Diversity Initiatives in Higher Education: A Case Study of Multicultural Organizational Development through the Lens of Religion, Spirituality, Faith, and Secular Inclusion

By Christine Clark

Introduction

This is the second in a three-part series focusing on the topic of Christian privilege. In the first article, the concept of Christian privilege was introduced and strategies were suggested for challenging and beginning to effect its resolution in the public education and workplace context through an examination of: (1) climate concerns; (2) policy and law; and (3) training and education (Clark, Brimhall-Vargas, Schlosser, & Alimo, 2002). The third article will focus on the secularization of Christianity and its impact on the perpetuation of Christian privilege.

This article undertakes a case study of the University of Maryland Office of Human Relations Programs’ (OHRP) efforts to confront Christian privilege and build a religiously, spiritually, faith-based, and secularly inclusive community within OHRP and across campus. It is a first-person narrative describing my perspective, as the Executive Director of OHRP, in facilitating a change process for my staff in which I was also a participant. This change process was directed toward creating a plan of action for celebration that affirms religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular diversity.

Additionally, this article pays special attention to the process through which change efforts were undertaken to ensure that both the confrontation of, and resolution to, Christian privilege honored the complexities of multiple social identities, especially those embedded in a juxtaposition of Christian privilege with race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic oppression.

Background

OHRP is the University of Maryland’s version of an Office of Multicultural Affairs. Its point of entry into multicultural affairs work is built from the integration of multicultural and social justice education. The essence of what this means is that OHRP takes a sociopolitical or progressive approach to multicultural affairs work. Or, said another way, it considers issues of power, oppression, and privilege in seeking to create a multiculturally inclusive and socially just campus community and society.

It is extremely important to note that even in the multicultural and social justice arena, the issue of Christian privilege and the struggle to create religiously, spiritually, faith-based, and secularly inclusive communities are still relatively new areas of diversity-related learning and action (Clark, Brimhall-Vargas, Schlosser, & Alimo, 2002). As such, these areas are treated differently than, for example, those along the lines of race, socioeconomic class, and gender have been.

“Differently” in this instance means with less directness, honesty, and confidence. While sociopolitically-oriented multicultural and social justice education have long confronted White, class, and gender privilege boldly, openly, and unequivocally, when it comes to Christian privilege, it seems we stutter and stumble, suddenly unsure of what is okay to say or do (Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1996). The reason underlying this difference is not monolithic, but three-pronged.

The first part of this difference can be attributed to the influence of the theory of the “hierarchy of oppressions” that has long operated in the left wing of multicultural and social justice education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). This theory suggests that some forms of discrimination, namely socioeconomic class-based and race-based, and sometimes gender-based, forms are more serious than others; such as those related to sexual orientation, disability, and—yes—religion, spirituality, faith, and secularity. In being socially constructed as more serious, especially class-based and race-based forms of discrimination are confronted, almost without apology, for the often painful impact of that confrontation on the people whose identities afford them race and class privilege. On the other hand, those socially constructed as less serious forms of discrimination are typically confronted more gingerly, taking into consideration the range of potential outcomes such confrontation might have on those empowered by, say, homophobia, able-body status, and/or Christianity.

Clearly, even in describing the hierarchy of oppression theory, its limitations emerge. Certainly, there has been significant recent backlash against the unabashed confrontation of White privilege as evidenced by the onslaught of legal blows to affirmative action (Milem, 2000). At the same time, it is true that an openly racist comment will be attacked virtually unilaterally in the public sphere as horrible, whereas whether or not Matthew Shep-pard’s murder or the overt criminal profiling of Muslims is necessarily “all bad” is still fodder for debate in the media (McLaren, 1999). Obviously, the theory of the hierarchy of oppression is difficult to firmly articulate in the abstract, much less delineate in the concrete. Nonetheless, it is a theory that persists within the most sociopolitically engaged quadrants of the multicultural and social justice education community and, thus, accounts for part of why the topic of Christian privilege is treated differently even by the OHRP staff—the staff that, perhaps somewhat ironically, provides multicultural and social justice education and corresponding support to the University of Maryland community.
A second part of the difference in how the topic of Christian privilege is confronted in the progressive multicultural and social justice education arena has to do with the fact that virtually everyone who works in this arena is “called” to this work through either a strong religious, spiritual, faith-based, or secular connection to concerns for equity and justice. So, while Christian privilege is another form of privilege that, like White privilege or male privilege, must be interrogated and dismantled in order for religiously, spiritually, faith-based, and secularly inclusive equity and justice to emerge, unlike White privilege and male privilege, with Christian privilege, many Christians are called to equity and justice work—inclusive of the work interrogating and dismantling Christian privilege—because of how they interpret and practice the tenets of Christianity (Clark, Brinham-Vargas, Schlosser, & Alimo, 2002).

