Peer Ministry: Students Leading Conversations on Interreligious Issues at Catholic Colleges and Universities

Helen M. Wolf

Abstract

A survey and interviews completed by peer ministers at Catholic colleges and universities in the United States from October 2012 to February 2013 reveal that the interviewed student ministers are engaging peers in interreligious dialogue. The research corroborates the premise that the promotion of interreligious relationships is important to this generation and is integral to the work of campus ministry offices. This article proposes that peer ministry programs, which exist at almost half of U.S. Catholic colleges and universities, can guide and nurture interreligious relationships on Catholic college and university campuses in order to understand more fully the faith and religious outlooks of their peers. These student leaders can help shape the nature of a very needed, yet still emerging, context for interreligious dialogue. A proposed educational model for the formation and training of peer ministers can also serve to prepare campus ministry professionals engaging in interreligious dialogue.

Interreligious Engagement: The Responsibility of Catholic Colleges and Universities

Catholic higher education has a paramount duty to foster and actively cultivate purposeful and substantive interreligious engagement and understanding among students because interreligious dialogue is a fundamental component of Catholic teaching and intellectual discourse. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church attempted to embrace a less classical view of the world by implementing an international council to address the challenges of modernity. Pope John XXIII invited members of other Christian traditions to participate in the Second Vatican Council in the hope of uniting Christians around the

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world in dialogue. It was his hope that the Council would provide a foundation for understanding the dynamics of religious development in the world, which included the importance of interreligious and ecumenical relationships. “In this way, the beneficial influence of the conciliar deliberations, we profoundly hope, must succeed to the point that it imbues with Christian light and penetrates with fervent spiritual energy not only into the depths of souls but also into the whole realm of human activities.”

The Second Vatican Council marked a significant shift in how the Church viewed religious traditions outside Catholicism and opened the way to dialogue and joint action with these other traditions. Principles that emerged from the Council recognized that truth and grace can be found in religions of the world other than Catholicism. Engagement with other traditions was something that the Church called all the faithful to pursue. Catholics then, from this conciliar understanding, are called to engage with those who practice religions other than Catholicism in order to build relationships of esteem and concern.

The popes who followed John XXIII also believed in the importance of interreligious dialogue and continued to advocate for a greater understanding of the diverse and multiple religious faiths of the world. Through the declaration Nostra Aetate, Paul VI recognized that moral truths are found in other religious traditions, in addition to Christianity. “The Church. . . exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.”

Understanding God as present and dynamic in the many religious traditions of the world was a recurring theme.

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1 This is a translation of the Apostolic Constitution, Humanae Salutis, with which Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council on December 25, 1961. https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/humanae-salutis.pdf (accessed March 11, 2017). The official Latin text may be found in AAS 54 (1962) 5-13; the original Italian text may be found in ADP I, 139-43, see http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_constitutions/1961/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apc_196111225_humanae-salutis.html (accessed March 11, 2017), 12.


in the writings of John Paul II. In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, he acknowledged that the deep and abiding faith of those practicing religions other than Catholicism is “an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body.”⁴

While visiting the United States, Pope Benedict XVI praised interfaith dialogue as a means of fostering greater understanding among practitioners of different traditions in order to work together to build a better world: “As we grow in understanding of one another, we see that we share an esteem for ethical values, discernable to human reason, which are revered by all peoples of goodwill. The world begs for a common witness to these values.”⁵ At a conference on religions and mercy organized by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Pope Francis advocated for interreligious dialogue as a means to confront violence committed in the name of God. Francis proclaims that the religions of the world are called to be “messengers of peace and builders of communion, and to proclaim . . . that ours is a time of fraternity. That is why it is important for us to seek occasions of encounter. . . .”⁶

Some eminent Catholic theologians today disagree about how best to build interreligious relationships. For example, Terrence Tilley asserts that interreligious dialogue is needed to explore as fully as possible the depth of God’s plan for humanity. He tries to show that some forms of religious pluralism are compatible with the Church’s faith. He offers inclusivist pluralism as promulgated by Jacques Dupuis, SJ, as an example, arguing that it may “indeed be the case that God wills the salvation of humanity and the cosmos through the church, but it is unclear that the church can be relevant to those who have never heard of it.”⁷ Therefore, Tilley (and Dupuis) make the argument that religions other than Christianity, in corresponding with God’s plan for humanity, can have positive salvific significance for the adherents of those traditions.

