

A New *Convivencia*?: Interreligious Friendship as Formative Practice for Christian Vocation

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ABSTRACT

Disciplined engagement in inter-religious friendship allows young people to articulate and to live into the commitments and understandings inherent in their own religious traditions. In this light, interfaith partnership can be understood as a formational Christian practice. As such, it has the capacity to nurture young leaders who are adept at navigating a religiously pluralistic world. This paper explores one congregation engaging in practices of interfaith relationship, paying particular attention to the ways in which these practices help shape the vocation of young adults. This vigorous “living together” with people of other faiths will be posited as one significant way young people come to claim a role, an identity, and a purpose within the Christian faith for this historical era. This paper is one chapter in a larger research project about congregational practices that nurture call and vocation in Christian youth.

Zohar’s Gift

In the novel *People of the Book*, Geraldine Brooks depicts the *convivencia*, a historical era between the ninth and twelfth centuries in Spain, when Jews, Christians and Muslims lived and worked in relative peace together, sharing their cultures in rich cross-fertilization of art and ideas.¹ Zohar, a fictional teen-ager living in Seville in 1480, discovers her vocation in the midst of this diverse milieu. (Brooks 2008)

Zohar’s father, a Muslim healer, *notices* her artistic ability and uses her illustrations in his works describing the medicinal properties of herbs. When her family falls prey to war, the sultan *names* her gifts. He keeps her alive to serve as portrait artist in the palace, where a closet-Christian introduces Zohar to a secret copy of the lavishly illustrated *Book of Hours*. Later, Zohar finds herself under the protection of a kindly Jewish doctor, who *nurtures* her talent and graciously invites her to partake of *Shabbat* feasts and *seder* rituals. He explains to her the intricate meaning of the meals that tell the story of his people’s creation and liberation. As a gift of gratitude to the doctor, Zohar creates her life’s work: brilliant illustrations that become the centerpiece of a *haggadah*, the religious text that orders the Passover meal.

Zohar’s gift – a retelling of the Hebrew faith’s central stories in vivid imagery comfortable to Christians but anathema to icon-wary Jews and Muslims of the day -- emerges in response to a particular plight. The doctor’s son, Benjamin, was born deaf and mute and so, therefore, isolated from the story of his family’s faith. Inspired by the detailed paintings she remembers from *The Book of Hours*, Zohar occasionally must ask the doctor or his wife to

¹ As depicted in this novel, the historical period known as the *convivencia* was not devoid of conflict and violence, some of which was based upon religious difference, as well as other complex social and cultural dynamics. Contemporary historiographers differ on their assessment of the *convivencia*, arguing that it conjures a romantic picture of interfaith harmony that is more accurately depicted by neutral terms such as diffusion, borrowing, and adaptation. For the purposes of this paper, we adopt a revised view of the *convivencia* that does not imply total harmony, but acknowledges that the existence of conflict and violence did not preclude the flourishing of an intercultural society that tolerated mutual expressions of respect, solidarity and collaboration. (Soifer, 3)

explain an intricacy of their faith so she can depict it accurately. “I reflect on what they say, and try to devise a way to illustrate it so that a young boy can understand. What struck me is how much of it I already know, for the Jews’ account of God’s creation differs only slightly from the correct version given in our Holy Koran,” Zohar reflects.

In bringing the story of the Jewish people into vivid imagery, Zohar creates a work of art treasured across centuries. Her gift illuminates Benjamin’s place in the world, even as it testifies to the *convivencia*’s power as one of perhaps many historical eras in which a Muslim’s intelligence, a Christian’s artistic sensibilities and a Jew’s hospitality could mingle in influencing a young woman’s emerging vocation. In this period, it is conceivable to imagine that the followers of the three religious traditions co-mingled to notice, name, and nurture a young person’s signature gift so that it might find expression in the world.²

Is it time now to imagine a new *convivencia*? The translation of this word means simply “living together,” although it most often refers to the remarkably valuable result in art, science, or literature that such a confluence of cultures can produce. How are U.S. congregations leaning into a Christianity marked by vigorous “living together” with people of other faiths? If done with intentionality, might congregations embrace interfaith *convivencia* as a formative practice that notices, names, and nurtures the gifts of young people for the healing of the world in *this* particular era? The importance of interfaith collaboration to reduce oppression and discrimination based on religious difference has been well documented. In this paper we provide two additional arguments for congregation-based interfaith work: 1) interfaith encounter, dialogue, and action can be claimed as a Christian formative practice; and 2) important formational benefits inherent in interfaith practices nurture young leaders who are needed for the Christian church in an increasingly religiously pluralistic world.