The same cannot be said for White people or men; there is no way to interpret and practice the tenets of Whiteness or maleness that lead to their interrogation and dismantling (Clark & O'Donnell, 1999). On their face, Whiteness and maleness reinforce White and Male privilege—to interrogate and dismantle these, White people and men must challenge all interpretations and practices of the tenets of whiteness and maleness, and instead reconceptualize their racial and gendered selves as antiracist and antisexist. Obviously, progressive multiculturally-oriented and social justice-oriented Christians never become anti-Christian, they become liberation theology-focused Christians, or radical Christians, or leave the Christian faith altogether.

While White people and men can politically dis-identify themselves from whiteness and maleness by joining with People of Color and women, and against most other Whites and men, in the struggles for racial and gender-based self-determination and liberation, they typically cannot cease to be White or male (McLaren, 1999). Thus, related to the limitations in the theory of the hierarchy of oppression, it is clear that while parallels between different forms of oppression can be drawn, there are limitations here as well because each form of oppression is also quite unique. Understanding the complexity of each form's uniqueness is foundational to its eradication. With the Christian privilege form, the “calling” to equity and justice work, inclusive of those called within OHRP, necessarily limits the ways in which it is confronted.

Related to the second part of the difference, a third part of this difference in how the topic of Christian privilege has been confronted in the progressive multicultural and social justice education arena—especially OHRP’s—has to do with the disproportional overrepresentation of people “called” to equity and justice work among those who also experience psychological disabilities, especially those who experience major depression or bipolar disorder (manic depression). While members of the OHRP staff are engaged in research to further explore this correlation, preliminary assessments of it suggest that the combination of “calling” and depression may be attributable to multicultural and social justice educators being profoundly affected by their awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the suffering of others in the world because of the persistent absence of equity and justice.

The outcome of the coupling of “calling” and depression and its self-perpetuating cycle common in multicultural and social justice educators: the awareness, knowledge, and understanding of suffering attributable to the absence of equity and justice in the world calls them to the work, a by-product of which is depression (and, often, its outward expression—anger), and the remedy for which is the continued commitment to the work. Here again, then, Christian privilege cannot be confronted in the same way White privilege and male privilege can because the role of Christianity in maintaining a balance in this cycle for some multicultural and social justice educators must be acknowledged and respected, at the same time Christian privilege is interrogated and dismantled.

Stage One: Rifts

The impetus for OHRP’s confrontation of Christian privilege and, ultimately, its desire to create a religiously, spiritually, faith-based, and secularly inclusive workplace emerged out of an office discussion surrounding the planning of a December holiday party in 2000. At the outset of my tenure as Executive Director in January of 2000, I was made aware that there had been some tension around the planning and actualization of the office’s annual December holiday party in 1999. This tension emerged because several non-Christian employees had expressed concerns about the party as essentially functioning as a Christmas party despite being called a holiday party. While Christian employees believe that they tried to take into account the concerns of their non-Christian co-workers in putting that party together, the outcome of the party left non-Christian employees angry and Christian employees slightly confused about, but largely oblivious to, what could have been wrong with the way the party turned out.

It is important to mention that OHRP has a thirty-year history. For most of that history, the office staff was all Christian and predominantly African American. The previous director, who was a member of the office for twenty-five years—first in a staff role and then in the leadership one—had a tradition of inviting the office staff to her home for a Christmas party during which Christmas carols were sung around a piano. In the five years prior to my arrival, the office had become increasingly racially, as well as religiously, spiritually, faith-based, and secularly, diverse. Despite this diversity, the interpersonal cultural norms of the office remained largely African American-centric and Christian-centric, and the African American-centric part of the office culture was limited by the White male-centric culture of the larger university and society, the Christian-centric part was reinforced by the university’s and society’s Christian-centricity.

While I was made aware of the December 1999 holiday party tension in January of 2000, I failed to address it until December of 2000, when the party planning discussion for this year emerged. It is hard to say if planning in advance would have helped our process because it is not clear if Christians in the office would have felt the weight of the concerns of their non-Christian counterparts if those concerns had been raised and addressed at a time of year when Christian celebratory hegemony was not at risk of challenge. That is, what may have allowed the seriousness of the concerns raised by non-Christians to be truly “heard” by Christians was the threat that these concerns posed to the realization of the annual holiday party only a few weeks away.

It is likely that a discussion of these concerns in February or June would have been much less contentious, but it is also possible that, in being less contentious, Christian employees may never have been faced with the visceral (and, therefore, uncharacteristically bold, open, and unequivocal) confrontation of Christian privilege for all of the reasons previously articulated. While those reasons did eventually come to bear on the confrontation...
process—making the confrontation more equivocal—it is likely that no meaningful confrontation, with or without equivocation, would have ever taken place if the initial one had not been pregnant with Christian celebratory expectations and mounting non-Christian defiance empowered by leadership willing to, and to some degree, naively willing to, challenge the prevailing interpersonal cultural norms of the office.

It is crucial for me to acknowledge that although I was raised Christian—the liberatory theology-focused and radical kind—I ended up leaving the Christian faith altogether. I identify as pagan, in essence, someone who experiences a higher power through the natural world. While I am deeply spiritual, I am not devout in the practice of that spirituality—I do not, by and large, participate in pagan rituals. I am about as disciplined a pagan as I was a Christian: my spirituality is with me in the everyday, but not in a formal way. I am also White (European American).