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According to Tilley, to deny this possibility of salvation being made available for participants of other religions would be to deny God’s dominion. He calls for an understanding of the existence of other traditions as part of God’s universal plan of salvation.

Gavin D’Costa counters Tilley, arguing that any form of religious pluralism is incompatible with Christian orthodoxy. D’Costa, in referring to the Catechism’s definition of faith to include both subjective and objective elements, proposed that faith cannot be objectively attributed to religions which do not accept belief in the Triune God. Unless non-Christian religions profess a belief in the Trinity, they, according to D’Costa, cannot be viewed as having faith. As such, D’Costa claims that other religions do not have salvific significance.

The debate between proponents and opponents of interreligious dialogue provides a glimpse into the ongoing evolution of theological discussions about religious diversity. The religious pluralism on today’s college campuses indicates the need to provide settings for exploring religious understanding and practice from a number of traditions, especially in light of the Second Vatican Council’s mandate to explore ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. College students are learning about diverse faith traditions not only from campus ministry programs, courses, books, news reports, and the Internet, but also from conversations in residence halls with classmates and over dinner in the cafeteria. Knowledge of the many religions in the world sparks a number of questions in the minds of today’s young adults: If I were to marry an observant Jew, would I have to convert to his religion, or could I continue practicing Christianity? Will I be able to discuss terrorism with my Muslim classmate without blaming her faith for what ISIS is doing in the name of Islam? If moral truth can be found in everyone’s religion, does that negate the truth of my own? How can I develop my own religious identity amidst the many different beliefs held by my peers?

Opportunities for Catholic students to be educated in the Church’s religious principles are critical, but Catholic colleges and universities also collaborate in ecumenical and interreligious efforts to care for the pastoral needs of their students who are not Catholic. The religious

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8 Ibid., 60.
liberty of each student is to be respected, as is each student’s right to participate in the life of her/his respective faith. Also imperative is for students to strive to reach a level of understanding about one another’s beliefs. Dialogue that engages students about the differences and commonalities of the many and diverse religious traditions practiced in the twenty-first century can be difficult, but they are necessary. In today’s postmodern world, academia must educate students to live, work, raise families, and worship God in this globalized world of religious pluralism. As peer ministers are responding to the call to engage in interreligious dialogue on their campuses, these student leaders can help shape the nature of a very needed, yet still emerging, context for interreligious dialogue.

The Importance of Interreligious Dialogue on Today’s Catholic College Campuses

Authentic dialogue among people of diverse faiths has the potential to lead students of any tradition to a greater appreciation of and a deeper relationship with God. There are two important considerations regarding the Catholic Church’s teachings about interreligious relationships. First, as stated earlier, dialogue and engagement with those practicing religions outside Catholicism is something that each member of the faithful is called to accomplish. Second, we must understand that theological discussions about the nature and scope of interreligious relations is an ongoing process. With that said, there is a growing consensus today that there is no need to construct a metanarrative that gives insight in a collective manner to all the religions in the world. Neither do people of faith need to be concerned with establishing a universal religion that people of all faiths can practice. As Paul Knitter points out, “If we boil the ‘many’ down to ‘one,’ we would harm ourselves and maim the world.”11 Instead, in striving to foster interreligious dialogue, there needs to be mutual understanding of the other without giving up one’s own religious beliefs.

