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WMU researchers creating national database of religious response to COVID-19

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KALAMAZOO, Mich.—Research underway at Western Michigan University will create a national archive of religious response to the pandemic. Funded by a University COVID-19 response grant, the project will also fuel the development of relevant coursework for students at WMU and other colleges and high schools across the country.

"History needs to be taught in order for society to be more prepared in future crises," says **Dr. Stephen Covell**, department chair and professor of comparative religion, who is leading the project alongside **Dr. Diane Riggs**, a faculty specialist. " (Teaching) modules will serve to highlight the powerful role religion plays in our communities, our politics and our health care."

A team of graduate students is working with the faculty to cast a wide net in culling material. They've worked for several weeks compiling and cataloging news articles; social media pages and posts; blog posts; government documents and



A priest delivers Easter Sunday mass via livestream with photos of parishioners in pews in South Orange, New Jersey.
(Photo by Elsa/Getty Images)

guidelines; lectures and presentations from religious leaders, health officials and religion scholars; and webpages belonging to different religious organizations and communities.

"One of our goals is to capture as many sources as possible before these sources and material get lost in time," says **Cameron Borg**, the graduate student project leader. Once sorted, all of the materials will be uploaded into WMU's Scholarworks database, which Covell expects to be searchable by August. The next phase of the project will focus on analyzing the data collected to create pedagogical tools for teachers and professors.

"We are currently living in a difficult and confusing time—a time that will be remembered in any discussion of the 21st century," Covell says.

Borg adds, "The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis which has impacted everyone. By forming the materials to teach about religion and COVID-19, we can aid society in critically thinking about this point in history."

EARLY OBSERVATIONS

While their work is far from over, the team has noticed some trends through its research. For instance, the researchers have documented a number of situations where religious communities and their members feel orders related to COVID-19 have violated their freedom of religion.

"We have seen a trend in the tension between religion and government," especially in the Midwest but also nationally and internationally, says Covell. "Many religious groups are supporting the social distancing rules, encouraging their members to pray and worship individually. However, some groups still hold large gatherings at their places of worship. A trend we have found with religious groups who still hold large gatherings is their belief in protection through prayer."



Volunteers pass out gifts to worshippers during a drive-thru Eid celebration in Wheaton, Illinois. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

The emergence of COVID-19 has also disrupted traditional religious practices and ceremonies. Modifications range from moving services online to virtually performing last rites or providing alternative forms of rituals and prayers. Researchers in the future could use the information gathered to determine the lasting impacts of these modifications on different religious groups and practices.

"COVID-19 has led to religious groups and organizations having to adapt to health conditions along with law and public policy, all while following the doctrine of their religion," Borg says. "It is difficult to say what changes will remain once the pandemic is over, however religious organizations and groups will be more prepared if another global pandemic occurs."

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

In addition to providing a valuable catalog of information on the impact of COVID-19 on religion, it also gives the graduate students an opportunity to stand out in their field.

"This project provides an unusual opportunity for faculty and graduate students to work together on a project that will support research in this area for years to come," Riggs says. "It is particularly rewarding to see our graduate students developing their critical thinking and research skills."



Ushers wearing masks pray at the International Church of Las Vegas in Las Vegas, Nevada. (Photo by Ethan Miller/Getty Images)

Those skills are vital for students like Borg, who is pursuing a master's degree in comparative religion and hopes to eventually teach world religions at the college level.

"Having the opportunity to work with individuals and faculty such as Dr. Covell and Dr. Riggs is allowing me to learn the ins and outs of an original and in-depth research project," he says. "Everything I have learned during this project will prepare me to be successful

in future research endeavors."

The relationships he's built in the Department of Comparative Religion are what drew him to WMU's world-renowned program, which he heard about during his time as an undergraduate student at another institution.

"Every professor I've had the privilege to take a class with or TA with has taught me to be a more efficient and well-rounded teacher" as well as how to excel in his chosen field, says Borg. Digging into this research effort has also impacted him on a personal level.

"This project has been a constant reminder that this pandemic has impacted the lives of everyone, in addition to all aspects of society. Although our project is primarily focused on religion and response to COVID-19 in the Midwest, our research demonstrates the complexity of the pandemic in the U.S. and around the world."

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