneously protects the academic freedom that faith supports. Thus Lutheran faith secures academic freedom instead of being threatened by it.

Religious Diversity and Ethical Agreement

But not everyone in this community is Lutheran or even religious. How can everyone be a part of this community that bears the Lutheran identity?

Our communal differences with regard to faith are brought into ethical agreement around the importance of faith (religious and humanistic) and the enunciation of a set of values embraced by the whole college community. While it's true that not all members of this community identify as Lutheran Christians, it is true that everyone tacitly accepts faith or spirituality as a matter of legitimate public discussion. It is also true that everyone is expected to buy into the five Gustavus values. As an example, just as the 4 key principles of medical ethics bind a community of otherwise disparate people together into a single community, so too the 5 values at Gustavus provide a shared normative ground for everyone here. People may arrive at the 4 medical principles from a variety of perspectives, just as community members at Gustavus may affirm the 5 values out of various religious and cultural contexts. While the Lutheran identity grounds the institution, these agreed upon values ground the actual community. Unlike the Lutheran identity of the college, however, the values are always open to negotiation—at least in theory.

Present Context

From a theological perspective, what is the present context that calls us to welcome interfaith dialogue and worship among us?

The vocational understanding of Gustavus begins with preparing our students for lives of love and service in the context of the world they are inheriting. In this twenty-first century, religious and cultural diversity, while being seen as challenging or even threatening for some, is understood as the locus within which the vocation of service and leadership flourishes. We hope to help our students become leaders in society that serve with compassion and integrity. And we know that the capacity for effective, self-directed agency requires a profound discernment of one's own identity, religious or otherwise, and a critical receptivity to a pluralistic world. Indeed, we must help students to discover for themselves a "third way (see above)," one, that is neither defensively self-protected (sectarian side) nor ineffectively chameleon-like (non-sectarian). This college, with its Lutheran heritage and understanding of the 'third way', is particularly well suited to meet this need. It is therefore important that the college take this identity seriously such that 1) the college community itself demonstrates how a core based on the principles of Lutheran higher education remains freely open to all diversity; and 2) this community develops every avenue to help our students exercise this ability themselves. Thus, the college with its Lutheran heritage and openness to all diversity, models for our students a way of being and acting in the world.

Conclusion

Gustavus, with its dual heritage as a Swedish Lutheran and liberal arts college is called to act out of its identity as an institution informed and grounded in the principles of Lutheran higher education. In this way, the college can prepare students to serve the world by modeling for them a “third path” that demonstrates a freedom to act openly and compassionately in a pluralistic world while maintaining and deepening their own faith convictions.

Inter-religious Dialogue Tactics

The following tactics represent the combined thinking of the task force, meetings with over twenty groups of students, faculty and staff, and research regarding peer institutions and model programs around the country. There was wide consensus these tactics build on current efforts and would intentionally help to coordinate and foster a culture of inter-religious dialogue and habits of inter-religious conversation and cooperation.

Financial Resources Required

1. Create a new place of worship separate from Christ Chapel for use by multiple religious traditions and small groups on campus. Establish a task force representing various religious traditions to work with architects and designers. The Community Service Center and the Wellness Strategic Working group are also recommending developing such a space for their needs and partnering with these efforts would be advisable. Renovation: \$50,000 New Building \$500,000
2. Sponsor periodic interfaith celebrations in Chapel and/or on campus. Endorse the ongoing work of the Chaplains’ office to coordinate inter-religious observances in daily chapel and to establish other events in consultation with the diversity center, diversity committees and religious representatives. \$25,000
3. Partner with off-campus places of worship to support transportation for students to those place of worship and purchase/rent vans with drivers. \$25,000
4. Sponsor residencies by visiting scholars who are specialists in inter-religious dialogue. Host academic conferences, inviting speakers to address the issue of religious pluralism at a church-related college. \$25,000
5. Provide for the dietary requirements of various groups on campus. Work with the food service and the kitchen cabinet to explore options during holy days and times of fasting. \$15,000
6. Explore the staffing implications of these responsibilities. At the present time, a task force charged with oversight and implementation should be created with leadership

centered in the office of the chaplains, and with the cooperation of the diversity center and the religion department. ½ time \$25,000 Full time \$50,000

7. Adapt and/or alter the curriculum: create a .25 or .5 elective course in Interfaith Literacy, offer faculty development resources for creating interfaith elements in courses, add a religion requirement/course that augments a current course in Christianity with a second semester in inter-religious components, and secure funding for off campus visits to places of worship. \$40,000

No Financial Resources Required

8. Institute a campus-wide policy regarding the observance of holy days, fasts, and other religious events. Coordinate the observances on a central calendar. Work with marketing and publications to publicize events. Work with the academic division to develop announcements so that faculty and staff are aware of the implications of these events as they impact academic schedule.

9. Investigate the processes by which student organizations are “recognized” and provide support for other religious groups seeking to organize.

10. Work with the Office for Church Relations to expand its services to provide links between students and their home congregations/synagogues/mosques.

11. Provide training for admission counselors, hiring officers, board of trustee members, and other on campus representatives to clarify messages of church-relatedness and religious diversity. Work with marketing and public relations to insure that a coherent message is articulated within and without the Gustavus community. Draw on the statement developed for this strategic initiative as a starting point.

12. Continue to create and sustain an inter-religious culture by providing for discussions at new faculty orientations/faculty development seminars and new staff orientations/enhancement days, inviting scholars representative of differing religious traditions for faculty hires, and plan on-campus conversations about the changing culture of higher education.