

The Leadership Practicum: The Space Where DMin Education, Action Based Research and Interfaith Dialogue Converge

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Abstract

This essay argues that interfaith engagement is an invaluable form of Christian mission wherever Christian and other faith communities live together and share common social and geographical space. Actually, it is perhaps one of the most valued forms of Christian mission operable among dynamic multi-religious urban contexts in North America. The question that stands out is: “What would happen if the core DMin leadership course—the practicum—was re-conceptualized to enable the student who is engaged in action-based research to benefit academically from the perspectives and insights of another religion or faith tradition?” My suggestion is that the andragogy that informs my teaching among MDiv theological students at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), as they are equipped for ministry in the dynamically religious contexts of urban USA; has applicability for DMin education.² This unique approach toward interfaith dialogue competency supports and offers current and future Christian leaders opportunities for engaging three religions: African, Jewish and Islamic; and their faith systems based on a more relational model of interfaith engagement.

Introduction

In an article titled *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, the Pew Foundation highlighted the sharp decline of the Christian population in the US, and the fact that unaffiliated and other religious faiths continue to grow. “Between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the population

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fell from 78.45 to 70.6%, driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics. The unaffiliated experienced the most growth, and the share of Americans who belong to the non-Christian faith also increased.”³ While the focus of the previous essay is on the intercultural phenomena and how the DMin practicum can be designed to encourage intercultural competence, this essay is centered on how teaching DMin students to value interfaith dialogue and to learn with other religious leaders within their ministry communities can provide a unique learning experience that may impact positively the DMin dissertation project as well as the DMin researcher. This essay argues that not only is interfaith engagement an invaluable form of Christian mission wherever Christian and other faith communities live together and share common social and geographical space, but it is perhaps one of the most valued forms of Christian mission operable among dynamic multi-religious urban contexts in North America. What would happen if the core DMin leadership course—the practicum—was re-conceptualized to enable the student who is engaged in action-based research to benefit academically from the perspectives and insights of another religion or faith tradition? In this essay, I suggest that the andragogy that informs my teaching among MDiv theological students at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), as they are equipped for ministry in the dynamically religious contexts of urban USA; has applicability for DMin education.⁴ This unique approach toward interfaith dialogue competency supports and offers current and future Christian leaders opportunities for engaging three religions: African, Jewish and Islamic; and their faith systems based on a more relational model of interfaith engagement.

³ The source is the 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4 to September 30, 2014.

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The Ministry Context of Religious Plurality

Located approximately five minutes from the ITC in southwest Atlanta, Georgia is the West End, a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious community that often serves as a dynamic living ‘classroom without walls’ for courses in Missiology and Religions of the World Department at ITC. It is often acknowledged that the defining characteristic of the West End is its wide array of religious institutions, from the historic West Hunter Street Baptist Church to an old-fashioned spiritual reader to the Shrine of the Black Madonna Cultural Center and Bookstore of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church. For at least fifteen years, the West End community has played a significant role providing ITC students with a dynamic learning context to discover and practice what it means to be a Christian leader in a religiously dynamic community with a concern for interfaith competence. Students engage the following religious faith communities:

- *The Children of Anowa* (African Indigenous Believers): Anowa is a mythical woman representing Africa and the continental values of “love and respect for life, of people and of nature.”⁵ African spirituality in the West End is not restricted to places of worship, but is evident wherever African men, women and children are: in the home, the market place, learning centers and community gathering places.
- *The Children of Sarah* (Judaism): The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, sometimes referred to as the Hebrew Israelites, or the Black Jews, are very active in urban cities of the US. With a homeland based in Israel and as the largest African American religious community outside of the USA, the Hebrew Israelites through a number of public outreach and economic-based activities seek to impact the mind, health and spirit.

⁵ See *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*, by Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Orbis: 1995), page 10. Oduyoye further describes how Anowa is meaningful in the Ghanaian culture and makes references to other sources where Anowa is described as a priest (see *Anowa*, London: Harlow, 1970 and Longman-Drumbeat, 1980) and as prophet (*Two Thousand Seasons* (East African Publishing House, Nairobi, 1973) who represents Africa.

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- *The Children of Sarah* (Christian): Diverse Christian congregations which have had a long presence in the West End are also involved in community outreach activities. All types of congregations and congregational ministries are evident in great variations—Protestant, Catholic, Pan African, Pentecostal, multicultural and the historic Black Church.
- *The Children of Hagar* (Islam): The West End Islamic Center, known as the Community Masjid, has functioned for more than 25 years, dedicated to the establishment of Islam in the West. In addition to the followers of the late Wadith D. Mohammad also present are various forms of the Nation of Islam, and the Moors.

