

## Interfaith Campus Ministry

**Melanie-Préjean Sullivan**

In 2018, I retired after almost twenty years as the director of campus ministry at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. During my tenure at Bellarmine, the campus moved from college to university, more than tripled the number of its resident students, expanded its programs into doctoral and professional areas, and received several accolades. Meanwhile, the campus ministry program expanded, too. As the lone, full-time campus minister (CM), I followed a long line of distinguished priests in the role. I was, however, a “new form” of ministry on our campus—a non-ordained Catholic laywoman.

I often encountered individuals whose perception of my role did not quite match the reality. And, because that reality was so different from the perception, I found myself in a somewhat unique “new model” of ministry. I had no mentors for the role as I saw it. So, I ventured onto my own path.

When I told other Catholics that I was a CM, they pictured their own experiences of a Newman Center or parish adjacent to a state campus, a ministry directed toward Catholic students and staff. But, as the lone CM on a Catholic campus, I was an interfaith chaplain to a myriad of faiths as well as the spiritual-but-not-religious. It was a glorious mixture of God’s creativity, and no day was ever the same or what I’d predicted it would be.

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Melanie-Préjean Sullivan, DMin, retired from campus ministry at Bellarmine University in 2018. She currently serves as a research associate with the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology in Cambridge, England. Email: [msullivan@bellarmine.edu](mailto:msullivan@bellarmine.edu).

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)\* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

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The other perception I frequently encountered was depicted by a momentary look of confusion followed by, "How could a woman be a CM on a Catholic campus?" I usually chuckled to myself and thought, "Watch me!" I've always been independent and confess to a profound lack of trust in authority. In third grade, I questioned Sr. Anne, disagreeing with her that salvation was exclusively for Christians. It didn't match my theology then or now.

At Bellarmine, I had to show I knew how to write and lead public prayer even though I could not preside at Mass. I had to demonstrate the ability to give spiritual direction though I could not hear confession. I soon found that my earlier degrees in history and in counseling/student personnel services provided as much help as my theology master's. And, of course, four units in clinical pastoral education meant that I had solid training in recognizing psychological disorders and in healthy self-assessment.

Catholic Campus Ministry's guiding document is a 1985 pastoral letter entitled *Empowered by the Spirit*. While some of its language is dated, the essence of the "six aspects of campus ministry" described in the document are timeless: *Forming the Faith Community; Appropriating the Faith; Forming the Christian Conscience; Educating for Peace and Justice; Facilitating Personal Development; and Developing Leaders for the Future*. And, although the pastoral letter was directed at Catholic CMs, I found that it easily translated into an interfaith model for my goals, measurable objectives, and strategic planning.

We increased the number of faith-based small groups to *form community* and helped students to *appropriate their respective faith traditions*. Our programs focused on ethical questions, *forming consciences* for justice and learning to work for *social justice and peace*. We worked with our career development colleagues to assist in helping students *discern their vocational calls*, and we worked with the student development offices to co-sponsor *leadership training* programs of all sorts. So, I combined the directives in the pastoral letter with the training I received from the Interfaith Youth Core to "create" my own form of interfaith ministry.

Because I was on the campus that houses the Thomas Merton Center, Merton's writings influenced the campus's sense of mission and my own sense of ministry. I often used his quote, "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self."<sup>1</sup> To me, this search is what life is all about, especially in college with its roller-coaster of

hormones, academic pressure, and existential angst. Discernment is an essential set of skills that we could help students hone.<sup>2</sup>

Even though I had no official off-campus mentors for my position, I did have an exceptional network of supportive colleagues. We worked together to accommodate religious holy days on campus. Our peer ministers, of many faiths, promoted spiritual growth and development in residence life. My part-time colleague Fr. Ron Knott was a godsend, especially when he introduced me to large gatherings as his “boss,” sending all kinds of gasps rippling through the pews. I didn’t have the title of “chaplain,” but I certainly felt like one.

Beyond common perceptions, this “new form” of ministry is evidence that on small Catholic campuses with one CM, the job is *ipso facto* interfaith. Today, I write with sincere gratitude that my CM experience, interfaith training, and clinical pastoral education prepared me for a fruitful retirement from university life, retaining my identity as an interfaith chaplain.

#### NOTES

- 1 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 31.
- 2 My doctoral project was on teaching discernment. The curriculum guide I prepared, *Whispers, Nudges, and a Couple of Kicks*, is available through Bellarmine’s Office of Campus Ministry website: [www.bellarmino.edu/campusministry](http://www.bellarmino.edu/campusministry).