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Only good can happen when different faiths work together

Bill Tammeus | Nov. 14, 2012 A small c catholic

Our coalition gathered in the downstairs parish hall of a new independent Protestant church [1], and right away, it was clear that despite a great first few weeks at the troubled public high school just down the block, trouble had returned there.

Nine teachers had been transferred to another school and not replaced. So just a month into the school year, the whole academic schedule had to be redone. And students with profound behavioral issues -- the very pupils the school's administration had managed to send elsewhere last year for the help they needed -- were being sent back.

And here we were, representatives of seven or eight Catholic and Protestant churches in the area, trying to figure out how to help steady this threatened ship.

Why?

Don't we have enough to do at our own congregations -- or, in the case of St. Peter's Catholic Church [2], its own school?

Yes, we have plenty to keep us busy without worrying about what now is called the Southwest Early College Campus [3] (SWECC). But we also understand that the mission field no longer lies only in far-away lands. It lies right outside the doors of our church buildings.

So in the last few years, the SWECC Faith-based Coalition has come together to see how we can help stabilize what once was one of the top high schools not just in Kansas City, Mo., but also in the country. Since those heady days, Southwest has run into the kind of terrific headwinds that have battered urban schools across the nation.

The situation is even worse with Southwest because the school district of which it is a part lost state accreditation [4] on Jan. 1, 2012.

Southwest had a good recovery year last year under the guidance of an excellent new principal, and hopes were high for continued progress this year. But, as I say, a month into the schedule, things began to run aground.

As our meeting moved along, there were Catholics, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, Methodists and others trying to imagine how we could be part of the solution to this new situation without crossing church-state boundaries and without jeopardizing our so-far excellent relations with the Southwest administration and faculty.

Is this what Jesus meant when he said "Follow me"? I think so.

That's because what we are doing -- or at least trying to do -- is giving hope and life to young people who are in desperate need of both. We are trying to care for and love these students. Beyond that, we are trying to keep the

social fabric that is our neighborhood from unraveling and disrupting the lives of the thousands of people who live here.

So I think Jesus would be profoundly disappointed if we were ignoring the students at Southwest.

What I find especially encouraging is that though each congregation in the coalition brings different people with different skills to this work, there doesn't seem to be a Catholic or Methodist or Episcopalian way to solve the problems Southwest faces.

Rather, we all are looking for any ideas that work. So when someone suggested that we needed to request a meeting with the superintendent of schools and press him to find solutions to the new troubles at Southwest, we simply divided up the tasks required to get such a meeting set up, not worrying about whether more Catholics or more Presbyterians would attend it.

Beyond that, as we move our monthly meetings from church building to church building, we become more familiar with each other's faith communities and there's less likely to be either suspicion or animosity, which can grow when there is separation.

All of which is to say that coming together ecumenically (and I hope someday in an interfaith way) can be an important means of being faithful to our individual traditions as well as to the one Lord we all serve.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [5] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [6]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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