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Reports

DREAM and Tears at USF

By Sara Pendergast

Interfaith work at the University of San Francisco (USF) was a small seed planted last year by a graduating senior who was inspired by Eboo Patel's Interfaith Youth Core. His message that "faith in the 21st century can build bridges of cooperation that are stronger than barriers of division" deeply resonated with her. With that vision in mind, she advocated for the implementation of an interfaith program within university ministry. In order to solidify its existence, USF petitioned to be part of the White House Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge. Yet, institutional commitment to an "interfaith program" and being a part of the President's Interfaith Challenge didn't immediately equate a created community.

Thus, USF hired me as a resident minister to work on creating a space for interfaith engagement. Immediate questions that I began to grapple with were how does our office define interfaith? How do I find students who want to be involved? What sort of programs do I run? On a campus where engaging students in matters of spirituality or religion is a challenge to navigate, this task felt daunting.

What ended up bringing the initial growth to this area of ministry was teaming up with a colleague on an event that was rooted in social justice and interfaith dialogue combined. We collaborated on an awareness campaign around the federal DREAM Act, entitled the "DREAM Sabbath" which included elements of education, reflection, and advocacy. The central event was an interfaith prayer vigil where various spiritual reflections

around immigration rights were shared by students of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim backgrounds. Through the service, the message of the importance of welcoming strangers, setting captives free, and the dignity of all human beings was dynamically illustrated. When it came time for a DREAM student to share her own personal testimony, she had been moved to tears. The wide embrace that this interfaith service provided was for her was a

beautiful example of faiths working together for the common good.

Since then, interfaith programs have produced much fruit at USF. We host a monthly interfaith dialogue dinner and have continued to tie social justice and interfaith programs together ranging from a campaign for the SAFE Act, which would end the death penalty in California, to events centered on ecological justice. University ministry has strengthened its relationship with other

faith-based clubs such as the Muslim Student Association and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

Perhaps the biggest indication that we are moving in the correct direction was when after one of our dialogue dinners a student who is Muslim asked, "Are there internships within University ministry?" This sort of statement and the DREAM student's reaction to the candlelight vigil, are what stretch me to widen the embrace of interfaith programs, find God in all things, and search for the common good. ■



Sara Pendergast is a resident minister at the University of San Francisco. And coordinator of interfaith programs. To learn more visit www.usfca.edu/universityministry