Modern-Day Zohars

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack on the Twin Towers, anti-Muslim sentiment flourished across the United States. Some Christians responded with “God Bless America” bumper stickers. Other congregations quietly went to work, getting to know their Islamic neighbors or deepening the ties they had already established. Almost a decade later, one such congregation embraces interfaith friendship as one important practice among many that are central to its identity as a Christian community. Young adults who find their way to the First Congregational Church of Berkeley (FCCB) are drawn to a different kind of Christianity, a kind of Christianity that welcomes engagement with religious difference as part of the path toward living fully into one’s own religion. Young persons in this congregation echo precisely the sentiments of religion scholar Judith Berling: “Just as coming to know other persons helps me understand myself, so learning other religions brings my Christianity into sharper relief and helps me notice and own what I earlier took for granted” (Berling 3).

This paper will argue that we are living in an historical era in which a new *convivencia* is already happening for young people across the United States. In their math classes, on their soccer teams and sometimes even within their own families, they are daily exposed to a rich and

² The collection of words “notice, name, and nurture” is adapted from the work of Mark Yaconelli (2006) and is used frequently in the work of Calling Congregations, an initiative of the Fund for Theological Education (FTE), whose aim is to support the next generation of leaders for the church. This paper is one chapter in the forthcoming book *Greenhouses of Hope: Congregations that Nurture Young Leaders* (Alban, 2010), a research project funded by FTE.

vibrant mixture of diverse religious stories. Given their daily encounters with persons of other faith traditions, one of the greatest theological struggles for young U.S. Christians in this new century is how to be a faithful Christian without being intolerant to persons of other religions. Young Christians from strands of the tradition that do not emphasize the need to evangelize or convert persons of other faiths find themselves with a particular concern: what does it mean to be a faithful Christian without simultaneously communicating denigration of their neighbor's religiosity?

One of the primary reasons that interfaith relationships and action are particularly important to young people is precisely that Christians and other persons of faith recognize that religious intolerance and violence presents a problem to our world, one that they are not often allowed to pursue deeply in public school settings. Sohaib Sultan, the first fulltime Muslim chaplain and coordinator of religious life at Princeton University, notes that "one of the things that motivates students to build interfaith relationships is their real desire to do something important in the world. They see that part of the human tragedy or conflict in the world has to do with religion. Particularly if they are religious, then they want to know how to be so without being intolerant."³ In other words, young people long for a practice of living together with persons of other religious traditions that is authentic to their own tradition and that will contribute to reducing suffering caused by religious oppression and violence. In the process of engaging in these relationships, the young people come to understand their own religious identity and practice in new and generative ways.

While much work has been done to articulate a Christian theology of religious pluralism (Campbell 2007; March 2005; Hick 1995), most churches are hesitant to teach this to their young, outside of an occasional visit to a mosque or synagogue. Perhaps this results from a fear of inadequacy best expressed by the Sunday School teacher who laments: "How can I teach fifth-graders about God's love for our Muslim neighbors if I can't really articulate that myself?" Perhaps it is the result of the perception that one must *first* understand one's own faith completely before learning about another's. In either case, we are inviting congregations to wonder with us:

- What might regular, intentional engagement in acts of friendship with people of other religions offer young people, even as they are still in the midst of learning their own tradition?
- Rather than ignoring the theological implications of our contemporary *convivencia*, leaving our young people to muddle through on their own, how might Christian congregations seize an opportunity for vigorous experiential learning situated within a community of meaning-making?
- When embodied consistently by faith communities over time, how might the Christian practice of *convivencia* create a seedbed in which the particular kind of young Christian leaders necessary for ministry in a pluralistic age might emerge?

