

Modified Projects for Peace Proposal Interfaith Youth Initiatives

Project Status: Over the past three months, a project team of students, faculty and staff developed an initiative consisting of a 5-day Interfaith Youth Experience for high school students on the campus of Westminster College. The concept, curriculum and overall planning logistics were given high marks by all who came into contact with the project; however, we have been sorely disappointed by the number of participant registrations for the program. It has become obvious to us that developing a program like this in Missouri, a state with almost no interfaith activities, requires considerable networking, relationship building and involvement of various stakeholder groups. For example, Muslim students have been the most difficult to recruit for the project and it has become obvious to us that our connections with the Muslim communities throughout the state are not as strong as we want them to be.

Decision: Because of the low enrollment, we are proposing that we modify our plans in a way that continues the theme and which lays the groundwork for doing more interfaith activities in the future. These new plans continue to focus on the same goals and objectives but they use three different methods of achieving them.

Component #1: A Modified Interfaith Youth Experience

The Interfaith Youth Retreat will be a weekend experience (rather than a 5-day program) that takes place on August 4th and 5th on the Westminster College campus. The retreat will involve 12 to 18 participants instead of the 48 as was previously planned. We will be asking high school and college students from a variety of faiths (not just Muslim, Jewish, Christian) to work together to discuss interfaith issues with the concrete goal of planning a future interfaith experience for high school students. In some ways, this will be an extended and intensive “focus group” that will help our Westminster team develop a strategy for continuing its interfaith initiative. Some of the original activities will be tested with this group but the majority of time will involve interfaith dialogue and developing a strategic plan for the future.

Component #2: An Interfaith Elder Retreat

This one-day retreat on the campus of Westminster College will involve 8 to 12 invited “elders” from different faith groups to come together to discuss interfaith youth activities in the state of Missouri and to provide consultation to our Projects for Peace leadership team on developing future interfaith initiatives. The retreat will be facilitated by Dr. William Young and Professor/Chaplain Brad Sheppard, members of Westminster’s faculty and the Religious Studies Department. Eight college students representing different faith groups will be engaged in the dialogue, planning and recommendation formation during different points in the agenda. The goal of this retreat is to begin building relationships between Westminster College, the interfaith leadership team, and elders from various faith traditions in order to create a sustainable interfaith initiative in central Missouri and eventually the state of Missouri. The concrete outcome of this retreat is a set of recommendations on: a) building a network of clergy and elders interested in interfaith

activities; b) developing an interfaith youth experience during the summer of 2008, and c) identifying funding sources that would support a sustainable statewide interfaith effort with Westminster College providing its base of operation.

Component #3: Enhancing Interfaith Network

The past few months have made it crystal clear that the state of Missouri lags far behind most states in its efforts to promote interfaith dialogue. We propose that two members of our interfaith leadership team and two other college students (representing two other faiths) meet with key leaders of Chicago's Interfaith Youth Corps. This would take place in late July and involve sessions with program administrators, activity planners, fundraising personnel and student participants. This networking and consultation will help our interfaith leadership team identify and utilize existing resources, develop future project plans based on others' experiences, and provide an ongoing relationship that can provide support and expertise in the future.

The combination of all three components – the student interfaith youth retreat, the interfaith elder retreat, and the development of an interfaith network/support system – will provide the underpinnings for developing a successful interfaith youth initiative in the state of Missouri, beginning with central-Missouri.

Future plans: With the completion of these three components, our interfaith leadership team will be poised to develop a strategic plan for the 2007-2008 academic year, including a longer and larger interfaith youth experience in the summer of 2008. Specific activities will include: a) writing grants to foundations that promote cross-cultural education and experiences; b) development of a Leadership Studies class/lab that will prepare students in the spring semester for their participation as leaders in the summer interfaith project; c) strengthening Missouri's interfaith network by identifying and then involving key religious leaders in an ongoing dialogue about the importance and methods of interfaith activities. Ultimately, Westminster College, with its mission of "developing leaders in a global community", will become a hub for interfaith education and activities, anchored by its annual Interfaith Youth Experience.