As DMin students seek to respond as informed leaders to complex and often challenging problems that arise within the context of the practice of ministry, they need to be encouraged to take advantage of the presence of other religious leaders and faith traditions residing within the ministry context for learning, teaching and building relations. Not only might students gain valuable insights that can enhance their dissertation projects, but they will also be challenged to develop a way of ‘being’ that informs how they as Christian leaders are to (1) treat people who embrace different faith traditions and (2) how to treat what they believe.

The Methodological Components of an Interfaith Engagement: As Theological Praxis of Christian Mission

Recognizing that there is no religion that has not been influenced by cultures and no culture that has not been influenced by religions, Christian theological institutions should actively and effectively prepare students to engage in interfaith ministries, identifying and utilizing key resources (experience, sacred scripture, tradition, culture and social change) that have served to promote the Christian faith as an intelligent inquiry into God consciousness. These same institutions serve their students well by helping them to understand the presence and power of other religious traditions, and how other believing leaders utilize their faith to promote religion as an intelligent inquiry into God consciousness. Understanding this is crucial if Christian mission and ministry are to be perceived as useful and necessary by those living and working within the West End and also globally as a faith heritage capable of embracing purposeful, creative, holistic, and healing human interactions.

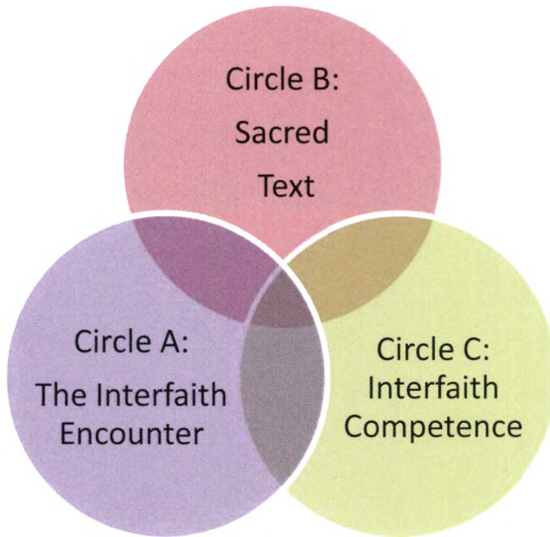
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Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., bell hooks, James Cone, Deborah Majeed, Amina Wadud, Cornell West, Jacqueline Grant, Katie Cannon, Anthony Pinn, Will Coleman and so many other community advocate/activist/ scholars remind us clearly that the contemporary struggle for human dignity and human rights within the USA is profoundly personal and communal. Because of this, and given the dehumanizing theologies and methodologies historically affiliated with Christian missions (local, national and worldwide); along with prostitution of the gospel message associated with the encounters of people— particularly of African descent—by western Christianity for economic gains; it is crucial that African American Christian leaders should use their theological resources in ways that respect people and can ignite a sense of shared vision and purpose. Local churches and their leaders across the nation, who are located in religiously diverse contexts such as the West End, need mentoring as to how they can overcome ignorance, hesitancies and the fear of change, and in providing a moral compass as they grow in their discovery of who they are and how powerful they can become without the need to demonize self, or to demonizing others who are different. It is only when theological institutions are able to help churches and ministries to embrace what church historian emeritus, Gayraud Wilmore, refers to as a “pragmatic spirituality,”⁶ an active demonstration of the Christian faith, will leaders be able to respond meaningfully, authentically and faithfully to 21st century realities facing religiously diverse communities, and the changing religious landscape.

⁶ *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith through an Africentric Lens* by Gayraud S. Wilmore (New York University Press, 2004) is the book referenced here.

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Figure 1: The Tripartite Nature of Interfaith Engagement as Christian Mission Praxis⁷



Circle A: The Interfaith Encounter

The learning process that is advocated in this essay begins not in an abstract or virtual world, but instead with a story of real people engaged in real life learning. It begins with the DMin student who has encountered a particular theme, concern or problem as result of engaging in the practice of ministry and has identified that theme as worthy of an academic pursuit. As a result of engaging in action based research, and discovering that the problem that needs to be addressed is not only of interest to Christians, the student realizes that by welcoming the insight of another religious or faith perspective centered on that very issue can serve to broaden and enrichen, and not reduce his/her knowledge base. By focusing on a real lived problem identified and described by the DMin student, one that originates as a result of ministry practice and that is brought intentionally to an interfaith encounter relative to leadership practice, allows all persons

⁷ This methodology (and the related figures presented) are adapted from the work of an international research and writing team I participated in which resulted in *God So Loves the City: Seeking a Theology for Urban Mission*, by Charles Van Engen and Jude Tiersma, editors, (MARC: 1994).

