

Protagonist Corner

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This story begins with Dan Schrock, a pastor and spiritual director who received his Doctor of Ministry degree from Columbia Theological Seminary in 2007. In 2001 he was serving the sole Mennonite congregation in Columbus, Ohio, when he received a telephone call from a researcher at Princeton University. She said she was working with Robert Wuthnow, Director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton. She wanted to interview Dan about his religious neighborhood--and more specifically, about his congregation's experience with interfaith relationships. He agreed and they set aside an hour for their conversation.

What the researcher knew and Dan did not was the reason his congregation had been selected for the Princeton study--because there was a mosque in his neighborhood, less than a mile from the church. When Dan learned this near the end of the interview, he was aghast. "This was particularly astonishing to me," he said, "since ours was a highly educated, internationally-traveled congregation with lots of professors and urbane professionals, ex-overseas mission workers, and the like. One would have thought that we of all people might have known of a mosque in the neighborhood of our own building."¹

The story stuck with me, since my sympathies were entirely with Dan. In a big city of rapidly changing neighborhoods, with who knows how many new businesses and storefront churches springing up, what busy pastor notices everything happening within a mile of the church? Sometimes it is all you can do to notice everything happening on your desk. Plus, who needs a researcher from Princeton to remind you that there are important things escaping your attention every hour of the day?

I looked forward to reading Wuthnow's book, which came out in 2005 as *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity*. The question that drove his research was how well a "Christian nation" is doing with increasing numbers of neighbors devoted to other faiths. His team interviewed 2910 adults in all, selected to be representative of the adult population of the United States. After the initial survey, researchers went back to 200 of the respondents who were church members to ask more questions about their beliefs and the activities of their churches. They also contacted the pastors of fifty of their churches to ask about their awareness of and level of interaction with people of other faiths.

Since this is not a book review, I will let those of you who are interested peruse the volume on your own. There is one paragraph, however, that every Christian should read at least once. It comes from chapter 8, called "How Congregations Manage Diversity," and here is what it says:

One of the main conclusions that emerges from conversations with scores of pastors in various parts of the country is that many churches--probably a majority--are dealing with the growing religious diversity of our society by simply avoiding the issue. They seldom talk specifically about how to relate to their Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist neighbors and they

certainly do not sponsor activities that would bring them into contact with these neighbors. Yet these are churches that are located within a few blocks of mosques, temples, or synagogues and their pastors are thoughtful and informed leaders who are clearly aware that other religions are an increasingly prominent reality in today's world. How is it possible for pastors to avoid paying greater attention to other religions?²

I found that last question so interesting that I required Wuthnow's book for a Doctor of Ministry course called "American Spiritualities" during the summer of 2010. The course was quickly oversubscribed, leading the registrar's office to hold a lottery for available seats. The ensuing two weeks were full of rich experiences and discussions, but the part I want to talk about here is what I learned from pastors in the course about the paragraph in Wuthnow's book.

The main thing I learned is that there is nothing "simple" about avoiding the growing religious diversity of our society. As part of their preparation for the class, students pasted the zip codes of their churches onto a mapping tool (such as mapquest.com or maps.google) to find out who their religious neighbors were. Many were astounded by how many entries popped up—especially when they searched for "temples," "masjids," and "gurdwaras" as well as "churches" and "synagogues." Others learned that the diversity in their areas was largely Christian, while freely admitting that they were as clueless about some of their Christian neighbors as they would have been about Buddhists, Muslims, or Sikhs.

After conducting the search, several students came to the same conclusion. "The people in my community really have no exposure to people of other faiths," one of them said, giving voice to a common fallacy. Anyone who watches television, listens to radio, or reads a newspaper has extensive exposure to people of other faiths—often negative—which increases rather than decreases the need for pastoral intervention (if helping congregants make sense of religious pluralism is a pastoral priority). Without everyday encounters at the post office or the grocery store to counter religious stereotypes, people in all of our communities are at risk of buying what various media have to sell them. One need only note the recent, precipitous increase in anti-Muslim sentiment to recognize how effective such campaigns can be.

Yet even the pastors who discovered (or already knew) that they were serving churches in religiously diverse neighborhoods tended to file that knowledge under "interfaith dialogue"—something important that they genuinely believed they should be doing more about, saved in the same folder with "environmental action" or "community health care"—important but secondary to the more central concerns of keeping a church going. For a variety of reasons, keeping peace with those of other faiths did not rank very high on anyone's list of what Christians exist to do.

Wuthnow identifies several pastoral "strategies of avoidance" for dealing with religious pluralism. These include avoiding unnecessary theological trouble ("I think there'd be resistance from the members"), admitting institutional limitations ("It's just not in line with what we're trying to do here"), and citing overall busyness ("It would just be another thing to do"). While it is hardly possible to read these defenses one by one without feeling the discomfort of the speakers, reading them one after another adds up to quite a long list of excuses. Yet with the help of the pastors in my class, it was possible to see into the depths that these diffident-sounding excuses cover.

Many congregations already have plenty of trouble on their plates, whether it entails dealing with denominational debates over human sexuality or figuring out where to find the funds to stay open for another year. While most pastors I know would not hesitate to get involved if a nearby synagogue were set on fire or a Muslim school were threatened, many are reluctant to take the initiative in building relationships that might lessen the odds of such things happening. Even in my small community where most of the fire is rhetorical, I do not see many letters to the editor from local pastors. Why borrow trouble when there is already enough to go around?