Interreligious Friendship as a Christian Practice

Interreligious encounter is a reality of life in a religiously plural culture. To claim that interreligious friendship can be considered a Christian spiritual practice requires a bit more

³ Sultan articulated this concern in an address to the conference "Nurturing the Next Generation of Interreligious Leaders" held at Virginia Theological Seminary in May of 2009.

explanation. How does “living with” persons from other religious traditions contribute to the formation of Christian identity, belief, and living?

On its face, interreligious encounter violates a certain idea of Christian formational practice: that it happens in a Christian community with a coherent set of theological norms and ritual practices that are embodied in its life together. As Dykstra and Bass argue, (and Hauerwas and Willimon before them), Christian practices are best understood and shared as communal behaviors rather than individual performances. They are “...patterned activities carried on by whole communities of people, not in just one particular location, but across nations and generations” (Dykstra and Bass 26). So how can living with and befriending persons who are not Christian contribute to Christian formation and, as we are further arguing, do so in such a way that strengthens Christian vocational understanding?

We are using Christian practice here to describe “a form of cooperative and meaningful human endeavor” which inextricably involves both thought and action (Dykstra and Bass, 21). In the congregations that will be profiled in the larger project, and the one we use as a case study in this particular paper, inter-religious friendship is a shared practice of the congregation, not just an individual choice lived out in the more secular contexts that members inhabit, such as work and school. For these congregations, living together with their non-Christian neighbors has become part of their common lived Christian response to the real human needs that their context has presented to them. As Dykstra and Bass define Christian practices, they are “the constituent elements in a way of life that becomes incarnate when human beings live in the light of and in response to God’s gift of life abundant” (ibid 21). In these particular congregations, interfaith friendships are responses to basic human needs that allow them to “reflect God’s purposes for humankind” together as a community.

For a generation of post-9/11 adolescents and young adults who have grown up with both intense anti-Muslim rhetoric and a post-Holocaust awareness of anti-Semitism, interfaith encounter and friendship becomes a key justice practice that raises critical issues for their theological consideration. Living into inter-religious friendships and mutual action provides the conditions for young people to consider their religious identity and to practice a Christian faith that steps into rather than ignores this contextual reality. As Dykstra and Bass claim, noticing these “God-shaped fundamental human needs and conditions” and living into a response to them is a “crucial theological task” for contemporary young people (Dykstra & Bass 24). Precisely because living in right relationship with neighbors of other religious traditions presents itself as a crucial human need at this point in history, and it raises key theological questions as to what a “God-shaped response” might be, congregations who are taking this contextually-posed challenge seriously are vital places that nurture their young people into mature Christian vocational expressions of love for neighbor.

In the congregations we have visited as a part of this study, the practice of interfaith friendship and living together contributes to a more fully Christian response to other situations and concerns that present themselves to the community. Canon Greg Movesian, Director of the Abrahamic Initiative at St. John’s Cathedral Denver, another congregation we are studying as a part of our larger research project, notes that the congregation’s involvement in inter-religious conversation and learning has led it into other areas of welcoming the neighbor, such as immigration initiatives, legislative and advocacy initiatives, even establishing a coalition of other congregations to enable greater cooperation on religious educational initiatives in each community. This experience reflects Dykstra and Bass’s claim that “the various Christian

practices are deeply integrated with one another,” that strong practice in one area leads to attention to other normative Christian practices as well (Dykstra and Bass 23) .

Finally, one could argue that there is nothing particularly Christian about inter-religious friendship, that it is just a human practice resulting from the social reality of religious pluralism. Miroslav Volf argues that a Christian practice need not necessarily have core Christian beliefs inscribed in it. He makes a distinction here between “sacraments” and “practices,” noting that “sacraments ritually enact normative patterns for practices” (Volf 248). In other words, interreligious friendships may not embody Christian doctrine in a direct way, but may allow participants to live out normative aspects of Christian belief – such as love of neighbor -- articulated and embodied elsewhere in the communal life.

