

Report to the Provost

Religious Life Strategic Planning Committee

June 2003

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Religious Life Strategic Planning Committee was charged to consider religious life at USC: its role in advancing the University's central mission, as well as its goals, challenges and opportunities in a twenty-first century milieu where both religious diversity and self-directed spiritual searching are on the rise. The Committee, whose roster and strategic planning process and product are given in the full Report, thanks the Office of the Provost for this opportunity to serve, and offers:

- *a mission statement to guide religious life at USC;*
- *an account of how the mission of religious life advances the central mission and Strategic Plan of the University;*
- *a recommendation that the religious life Mission Statement and Strategic Plan serve as a resource for the current review of the University's Strategic Plan; and*
- *strategies and action steps that advance the mission of religious life at USC by building upon existing strengths.*

The Committee is enthusiastic about these recommendations, as they were about participating in the overall process. Such enthusiasm may be surprising, for two reasons. First, Committee members include not only people for whom the practice of religion or the pursuit of spirituality is central to their life, but also skeptics. Second, apart from the Dean of Religious Life and religious directors, Committee members do not have an immediate professional stake in the strategic planning product or its implementation. It might be thought that the first factor would render agreement unattainable, and that even if common ground could be located, the second factor would reduce interest in what could be built upon it. *In fact, these two factors explain why religious life at USC is strong—and will grow stronger if we take advantage of the opportunities that diversity of viewpoint and a decentralized, self-giving spirit offer us.*

USC religious life gives members of the USC community opportunities to form close, stimulating human connections across various dividing lines: field or method of study, religious affiliation, and university role. Throughout the University are people—students, but by no means only students—who want to participate in what our University Role and Mission Statement describes as a life of *wisdom and insight, love of truth and beauty, moral discernment, understanding of self, and respect and appreciation*

for others. The mission of religious life at USC is to amplify excellence by fostering relationships through which we develop these dispositions and capacities.

The complexity and richness of such worthy connectivity can easily be lost when distilled—as in this Executive Summary. Without sensitivity to nuance, a vision and program for religious life at USC cannot achieve excellence or serve the University’s central mission. Therefore we encourage the Office of the Provost to make use of the full Report, which at all levels—mission statement, relation of mission statement to USC’s central mission, and strategy and action steps—acknowledges the complexity of its subject matter.

MISSION STATEMENT FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE AT USC

Fostering a vibrant university community that [1] encourages the pursuit of meaning through spiritual reflection and free inquiry, [2] provides fair opportunities to participate in religious life, [3] advances mutual understanding and respect among differing traditions—and [4] in all these ways, strengthens us to actively engage in building a just and peaceful world.

The agent of this fostering is not the Office of Religious Life (ORL) alone, but the whole project of religious life at USC (including the ORL, the student religious organizations, and their religious directors and advisors) in and through partnerships with faculty, administrators, and others. Accordingly, the Report’s recommendations address the whole project, centrally including the partnerships, which not only serve the mission but exemplify it.

The mission includes four elements (identified here in square brackets). In [1] *encouraging the pursuit of meaning through spiritual reflection and free inquiry*, we support cognitive, critical engagement with enduring questions that attract the interest and attention of smart, responsible thinkers. “Spiritual reflection” indicates that this engagement takes place both inside and outside religious groups, and it is not limited to prayer or worship. A University that [2] *provides fair opportunities to participate in religious life* offers rich and varied resources to all, but imposes religiosity on none. Because the demographics of USC religious life are complex and constantly changing, the University cannot undertake to provide full opportunities, but it does apply its resources so that opportunities are available fairly. Responding to its rich religious demographics and many international students, USC [3] *advances mutual understanding and respect among differing traditions*. We aim to foster in our students a religious literacy—knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to work creatively and productively with others who view questions of ultimate concern differently. We do not mandate such literacy but encourage and support it. Finally, our mission reflects the fact that religion is not only cognitive and experiential but also practical; that is, oriented to moral choices and active undertakings. In University life, we refine our beliefs and commitments by acting on them; for example, by choosing among modes of community

service. Hence, our vibrant University is one that [4] *in all these ways, strengthens us to actively engage in building a just and peaceful world.* “Just and peaceful” means that our ventures and partnerships are not only personally valuable and characterized by mutual understanding, but also engaged with the truth as we understand it in a challenging academic context.

THE MISSION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE & THE CENTRAL MISSION OF THE UNIVERSITY

The University’s Role and Mission Statement begins: *The central mission of the University of Southern California is the development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation of the human mind and spirit.* The University advances this mission in many ways, and no segment or office of the University has exclusive responsibility for it. However, a vigorous religious and spiritual life on campus is necessary, though not sufficient, for the mission’s effective pursuit.

