

The Office of Religious Life at USC: A Model for Meeting Students'™ Religious & Spiritual Needs

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SUSAN: Responding to my recent inquiry through campus ministry networks, a colleague in Kentucky wrote as follows: "Students are looking for something, but are often not able to articulate just what that something is." At the University of Southern California, we work hard and take great pleasure in supporting that search. No simple endeavor, this; for it requires translating both inchoate and insistently clear needs into the reality of campus religious life. That reality features the complex and often-messy business of religion itself, of student religious organizations with their various ties to outside entities, and of campus politics within which religion/spirituality stands as only one of the players.

If you will allow my colleague Elizabeth Davenport and me to be somewhat immodest, Religious Life at USC has emerged as something of a model—a model for addressing religion and spirituality on campus; also, a model for understanding that managing these forces well—and providing careful and fair opportunity for religious practice, outreach, and expression—is a "value-added" thing for a campus these days. We know that there are differences between what we are able to do at a large, research university that is private, and what can be done at a public campus or a community college. Nevertheless, we believe that much of what we have achieved and learned can be replicated in other settings, even if under other titles and modes of organization.

ELIZABETH: It has become commonplace in recent years to talk of diversity on campus. Indeed, our students at USC, responding to a senior survey two years ago, ranked "diversity education" as the #1 priority of the university administration, as they had perceived it (somewhat to our surprise!). They had heard about it at orientation, they had heard about it in their residence halls, they had heard about it in general education settings. In Student Affairs, when we talk of diversity, we tend to mean ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, socio-economic background. Before taking up my present position last year, I was Assistant Dean of Student Affairs at USC, and these were certainly the categories that we emphasized. We did not talk about religious or spiritual diversity. Now that may in part have been because we had Susan championing issues of religion and spirituality from the Office of Religious Life, which is not, and has never been, part of Student Affairs (though there is of course overlap in spheres of influence). However, I suspect it was also because most of my colleagues in Student Affairs felt that they had enough to do without venturing into the frequently difficult territory of religion.

At some universities and colleges, an enthusiastic Student Affairs professional may address the religious and spiritual concerns of students in the absence of any alternative—"no Office of Religious Life. This person may end up having some general oversight of student religious organizations, for example, or some responsibility for managing the access to campus of non-university representatives of religious traditions. Nevertheless, there is a limit to what such a person can do to facilitate interfaith relations if they lack formal theological training or other relevant experience in this area; and, assuming they carry some other portfolio within Student Affairs, their attention is necessarily spread somewhat thin. In addition, what when this person moves on or up, if there is no Office of Religious Life or its equivalent?

SUSAN: So what does an Office of Religious Life (or an Office of Religious and Spiritual Life) actually do? To give you a taste, let me mention our larger preoccupations since classes

resumed on January 14: (1) Organizing a panel on what we were calling "The Three Abrahamic Religions" only to discover that there are actually four, including Baha'i! (2) Guiding the nine-student steering committee of the newly forming Rapport Interfaith Group towards being dialogue leaders once that group expands. (3) Meeting for long hours with 21 graduate Architecture students, and their instructors, who are spending their entire spring semester helping us dream a new multi-faith center into being. And (4) Learning what it takes to launch a new building on campus—lots of meetings, a whole new vocabulary, and a keen sense for the invisible rules and cross-hatching hierarchies that overlay the university's official organizational chart.

ELIZABETH: And my time is taken up now with organizing a series of events to occur later this month, under the general rubric of "Religion on Campus Week." We will be holding a multi-faith service, for example, involving student organizations from at least 15 different faith backgrounds; and a lunchtime outdoor religious exploration fair, at which we'll be inviting students to meditate with the Buddhists, consider karma with a swami, learn to write their name (or God's) in the kind of calligraphy found in the mosque, move to the rhythms of our Black gospel choir, try their hand at swinging incense, and more. In addition, the week will include events sponsored by individual student religious organizations, of which we have some 57 now (this card gives you an idea of the scope of the week).

And then I spend time each week on our health sciences campus, finding opportunities, both curricular and otherwise, to assist our medical students in thinking about religious expression and practice as it may affect their professional lives; to partner with faculty in addressing issues related to ethics; and to support the community in the medical school and health-related professions in integrating questions of spirituality and meaning into campus life, among other ways by helping to establish student religious organizations from faiths other than Christian. Then there are community engagements with other local religious leaders: a prayer breakfast for Martin Luther King Day, for example. We do monitor carefully our involvement on this level, because it could easily consume our entire Religious Life enterprise.