Interfaith friendship may be somewhat of a counter-intuitive Christian formational practice. Resistance to opportunities to embrace inter-religious friendship as a core congregational activity often lies in the belief that it will lead to either the conversion or dilution of Christian belief. On the one hand, our own unfortunate Christian history of learning about other religious traditions merely to enable better conversion tactics may inform our sense that the only possible outcome of encounter would be conversion. On the other hand, a twentieth century attempt to manage religious difference by downplaying differences and promoting an ideology of assimilation informs an imagined outcome of diluting or denigrating the unique belief and practices of each tradition in encounter. Fortunately, the discipline of religious education has a fairly rich history of exploring the ways that inter-religious encounter can lead to enhanced religious identity and practice without leading to either of these outcomes.

A key figure in articulating this understanding of inter-religious learning as a critical component of religious education is Gabriel Moran. Moran argued twenty years ago that conversation about religious education should have an inter-religious aspect: “Religious education seen within this context has two aims: 1) a better practice of one’s own religious life and 2) a deeper understanding of the other’s religion. These two aims are not parallel; the latter is intrinsically related to the former. One cannot intelligently and freely practice any religion today without some understanding of the other, some backdrop of comparison” (Moran 230). Utilizing the metaphor of learning a second language, Moran argues in a manner similar to Berling the paradoxical notion that learning about another religious tradition increases one’s awareness and understanding of one’s own tradition. For Moran, as for others, true religious education requires disciplined encounter with the religious other, not merely for altruistic ends but because it opens up a level of understanding of one’s own tradition and commitments not available without such encounter.⁴

Contrary to our current argument, Moran believed that such a religious education was not readily possible in most parishes nor would it be the center of educational efforts in local congregations where it did occur, indicating that the church’s responsibility for teaching religion

⁴ Such a focus has been more fully argued in European conversations about religious education in publically funded schooling. An example of this is Robert Jackson: “Elsewhere I have argued that a key aim for RE is to develop an understanding of the grammar—the language and wider symbolic patterns –of religions and the interpretive skills necessary to gain that understanding (Jackson 1997:129). The achievement of this aim requires the development of critical skills, the application of which opens up issues of representation, interpretation, truth and meaning. Religious education develops self-awareness, since individuals develop through reflecting upon encounters with new ideas and experiences. Religious education is thus a conversational process in which students, whatever their backgrounds, continuously interpret and reinterpret their own views in the light of what they study” (Jackson 169).

in this way was fulfilled through the sponsoring of universities and schools (Moran 141). While we believe that the work of religious education in this mode in university religion departments is critical, and that much of the inter-religious work that currently occurs in the United States happens in campus ministry, we also want to claim that the current historical situation pushes this work into the parish more than it did twenty years ago. Changes in immigration law that allows for greater immigration from non-Christian countries, recent historical events and wars traced to religious conflicts, and increasing awareness of religious diversity in public celebrations has intensified the need for inter-religious education in the parish in the twenty years since Moran's important work.

Embodying a New *Convivencia* : A Congregation Practicing Vigorous Interfaith Friendship

First Congregational Church of Berkeley (FCCB) is a congregation interpreting afresh what it means to be a follower of Christ *and* a good neighbor to those who are not. Situated in the diverse cultural mix that is University of California-Berkeley, this congregation helps demonstrate interfaith friendship as a formative Christian practice, particularly as they intentionally witness to college students who may have never seen a vigorous inter-religious curiosity go hand-in-hand with Christianity. Because its college-aged members are often engaged in exploring their emerging gifts, this congregation is also immersed the language of call and vocation. Like the *convivencia* in which Zohar's gift emerged, FCCB provides a rich milieu in which young persons might discover and receive support in their callings.

The actions that comprise FCCB's practices of interfaith friendship began with individual commitments, but became imbedded in the institution's daily life, particularly as a response to anti-Islamic rhetoric and actions following 9/11. The fruits of this congregation's interfaith friendships in the almost-decade since then include multiple acts of education, advocacy, fellowship, and worship. Over the past few years, this church has:

- Sponsored of a "Peace not Prejudice" educational outreach on University of California-Berkeley's campus in direct response to anti-Islamic sentiment
- Co-Hosted a 14-week academic course called "Food and Faith" in which guests from five religious traditions shared culture, ritual and practice around food
- Celebrated Ramadan at a nearby Mosque, including fasting and breaking fast together
- Invited Muslim women to lead an annual women's retreat at which space was created to share concerns over expressions of fundamentalism in their respective traditions
- Regularly invited the Imam and Rabbi of neighboring communities of faith to take part in worship, including occasional preaching
- Hosted peace-making trips to Iran and Israel-Palestine, the latter of which included before and after conversations with a travel seminar hosted by a neighboring synagogue.
- Crafting a resolution to the General Assembly of the United Church of Christ that led to a nationwide "Axis of Friendship with Iran"
- Learning and teaching Sufi dancing
- Re-inventing their pastoral counseling center as intentionally interfaith and recruiting counselors of multiple faiths to practice there.
- Planning a cooperative program with the Berkeley Hillel Society to support vocational discernment for UC-Berkeley students in their sophomore and junior years.