By framing religious and spiritual life in ways that integrate cognitive and academic values with expression and experience, we serve this central mission by diminishing risks of intolerance and incivility. Religion so conceived is less of a conversation stopper and more of a connective principle. It is a medium or space in which two University goals, the cultivation of mind and the cultivation of spirit, advance together. It is also a medium or space in which people connect with one another profoundly and obliquely; that is, across existing institutional lines. Religious life provides a lens through which the University brings into sharp, common focus both the development of individual human beings and the development of its own community. Moreover, because the mission of religious life at USC also draws attention to real-time public service and to furthering opportunities for our students to work together constructively in a religiously diverse world, we also connect the development of the individual to the development “society as a whole.”

The University’s commitment to education entails providing a broad array of academic and extracurricular programs that are truly excellent. The Mission Statement for religious life at USC offers a definition of extracurricular or co-curricular excellence in this area. This definition encourages partnerships between the ORL, the student religious organizations and their religious directors or advisors, and the many faculty who conduct research in and/or teach classes about religion—across various disciplines, programs, and centers at (or affiliated with) USC.

The mission for religious life at USC also supports the University’s four Strategic Initiatives: undergraduate education, interdisciplinary research and education, programs building on the resources of Southern California and Los Angeles, and internationalization. Regarding internationalization, we position USC as a University which not only offers rich opportunities for contact across national lines, but also taps the potential of such contact by (*inter alia*) advancing mutual understanding and respect across differing traditions. The whole strategic plan for religious life at USC advances

the University's other strategic initiatives in ways that will be stated or inferred below, in the summary of strategies and action recommendations, as well as in the larger Report.

With the University undertaking a broad review of its strategic plan, the religious life Strategic Planning Committee has been deeply conscious of the timeliness and relevance of its project. It worked hard to look forward, envisioning a changing religious and spiritual environment that brings new challenges and opportunities. The Committee feels confident that its central proposals have something to offer to the University's broader review. Accordingly, the Committee asks the Provost to make use of the Report as the University's strategic plan is further developed.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES AND ACTION STEPS

1. Programming by the Office of Religious Life

The ORL should continue and expand its programming. Series like *What Matters to Me & Why* have enabled students to encounter faculty on a plane that is personal as well as intellectual. The *Genesis Discussion* and *Seven Deadly Sins* series, and the *Three Abrahamic Faiths* program, have been successful because they bring students, faculty, and religious directors together in an intellectually substantive manner. Such programming is co-curricular in the best sense: it has real academic content (e.g., involving study of texts, exchange of ideas, and critical thinking), and in that way complements what occurs in the classroom. In formulating its mission and recommendations, the Strategic Planning Committee relied heavily on such programming to achieve the mission goals of [1] *encouraging the pursuit of meaning through spiritual reflection and free inquiry*, and [3] *advancing mutual understanding and respect among differing traditions*.

The ORL should offer more programming of this kind. It should also take advantage of its excellent working relations with the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, the School of Religion, Hebrew Union College, and other religious life partners who carry out teaching and research, to partner in running roundtable discussions on critical issues (such as Science & Religion), as well as in presenting high profile speakers series and annual conferences on topics like Beyond Violence and Sacred Music. Activating these partnerships is congruent with Dean Joseph Aoun's initiative for multi-centric research in religion; and it can help channel benefits from that initiative to USC students, particularly undergraduates.

To pursue this strategy, the ORL would require an increased program budget. More significantly, it would require additional staff. The staff would need to coordinate with partners and carry out event logistics. Increased publicity capacity is essential. The Committee asks the Provost to consider whether this increased publicity capacity is better pursued by assigning publicity responsibilities to internal ORL programming staff or by facilitating a closer partnership with the University Public Relations office.

2. The ORL as a node for curricular projects and access

Many courses across the curriculum substantially address questions of ultimate meaning in ways that advance [1] *the pursuit of meaning through spiritual reflection and free inquiry*. Other courses help students better understand their own faith tradition, thus supporting mission element [2]; and alternative traditions, thus supporting mission element [3]. Other classes challenge students to engage moral issues, thus supporting mission element [4]. The ORL, working with faculty, should develop a searchable database that would make it easier for students to learn how USC courses intersect with these interests and goals.

Faculty interested in expanding their teaching and research in religion sometimes turn for assistance to the ORL and to the religious directors. This service can be augmented and made better known. Just as the CRCC's Pew grant has brought together faculty across the University to jointly pursue research in religion, so the ORL can serve as a node where faculty interested in expanding students' academic exposure to religion meet one another and find creative partners. For example, interested faculty might explore together the idea of an interdisciplinary minor in religion, or propose new courses related to the religious life mission areas. One such course might be co-taught by the Dean of Religious Life.

In order for the Office of Religious Life to function as a curricular node, enhanced staffing would be required.

3. Strategies for multi-faith learning

Both strategies 1 and 2 above would advance mission goal [3], *advancing mutual understanding and respect among differing traditions*. But strategies specifically targeting this goal are essential. Our students need to be given opportunities, not only to learn about other traditions, but also to learn with classmates from other traditions and with different worldviews. A good way to do this is through facilitating and rewarding, so that students may choose to work on projects as part of a religiously diverse group. Working with other academic deans, the Dean of Religious Life might be able to identify appropriate clinical training or class projects, already part of school programming. The students involved might request a small grant and/or receive University recognition for their multi-faith collaborations on, for example, making a film, pursuing fieldwork, or doing community service.