SUSAN: Another big project goes back a ways and was, in fact, the topic for the cyber-inquiry to which I referred at the beginning. It concerns the number and names of student religious groups, and coming up with policies in those regards that are fair and helpful. We have also been revising our policy on Office of Religious Life co-sponsorship support for programs mounted by particular groups. Let me add that these policies have been hammered out within the circle of what we call "Religious Directors"—some 25 people who work at least half-time at USC on behalf of a particular religious organization—and then discussed and finalized by the Religious Life Advisory Committee. The challenge here involves creating, not unanimity, but an atmosphere of respect for differences and understanding of commonalities. For me, this means taking calculated risks by encouraging honest (even if not full) expression, creating a level playing field for all the world religions represented on campus, and coming up with projects that benefit the entire religious community at USC as well as the campus as a whole.

ELIZABETH: For example, we knew we needed to address issues around the proliferation and naming of groups, especially within the Christian communities on campus. As of the beginning of this year, we had 41 different Christian groups seeking students' attention. In the course of interviewing the student leaders of these groups during the annual group recognition process, we began addressing the fact that some of the groups were simply sub-groups of other existing organizations (for example, an outreach of Campus Crusade to

athletes, or of Intervarsity to international students). After consulting with the religious directors of the various Christian groups, we came up with some guidelines on multiplication and division. International students, for example, should not be treated as a separate category, other than for purposes of setting up meetings in particular languages. In addition, where a group wants to form a sub-group, we now ask that they hire a separate religious director for that group. There was a concern that unfair access to student programming money could be an issue here—a group splitting into three might then apply three times to the same funding source, for example.

The naming of groups was another looming issue. We had students who were choosing names that were distinctly grandiose (a group of three students, for example, who wanted to call their new group “the university church in Southern California”). Moreover, we had names that really did not communicate the identity of the group (“why didn’t you tell me this group’s meetings are held exclusively in Chinese?”). In addition, names that did not label the group’s religious tradition, or, in some cases, even identify them clearly as a religious group. From now on, they are required to have a name that indicates their religious tradition and any particular off-campus group or congregation to which they have links. In addition, they can only use the word “church” if they intend to be a primary congregation for their members. (It takes time & careful attention to theological niceties to figure these things out.)

However, let us put this in a little historical perspective, and go back for a moment to the time, some 12 years ago, when Susan and I each arrived at USC.

SUSAN: That was a different era. You see, we have been working together in the Office of Religious Life for only the past six months; however, we have taken parallel career paths. Elizabeth moved from being Episcopal religious director to becoming Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, a position she held for ten years before, as it were, “returning” to the newly created position of Associate Dean of Religious Life.

As for how I wound up overseeing Religious Life at USC, which is something I never expected or hoped for, but now really love doing. I came to USC, my undergraduate alma mater, as director of the Hillel Jewish Center in 1992. Among my duties was attendance at the monthly meeting of religious directors, led then by the University Chaplain, a distinguished professor of Religion and Ethics, who had served in that position for almost three decades. Reporting to the President whereas I report to the Provost, he had been spending more and more of his time in the arena of civic and community relations. When he retired, there were behind the scenes deliberations whether he should be replaced and in what way. Finally, a new Dean of Religious Life position was created and advertised nationally, and I found myself a candidate. When I was finally offered and accepted the job, USC broadcast the virtually unprecedented appointment of a rabbi as “Chief Religious Officer” of the university.

I love being Jewish and a rabbi as much as being Dean of Religious Life, but my particular Jewish identity is not the issue. People regularly contact me to sponsor this or that Jewish program on campus—and I refer them to Hillel, unless I am able to parlay the offer into a multi-faith or multi-disciplinary offering. My role, like Elizabeth’s, is representing all religious and spiritual traditions equally. I believe it is vital for us, and anyone doing this work, to be rooted in a particular religious tradition—because only then can we feel in our bones the urgency and non-negotiability of committed practice. In addition, it is equally vital to be a religious pluralist. When asked about why I love my work, I point to the theory and practice of religious pluralism as the source of its unending interest. For me, the theory

is best expressed in a metaphor like “all paths leading to the same central point”; and the practice calls for constant oscillation between openness and drawing boundaries, respect and rootedness.