Interreligious dialogue is needed to lead people of various faiths to a better understanding of the common issues that affect all in the globalized world in order to act on them in the pursuit of justice, peace, and

the common good. Each is a member of and partner in building God’s reign on earth. Although coming to the table with different beliefs and perspectives, each has the capacity to learn from the other. Harold Horell affirms the importance of being grounded within a specific faith tradition with this caveat: “[I]f we think that the answers to all questions can be found only within Christian faith traditions, there can be no true dialogue with others.” Eboo Patel maintains that “the clear and proud expression of one’s faith identity isn’t a barrier that separates people of different faiths, it’s a bridge that invites them in.” Some of the peer ministers who took part in the research for this study support Patel’s supposition:

Having discussions with people of other faiths has allowed my peers to better understand what it means to be a Muslim.

Being a peer minister has given me the chance to support other students in understanding different faiths, which is important in helping them learn from others and expand their views about their beliefs and those of others.

Conversations with my friends and peers on campus play a huge role toward interfaith dialogue and community building.

In a period of growing intercommunication, the Church needs to recognize religious communities as they currently exist. We are called not only to listen to others, but also to “try and see things with the eyes of the others.” While the various traditions differ experientially, interreligious dialogue focuses on building relationships and enhancing mutual understanding through engagement and collaboration.

From her research, Kathy Winings concludes that many students today desire to be actively engaged in the practice of their faith and to be in relationship with others who practice traditions other than their

15 Student survey participant 182.
16 Student survey participant 157.
17 Nyla, interviewed peer minister.
18 Waldenfels, *Jesus Christ and the Religions*, 103.
own. College students want to confront understandings of their personal faith and they desire to learn more about other traditions in order to “challenge their concept of the ‘other’ in a spiritually healthy manner.” Winings’ research corresponds with the research data for this study. Moreover, Patel and Meyer write: “This generation of Christians — and young people of all faiths — grasp the absolute need of engaging religious diversity. Interfaith for them is not a luxury reserved for quiet tables of seasoned, fully formed religious leaders. Instead, it’s the reality of the lunchroom, and the dorm lounge, and the classroom.” Clearly, engaging with and understanding various faith traditions are important to today’s college students. When young adults engage in a dialogue of faith, there is an opportunity for them to formulate, choose, and live out a free response to the doctrines of their tradition.

Why Peer Ministry as a Means of Promoting Interreligious Dialogue?

Peer ministers are students serving in leadership positions with offices of campus ministry. These student leaders assist professional campus ministers in fostering the faith development of their peers by providing opportunities for theological study and reflection, student leadership, liturgical worship, pastoral care, spiritual development, and experiences of service in order for students to grow intellectually, morally, and spiritually. Serving as a peer minister implies a willingness to explore one’s personal faith as well as a desire to understand how others with different beliefs come to know God. Peer ministry is an outreach concerned not just with the spiritual and faith development of the other, but also with the development of the self within the context of community, an experience whereby peer ministers develop relationships

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20 Ibid., 338-40.
22 Many programs are explicitly called peer ministry, but other titles include student ministry, leadership team, student spiritual mentors, campus ministry commissioners, companions, faith in action team, student spirituality team, and student fellowship. Some universities’ peer ministers facilitate chapters of faith-based programs already in existence, like COR (Chasing down, Overtaking, Running over) and FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students). Others fashion names for peer ministry programs specific to the institution or the charism of the college’s founding order, like Loyola Companions and Ursuline Leaders.
with other students in an effort to understand and respond to God's presence among them. While peer ministry programs at Catholic colleges and universities are grounded in Catholic teaching and tradition, students of differing religions can and should serve as peer ministers in fulfillment of the doctrines and history of their respective faith traditions.

Peer ministers grasp the importance of interreligious dialogue as a sustained conversation between parties who respect differences, with the hope that encounters with differing faiths can lead students to reflect further on the tenets of their personal faith. They can provide opportunities for young adults to foster interreligious dialogue with other students on their respective campuses, thereby promoting an understanding of the diverse and multiple religious faiths practiced on today's Catholic college campuses. Peer ministry has the capacity to offer formation in the practices of the religious traditions of student ministers, as well as teach them to understand religion from an interreligious perspective. This is an opportunity to guide college students as they develop and practice their faith in the light of an awareness of the tremendous religious diversity of our world. When the connectedness to other traditions is established, respect for and a sense of responsibility to one another can strengthen.