The ORL, working with the religious directors and advisors, encourages multi-faith and interfaith events, including multi-faith worship services. These programs should be expanded. This would require additional staffing in the ORL and additional space suitable for multi-faith events.

Such programmatic expansion, however, will not go far enough to advance the goal of multi-faith learning. The University needs to develop physical spaces in which members of different faith traditions can encounter one another and learn to work together. In the short term, this probably means adaptive re-use of existing space, including the University Religious Center and/or the United University Church. In the

longer term, construction of a Multi-Faith Center is strongly recommended as the best way to encourage the kinds of constructive learning and mutual engagement for which the mission calls. The Strategic Planning Committee has begun the process of conceptualizing such a Multi-Faith Center, in preparation for building a case statement that would include the Center in a major development effort. The Report to the Provost also recommends that in planning ahead for spaces and places that will best support the religious life of a twenty-first century USC, we should include the concept of a “spiritual garden”—one or more green spaces that are clearly non-denominational and that invite quiet reflection within the bustling UPC and HSC campuses.

4. Strategies for facilitating participation in particular faith communities

Without additional space for the individual faith traditions to use—both as office and counseling space for their religious directors, and as meeting space for group activities—we will retrogress in relation to our mission goals. The ORL does not have space that it can allocate to Moslem students for their prayer needs, or to Buddhist or Hindu students for practices of parallel importance in their traditions. The current space infrastructure was designed for a University religious demographic that is long outdated. Existing good will for mutual understanding and multi-faith cooperation, developed over the past seven years, will erode if space for religious group life does not expand in the near term. In the longer term, the right solution is to make space available for group meetings, worship, and offices for religious directors, in the Multi-Faith Center. The design of this space should facilitate the work of the particular faith communities while simultaneously encouraging cross-faith cooperation and interaction. And it could ensure flexibility so that the ORL can adapt to inevitable changes in religious interests and demographics over time.

As a one-time expense, informational access to the student religious organizations and to the mission and programming of religious life at USC should be facilitated through creation of a CD-ROM (somewhat like that on Greek life) that would be sent to incoming students. A video should also be created, in which the mission, resources, and ethical norms of religious life at USC can be rendered concrete and appealing in a format with which today and tomorrow’s students will be familiar. The ORL website should be updated, with links to the CD, to the video, and to the religious organization websites. Once these systems are in place, their regular updating can be a part of the ORL budget. The ORL should also facilitate funding for emerging religious groups; for example, in the form of seed money grants for religions that otherwise lack support.

The religious directors who work with the student religious organizations are talented people with ideas and energy. But many have less training and less outside support than was once the case. With additional staffing, the ORL can provide more mentoring to the religious directors and advisors, further developing their skills, and in return win greater assistance from them in advancing religious life and overall University mission goals. Additional staffing in the ORL, especially if this staffing includes an

ordained clergyperson, would also enhance the ORL's capacity to further mission goals on the Health Sciences Campus. Modest increases in support for the religious directors—such as improved telephone, computer, and photocopy access, especially in a Multi-Faith Center—would foster more and better religious life activity, both particular and multi-faith.

5. Strategies for improving active engagement

Though harmony, mutual understanding, individual insight, and shared experience are very important goals of religious life at the University, they are incompletely realized if students lack exposure to what is sometimes called the “prophetic” aspect of faith: the challenge to be caring and responsible as well as reflective. Religious life must offer what our University Mission Statement calls “selected forms of public service.” The ORL, in partnership with the Volunteer Center and other units, should increase opportunities for students to put their faith into action in the challenging learning environments that community service provides. This calls for greater information sharing and more partnerships with religious organizations (and their service programs) in the community.

6. Essential components: space, staffing, and development

Looking ahead, we should continue the momentum of the strategic planning process by building a case statement for the ambitious goal of a Multi-Faith Center. The crafting of the case statement would undoubtedly occasion further thought about which religious life mission goals should be supported within the regular ORL budget and which by foundation grants and joint ventures with partners both within and outside USC. But while this crafting and thinking-through takes place, we must make more space available and increase program activity in the near term. These simply cannot be put on hold while the longer-term project unfolds. Increased programming, mentoring, HSC presence, and other strategies require increased ORL staffing.

The Committee recommends adding to the ORL two additional staff. One, an ordained clergyperson, ideally with a Ph.D., can mentor/supervise the religious directors and advisors as well as work on their recruitment and retention, facilitate the curricular node, develop a vital presence on the HSC, and share responsibility for implementing the strategic plan and applying measurements to assess progress. The other staff person would help carry out regular and special programming (including round tables and conferences), administer space, and perhaps (depending on how best to facilitate publicity) publicize events and opportunities. Essentially, adding a religious professional in the first position necessitates adding a support person in the second position.

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