Plus, it is no small thing to construct (much less communicate) a Christian theology of other religions. While most major Christian traditions have published position papers on their relationships to those of other faiths, making sense of those positions requires readers to grapple with how and to whom God is revealed, who Jesus was and is, what salvation means and how it happens, who is eligible for it and to what end. While all of these topics show up as chapter titles in standard college introductions to Christian theology, I do not know many churches that take them up in any systematic way.

Small wonder, then, that some Christians question whether engaging neighbors of other faiths is “in line with what we’re doing here.” Does taking time to learn about other religions legitimate their teachings? If we initiate relationships with people who do not accept Christ without trying to change their minds, what does that say about our own faith in the gospel? Are we saying to them (and to the wider community) that we think all religions are alike?

The illogic in some of these questions—common as they are--demonstrates not only the need for critical thinking in such matters but also how important it is for Christians to recognize central *Christian* reasons to engage neighbors who are not and will not become Christians too. One of the standout days in the D. Min. class was the day pastors answered a question asked of a pastor in the Wuthnow book: “Can you tell me how your understanding of Christian faith informs your relationships with people of other faiths?”

Their theologically astute answers included biblical teachings from almost half of the books of the New Testament. Matthew 25 figured centrally (“Lord, when was it that we saw you...?”), but so did John 10 (“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold”), Luke 4 (in which the hearers of Jesus’ first sermon become enraged not because he claims to be God’s messiah but because he reminds them of God’s favor towards those who do not share their faith), Romans 11 (“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”), 1 Peter 2 (“Honor everyone”) and Revelation 7 (“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands”).

By the end of the course, most of us could articulate the reasons why making and keeping peace with neighbors of other faiths was central to our identity as Christians--and how our sacred texts, theology, and practices equipped us to pursue that mission as only we could. Even those of us with little energy for “interfaith dialogue” could see how we might band together with neighbors of other faiths to make our neighborhoods, schools, streets, and parks safer for all of our children. Of course that did not solve the “one more thing to do” problem. But it did remind us that our common

call went beyond the preservation of our churches to joining God in the healing of the world.

What is this essay doing in a journal for preachers? I have recently had the privilege of reading thousands of essays written by biblical scholars, theologians, pastors, and preachers for the twelve volumes of *Feasting on the Word*. Among many other things, this has offered me a snapshot (okay, a really fat photo album) of the kinds of concerns on the minds of mainline Christians today. These include biblical literacy, theological integrity, cultural relevance, institutional preservation, and homiletical depth—along with Christian faithfulness in responding to a wide range of social problems including poverty, racism, consumerism, economic change, immigration, and disintegration of the nuclear family.

9/11 comes up so often that it clearly marks a sea change for a whole generation of Christians, yet I can only think of a handful of essays that explore what that date means for relationships between Muslims and Christians in the United States. During the editorial process, essays marred by subtle and not-so-subtle anti-Judaism arrived with some regularity, their writers almost uniformly surprised to see what they had written through other eyes (and always gracious in their willingness to revise). Fear of the stranger came up often enough, as did the Christian practice of hospitality as an antidote to that fear, but all in all Wuthnow seems to be right. Engaging religious pluralism is largely absent from the Christian agenda as I know it.

Meanwhile, preaching is how most of us communicate with most of the people most of the time. What we say from the pulpit establishes and reinforces the norms of public discourse in our congregations. How we speak of those who are not present constitutes real teaching about their worth before God. For the young people who are listening, our “posts” may affect how they make sense of all the other information they are gaining from social networking sites about people of other (and no) faiths. Different preachers will respond in different ways depending on their communal contexts and individual dispositions. In my own preaching practice, I have begun to respond in several conscious ways. First, I remember that increasing numbers of my listeners work with, go to school with, live next door to—or are married to—people of other faiths. Stereotypes will not fly with them. Many of them are listening for gospel that includes those who are not present with them in church. Keeping both those who are present and those who are absent in mind, I work my chosen text for news that is good not only for Christians but for all humankind.

Second, I look for texts that contain teachings about how to live with neighbors who are not like me (and do not want to be like me). I stay mindful of the subtle but significant difference between texts like some of those listed above and texts about the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8) or Cornelius the Roman centurion (Acts 10), who rate mention because of their conversions to Christianity. Their stories are important, but so are the stories of the Samaritan leper (Luke 17) or the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7), both of whom received healing from Jesus without becoming followers.

Finally, I try to watch my language—not just my language about people of other faiths but also and especially my pronouns. When I say “we,” who is included? When I say “they,” whom do I have in mind and what caused me to set “them” at a distance? When I deal with texts that measure holiness by the separation between “us” and “them,” I have extra work to do, but “the Pharisees” are not the problem. Torah has at least two identifiable streams of teaching about what constitutes true

holiness. “We” have always had plenty to talk about when it comes to who is “in” with God and who is “out.”

Participants in last summer’s Doctor of Ministry class came up with dozens of initiatives to pursue in their own settings, ranging from interfaith film festivals to preaching series to broader discussions of religious diversity in their clergy associations. Whether or not those projects ever come to pass, the course “succeeded” the minute their designers took time to look around the neighborhood—the global one as well as the local one—and saw faces they had not seen before. Now there is no *un-seeing* them, which is great good news.

“Lord, when was it that we saw you...?”

No one in Matthew’s story knew the answer to that question, but you do—so blessed are you, and may blessings abound in your ministries, both in the church and in the world God so loves.

Notes

1. A story told with Dan’s permission. To learn what he is doing now, see www.danschrock.org.
2. Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 244.