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involved in the story (of dialogues) to be viewed as subjects and not as objects, and what they see, hear, interpret and experience, to receive voice. While the story of interfaith encounter focuses primarily on a problem or concern that originated in relations to the practice of ministry, it is important not to limit its public connectivity, but and to recognize that many of the ministerial issues that students seek to address have the ability to impact a number of issues of public concern: family, education, juvenile justice, economic disparity, senior care, and health disparity, and overcoming community violence.

Narrative inquiry, a relatively new qualitative methodology, is centered in the study of experience understood narratively. It encourages a way of thinking and studying experiences that follow a recursive, reflexive process of moving from a particular field (with starting points in telling or living stories) to fields of texts (data) to interim and final research texts.⁸ Any religious activity that leaders perform in the story helps expand our understanding of power actions and leadership influence. This method rejects the information deposit-making pedagogy, and instead involves students in the practice of teaching and learning based on the realism of intercultural encounters of our time. Because it also allows an enhanced understanding of leadership as the exercise of power and influence through the shaping of behaviors, practices and thoughts, it is highly recommended.

Circle B: Sacred Text, the Ultimate Definer of the Meaning and Value of Human Diversity

How does God view human diversity based on the Bible, the sacred text of Christians? Daniel Aleshire of the Association of Theological Schools has observed theologically, “it is one thing to conclude that racial prejudice and the discrimination that is caused are wrong, and another to conclude that diversity is a theological virtue.”⁹ Is human diversity a theological virtue? Even among North American Christians, the response to this questions varies. How is human diversity presented in the sacred written texts of other faith traditions such as, the Torah, the Qur’an, the Vedas, and the Tripitaka, as well as the unwritten sacred text of African and Native American spirituality? Because of the

⁸ See D. Jean Clandinin, *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry: Developing Qualitative Inquiry*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, California, 2013).

⁹ Daniel Aleshire, “Gifts Differing: Race and Ethnicity in Theological Education”, Chief Academic Officers Society Seminary, June 2008, 6.

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sola scriptura adage in the Protestant Christian mission movement, our DMin students must give careful attention to the Bible as sacred text and how it functions in shaping the role and praxis of interfaith competence. Because the Bible bears witness to the revelation of God in Jesus the Christ who shapes religious beliefs and practices, it is imperative in a religiously diverse society that believing people and believing faith communities understand and are able to articulate what they believe their sacred scripture teaches about what it means to be human, humanity diversity, and the diversity of human experience.

I offer one final comment related to the Bible as sacred text. Contrary to popular belief, the African American believing communities still place a premium value on the Bible as sacred text. As theologian Renita J. Weems has stated:

An on-going challenge for scholars committed to a liberation perspective on the Bible is explaining how and why modern readers from marginalized communities continue to regard the Bible as meaningful resource for shaping modern existence. This is a challenge because in some crucial ways not only do biblical authors at times perceive reality very differently from these groups, but the Bible itself is often used to marginalize them...Likewise, African American scholars have brought eloquent and impassioned charges against the Bible as an instrument of the dominant culture that was used to subjugate African American people. However, the Bible is still extremely influential in the African American religious life, and these scholars are hard pressed fully to explain why.¹⁰

Given the current USA context of terrorism, violence and hatred (referring to the mass shooting at the Pulse Nightclub, Orlando, Florida, June 12, 2016) DMin students should be encouraged to study social issues, concerns and themes that impact the human spirit from both the internal perspective of our own sacred text, as well as from the external perspective of the faiths of our neighbors, those with whom we share geographical

¹⁰ "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible" by Renita J. Weems. 1991. in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Cain Hope Felder; Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 57.

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space and community. As Christian leaders, students must be prepared and willing to learn and teach or study with other religious people, and dialogue about the teachings and work of Jesus Christ as well as learn about the teachings of the Qur'an. The identity of Jesus as Prophet, Teacher, Savior and Liberator, on the move, constantly engaging, challenging and confronting people with the notion of the reign of God, promoting human wholeness in the midst of a dehumanizing empire, is an extremely important one for DMin students. By examining Jesus as Teacher, DMin students learn how to engage in meaningful interfaith dialogue by focusing on that which is central to our faith—how Jesus teaches by doing (we are called to do love); that he is the Text on intercultural competence, and if we want to know what he teaches about relationship with other religious people, Jews and non-Jews, we need to watch how he teaches and what he teaches. Jesus did not segregate; he teaches us how to overcome the greatest impediment to learning, fear; how to overcome walls of hopelessness and how to build people up; and how to forgive.¹¹