What Peer Ministers Say about Interreligious Dialogue

Original empirical research, completed from October 2012 to February 2013, supports the premise that student leaders are not only interested in learning about the faith traditions practiced by their peers, but also concerned about engaging in dialogue about religious practices and beliefs of unfamiliar religious traditions. The research consisted of the following:

- An examination of websites, along with responses to letters and e-mail communications, identified 1,884 peer ministers active in 117 peer ministry programs at Catholic colleges and universities in the United States.
- Two national surveys were conducted. The first was sent to student ministers (303 respondents) and the second to administrators of peer ministry programs (88 respondents).

The student survey revealed that 76 percent of peer ministers addressed interreligious issues in their work. In addition, survey participants were asked to provide information on the following topics:
• Requirements of peer ministers/student leaders
• Responsibilities
• Training/formation
• Remuneration, if applicable
• Personal spiritual practices
• Impact of the ministers/student leaders in the faith development of their peers

(Further results of the student survey were published in the summer 2014 edition of the *Journal of Catholic Higher Education.*

After completion of the surveys, a sampling of peer ministers was interviewed in order to gather further data about the role student ministers play in the faith development of their peers and about the effects that serving as peer ministers has on their own relationships with God. The interviews allowed students to expand on their roles as peer ministers in their own words.

Six students were interviewed: three women and three men. Their terms serving as a peer minister ranged from one to six years. One student identified herself as a Muslim and the remaining five as Catholic. A broader sampling of students from other traditions, although preferable, was not possible as the peer ministers who responded to the survey were overwhelmingly Catholic, and nearly all were Christian. Less than 5 percent practiced religions other than Christianity.

The interviewed students included four undergraduates, each with a different major: English with a religious studies minor; biology and psychology double major; accounting and finance double major; and religious studies and sociology double major. Three were seniors and one a junior. One graduate interviewee was studying pastoral ministry and the other was pursuing a religious studies degree. The subjects were each from a different Catholic college or university. Each institution was in a different state from four geographic regions of the country: Northeast (New York and Massachusetts), Midwest (Indiana and Ohio), West (Colorado), and South (Texas). The population of the institutions ranged from very small to large: one very small school of 1,500 students; two small schools between 3,000 and 5,000 students; one mid-size school at just under 10,000 students; and two large

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24 Ibid., 242.
schools of just under 15,000 students. One of the schools is open only to women and a second had a 91 percent female population. The gender parity of the remaining colleges and universities’ populations were relatively even (see Table).

The interviews included six probing questions:

1. Why is being a peer minister important to you?
2. How do you nurture your relationship with God?
3. How do you help your friends on their faith journey with God?
4. How does your faith impact your relationship with friends and classmates?
5. Do you speak about your faith in God with peers on campus?
6. How important is interfaith dialogue and building interfaith relationships in your ministry?

For the purposes of this essay, I will limit the findings to the last question.

Interreligious Dialogue among Today’s College Students

The interviews and questionnaires included open-ended questions that allowed participants to expand on their answers and present opinions. Their answers offer profound insights into students’ experiences in their service as peer ministers. Interreligious dialogue is an important component of their peer ministry experiences. Says one surveyed peer minister, “Last year, I arrived on campus excited to continue my interfaith work and further explore my religious identity.”

