Chapter 11

Navigating the Terrain of Diversity:
Lessons and Insights for Religious Institutions and Faculty from Diverse Backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors suggest that religious institutions are strategically and morally positioned to advocate for the inclusion of faculty from diverse backgrounds who will become the voice of the voiceless and the ambassadors for many historically oppressed and underrepresented groups in higher education. The successful integration of faculty from diverse backgrounds at predominantly European American religious institutions of higher education brings the much needed transformation into the social, spiritual, and academic lives of students. Through the lived experiences of six faculty members from diverse backgrounds serving at a variety of religious institutions, the authors discuss ways religious institutions of higher education can advocate for faculty from diverse backgrounds by adopting distinctive policies and beliefs, creating a strong support base through mentorship, and providing opportunities for professional growth to create a welcoming work environment.

INTRODUCTION

The authors seek to explore the contested terrain of diversity in religious institutions of higher education. Through personal narratives, interviews, and traditional academic research the authors examined some of the challenges and tensions that are encountered and endured by faculty from diverse backgrounds. The vision and mission statements from many predominantly European American religious institutions glorify the idea of embracing diversity, but the experiences of faculty from diverse backgrounds and a review of literature on the subject paints a different picture of the current reality. The successful integration of faculty from diverse backgrounds at these institutions brings the much-needed transformation into the social, spiritual, and academic lives of students. Diversity, a global phenomenon and reality of the 21st century, needs to be embraced and celebrated in all spheres of life, and higher education, especially religious higher education, is not an exception.

Reasoning suggests that religious or faith-based institutions are strategically and morally positioned to advocate for the inclusion of faculty from diverse backgrounds who will become the voice of the voiceless and the ambassadors of many historically oppressed and underrepresented groups in higher education. Issues of social justice and engagement of civic domains, which are the cornerstones of democracy, will be tackled from a more informed position with the inclusion of the voices of faculty from diverse backgrounds.

The quest for inclusion, equity, educational equality, and the desired transformation professed in the vision and mission statements of many religious institutions should have, by now, led religious higher education down the pathway of celebrating diversity. González (1998) expressed the view that the vision for diversity in religious institutions of higher education can be sweet, but there is a bitter side to it that involves radical changes in the way these institutions understand themselves and conduct their business. Abadeer (2009) observed that just like any other human project, the subject of diversity comes with foreseeable tensions and challenges, expectations and concerns, hopes and frustrations, genuinely welcoming hearts, and inhibiting doubts and fears.

From an ethical and a biblical standpoint, religious institutions of higher education must live up to their expectations of being a source of light and fountain of hope to all people, regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, creed, national origin, skin color, or sexual orientation. The leadership at these institutions must recognize the importance of leading by example and then live out in practice the power and strength, which comes from fully integrating faculty from diverse backgrounds, into the very fabric of the institution. The practice of transparency and engagement on

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