Circle C: Interfaith Competence

The third circle involves bringing into focus the narrative of the theological education institution and its capacity to dialogue with alums as well as current the DMin student who is engaged in interfaith activity for the purpose of shaping convictions, policy and procedures. How to define and access demonstrations of effective implementation of Christian mission as interfaith engagement is not an easy task. As was emphasized in the previous essay centered on the concept of intercultural competency, interfaith competence can be measured, but because interfaith competence involves more than knowledge of other religions, attention must be given to a larger and deeper educational process that involves the comprehension and development of one's self and attitudes in effectively and successfully engaging with persons of diverse religious backgrounds.

In an effort to advance in the process of interfaith (and intercultural) competency, higher theological education institutions must rely on their historical, psychological, sociological, theological and creative resources. It is helpful for institutions to facilitate this necessary

¹¹ James H. Cone in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Orbis, 2013) does an excellent job in bringing together two of the most emotionally charged symbols in the history of the African American community. He explores these symbols and their interconnection in the history and beliefs of African Americans.

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and crucial dialogue related to interfaith competence by beginning with an acknowledgement of the rich resources already represented among the faculty. For instance, at the ITC professors Anne Streaty Wimberly (Christian Education) and Edward P. Wimberly (Pastoral Care) have long incorporated within their educational work—among future and current theological students—a learning module on “Leadership and Multiple Intelligences.” Leadership in ministry requires an understanding of intelligence that goes beyond our normal considerations. While a monocultural perspective on the topic of intelligence with its greater emphasis on intelligent quotas (IQ) and grade point averages (GPA) prevails within the USA, this understanding is often found to be too limited and limiting. On the other hand, a multicultural and multi-religious perspective on the topic of intelligences enables us to broaden the understanding of intelligence that we bring not only to the classroom setting, but also to all other programmatic aspects of ministry. Such a shift allows us to discover that one of the most important intelligences required within the urban multi-religious context is emotional intelligence. For the Wimberley’s, an emphasis on multi-intelligences and knowing how to best utilize them helps to develop intercultural and interfaith traits important to leaders: accurate self-assessment, self-confidence, self-control, transparency, adaptability, initiative, optimism, social awareness, empathy, and organizational awareness.¹²

¹² What follows is a list of intelligences from a holistic perspective that program administrators, curriculum researchers, and educators invested in cognitive theory have affirmed as important to cultivate. The Faith Journey in Partnership Program, a mentoring program developed by Anne Wimberly at ITC identifies as important the following listing: 1. Verbal/Linguistics: the use of the spoken and written words in learning; 2. Logical/Mathematical: the use of abstract patterns, concepts, number, linear and sequential thinking; 3. Visual/Spatial: the use of physically seeing and mentally picturing images as a way of learning; 4. Body/Kinesthetic: the use of our bodies as a means of learning; 5. Musical/Rhythmic: the use of sound, rhythms, tunes and songs in learning; 6. Interpersonal: the use of communications with one or more person in learning; 7. Intrapersonal: the use of inner knowledge and reflection as a means of learning; 8. Emotional: the use of emotional sensitivity and management skills for learning; 9. Relational: the use of and value of relationships as a way of learning; 10. Spiritual: the use of integrity, intuition, wisdom and compassion in learning; and, 11. Cultural: the use of aptitudes and skills for interaction and problem solving in intercultural learning.

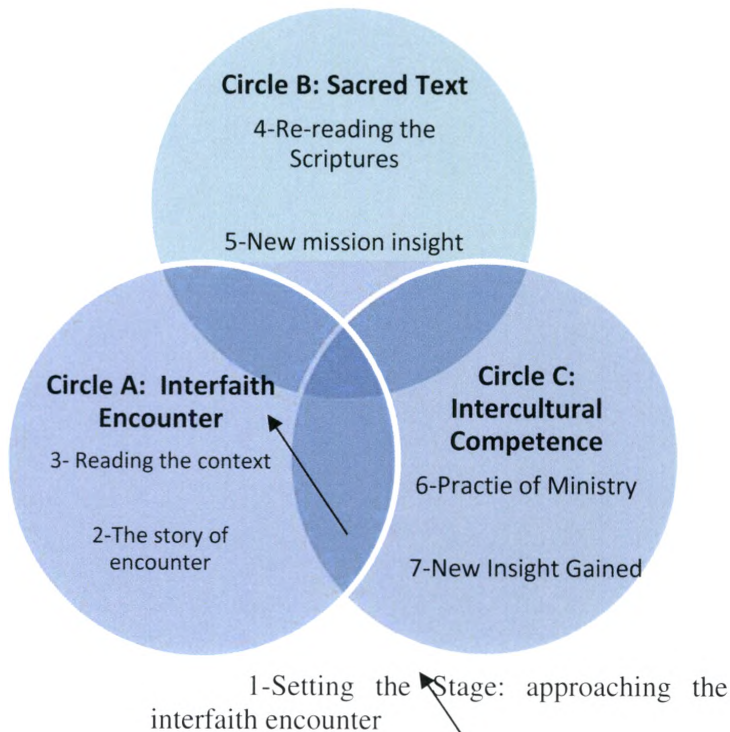
The Overlapping, Integrating Shaded Spaces of Reflection