All six interviewed peer ministers incorporated interreligious dialogue into their ministries. They all agreed that understanding various faith traditions promoted understanding and acceptance among religions. Most believed that their peers felt as strongly as they did regarding the importance of strengthening interreligious relations. One of the interviewed peer ministers, Rose, confirmed the importance of interreligious dialogue and believed that her peers had similar sensibilities. She stated, “The students that I work with and minister to . . . really understand the importance of dialogue and for us to communicate with others of different faiths.” Peter, another interviewed peer minister, stated: “If we had dialogue between faiths, we would see we’re not all that different. If we had more of that [dialogue], we would be able to solve a lot of

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25 Student survey participant 172.
**Table: General Information Regarding Interviewed Peer Ministers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Year of Study</th>
<th>Faith Tradition</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Size of Institution</th>
<th>Years Serving as a Peer Minister</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>IN</td>
<td>Very small</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1-21-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2-15-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11-10-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11-28-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Graduate student</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>Mid-size</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2-22-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Large</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2-19-13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
things.” Thomas and Peter, however, admitted they were unsure how their peers felt about interreligious dialogue.

The six interviewees engaged in numerous interreligious programs, including prayer-a-thons, panel discussions, prayer services, exhibits, and presentations. In addition, all engaged in interreligious dialogue on an informal level during one-on-one sessions with peers or during group meetings. Frank encouraged peers to share their faith during programming he facilitated. During these discussions, he was challenged to articulate his faith in order to be as clear as possible to his peers. He felt an obligation to foster understanding of and respect between people with different beliefs. “I find that that’s when I grow most in my faith — when talking to people who have different [beliefs]. And open and respectful conversations are vitally important, especially in a global world where these students will be graduating and working with people of a variety of different faiths and needing to be open and respectful to them.”

Nyla believed interreligious dialogue played a huge role in building community. She was especially sensitive to building understanding among faith traditions because she felt called to break down the stereotypes that existed about Islam. She wore the hijab, which readily identified her as a Muslim and exposed her to questions about her faith. She shared: “There are a lot of stereotypes and the conversations just start off [with] ‘Oh, you’re a Muslim, right?’ And it kind of goes from there, answering questions that people have.” One way she tried to break down stereotypes was to foster awareness of commonalities among religious traditions. For instance, Nyla coordinated a panel discussion on fasting during Ramadan. She invited speakers from several religions to speak about the importance of fasting in their traditions. Similarly, Peter was often called on as a peer minister to help integrate freshmen of other faith traditions into college life in a Catholic university setting. Like Nyla, he believed that interreligious dialogue is a means of understanding those who are “different” by focusing on those things religious traditions have in common.

The personal, lived experiences of these interviewed peer ministers are an integral component of their efforts to compose meaning and a life of faith, each serving in ministry as a way of living out the teachings of his/her respective faith tradition. Denise shared: “I think [interreligious dialogue] is really important. I think it has allowed me to understand my views of my own faith. It’s allowed me to strengthen a lot of my views and it’s also given me different perspectives, so that I can cultivate them as my own.” Peer ministry has the capacity to offer
formation in the practices of the religious traditions of student ministers, as well as teach them to understand religion from an interreligious perspective.

**Pedagogical Approach: An Intentional, Ministerial, and Educational Plan**

Pedagogical approaches can help facilitate the deepening of respect and openness as peer ministers pursue interreligious dialogue with schoolmates on today’s Catholic college and university campuses. An intentionally designed educational framework for peer ministers to engage classmates in interreligious dialogue can better serve students as each strives to understand and engage others in an exploration of religious faith. Dupuis believes a Christian theology of interreligious dialogue should adopt a regnocentric perspective, meaning those engaged in the conversation must balance their commitment to their own beliefs while being open to those of others.26 How can this dialogue be nurtured in order to maintain this balance?

Dialogue, by its very definition, implies the involvement of two parties in a conversation. Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is a social encounter during which each engages in a relationship in search of divine truth with the hope of learning about God’s presence in the many religious traditions of the world. Peer ministry programs that engage in interreligious dialogue will only be effective if people practicing different beliefs are able to communicate with one another.

As a foundation for interreligious communication, Kieran Scott emphasizes the importance of learning facts about religious traditions. He cites the September 11 attacks as signifying the importance to the world today of understanding the tenets of religious traditions.27 For religious understanding to occur, we need to teach about religious traditions, which requires listening and articulating meaning. Mary Boys calls on religious educators to teach without referencing generalizations, stereotypes, or hidden agendas about other faith traditions.28 Boys is also concerned

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with comprehension. Critical thinking skills and strategies that facilitate the conversation are also important in order to lead to transformation and a new comprehension.

Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice offer a pedagogical approach to dialogue that regards differences as an opportunity, “a challenge to our abilities to communicate and understand” one another with tolerance and respect across unresolved differences.29 When directed at mutual understanding and offered with profound respect, interreligious dialogue provides an opportunity to establish intersubjectivity, consensus, and — eventually — understanding. They emphasize that it is not enough to make it possible for people holding different viewpoints to come together for a conversation.

Burbules and Rice suggest several dialogue practices that will raise awareness and transform the lives of the participants. These include:

1. **Start with an openness and respect for varying opinions, and be sensitive to the various kinds of diversity encountered.** Accept the way each self-identifies, giving at least provisional plausibility to the other’s claims.

2. **Recognize that each comes into the dialogue formed by their personal histories.** Compensate for the fact that prior experiences that caused hurtful feelings could lead to acceptance of stereotypes or an aura of superiority.

3. **Recognize the barriers inherent in the dialogue.** Interreligious dialogue can be skewed by the viewpoints of a dominant person or group involved in the conversation. Each must be fairly treated and allowed to express his or her viewpoints.

4. **Recognize that acceptance of one another’s beliefs is not a requirement nor a necessity.** “There is no reason to assume that dialogue across differences involves either eliminating those differences or imposing one group’s views on others; dialogue that leads to understanding, cooperation, and accommodation can sustain the differences within a broader compact of toleration and respect.”30

5. **Accept that no one religious tradition is to be codified as the universally accepted perspective.** To do so would elevate one above all others and frustrate dialogue.

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30 Ibid., 402.
6. **Focus on commonalities**, like belief in the Divine, forms of prayer, and acts of mercy. Differences should not be elevated to primary importance between groups engaged in dialogue. Develop a framework in which differences and commonalities interact with each other.

7. **Recognize that dialogue is fallible.** Even failed attempts at dialogue can be educative.

8. **Espouse the virtues of interreligious dialogue:** persistence, tolerance, patience, a willingness to listen, an openness to reexamine personal presuppositions, acceptance that mistakes will be made, self-restraint in order to allow others to speak, integrity, honesty, and sincerity.\(^{31}\)

Drawing insight from prominent religious educators — such as the approach offered by Burbules and Rice — can help foster dialogue that promotes understanding and respect among and with peer ministers. These guidelines, or rules for dialogue, can help mitigate difficult conversations arising from differences about religious beliefs. Over time, practices such as these for fostering mutual dialogue must be encouraged. Educators should focus on the development of these communicative practices, striving to continue to move forward even when encountering problems and without a guarantee of success. “To live in openness toward others and to have an open-ended curiosity toward life and its challenges is essential to educational practice.”\(^{32}\) By adopting an intentional, ministerial, and educational plan to interreligious dialogue, which includes a willingness to listen to others while remaining open to re-examining one’s preconceived suppositions, today’s peer ministers can make possible a genuine dialogue toward mutual understanding, building relationships, agreeing to disagree from time to time, and learning about other traditions with esteem and concern.

### Concerns and Limitations

Religious education in the twenty-first century needs to be creatively instructional in order to facilitate an educational process for interreligious dialogue led by student peer ministers at Catholic colleges and universities. However, religious scholars and educators from the many religious traditions of the world including Catholicism often

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\(^{31}\) Ibid., 396-411.

experience difficulties approaching and addressing questions concerning interreligious dialogue. Each tradition has its own way of expressing and living faith, and each believes its tradition to be the true faith. For example, Catholics begin the conversation believing Jesus is the definitive and salvific revelation of God. This assertion can be perceived by those practicing religions other than Catholicism as imperialistic, exclusionary, and patronizing and can hinder, rather than enhance, the building of interreligious relationships. A concept specific to a religious tradition, such as salvation, may not be a constitutive principle of another religion. It is a natural inclination to deconstruct other traditions by comparing others’ religions with one’s own and then to transform others’ traditions into something one can understand from one’s own limited perspective. Unfortunately, this deconstruction often results in a false impression of other faith traditions. Interreligious dialogue must be careful to invite a truly respectful conversation in which the other is viewed with extreme openness.