What kind of young Christian leader emerges in this milieu? How is Christian identity formed in a place -- not of isolation -- but of robust conversation with Jews, Muslims, and people of other faiths? The influence of this new *convivencia* on emerging vocation becomes visible through the lens of the church's committee on call and discernment. Rebecca Wright, a lay pastoral counselor, leads that group. She notes that, because the church is located near the Graduate Theological Union, a consortium of nine seminaries, their neighborhood is sometimes described as "holy hill." It's not unusual for a church in such a location to become home to people moving through seminary. During the past few years, FCCB has nurtured fourteen persons as they move from discerning a call to ministry, through seminary and into ordination in the United Church of Christ. Many of those candidates for ministry have been young people, drawn into the FCCB congregation through its on-campus presence. One such person is Shelly Dieterle, who began attending FCCB during college and currently serves as the congregation's minister of campus life. Her vocation as a pastor is intricately linked to the church's practices of interfaith friendship.

Dieterle was a seminary student at Pacific School of Religion and a member of FCCB in 2001. The day after the 9/11 attack, she noticed that a local mosque was offering an open worship. "I remember being really nervous about going to the mosque and not knowing at all what I was going to experience. But for whatever reason, I felt a deep urgency to be there," she said. She brought a few seminary friends along to that service, and they were greeted with "a wonderful welcome and excitement about our presence." They were given veils to cover their heads and gently assisted in understanding the Farsi-language service. "I came back to church and talked about how powerful my experience was. We then invited someone from the mosque to come worship with us, and especially to be present during our prayer time." The following year, folks from FCCB fasted and celebrated Ramadan at the mosque.

These friendships initially formed in the immediacy of a grief-filled national crisis with many personal points of connection. The personal dimensions of grief and loss surrounding the crisis allowed people to imagine immediate responses to the escalating violence against people of middle-Eastern descent that happened during the time the United States was preparing to go to war against Iraq and Afghanistan. A first step was the formation of a group of women from different faiths called "From Fear to Friendship." Later came a week of educational emphasis called "Peace not Prejudice." The course "Food and Faith" created an inviting place to understand different expressions of ritual, feasting, and hospitality. When a daughter of a prominent family at the nearby mosque launched an Interfaith Action Initiative on campus, FCCB supported it by encouraging one of its members to become an intern there.⁵

Threads of interfaith friendship are so deeply embedded in this congregation that it has become integral to who they are, while not diminishing their decidedly Christian way of being. This distinctive way of following Christ seems to be particularly important to the young people, such as Dieterle, who find a home at FCCB. As a younger clergy person, she is often asked what churches must do to attract people in their 20s and 30s. "I feel as if this younger generation doesn't have issues with the boundaries of religions. Right now, much of the Christian theology

⁵ This initiative received training and support through the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Corps (IFYC) founded by Dr. Eboo Patel, who currently serves on President Obama's office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. IFYC is responsible for launching a highly visible national movement that engages young people in interfaith service and learning. It provides training and community organizing around issues of interfaith action for campuses and faith communities across the country.

that is out there is often oppressive toward people who are not Christian. Many young people have a hard time with that. They've grown up in this mix." In Dieterle's work on the UC-Berkeley campus, she finds young people very receptive to a Christianity that operates by the mantra "in church, *tell* the story, in the world, *live* the story." (Brueggemann 16) She articulates this perspective, one she has honed within the *convivencia* that is FUCC: "Justice for all is central in my call to ministry. Interfaith action is central to my life as a Christian. I don't always out myself as a Christian in public settings. I would rather them observe my behavior and later learn what inspires it. I try to create opportunities and environments for people to live and experience Christian values."