The three circles presented below are linked by shaded spaces that symbolically represent intentional, guided periods of theological reflection, sometimes in solitude, but most often communal. This period of theological reflection on a specific ministry activity is crucial in discovering the level of interfaith competency of the student as an anticipated outcome of theological education. The late Michael I.N. Dash, Professor Emeritus of the Ministry and Context Department at ITC, would stress again and again the importance of engaging in theological and ministry reflections that examines “one’s faith in the light of experience” and “experience in the light of one’s faith”. Aimed at pressing the question about the presence of God in the experiences of cross-cultural life and intercultural realities, and the implications for that presence, Dash would utilize a four-source model of theological reflection that would encourage attention given to exploring the world of tradition, personal position, cultural beliefs and assumptions, and implications for action.

It is through dynamic theological reflection on interfaith engagement that the student is led to self-identify areas of personal responsibility and to take responsibility for personal growth and spiritual maturity as discerned necessary to accomplish a given purpose. Individual traits (flexibility, empathy, sincere listening, etc.) as well as attention to the nature of the relationship between individuals involved in an interfaith encounter are significant. Because there is no prescriptive set of individual characteristics or traits that guarantee compliance in all interfaith or interreligious situations, relationships and the quality of relationships formed are also emphasized.

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Figure 2: Methodological components of Interfaith Competence



1. Setting the Stage: Who (self-define with specificity) is attending to this encounter, and what assumptions are undergirding the encounter?
2. The Story: What ministry issue or social concern, based on action-based research, is identified as significant, one that could benefit from another religious or faith perspective and that forms the narrative inquiry?
3. Reading the Context: What contextual dynamics and relationships are at play, and how do you understand them?
4. Rereading the Sacred Text: How might a re-focus on the Bible as sacred text shed light on the particular social or ministry incident? What insight might be gained from studying the issue of concern from the perspective of another faith's sacred text?

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5. New Interfaith or Religious Insights:¹³ What new insight gained might help to shape a better understanding related to the dissertation project and/or theological reflections?
6. Leadership Mission action: What interfaith competence action and skills are required of the student as a sign and symbol of the reign of God?
7. New Insight gained into the Practice of Ministry: What new insight has been gained as a result of engaging in dialogue and viewing the ministry concern from the perspective of another believing community? As a result of engaging in this particular methodology aimed at discovering God's will and God's ways, how can we envision a different response, one that speaks of "love and respect for life, of people and of nature"?

Conclusion

As DMin students prepare to serve the church, Christian ministries, public educational institutions and other social agencies, they must be reminded that they do so within a religiously diverse context. It does no good to ignore or silence others who live within our ministry context and with whom we must share geographical space simply because their faith beliefs differ. The seven steps identified in the methodology recommended in this essay are meant to promote interfaith competence. If observed, it becomes clear that through interfaith encounters, not only do students engage in intrapersonal reflections that allows them to self-assess their ability to serve as religious leaders in a variety of vocational and professional settings, but they also discover new skills developed that may be used to serve the church and the public in variety of ways, such as: public theologian, innovative faith leader, community activist, interfaith dialogue partner, religiously inclusive creative educator, contextual and cross-cultural communicator, prophetic justice minister, and asset based community developer. By suggesting a particular methodological

¹³ Essential principles of womanist religious scholars, pastoral care givers, and womanist methodologies that are applicable and offer extremely helpful insight are as follows: the promote clear communications (verbal, physical and/or spiritual); multi-dialogical; liturgical intent, has implications for life and living; didactic intent, has implications for teaching and learning; committed to both reason and experience; holistic accountability (rejects bifurcation between sacred and mundane); and has a concern for healing.

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paradigm, attention was given to how the interfaith engagement of students may become an analytical outcome of Christian mission which points toward a process that enables us to learn how to provide students with the attitudes, skills and behaviors that will lead to effective, successful and faithful leadership competence in contexts of religious diversity.

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