

# Religious Diversity and Resources are Spreading at Penn State Campuses

Bobby Casiano

Religious diversity has spread throughout Penn State. During this past year, the 45 religious and spiritual faith groups reported that 73,123 students worshipped together; 6,655 shared group meals and fellowship; 8,065 attended prayer together; and 3,367 were involved in service projects together. According to the Center for Ethics and Religious Affairs (CERA) at University Park, these numbers were "especially impressive considering that only 20 of the 45 groups submitted year-end summaries."

CERA is a diversity-focused

group for religious activities and programming at Penn State. Their goal is "not to convert, but to educate, expose, and assist students with their comfort level in interacting with others who have different beliefs, traditions, holidays, and languages." From January through May of 2003, CERA sponsored a series of discussions on Inter-faith relationships and the exterior issues that they bring up. Penn State has been influenced by a wave of religious diversity among its Commonwealth Campuses.

A 2004 University Park

survey shows that over 61% of the student population strongly believes that the University is supportive of religious and spiritual groups. Furthermore, over 42% responded that the students' climate is supportive of religious and spiritual groups. The Penn State Pulse also stated that over 88% of their students in 2004 were significantly more likely to respond that their matriculation was influenced by the presence of their religious group.

The Commonwealth Campuses have also been influenced by this wave. There

was a recent message in the Mont Alto listserve that the local chapter of Gideon's International was providing free pocket-size copies of the New Testament for all the students interested in health care majors. Does this mean that anyone can give out any religious material? If a person of Jewish descent wanted to pass out a Torah, or a Muslim wants to pass out a copy of the Qumran, would that be possible? Yes, was the answer from our student affairs coordinator, Andrea Christopher.

A straight-forward Christopher says, "the student's spiritual development is important." She confirms that the school does not stop anyone from speaking or passing out literature of any kind as permitted by the AD51 policy, which consists of expressive activities, freedom of speech, and public speaking in the outdoors of the University. This is with the condition that one would not disturb the peace or academic setting of the campus. The campus administration usually coordinates a proper location so that there would not be any controversial tensions. However, is every denomination and religion being offered services?

According to Christopher they have finally "found someone to keep the balance" at Mont Alto. She has mainly been relying on "cues of the students" on how to develop different denominational ministries on campus. She also relied on "outside groups" such as the Daises of Harrisburg and certified Chaplains around the area. However, after such a struggle they have been able to hire our current campus minister, Angela Pontorero.

Pontorero took the job because she "loves college students." She is willing to

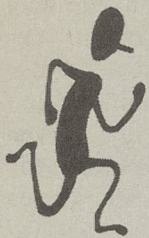
"serve and help anyone out." An enthusiastic and motivated Pontorero reflected on the perspective of having an "unbiased ministry." This statement is true according to Mont Alto Muslim student Dakkar Abdyl-Hadi. She found a "reasonable amount of support compared to the small Muslim population on this campus." It is clear that the flow of representation and religious diversity on campus has become strong on its Commonwealth Campuses.

When asked what he thought of the religious diversity on campus, Dr. Peter Dendle had the following to say: "While most Mont Alto students are generally open-minded toward others and very generous of spirit, we still have a long way to go in terms of genuine toleration and mutual support. Students feel most comfortable with dialogue among the three major monotheisms, but usually have had little exposure to historical polytheisms or to alternate forms of spirituality. A student living in the dorms a few years ago was continually harassed for exploring neo-paganism, for example. She was taunted and called a "witch," while her door (which exhibited expressions of her spiritual beliefs) was continually vandalized. To my mind, this reflects a medieval mindset and perhaps raises questions about Penn State's commitment to equal protection for religious expression among all students. Had it been a Star of David that the students were vandalizing, I suspect we would have heard a lot more about it. Also, many students from traditional religious backgrounds—as, indeed, many Americans—feel threatened by secular modernism, which comes with its own landscape of beliefs and values; I believe there is more tension and misunderstanding than we like to admit."

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