Hartford International University for Religion and Peace

COHORT 6

Rev. Dr. Donna Schaper, Associate Professor

Relating Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Speech, and Freedom of the Pulpit

When I applied for the Educators Cohort, I was teaching leadership at the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, formally the Hartford Seminary for 10 years. My courses were in grief, how to pray in times of crisis, whether environmental or school shootings, and basic ministry to chaplains of three different denominations.

Being immersed at Summer Institute with middle school and high school teachers who were mostly Jewish was an eye-opener. I learned a lot about what I needed with respect to curricular guidance and how to parcel issue from issue.

The main benefit of the program for me was this renewed appreciation for what teaching can do to and for younger people. It has to do with getting the subject to the right size in the right frame at the right time. And it has to do with sequencing.

In the conversations we had at the New-York Historical Society that very precious week I was impressed by my learning. It helped me write better sermons, teach better courses and lead better discussions. That latter item might be the one I was least aware of that I needed.

I think the ability to work in short segments on large items of material, particularly materials that we think we know already like the United States Constitution or the Declaration of Independence or the Bible will be my biggest take away.

While each of these concepts start with the word freedom, they guard and protect it in unique ways in unique situations. Constitutional protections are different from religious habits. Still, these ideas blend and sometimes confuse. When people argue for freedom of the pulpit, they are arguing for an individual, alone, interpreting the word of God. That freedom is different. It is communal. It is necessarily dialogical, involving an interpreter, a scripture, and a listener.

In speech, we are simultaneously individual and collective. Not yelling fire in a crowded theater comes to mind as a very good safeguard to the freedom of speech. Today, we are surrounded by hate speech which inflames, while assuming constitutional protection. This hate devolves to physical wounds regularly. Minorities certainly need protections, and haters and frighteners need limitations. All thoughts may be

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welcome, but all behaviors are not. All people may be welcome to a worship service and the preacher may have freedom of personal thought. But all behaviors are not welcome in a worship service. There are right and wrong ways, better and worse ways to disagree about interpretation. The parishioner has as much freedom to disagree with the sermon as the preacher has to preach it. All have access to the free interpretation of the text.

While my original intention was to create a class about faith and democracy for the American expat Community Church of San Miguel de Allende in Mexico, an experience I had with a church member who cried “blasphemy” at the end of one of my sermons became an opportunity to explore freedom of speech in the pulpit and the nation.

I wrote an article that uses Ralph Ellison’s short story “In a Strange Country” to reflect on the incident at my church through a different vantage point.

Both involve a constitutionally protected American in a strange land, one in Wales, the other in Mexico. They reach beyond the “localism” of the Constitution and American traditions of pulpits. They show how attempts to blind and silence difference often result in their opposites. They show the power of music to bind. They cause patriotism to increase rather than diminish. Both hurt, but ironically conflict and suffering have the power to improve us.

To read Rev. Dr. Schaper’s article, “Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Pulpit,” click here!