



INSPIRATION THROUGH INTERFAITH INCLUSIVITY

As an institution founded on the Christian tradition and the understanding of an education grounded in the liberal arts, Mount Union's quest for religious growth and understanding is nearly 175 years in the making.

Over the course of the past five years, Mount Union has made great strides in making interfaith learning a focal point on campus. Interfaith cooperation is defined by the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) as, "...a process in which people who orient around religion differently come together in ways that respect different identities, build mutually inspiring relationships, and engage in common action around issues of shared concern."

Not only is that definition an ideological parallel to the mission of the institution focusing on responsible citizenship, it is becoming increasingly necessary as Mount Union welcomes students from a variety of backgrounds across the world.

Earning Program Funding


To move Mount Union forward in its interfaith endeavors and efforts to support students' diverse spiritual explorations, Mount Union's religious studies program has led the way in garnering more than \$50,000 in grant funding over the last four years. As a result of receiving generous funding from the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) and the IFYC, the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies has been able to offer a variety of programming to the campus and surrounding communities.

The first of two NetVUE grants in 2017-2018 supported faculty exploration of vocation and purpose and the development of vocation-related classroom learning activities. The second grant, spanning 2019-2021, supports vocational exploration across the institution, including the development of a two-credit course called The Quest for a Purposeful Life, vocation retreats, subsidized internships with social-service and faith-based agencies, vocation-related programming in the Honors Program, additional faculty development, and other programming.

The IFYC grants funded four interfaith dinners that took place in 2017 and included members of the faculty, staff, and student body from a variety of backgrounds who discussed religious texts and personal experiences around the theme shared value.

They also helped fund a series of "Lunch and Learn" events with which approximately 140 members of the Mount Union community were involved. Additionally, it helped create two student-organized events in an Interfaith Fair and an Interfaith Forum, during which more than 120 students had open discussions with peers from different religious backgrounds and affiliations.

Last but not least, the most recent IFYC grant focused on the Mount Union alumni population. In May 2019, an alumni interfaith panel was hosted on campus featuring five alumni speakers discussing interfaith issues in professional settings, with an ongoing video interview project in the works. The



Dr. Niki Johnson, professor of philosophy and religious studies, displays a copy of her new book, *Faithful Witness in a Fractured World: Models for an Authentic Christian Life*, which discusses inclusivity, care, and compassion for all people.

alumni involved were Mario Calandros '05, Theresa Davis '95, Scott Harrison '78, David Jones '62, Tammy Mierzwa '03, and Abby (Weingart '11) Vallandingham.

Campus Life

Aside from the grant-funded events, Mount Union's students have been increasingly active in generating interfaith awareness across campus. Along with Mount Union employees, students have participated in the IFYC's Interfaith Leadership Institute during the past three years, bringing knowledge back to campus constituents. Some of these ideas led to the founding of the Student Interfaith Alliance, a student group dedicated to discussing interfaith issues and initiatives.

"Students are interested in matters of spirituality and faith, though they often don't frame it in those terms," said University Chaplain Rev. Kyle Woodrow. "This means that they want to address issues of faith in their own way. The Interfaith Alliance is a student-founded organization that is trying to stimulate some conversations and service around shared values and the faith that motivates people, whether that is faith in divinity or humanity."

Students have also had the opportunity to go on several religious site visits, gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of the multi-faith environment that exists at Mount Union. They have participated in faculty-led research about the role of faith in the lives of individuals, as well as service-learning done at locations like the Alliance Catholic Worker.

Moving Forward

As many are aware, Mount Union's Board of Trustees voted to disaffiliate from the United Methodist Church (UMC) in May of 2019 as a result of its stance on human sexuality. This decision was made to continue to fulfill the institution's historical and current commitment to welcome and support all who wish to be involved with Mount Union.

Following that decision, the Committee on Mission and Ministry was formed to help determine the future direction of Mount Union's Methodist affiliation while honoring its commitment to interfaith appreciation. As a result, the insti-



Students play a significant role in raising awareness for interfaith practices on campus. One of the ways this is done is through service-learning in which students like the ones pictured above have participated. Below are the spiritual life organizations committed to sharing that understanding at Mount Union:

- Campus Crusade for Christ
- Fellowship of Christian Athletes
- The Edge
- For Love of Christ the King (FLOCK)
- Kappa Phi
- OASIS
- Student Interfaith Alliance

tution has applied to join the new North American Association of Methodist Schools, Colleges, and Universities, which was created as a result of the church's decision and accepts members who are not directly affiliated with the UMC.

"The University remains committed to being a place where faith is valued and nurtured," said Dr. Susan Haddox, professor and chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies and member of the aforementioned committee. "We left the denomination because of its position on human sexuality, which contradicted our commitment to inclusivity and equality. However, we continue to affirm the active pursuit of a just world and education for all in the context of a Wesleyan/Methodist ethos."

The department's faculty continue to emphasize the importance of vocation and sense of purpose in the world, which is often driven by faith. Combining this ideal with interfaith understanding, two new courses — Interreligious Understanding and Religious Diversity in America — have been developed.

As the institution continues to be more culturally aware, Mount Union's interfaith efforts are an important part of its continuing commitment to inclusivity.



The Interfaith Fairs on campus allowed students to have open discussions about different faiths and backgrounds. These were funded as a result of grant money from the Interfaith Youth Core.