Dara Wakefield encourages Christian colleges and universities to shift from a tolerant stance to one of hospitality when embracing religious diversity. The notion of tolerance could include a connotation of one tradition being superior to another. In contrast, hospitality suggests friendship and respect. Although this insight is helpful, it does not go far enough. Judith Berling writes, “The history of Christian superiority and entitlement . . . has hampered Christian affirmation of religious diversity.” Interreligious dialogue must be careful to invite a truly respectful conversation in which the other is viewed with extreme openness.

Students engaging in interreligious activities may express concerns about being unfaithful to the religious tradition in which they were raised, fearing that they will be unable to maintain their personal integrity if they recognize and interact with others who are different. Hence, it is important for peer ministry programs to point out that in

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34 Gilkey, “Plurality and Its Theological Implications,” 42.
order to engage in interreligious dialogue, a person does not have to
give up her/his own convictions, identity, or beliefs. Rather, engaging in
this dialogue can actually become a pathway to spiritual growth as each
comes to understand her/his own faith tradition from another perspec-
tive. Every person of faith must learn how to affirm her/his own religion
in a way that does not offend the faith of others.

Offices of campus ministry at Catholic colleges and universities can
play a vital role in fostering opportunities for students to come together
as they seek to integrate their beliefs into daily life.37 There must, how-
ever, be a conscious and deliberate formation of peer ministers. Campus
ministers are guided by Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces
the Future, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)
1985 pastoral letter on campus ministry. This document, the USCCB’s
only directive regarding campus ministry, highlights the importance of
charging students to bring their distinctive gifts into conversation with
others in their college faith community as a way of growing into greater
maturity in Christ. “[I]t is important that those serving others are
well-prepared through proper grounding in gospel ideals and church
teachings.”38 The formation process provides opportunities for peer min-
isters to come to a deeper understanding of their personal religious tradi-
tions by engaging them in a critical discernment of their faith in light of
their lives and experiences. In order to engage their peers in interreli-
gious dialogue, peer ministers need to be offered ways, intentionally and
explicitly, to nurture faith development both individually and commu-
nally. Deliberate formation sessions that balance training in ministerial
skills with more pragmatic skills will foster participants’ leadership abil-
ities in order for them to engage their peers in fruitful dialogue.

Eboo Patel is the founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core
(IFYC), an organization that partners with college campuses on inter-
faith programs.39 IFYC offers training labs and institutes for students to
become leaders in the movement toward interfaith cooperation. Patel is
concerned that students should obtain the knowledge base and skill set
needed to engage religious diversity on their campuses and as future
leaders. Peer ministers engaging students in interreligious dialogue will
find IFYC’s resources extremely helpful in their leadership role.

37 Michael Galligan-Stierle, “Millennials and Ministry on College Campuses,” New
38 Empowered by the Spirit: Campus Ministry Faces the Future (Washington, DC:
39 See https://www.ifyc.org.
Patel goes further to address those desiring to pursue interreligious dialogue in professional capacities to also be certified as interfaith leaders. He proposes a curriculum for developing such leaders, perhaps “a concentration in an undergraduate program — a course sequence a student might take as part of a major in religion, political science, or international relations.” He also advocates for utilizing case studies in courses to ask students “how they would strengthen interfaith cooperation in particular situations when diversity seems to be tending toward conflict.”

Campus ministry professionals working with peer ministers would benefit from such preparation, as many are lacking the skills necessary to dialogue with students of diverse and varied traditions.

