

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Seeking the 'courageous middle'



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How does a community navigate a controversial issue in our current environment of polarization? It is an issue affecting not only our nation, but our religious communities, individual churches and colleges.

My alma mater, Houghton College in New York State, is currently in the midst of such a challenge. Houghton College is a part of the Wesleyan Church, a conservative evangelical tradition, in which I was raised and where my father was a minister and national church administrator. While in my growing-up years, I remember it primarily for what was prohibited: movies, dancing, drinking, smoking, even playing cards. But in recent decades more in this community have been reintroduced to its social justice history, going back to the beginnings of the denomination, as it split with the Methodist Church in the mid-19th century over slavery and other justice issues. Its theology is still quite conservative as it seeks to maintain its understanding of biblical principles.

The issue was triggered by a homecoming alumni art exhibition where one of the works called attention to some of the alumni's experiences of alienation and pain as members of the LGBTQ community. In this setting, others called for the work to be withdrawn because it challenged the college's (and the church's) position on sexual morality. The college president, Dr. Shirley Mullen, supported leaving the art work in the exhibit "on the grounds of the historic role of art as cultural critique especially within a Christian liberal arts context." In her recent blog sent out to all alumni and friends of the college, she writes, "We are clear enough on who we are as a college to hear our own alumni's stories."

As the campus controversy heightened, some students painted the campus "spirit rock" with the rainbow flag, only to find a quick response from others who repainted it with the American flag, both very powerful symbols. President Mullen and others in the college community were invited by some of the LGBTQ students to repaint the rock "in a way that would represent our campus's commitment to notice and stand with all those in our community who feel alone and marginalized." So with the presidents help, the rock ended up with a message of representing the diversity of the members of the community represented by different colors of hand prints.

In her blog, Mullen goes on to describe the not-so-surprising contentious response "from both sides of the political and theological spectrum."

"It seemed impossible for many in our constituency to imagine that we could actually, in our time, embody our Lord's pattern of seeking to bring together a commitment to both Truth and Grace in the same space," she writes. "It seemed for some too much of a stretch to imagine that an institution could, out of its very confident commitment to a traditional biblical understanding of sexual morality, also provide a place of pastoral care to all of our students from both sides of the political spectrum as they seek a safe place to grapple with the challenges of becoming an adult amidst the noise of our current culture."

Mullen describes this as the call to the "courageous middle." It is not "splitting the difference — as if Truth were settled by statistical averaging," nor is it sitting on the fence or "settling for a relativistic view of Truth." The courageous middle is the difficult task of listening

and seeking to understand both sides while respecting the people as they express very different positions and strongly held conclusions.

In such polarized issues, she writes, there is a tendency for each side to assume that the truth is simple and "that anyone who has not come to the same conclusions is either morally or intellectually deficient." Mullen instead suggests that "the Truth is often complicated — that ... even intelligent and good people might not have the complete picture. Time and time again, our Lord had to remind the most learned and devout people of his day that they were missing an important piece of the puzzle. They did not have the imagination to take him seriously when he said that he 'had not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it.' That was much too mysterious and troubling — and did not fit neatly into their categories."

She continues: "At a time in our culture when even the churches, the universities, the media, and the government have all too often abandoned their historic commitment to careful analysis, dialogue and debate, one of the most important gifts we can give to the church and to the culture is a 'middle' space where students and faculty truly listen to each other — where we learn from those who do not agree fully with us what part of the Truth they believe they see that we have not yet seen as fully. ... While we assert confidently that the Truth exists — that is, we are not relativists — we also know that we need to be appropriately humble about our own capacity to be in possession of the whole Truth."

I was quite inspired by this bold and clear affirmation of the "courageous middle." As our nation and our religious communities are facing serious divisions that seem to prohibit even civil discourse, I found President Mullen's words applicable to so many issues far beyond the campus of my alma mater. It is also at the core of our interfaith work at the Kaufman Institute, where we come together to listen and learn, but not to judge.

Let me also be clear that the Kaufman Interfaith Institute does not take a position on the issue described above. On such matters that continue to divide us into various religious and political camps, we will not take a position. Even our staff would not agree on many such issues. Our goal and mission is to bring people together to share and discuss in the effort to learn, understand and be respectful to all persons.

We can learn much from those who have grown up in different cultures, seen the world through different eyes, were taught values and beliefs that might even seem strange, and express their faith in different ways. We do not seek agreement on all issues, nor do we assume that these differences are unimportant, but we do seek the understanding and acceptance of all peoples who seriously affirm their beliefs and values. It is a humility that does not assume that my understanding is total, complete and has no opportunity to learn. It is simply the affirmation that "I am not God" but a child of God who can and should aspire to learn and grow in understanding.

Let us all seek that "courageous middle" between confidence in our convictions and humility and openness in seeking further truth.

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The spirit rock at Houghton College in New York was repainted to reflect a desire for diversity and respect for others, even when we disagree on controversial topics.
Submitted, Houghton College

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Dr. Shirley Mullen, president of Houghton College