Tinley Ireland is one of the young people who found FCCB's authentic expression of Christianity in dialogue with other religions particularly inviting. Ireland, now 23, served as an intern at the church in 2008, while still in college at UC-Berkeley. During this year, one of her primary responsibilities included stepping up to plan, lead, and be a primary Christian spokesperson at the first "Peace Not Prejudice" week that was designed to educate in the face of anti-Islamic bias. "One of the things that attracted me to this church was its interfaith slant. Our church is very Christian, but also very interested in working with other faiths, especially for the betterment of the community," Ireland reflects. Ireland was raised as a Unitarian Universalist, but describes herself as converting to Christianity in her freshman year of college. On one of her early visits to FUCC, a rabbi spoke during part of the service. On another occasion, Ireland remembers hearing a portion of the Koran was read alongside the Bible. Judaism and Islam were "not given equal authority with Christianity, but the fact they were present resounded with my interest in maintaining relationship to other faiths, while being distinctly and decidedly a follower of Christ. I think it is very important to be so comfortable and so sure of your faith that it is possible to comfortably interact with people of other faiths." She remembers a text-study held at the church in which a rabbi explained that, although for him Judaism is the best and truest expression of faith, encounters with differing interpretations deepen his own reflection. It is only in coming from a place of openness about other religions and certainty about one's own that difficult conversations about living together peaceably can take place, she remembers him saying. That approach has become foundational in her own way of living out Christianity. After considering seminary in conversation with members at FCCB who helped her identify gifts for ministry, Ireland has decided instead to pursue a doctor of philosophy in Italian studies. She remains an active lay leader at FCCB and is grateful for her internship year as a time to explore more deeply her gifts of leadership.

In addition to sponsoring internships, FCCB helps college students explore vocation through a mentoring program. Dieterle designed this project as a way to help FUCC members relate to students. Members from the church are matched with students expressing a desire to be mentored. "In training mentors, I'm often asked 'Am I supposed to talk about being Christian?' I tell them to share who they are and what they do, the non-profits they are part of, the volunteering they take part in. I encourage them to talk about the border trip they just got back from. Tell the stories of your life: That's how we witness to how the progressive Christian story is woven into your life and finds expression in the things that you do, in and beyond your profession, in your everyday life." This activity in intergenerational progressive Christian witness is not without an interfaith edge: when sharing the project with a friend who directs the campus Hillel center, a foundation for Jewish campus life, Dieterle glimpsed another place for collaboration. In its future, this mentoring project will enlist members of the Hillel community as mentors.

In a prominent corner of the FCCB sanctuary sits a large Tibetan singing bowl. When struck, its tone fills the large space, signaling all to enter into a brief time of centering on a passage from the Bible. This bowl has a story: it belonged to the now-deceased husband of a congregation member who brought it back during a time of earnest spiritual quest. Adam Blons, minister of community life, explains that the bowl is a symbol of FCCB's lived theology. "The key for us is relationship. This bowl and its place in our worship grows out of a connection. That's why it feels authentic. We live in this multicultural, multi-religious environment. It's who we are. It's presence here honors who we are." The presence of a singing bowl in worship also teaches, Blons says. Like inviting someone's Jewish dad to a Sunday School class to describe Shabbat or inviting a couple in the congregation who meditate to share their practice with the youth group, interfaith moments invite questions. Questions invite reflection. Reflection leads to fresh insight about one's own path. At FCCB, that's a path marked, in Blons' words "by God's radically inclusive love, best understood as Jesus' mission to break open the idea that God's love is meant only for a chosen few."

From Berkeley to Boston: Resources for an Emerging Practice of a New *Convivencia*

The radically inclusive theology that undergirds FCCB's practice of interfaith friendship may be embraced readily in Berkeley, where the simple act of walking down the street causes one to wonder why so many diverse religious expressions exist. People who live in more homogenous settings, such as small towns or rural areas, might find it more difficult. If you're not confronted with religious diversity where you live, why should you care? If you care, but don't come in contact with much diversity, where do you start?

