


SURVEYING A CHURCH'S ATTITUDE
TOWARD AND INTERACTION
WITH ISLAM


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Virginia Theological Seminary invited our alumni, as well as other lay and ordained church leaders affiliated with the seminary, to participate in an online survey about their interfaith experience.¹ We asked them in particular about the following, in relation to Islam specifically as well as other faiths in general:

- *Interfaith formation and education:* Whether or not, and how, they learned about other faiths
- *Interfaith instruction and engagement in congregations:* Their experiences teaching about other faiths in, and inviting other faith leaders into, their congregations
- *Interfaith partnership in the broader community:* Their experiences engaging in interfaith work and partnerships in their neighborhoods, towns, and cities
- *Evangelism:* Their experiences fostering direct efforts

in their congregations to speak more publicly about their faith and experience of God

- *Theological differences and similarities*: Their views of similarities and differences between Muslim and Christian theology
- *Goals and plans*: Their hopes, aims, and plans regarding evangelism, interfaith education, and interfaith relations
- *Demographics*: Their age and gender, size and location of their congregation, and distance to the nearest mosque and another faith's house of worship

From an initial email invitation, we secured 353 survey responses (nearly a 9 percent response rate from the total pool of recipients, but closer to a 15 percent response rate among alumni). The degree of survey completion varied: more than three hundred completed the first twelve survey questions, more than two hundred wrote thoughtful responses to later open-ended questions, and 265 completed the basic demographic information at the end of the survey.

Survey respondents were from all regions of the United States and from other countries in a pattern of distribution reflecting the geographic spread of the seminary's alumni—most in the southern and northeast United States and only a few (eight people) in other countries. Most were ordained, with 15 percent identifying themselves as lay leaders. Nearly two-thirds of respondents were men. Similar to the racial distribution of clergy and laity in The Episcopal Church, 92 percent were white. Only 14 percent were under the age of 35; an additional 21 percent were between 35 and 49; and 40 percent were 50 to 64. One-fourth were 65 or older. Nearly three-fourths were serving in urban or suburban settings; the remaining respondents were in small towns or rural areas. These distributions of

race, age, gender, and setting of ministry among the seminary's survey respondents are consistent with the patterns found overall in The Episcopal Church across the United States—and are consistent with patterns found among several of the mainline Protestant denominations in the United States.²

The following discussion of survey results is restricted to the 222 alumni priests whose responses were most complete across all segments of the survey. These respondents represent not only active clergy graduates of Virginia Theological Seminary but those who had served or were currently serving in congregations, schools, and other ministry settings throughout The Episcopal Church.

TWO KEY FINDINGS

Let us begin with a few vivid patterns emerging from survey responses. Two key findings emerged:

1. A solid majority of the seminary's active alumni priests have pursued some education in Islam and other religions.
2. This exposure does not consistently lead to action in the form of parish programs for interreligious education or cooperative interfaith engagement.

Nearly three-quarters of active clergy respondents indicated having some education in Islam, and just over three-quarters indicated education in other religions. But only around half of these priests have held forums or instructional events in their parishes about Islam or other religions. Furthermore, the total of priests who have successfully partnered with leaders or congregations of other faiths on various interfaith activities in their surrounding communities was only 38 percent (see table 1).³

There are a few things to note about this pattern. First, for

	Did you have some education about . . . ? (% yes)	Have you led forums or instruction about . . . ? (% yes)	Have you partnered with leaders or congregations of other faiths on various activities? (% yes)
Islam	71%	50%	38%
Other faiths	76%	47%	

Table 1: Responses to three key questions about interfaith learning, teaching, and partnership (165 active priests)

the seminary and for The Episcopal Church as a whole, these results are encouraging: more than three-quarters of currently active priests have had at least some education about and exposure to Islam. Around half have taught in their congregations at some point about Islam. And while only a little more than one-third of clergy have successfully involved their congregations in partnerships with congregations of other faiths, this is still much higher than the average interfaith involvement of U.S. Christian congregations found in the *Faith Communities Today* survey of 2010.⁴ Furthermore, this pattern in Episcopal priests' responses held constant across clergy gender, race, age, and geographic location in the United States. It appears that The Episcopal Church is doing well compared with other denominations when it comes to fostering interfaith understanding and cooperation.

It is worth noting the gaps. There is a marked disparity between priests' education about Islam and other faiths, their efforts in teaching in their congregations about Islam and other faiths, and their successful efforts in forming any partnerships

or collaborative actions with congregations of faiths outside the Christian tradition. What contributes to the gap between church leaders' interreligious education and their efforts to provide opportunities for education and engagement in their parishes?

