

“Founding an Interfaith or Interdenominational Group on Campus”

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The rapid rise of para-church and other evangelical Christian groups on most college and university campuses may create special challenges for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. United Campus Ministries used to carry the mantle of openness and a willingness to be in dialogue with diverse campus constituencies. Funding for United Campus Ministries has dried up in many places, and, as a result, Hillel, Newman, Muslim Student Associations and other groups may feel more isolated or may become more self-focused, because there does not seem to be an avenue for connection to other religious groups willing to enter into dialogue. The creation of an interfaith or interdenominational religious group can offer a model for discussion, activism and prophetic witness that can serve to energize the larger religious life program.

Questions to Ask Before Proceeding in the Creation of a New Religious Life Group:

- Do we really need a new group on campus?
- If so, what is the best way to go about getting a group started?
- How do we deal with resistance that may come from existing groups?

If plans for the creation of a new group move forward, the founders need to ask themselves what kind of group it is that is being created.

- Are we really providing something new?
- What will distinguish us from groups already in existence?
- Shall this group be an interdenominational or interfaith group?

Those hoping to establish a new organization should be willing to spend a significant amount of time listening to the views of various campus constituencies. If this part of the process is done with sensitivity and patience, it can mitigate some of the resistance that may be felt from religious organizations already in existence on campus.

Once the group is established, how will it define and maintain its identity on campus?

- How will the group define itself? Does it have a logo, a mission statement, or other way of giving a snapshot of its purpose?
- Shall this group be known as one that seeks to build bridges with the other religious organizations on campus?
- It is important during the early years of the group's existence for its leaders and members to return to its mission statement to see if the direction of the group has changed.
- What will happen if a time comes when the purposes and mission of the group seem to be very close to that of another group on campus? Does the group seek to consolidate with another group, or redefine itself so as to maintain distinctiveness from other organizations?

Resources:

The following resources may aid in your work as you begin the process of listening and discussing what an interdenominational or interfaith group may look like.

A good resource from the web, sponsored by Religion/link.org is:

http://www.religionlink.org/tip_060925.php.

Print resources that may help get the discussion going are:

Butler Bass, Diana. Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith. New York, Harper One, 2007.

Colatch, John. "The Movement to Religious Hospitality" adapted from doctoral dissertation for Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, March, 2003. (Available electronically upon request to the author)

Eck, Diana. Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras, Second Edition. Beacon Press, 2003.

Seifert, Tricia. "Understanding Christian Privilege: Managing the Tensions of Spiritual Plurality." *About Campus*, May-June 2007.