ELIZABETH: One of the things that quickly came to characterize Susan’s work as Dean of Religious Life in those early years was her tireless effort to support students from faiths that had no formal presence on campus at that time. When she began as Dean, there was no Buddhist student group, no Hindu student group, no Muslim religious director, no visible presence of Sikhs or Jains or pagans or Wiccans. Now we have all of those, though we are still nurturing some of the groups along (and we are still looking for some Zoroastrians). The Hindu Student Organization was the first of these groups to become established, and it became something of a model in this respect. A couple of Hindu students began discussing with Susan how they might form a student group and rather than simply saying, “Wonderful, good luck in doing this,” Susan set about the task of giving them practical support. The office paid for advertising for them, and helped them set up meetings, and Susan was present when they did their first public event, formally offering them the university’s encouragement and blessing. We continue to provide that kind of support for groups which are struggling to secure assistance from their wider religious tradition, or that represent a religious presence not otherwise existing on campus.

Let me add that we are still trying to find ways of catering to students who define themselves as “spiritual but not religious” which may implicitly mean that they do not want to belong to any organized group. This new expressed interest in spirituality among students does not always translate into action or involvement that we know how to support or sustain in any effective way. We have the embryo of a group called Soul Search, students interested in spiritual practice but not in aligning themselves to a particular or historic set of beliefs and we know there are students out there who like this concept of learning from spiritual teachers and from one another, but they don’t show up readily at five o’clock on Thursdays!

Another thing Susan did almost immediately was to create a working group to think about ethics and practice. After long hours of discussion and review, they came up with a document called Guidelines and Governance for Religious Life at USC. This document clarified for the first time the mutual obligations of the university and the various religious directors sent into its midst by their faith communities or denominations; and it created standards of practice that they and their student religious organizations have to observe in order to remain in good standing. Groups have to adhere to truth-in-advertising rules, for example—they cannot advertise a Bible study as though it were just another student social event. They have to put their full name (not just their acronym) on every piece of publicity, every flyer, every e-mail. Moreover, whatever they privately think, members of one faith group may not denigrate another religious group publicly. Overall, what Susan was trying to do was to systematize things in ways that were fair for everyone—for the different student religious organizations (some of which have significant support from outside sources, and some of which have no such resource), for students who might want to belong to these organizations, and for students who might prefer to be left alone and not approached by yet another person seeking to invite them to some meeting. This was especially important in the residence halls, which are students’ homes while they are on campus. The Guidelines and Governance document says you cannot go door-to-door in residence halls (which was once a standard practice for some groups). The existence of an Office of Religious Life has meant that there was oversight of things that had previously been left to chance.

SUSAN: Guidelines and Governance was definitely the major achievement of my initial years as Dean. Now here we are at a very different time in terms of religious and other demographics from that when most private universities established their Chaplain's Office—a different time in terms of world order and global threats, economic pressures and social stirrings. During last year's Strategic Planning process (about which I'll say a bit more in a few moments), a committee of students, faculty, and members of the administration asked itself how the overall Religious Life enterprise at USC should respond to both student diversity and world events. How could we provide rich and varied spiritual resources for all while imposing religiosity on none? How could we do more to foster religious literacy among students—knowledge, skills and dispositions that enable them, while on campus and in later life, to work creatively and productively in a religiously diverse world; to be full citizens of that world?

With pride in our accomplishments, gratitude for our supporters, and awareness of all that's left to do, we put forward the Office of Religious Life at the University of Southern California as exemplifying a new—or perhaps just a renewed—paradigm for the fostering of religious life in institutions of higher education. With all respect for Student Affairs colleagues, that paradigm is built upon the presence of one or more religious professionals holding ordination or its equivalent, and ideally holding the Ph.D. or its equivalent as well. These Religious Life professionals can belong to any of the world's major religions (and perhaps incorporate practices from others in their own lives), but they do not represent or favor any particular tradition in their work. Multiple benefits derive from these people doing some teaching, but oversight of religious life is no longer a job than can be done part-time by someone whose primary responsibilities and identifications are teaching and research. Nor, as we have already noted, can it be done as a bonus effort in spare time by a Student Affairs professional who happens to have an interest in this area, or as one among a panoply of responsibilities by an administrator who also does, or does not, have that interest.

In past decades, university chaplaincies fulfilled traditional functions such as offering blessings at and sometimes taking responsibility for ritual occasions, providing spiritual and other counseling, handling intersections of religious holy days with the university calendar, providing for the needs of particular religious groups, and encouraging inter-religious cooperation. USC's Office of Religious Life goes on performing all those functions, but it also engages in important new initiatives: helping to start new student religious groups where holes exist in the multi-faith landscape, assuming leadership for communitarian responses to crisis events like 9/11, and creating programs that juxtapose classic academic approaches to spiritual and moral ones. These new roles require added nuance and creativity. The campus response to or commemoration of an event like 9/11 cannot be built simply on a solid, traditional religious base—not even a Judeo-Christian, or Abrahamic, or purely God-focused base. There may be Psalms and other scriptural readings; but here—as often elsewhere under the new Religious Life paradigm—God will be in the attitude of awe, in the silence, and in the range of faces. A program on Religion and Science can no longer assume that professors falls into one camp or the other; nor can it afford to neglect the Arts as yet a third mode of inquiry and meaning-making.

