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An exercise in 'widening the tent'

by April Gutierrez

"Have you been saved?" Brianne confidently inquired. "Saved from what?" I asked. "You know, been cleansed of all your sins? Have you been saved?"

Brianne was my best friend in elementary school. I went to the small public school just up the street; but she went to a Christian school where she never had homework on Wednesdays, had to memorize scripture and learned questions to ask me about salvation -- such as this night when she saved me kneeling on her grandparent's cold basement floor. She invited me to summer camp where we read from the book of Kings in the morning and played on a water slide all afternoon, watched scary movies at her sleepovers and prayed before each meal.

My earliest religious memories grew from this relationship. As I grew into my own Catholic identity, her evangelical one informed me. It is not surprising that I have spent much of my work creating a ministry that would be inclusive of many Christian traditions.

Religious intolerance is so pervasive today. A recent column by Cathy Grossman in *USA Today* is just one example; I could easily cite a hundred. Religious intolerance is built on the ignorance of the values of traditions other than your own, and recent research shows that Americans -- self-proclaimed religious Americans -- are woefully ignorant of other religions' traditions.

Surely this is a mission that Catholic educational institutions could readily and ably address, taking a stand against discrimination to ensure the dignity of all.

Higher education already supports religious literacy through academic opportunities to study world religions, to gain diversity sensitivity and awareness training under the umbrella of culture and by degrees in ethnic, gender and class studies. But with regard to the difficult work of navigating amongst diverse communities, campus ministry has been widely let off the hook.

Catholic higher education serves Catholic students in the majority; however 40 percent self identify as non-Catholic, according to Michael James in "2006 Catholic College and University Statistics," Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, (www.accunet.org), and the roles of campus ministry are to nurture the spirituality of all the students. Therefore we need to "widen the tent" (Isaiah 54:2) and imagine new possibilities for the university to become one community of faith.

To address this, as a campus minister, I simultaneously began initiating relationships with pastors of diverse Christian churches in the area as well as Christian students on campus. I found that many pastors had the desire to serve college students but weren't connected to students and didn't have a clear sense of their interest, motivations or longings. Students were drawn to service opportunities and liked worshipping on Sunday at home with their families but yearned to experience the diversity of the Christian community on campus.

This led me to the formation of LOVE. (pronounced "love period"), a weekly gathering on campus featuring a worship band, students brandishing LOVE. logo t-shirts and messages from local pastors of many denominations, all honoring the core of Jesus' teachings - love. Topics ranged from a need for "widening the tent of inclusion" by an openly lesbian Episcopalian priest, to connecting science and faith through ongoing AIDS research in Africa by an AME Pastor/professor of biology, to using art and music in battling addiction by a minister in the Church of the Nazarene.

This community was far from homogeneous in doctrine or style and they often did not like one another. The key to LOVE.'s success is that they did not have to. They had to stay in relationship with me, which involved me taking the fall, apologizing for others, making amends and constantly battling a steep learning curve.

Through the university's relationships with local pastors, college students built depth of faith within their own denomination and were exposed to each other's worship styles promoting understanding and tolerance as well as allowing Christian students to know that their faith development is important to the school.

These relationships have enlivened not only campus ministry, but also the city's community events and potentially recruitment for the school. The formation of genuine relationships generates spaces of inclusion that are truly holy ground.

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[April Gutierrez is a guest columnist for Young Voices.]

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