As religious educators and stewards of Christian theology who are concerned with the future of the church, we care because we want to articulate a compelling Christianity that meets young person's desire to create a better world. This urge toward vocations of care is a tender seedling that sometimes sprouts in congregations that attend to their youth and young adults. A young person who is given the opportunity to understand a Buddhist singing bowl in high school – while surrounded by a community of meaning-making that encourages questions and conversation – may be more likely to find his faith weathering the storms of college, where an onslaught of religious diversity is likely to occur. A college student who is given ample opportunity to consider the historical context and the rhetorical impulse of biblical texts that have been used to argue that Christianity is the only true religion may find such intellectually rigorous Bible study invigorating and worthy of her best energy. ⁶A young Christian who befriends a young Muslim while working side by side in a soup kitchen may come to understand that service is a place where the Bible and the Koran speak the same language and inspire similar actions. The common denominator in these three examples is a congregation that creates space for young people to think and reflect in community on lived experience as it intersects the stories of our faith. In that conversation, new generations are encouraged to tweak inherited understandings of God. New theologies emerge. This is the impulse which, when nourished, creates a "God-shaped response" to a particular contextualized predicament. It is also, we believe, an impulse that can

⁶ A compelling example of this kind of text study is provided in the book *Wide Wide Circle of Divine Love: A Biblical Case for Religious Diversity*. See particularly the chapter entitled "God's Way Made Particular," in which author W. Eugene March persuasively argues that Jesus' words as recorded in John 14:6 ("I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.") when interpreted in context do not support an exclusivist Christian theology.

lead young people into more deeply questioning their role in God's dream for the world. Congregations that nurture young leaders provide healthy and robust opportunities for theological reflection. Like Zohar's gift – which could only have emerged within the cross-fertilized culture of religious influences present in her life – gifts of leadership among young people today require a congregational culture that intentionally notices, names, and nurtures them.

Young people, if left to muddle through on their own, may very well find their church's lack of attention to plurality in a growing pluralistic world to be a ticket out – a reason for not caring enough about Christianity to stay connected to it along the trajectory to adulthood. What is lost in that gap is both a tragic loss to the church, who needs bright articulate young leaders to carry its vision of shalom forward, and a loss to the larger human community, which needs leaders whose impulses toward healing the world are sustained by a multitude of complementary yet distinct religious ideals.

Listening to the voices of parishioners and pastors who have been deeply involved in the “living together” that is FCCB makes clear that interfaith friendships, like most Christian practices when newly embraced, must start small, close to home, where a need presents itself and people respond. Like the early days of the Civil Rights Movement, when Caucasian Christians began to cross borders of race in order to collaborate in seeking justice, mistakes will happen. Dieterle remembers once feeling slightly embarrassed by the language in a hymn after singing it in the presence of a rabbi. This particular expression of Christianity just didn't fit anymore: Her theology had changed in light of the relationship. As her theology evolved, adapting the artifacts of that theology, such as certain ways of praying or certain phrases in a hymn, was the inevitable work of keeping one's actions in step with theological growth and change. The proximity of non-Christian neighbors to Berkeley made Dieterle's inchoate attempts at inter-religious friendship fairly likely to recur with effort and intentionality. But what if you live in Lynchburg, Virginia, where only one small synagogue exists and a most of the international diversity in town is associated with Liberty University, an arm of the conservative Christian right? Not only is it difficult to seek out non-Christians to befriend, but powerful assumptions about Christianity's destiny to convert those of other faiths still thrives.

In a similar response to the aftermath of 9/11 that stimulated FCCB's deepening of inter-religious friendships, an organization in Boston set about creating a space to notice, name, and nurture the gifts of teens in an intentionally interfaith milieu. This organization, called the Interfaith Youth Initiative (IFYI), presents one resource for congregational leaders who care about educating for pluralism but find themselves in a less-than-diverse setting. The IFYI summer institute is an intensive eight day, overnight experience that offers workshops, small groups, leadership training and outlets for conscious creative expression and public social justice witness to young people between the ages of 15 and 18 from diverse religious faiths. Living together on a college campus, participants learn to coexist and build community across deep differences. Students go off campus to experience field trips to diverse places of worship; service learning projects around Boston; and to enact an Interfaith Walk for Justice, Peace, and the Environment through downtown Boston or Cambridge. Students work together to create a multi-media performance and to articulate a shared interfaith vision of peace/shalom/salaam/tikkun olam. College-aged mentors provide vocational support for the youth as they pursue their goals and dreams after the intensive. Participants testify to the power of engaging in one-week of intentional interfaith friendship. “I came here wanting to learn more about other religions, little did I know that I would be learning a great deal about myself and my own religion,” wrote one