The strategic planning process to which I referred earlier took into consideration virtually everything we are bringing forward today. Amazingly enough, a committee of 40 managed to forge a mission statement that genuinely captures the force of our work and our aspirations—so much so, that I had it emblazoned on a banner that yesterday took its first trip away from our office wall since being installed there several months ago. Let me read it to you, with all appropriate emphasis: “Fostering a vibrant university community that

encourages the pursuit of meaning through spiritual reflection and free inquiry, provides fair opportunities to participate in religious life, advances mutual understanding and respect among differing traditions”and in all these ways, strengthens us to actively engage in building a just and peaceful world.”

Not only did Strategic Planning Committee members participate in four all-day Friday workshops, but each one also belonged to a Task Force that was asked to create and keep refining its findings in one of five areas: (1) People (which focused mostly on the people we call “religious directors” and “religious advisors), (2) Infrastructure and (3) Partnerships (both of which Elizabeth will talk about in a moment), and two key substantive areas that we called (4) Particular Communities and (5) Multi-Faith Learning. Since submitting the Strategic Planning Report to the Provost in May 2003, I have found myself referring to these as the two pillars upon which our work is built or the two poles around which it circles. To an extent that is not always or easily appreciated, both are indispensable and neither can operate fully and with integrity on a college campus without the other.

ELIZABETH: Two immediate things came out of the strategic planning process. One was the creation of my job, as a second religious professional collaborating with Susan to meet campus needs in the arena of religious life.

The second, to which Susan already made brief reference, was the space issue. Although we have dedicated space on campus for certain Christian groups, paid for by those groups generations ago, we have no appropriate space for the newer religious groups”newer, that is, to campus. We need a place where Muslims can pray, where Hindus can worship, where Buddhists can meditate. We scramble to make suitable arrangements now, but we are working towards the day when we will have a new multi-faith center with both shared and particular space. We consider ourselves somewhat fortunate, incidentally, that we have no historic church in the center of campus”no Sunday services to manage, no cruciform building to adapt to today’s very different religious needs. In the course of the strategic planning effort, we also identified the rich variety of partnerships existing between the Office of Religious Life and other offices and departments within the university “ partnerships that enable us to leverage the work of a very small office with a relatively small budget. For example, the Admissions office has offered to help us create a new web-based approach to incoming students. Auxiliary Services gave us their best conference center space for our multi-faith service later this month, waiving the usual costs associated with this space. This latter arrangement happened because the head of Auxiliary Services is a member of our Religious Life Advisory Committee “ a group of faculty, staff, and students who meet with us for a nice lunch three times each semester, and who serve as an essential community support system, sounding-board, and sometimes corrective for us. Even beyond that committee, faculty as well as staff, are often keenly involved in our work. We have scholars renowned in their fields, for example, showing up on a Sunday night for the Abrahamic religions program that Susan already referenced. Faculty line up to be invited to present in the third year of our series, “What matters to me and why,” a program first conceived at Princeton and Stanford, which has become a highlight of USC’s campus programming.

SUSAN: Nearly all our work, including the Strategic Planning effort, has been received positively and sympathetically across campus and in its highest places. We are fortunate to have a wonderful constellation of leadership in our current President and Provost. Before I was formally offered or accepted my job nearly eight years ago, the Provost said something like the following to me and then waited for my reaction: Susan, USC is striving to recruit more Jewish students but that will necessarily proceed slowly and in the end, most USC

students won't be Jewish. What do you think about that and how will you handle it? A very good question, to which I made a good enough reply but one I could certainly do better with now. Shortly after assuming my new position, President Sample addressed the following quip to me at a reception: the Victorians talked a lot about religion but were very quiet about sex; in contrast, we moderns talk about sex all the time but repress talking about religion. My reply to him is one I have had occasion to use since: that I seek to bring religion out of the closet. There is still a ways to go, but we have made a fine start; and I hope that tracing its outlines can be of some help to those of you who have honored us with your attentive presence today.

Thank you very much, and now let us have some questions and reactions. About how our paradigm might apply in other college/university settings, particular across the public/private divide. About how it looks from the perspective of the other entities and disciplines from which you come, particularly Student Affairs? And whatever else strikes or puzzles you.