Interreligious engagement is an important component of peer ministry programs. As stated previously, 76 percent of surveyed student leaders indicated that they addressed interreligious issues as part of their ministry. Almost 96 percent of polled student ministers, however, are Christian (and these are overwhelmingly Catholic). If peer ministers are to develop in themselves and foster in others a sense of genuine understanding of the world’s various religious perspectives, those practicing a variety of religious faiths should not only be part of the conversation, but also serve as engaged leaders of the dialogue as peer ministers.

Perhaps it is an impossible task to have a purely open dialogue with others, completely free from bias of any kind. Interreligious dialogue on Catholic university campuses, however, must attempt to engage the other as fully as possible in order to see the world from a different faith perspective. What may help the conversation is stressing that there will be disagreement on some points. Interreligious dialogue does not mean total acceptance of the other’s views, but the groups involved in the dialogue should strive to reach a level of understanding about one another’s beliefs.

Applications in Catholic Higher Education

Catholic colleges and universities play a distinctive role in helping foster interreligious engagement and understanding, especially in view of the tremendous religious diversity of our world. The Catholic Church’s

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teachings on ecumenism and interreligious dialogue can help students at Catholic colleges and universities reconcile the beliefs of their faith traditions with the growing religious pluralism of the world. The ongoing debates among some theologians, however, raise concerns about whether or not acknowledging that God is actively present in religions other than Catholicism negates or belittles Catholic beliefs and traditions. These disagreements continue to stall the full implementation of the Second Vatican Council. Additionally, understandings of religious affiliation and doctrines of belief have changed in significant ways over the course of the last several decades. The rise of the “nones” is one example of how the religious landscape in the United States continues to evolve. In his examination of ecclesiastical models, Avery Dulles writes, “Theologians often tend to assume that the essence of the Church somehow exists, like a dark continent, ready-made and awaiting only to be mapped. . . . [T]he form of the Church is constantly being modified by the way in which the members of the Church externalize their own experience and in so doing transform the Church.” In light of this analysis, this researcher hopes the perspectives of this and each generation of college students will be considered by prominent theologians such as Tilley and D’Costa, as dictated by the needs that emerge in changing times.

Today’s college students often regard interreligious dialogue as a way of gaining deeper insight into the nature of God. Incorporating interreligious dialogue as a component of peer ministry programs provides an innovative approach to engaging student participation in building interreligious understanding. Pedagogical approaches and insights from prominent religious educators can help facilitate the deepening of respect and openness as peer ministers pursue interreligious dialogue with schoolmates. Campus ministers, through their interactions and relationships with students, provide guidance as students journey in their quest for full personal development. The professional

42 The “nones” are a growing cohort of the populace who claim no affiliation with a religious tradition. They are a diverse group, holding varied and sometimes contrasting beliefs ranging from theism to atheism. In 2008, 30 percent of the nones were between the ages of 18 and 29, which includes traditional-age college students. It is predicted that the percentage of the U.S. population made up of nones will continue to increase. The lack of affiliation and/or beliefs of this cohort adds a complex layer to the efforts of today’s peer ministers and professional campus ministers in facilitating interreligious dialogue. See http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/.

university staff must be prepared and can also benefit from this unique religious educational framework that provides training and formation to gain needed skills for interreligious engagement lacking in some, if not many, campus ministers.

A college community can help form peer ministers to understand the role they are called to play on their campus, in their communities, and in the world. In the case of peer ministers attending college, the participation of administration, faculty, staff, and alumnae/i can support the formation of these student leaders. By engaging university chaplains, residence life staff, faculty, the mission officer, and many others from the school community, offices of campus ministry can help create networks of belonging that offer social, spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual supports that confirm, as well as challenge, these student leaders in their service as peer ministers.

Conclusion

This study presents a framework for peer ministry programs that seeks to make a distinctive contribution to the field of interreligious dialogue. Its implementation, however, should be carefully considered so that peer ministers can be purposefully engaged in personal reflection as they determine how to deepen their relationship with God and live their lives with integrity. Peer ministers will then have the opportunity, with wisdom and foresight, to faithfully shape, guide, and nurture interreligious understanding and lived faith with their peers on Catholic college and university campuses.