participant. Another said “Not only did I learn about other religious traditions, I learned about my very own and will become a stronger Muslim because of it. It basically moved me to tears to know that people of other faiths honestly want to understand mine and how they prayed with us (the Muslims), I definitely won’t forget that.” (IFYI vision statement and evaluations)

Ongoing research will include deep listening to participants and Christian congregations that have repeatedly sent their young people to this summer institute and its various year-round sponsored events. A key question in this ethnographic listening will be how young Christians – once engaged in away-from-home interfaith friendships – find ways to translate practices of interfaith friendship back into the congregations that send them. Do young people who’ve experienced IFYI return to be leaders in their congregations and on their campuses? Does the experience shape young people for leading in meaningful new ways, with insights that would have been hard to imagine had the interfaith encounter not transpired?

Imagining a New Ending: Radical Welcome instead of Expulsion

In 1492, the *convivencia* came to a violent and radical halt. In the same room of the Alhambra castle in Granada where the newly victorious King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella blessed Christopher Columbus’ journey to find a trade route to India and prove the world was round, a horrible chapter in Christian history began. The expulsion of Jews and Muslims from southern Spain was bloody and violent.

We hope for a very different ending to the current *convivencia*. Stephanie Spellers, writing in the book *Radical Welcome*, uses the metaphor of embrace to talk about churches in the United States who are embodying an emerging theology of welcome across lines of race and ethnicity, generations, sexual orientation, and class privilege. We see a parallel movement at work where Christians are stepping into the emerging practice of interfaith friendship. Although Spellers does not name non-Christians as a focus for this radical welcome, we wish to extend her concept to apply to the practices of interfaith friendship for which we have been arguing. She writes:

Radical welcome is not an invitation to assimilate ... We are offering an embrace, and that means we have opened ourselves, offered ourselves. The risk is great, but embrace requires us to gird ourselves with the love of God and to say, ‘Come, bring who you are. My arms are open to you. Would you open your arms to me? We will receive one another, not losing our unique identities and histories, but releasing the rigid boundaries so that our stories can connect and a new community might be born.’ (17)

Spellers goes on to argue that a theology of radical welcome is ushered in with Jesus’ life and ministry. “Jesus’ whole ministry – the whole account of God’s human life among us – is that of one who honors his tradition, but will not be bound by it if the dream of God demands something else.” This work is of necessity slow and careful, because it entails vulnerability and involves a long history of distrust. The mutual embrace Spellers imagines is delineated by Miroslav Volf in his work *Exclusion and Embrace*. He provides poignant clues for the careful work of reconciliation that are also helpful in the work of opening oneself to experiences across cultural and religious divides. Volf’s steps of mutual embrace include: 1) opening one’s arms in invitation, like a door left open for an expected friend; 2) waiting at the boundary of the other, where the power of your vulnerability and desire to connect might prove compelling and even transforming; and 3) closing, which is the holding of another in such a way that you do not

merge or master one another, but receive each other on your own terms and continue to seek relationship. The last step in the process of embrace is a return to opening one's arms. Volf writes:

Because the two have not melted into one, you may once again open your arms. Now you have the chance to look at yourself and rediscover your own identity, "enriched by the traces that the presence of the other has left." And you look again at the other, the one whose identity will continue to change, the one who will continue to be both friend and mystery, the one you may embrace again with your now open arms. (Volf, 140-45, as quoted in Spellers, 12-13)

This image of embrace and the concept of radical welcome can function as a guide in the practice of interfaith friendship. It creates a pathway for Christians to live together with their non-Christian neighbors, not to convert them, but to seek with them a mutual embrace, a place of understanding out of which action on behalf of a hurting world might grow. Young people who see this radical love in action within a congregation and are invited to partake in it themselves might well be persuaded to consider how their lives contribute a signature gift for just such a time as this.

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