

Final Report from Westminster College Davis Foundation's "100 Projects for Peace"

Title: Central-Missouri Interfaith Initiative

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(With staff support from Robert Hansen and Kate Harrison)

PROJECT SUMMARY

The original interfaith proposal submitted in January of 2007 by Westminster College planned for an Interfaith Youth Experience for Missouri high school students of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish faiths. The proposal called for a five-day retreat to the Westminster campus in which students would participate in discussions and activities with the aim of sharing and learning about religious beliefs and cultural customs. This event would have been the first of its kind in the Mid-Missouri area.

In early May, it became clear to the project team that a number of key steps would need to be taken before the group could successfully execute a new and large-scale event such as this. Thus, in mid-June, the project team submitted a revised proposal suggesting that a large-scale interfaith event be postponed until the summer of 2008 and that the project team should, instead, devote the summer of 2007 to building a foundation for future interfaith work, including: learning more about interfaith work, making connections with existing interfaith organizations, and building a core group of team leaders and participants. The Projects for Peace staff approved this revised proposal.

The revised proposal sought to accomplish these goals within a three component program structure that included the following: (1) a consultation trip to Chicago, IL to meet with representatives of the Inter Faith Youth Core (IFYC) an innovative and nationally recognized interfaith organization; (2) an Interfaith Elders Retreat on the Westminster campus to host religious leaders of diverse faiths from the Mid-Missouri area to discuss the need for interfaith work as well as interfaith planning strategies; and (3) an Interfaith Student Dialogue event on the Westminster campus with area college students to build a core network of participants and leaders and begin planning for future interfaith activities.

The project events during the summer of 2007, made possible through the funding of the Davis Foundation's 100 Projects for Peace, were the beginning steps of a significant and sustainable interfaith effort on the Westminster Campus and in the Central-Missouri area. Described below are the program's short term achievements as well as its plans for future interfaith programming and long-term, sustainable peace.

PROJECT RESULTS

The revised three component program, smaller in scale than the original event plan, led to immediate success as the project team accomplished its goals of becoming more educated about interfaith work, building a network system with interfaith organizations in central Missouri, and establishing a core group of interfaith participants and leaders. Goals of the original proposal included a) an increase of knowledge of one's own faith and other faiths, b) a change in attitudes of individuals towards openness, understanding, and acceptance, and c) the effort to build meaningful and lasting relationships with people of the different faiths by engaging in activities with one another that promote peace within the greater community. These goals were intended to be met by the high school participants; however, with the change in project structure, these goals were met instead by the participants of the summer events – the "elder retreat" and the "interfaith student dialogue" -- as well as by members of the project team. Essentially, the final project was able to accomplish the same goals outlined by the initial proposal, just through different means. The Interfaith Elders Retreat brought together religious leaders from the Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Protestant and Roman

Catholic faith groups. Muslim, Jewish, Protestant and Roman Catholic students participated in the Interfaith Student Dialogue.

PROJECT IMPLICATIONS

The strength of this project is the utilization of this seed money to develop significant and sustainable interfaith activities on the Westminster campus and in the Central Missouri community. The goals that were accomplished throughout the summer served to lay the foundation for future interfaith work; thus, the main result of this project is that the program moved away from the initial plan of a short term, one-week event and developed into a new vision of a continuing interfaith effort that maintains sustainability and achieves long-term good. Described below are a number of prospective elements for the interfaith initiative that will help the message and goals of the program to spread through the provision of opportunities for interfaith education and activity involvement.

- ▶ ***Creation of the Westminster College Interfaith Initiative*** - A coordinated effort between the Departments of Religion and Spiritual Life and the Emerson Center for Leadership and Service to host interfaith programming on the campus of Westminster College.
- ▶ ***Development of the Central Missouri Interfaith Network*** - As a result of the Interfaith Elders Retreat and the Interfaith Student Dialogue, a network has been developed of individuals and faith communities interested and committed to interfaith dialogue.
- ▶ ***Construction of the Central-Missouri Interfaith Webpage*** - A webpage developed and maintained by students at Westminster College that provides information about interfaith programs and events in the Central Missouri area.
- ▶ ***Production of an Interfaith Video*** - A short, documentary-style video created by Westminster students to be used as an educational and informative tool about interfaith opportunities.
- ▶ ***Formation of Campus Interfaith Council*** - A network of Westminster students of diverse faiths that meet with the Director of Spiritual Life and engage in small group discussions and activities that focus on interfaith issues.
- ▶ ***On-Going Interfaith Education for Core Group Leaders*** - This includes extending the library of interfaith literature and multimedia resources as well as attending educational events such as the National Interfaith Conference sponsored by the Interfaith Youth Core every October in Chicago, Illinois.
- ▶ ***Interfaith Proposal for the 2008 Westminster College Symposium on Democracy*** - An annual event on the Westminster Campus, the Symposium on Democracy adopts a different theme each year. The Interfaith Project Team has proposed the theme of "Building Community through Intercultural Understanding" which includes a significant interfaith micro-conference within the 4-day symposium.

Summary: Prior to the Projects for Peace grant, no coordinated or significant interfaith network or activities existed in the Central Missouri area (Jefferson City, Fulton, Columbia). As a result of this grant, an interfaith network has been established with its own webpage and calendar for future interfaith activities. The Interfaith Project Staff thanks the Davis Foundation and the Projects for Peace for this seed money.