Before we explore this question more fully, I can point to three main factors that influence an Episcopal congregation's degree of involvement in interreligious education and partnerships: the prior education of the church's leaders (particularly its priests), those leaders' theological beliefs about points of similarity and difference between Christianity and other faiths, and the Episcopal congregation's geographic proximity to a non-Christian congregation. There is also a direct relationship between church leaders' instruction and training of congregations in evangelism and their instruction about Muslims and people of other faiths: stronger evangelism and stronger inter-faith education seem to go hand in hand.

Finally, these yes-no survey questions were broadly worded, allowing for any level of learning, teaching, and partnership to be endorsed positively, no matter how meager or momentous the effort. Thus, the positive responses may actually mask a percentage of "better than nothing" responses by priests whose efforts have been minimal but who have at least done something. I will address this point specifically in the next section, through a closer examination of survey responses.

CHRISTIAN CLERGY'S INTERRELIGIOUS PERSONAL LEARNING, CONGREGATIONAL INSTRUCTION, AND CROSS-CONGREGATION PARTNERSHIPS

Levels of Clergy Learning about Islam and other Faiths

We asked two questions about Islam specifically and again more generally about other faiths, one pointing toward inten-

tional seeking of instruction in a more structured group setting through courses or lectures, and another pointing toward intentional self-directed learning through direct reading and study of another religion's sacred texts. With regard to intentional instruction, fewer than three-quarters of active priests (71 percent) reported some form of course- or lecture-based education in Islam. With regard to self-directed learning, 76 percent reported having read at least some portion of the Qur'an. Regarding other faiths (primarily Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism), 76 percent reported that they had taken courses or lectures, and 69 percent indicated having read sacred texts of other faith traditions.

At first glance, this looks rather positive: around 70 percent of Episcopal priests, themselves called and pledged to committed study and teaching of Christian Scripture, have sought some level of knowledge about Islam and other religions. However, only 25 percent of the seminary's alumni priests indicated that they have read "significant portions" of the Qur'an, while 51 percent reported they have read "a few verses"—a far more cursory exposure. Additionally, priests' open-ended explanations about the other religious texts they have read ranged from minimal to moderate engagement: "I have heard them read publicly at interfaith services," "Bhagavad Gita—portions of it," and "Hebrew Bible, and selected midrashim" indicate a more minimal level of exposure; "the Bhagavad Gita, some Baha'i scripture, some from the Book of Mormon" indicates a little bit deeper and broader engagement; but "the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Tao Te Ching, devotional and mystical poetry from various traditions" shows exposure beyond a cursory level. This indicates at best a passing knowledge of the scriptures or core texts of other religions. As stated by one priest, "I answered yes, but the portion of other sacred texts I have been exposed to is very insignificant."

Beyond direct reading of sacred texts, education varied widely in breadth and depth, from formal courses to single lectures, public-broadcasting programs, self-directed reading, travel or residence in foreign countries, visits at worship services, formal interfaith dialogues, and informal conversations with non-Christian believers. A high percentage of the seminary's active ordained alumni reported having taken a world religions course in seminary or in college, and others reported specific courses in Eastern religions, Islam, or Judaism.

Personal contact with other believers or living in a country with a different majority religion had a particularly strong impact. This was especially true in regard to Islam, as indicated by these two priests:

Working with Islamic teachers and community leaders has been the most helpful for me. I can research and teach the tenets of other faiths, but to work with others who actually live out a life based in a different faith was very helpful to me emotionally and spiritually.

Living with Muslims in a country with Muslim leadership [was especially helpful]—by talking with Muslims . . . hearing their perspectives, and reading the Qur'an and commentaries that explain the historical background, I can better understand what the Prophet said and meant.

This final quote shows a level of profoundly deep engagement, in which a priest took the opportunity of immersion in a Muslim context not only to engage vigorously in dialogue but also to immerse himself in the Qur'an, hadith, and other commentaries. For this priest, the level of interfaith understanding has reached a deep level, rare among clergy.

Despite the wide range of exposure, most alumni of this seminary appear to have gained some level of interreligious exposure through courses, texts, and other sources of learning. How then does such preparation influence ministry in Episcopal parishes?

Level of Instruction about Islam and Other Faiths Offered by Clergy in Congregations

Although two-thirds to three-quarters of Episcopal Church leaders (at least from this seminary) have sought or received education in other religions, only half have taught or held forums about Islam (50 percent) or other religions (47 percent) in their congregations.

