Chapter 80

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 issues of diversity coupled with intentional efforts to reach out to both students and faculty from diverse backgrounds plays an integral part in the creation of a vibrant culture in religious institutions.

The successful inclusion of faculty from diverse backgrounds calls for a concerted effort on the part of religious institutions, administrators, boards of trustees, deans, department chairs, and each faculty member. Faculty from diverse backgrounds can create opportunities that will help to shape the future of religious institutions of higher education by providing cultural insights, perspectives, and leadership skills so the usually silent voices will be heard. In other words, a reservoir for advocacy will be established. Institutions will broaden their horizons and refine their adaptability skills to the demographic global changes currently taking place. Abadeer (2009) raised the idea that religious institutions of higher education should celebrate the differences and the richness in different cultures rather than attempting to assimilate or homogenize them into the dominant, European American, middle class culture so prevalent at these institutions. While religious institutions should promote the values, heritage, and traditions upon which they were founded, the need for genuine invitation and inclusion of members from diverse backgrounds cannot be overemphasized in the 21st century. The provision of a welcoming atmosphere and a climate conducive to learning from many voices allows faculty from diverse backgrounds and cultures to flourish and thrive. Faculty from diverse backgrounds can actively participate in decision-making processes and engage in community engagement projects that are designed to help and empower students both from diverse cultural backgrounds and from the dominant culture.

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