A closer examination reveals once again a range in depth and breadth of teaching. Of the priests who taught about religions other than Islam, more than half (60 percent) focused on Judaism, while only about a quarter (27 percent) focused on Buddhism and less than a fifth (17 percent) focused on Hinduism. About 15 percent offered instruction in all of these faiths and more in an introduction to “world religions.” Interreligious classes at times were for adults, at other times for youth, or, at a regional level, for people learning to do ministry. Motivations for offering interreligious instruction in Episcopal congregations included personal and congregational interest, the need to address public events and issues (such as September 11), concern for neighbors in faith and for healthy civic relationships, and enrichment of understanding of the Christian faith by way of comparison. A few seminary alumni noted that their educational efforts about other faiths were motivated by a desire to help their congregants become better apologists and witnesses: “The primary purpose of such educational programs was to assist our people in understanding what other faiths believe as compared to the Christian faith,” wrote one respondent.

“The secondary purpose was to assist our people in witnessing to adherents of those faiths in a winsome manner.” There is some risk in interreligious instruction motivated solely by a desire for proclamation (perhaps bordering on proselytizing) without an equally strong desire for dialogue.

The priests who did not offer interreligious instruction gave a range of reasons for not providing such instruction. Their reasons included a more significant concern about lack of congregants' knowledge about their own Christian faith, other priorities in ministry taking primary focus, lack of personal or congregational interest, and lack of time. These reasons may have some legitimacy at times and in some places, but at other times they may also simply be excuses. Lack of time, resources, knowledge, and interest can also be recited as reasons for inattention to prayer, evangelism and outreach, self-care, or many other important elements of Christian life that require ministerial and instructional effort.

However, these priests raise an important concern that their congregants understand their own Christian faith more deeply. This concern coincides with an enduring challenge in The Episcopal Church and many Christian denominations of low attendance at adult educational forums and sessions. If people will not commit time and invest effort in deeper learning about their own faith, then interreligious education sinks even lower on the priority list. These priests are fighting an uphill battle for their congregants' interest.

Unfortunately, such a situation can press a desperate religious leader toward either-or assumptions about how people learn. “How can I teach about Islam or some other religion when people don't understand so many things about their own Christian faith?” a leader might ask. This desperate plea signals a blinding of pedagogical imagination. People do not simply learn in a tightly compartmentalized subject-by-sub-

ject manner. What we learn in one arena helps enrich our learning in other arenas. Lessons about governments in other nations through history help American high school students better understand what they have heard and studied in American government classes. Learning another language enriches knowledge and appreciation of one's native tongue, as one discovers differences in nuances of meaning. The same overlap occurs with interreligious education, especially when done with planned attention to the overlaps. An introduction to Islam for Christians not only increases understanding of Muslims, it deepens Christian self-understanding. Even more, encounters with people of other faiths and hearing their perceptions of Christianity can help Christians learn to listen more generously to others and to think more clearly about their own faith. One priest described her discovery about the surprising value of interreligious instruction in a setting where such interest was not expected:

I was surprised how well an interspiritual book study (at my previous small town, southern parish) on *God of Love: A Journey to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* by Mirabai Starr was received. People love discovering our commonalities (and differences), and the deep points of connection in our social justice and mystical streams of teaching. I found that people were more ready than I imagined for an interspiritual understanding of our traditions rooted in a vision of our shared, global humanity.

In contrast to withdrawal from interreligious instruction are the examples of priests who with their congregations have gone the extra mile to create rich learning opportunities for

their congregations and other people from the surrounding community about other religions. The most robust forms of interreligious education involve more than classroom presentations and discussions—they involve direct exposure to and interaction with other communities of faith. The following quotes offer two particularly strong examples of how this more thorough and intensive interreligious instruction can be offered for congregations:

We held a forum on how a Christian might approach learning from other faiths. We are also involved in a project led by a sister parish fifteen minutes away that is hosting dialogue encounters with a regional Islamic center.

We do an interfaith tour every year with the confirmation class—a Christian place of worship (varies from year to year, last year was Moravian), the Islamic house of prayer, and Temple Emmanuel. We take three weeks beforehand talking about what we share and where we differ and all have the opportunity to explore and ask questions.

These two examples help highlight the tremendous value that comes to Christians from interacting with Muslims and with people from other religious traditions. Classroom presentation and discussion are combined effectively in these examples with opportunities for cross-faith conversation and planned visits to worship and educational gatherings of other religious communities. It is through this direct experience of, exposure to, and interaction with people of other faiths that the material presented and discussed in classes or forums becomes more deeply anchored.