These identities are important to know when considering my willingness to challenge the African American-centric and Christian-centric interpersonal cultural norms of OHRP. In characterizing my willingness to undertake this challenge as naïve, I mean that I am not certain I fully recognized and understood the African American part of the Christian-centrism—their interconnectedness—in the office culture when I began the Christian privilege challenge process. Had I been more aware in this regard, it is highly likely that I, despite my best effort to the contrary, would have been more influenced by the theory of the hierarchy of oppression in deciding, first, if and, second, how to undertake this process. That is, my own fear of being seen as or called a racist if I challenged Christian privilege couched in the African American history and culture of the office (especially given the larger role that Christianity has played and continues to play in African American liberation, notwithstanding its other role in colonization), might have precluded my willingness to engage this process at all. Thus, my limited vision in this regard both allowed and required OHRP to engage this process. Hindsight being what it is, had I known then what I know now, I would have done things differently—more gracefully to be sure—but not necessarily toward a better outcome.

Related to the previous discussions on the theory of the hierarchy of oppression and the parallels between and uniquenesses among different forms of oppression, the interplays of my racial and spiritual identities illustrate how various forms of oppression and privilege, related to these identities, do not exist or operate in a vacuum divorced from one another. On the contrary, all forms of oppression and privilege are interconnected. In this case study, the relationships between oppression and privilege related to race, ethnicity, national origin, socioeconomic class (inclusive of employment status), and language, as well as religion, spirituality, faith, and secularity are embedded in OHRP's process toward building a religiously, spiritually, faith-based, and secularly inclusive workplace.

Thus, it is important for me to delineate not only my own social membership group identities, but also those of the rest of the OHRP staff involved in this building process. These identities are as follows: three African American men, all graduate assistants, two Christian, and one atheist/agnostic; one African American woman, full-time support staff, and Christian; one African (Ghanaian) woman, full-time support staff, and Christian; two Afro-Caribbean (one Guyanese, the other half Barbadian and half Panamanian) women, one full-time support staff, and Christian, the other a graduate assistant from a faith-based tradition; one half African American and half Afro-Caribbean (Jamaican) man, full-time professional staff, and Christian; one biracial (half Latino [Peruvian] and half White [European American]) man, full-time professional staff, and Wiccan; two White (European American) men, one full-time professional staff and Christian, the other a graduate assistant and atheist/agnostic; one half Chinese and half Korean woman, a graduate assistant and Christian; one Afghan woman, a graduate student, and Muslim; one Filipina woman, full-time professional staff, and Christian; and one Indian woman, full-time professional staff, and Hindu.

The tensions that emerged in December of 2000 came about when an African American, Christian, female, support staff member, a thirty-year veteran of the office, came to me to ask if she should send around an e-mail asking people about how we should organize our annual holiday party. I responded by saying, "Yes, send around an e-mail, but in it ask people about how they feel about having this party, and then, based on their response to that, we can look at how we should organize it." Unfortunately, this staff member sent around an e-mail that went straight to the question of how to organize the party. Anticipating a hostile response from non-Christians, I responded to her e-mail by saying words to the effect that if we were to have a party, the party must not be a Christmas party masquerading as a holiday party. That is, it must be sensitive to the celebratory concerns of non-Christians. In retrospect, my e-mail response was way too big a hammer for the situation. While I was genuinely concerned about a hostile response from the non-Christians, I was also angry that the employee who sent around the initial e-mail had failed to heed my directions for how to open up the discussion about the party for a number of reasons—her actions seemed deliberately Christian-centrically passive aggressive, and her e-mail forced existing tension relating to the party to escalate and, in so doing, made more work for me. Unfortunately, my e-mail response reflected my anger more than my concern. Needless to say, bedlam broke loose. Christians were mad at non-Christians and vice versa, and everyone was angry at me. After two weeks of bedlam smoldered into silence, we broke for the semester for another two weeks having had no holiday celebration.

Stage Two: Reconnecting

In reconvening as an office in early January of 2001, we began a sort of informal dialogue that took various forms, and included varying configurations of the staff. Out of this informal dialogue emerged three parts of a process: (1) a recognition that we needed to address the conflict from December and work toward a positive resolution of it; (2) a general willingness to engage in a more formal dialogue toward that positive resolution; and (3) an understanding that we would eventually need help to realize that positive resolution. While the staff was unanimous about pursuing the first part, not everyone was as committed to pursuit of the second or third parts. But, the unilateral support for the first part, and substantial support for the other two, enabled us to move forward.

We began the process on our own, deciding to look at three questions we believed were indirectly related to the celebration conflict and, thus, questions we felt we could facilitate ourselves in discussion on. These questions were: (1) How do we talk about concerns we have in general? (2) How do we talk about controversial
issues in general? and (3) What is the relationship between our answers to these first two questions and our social identity group demographics? In relationship to this last question, two secondary questions emerged: (a) What is the impact of the professional staff and graduate assistants’ use of “academic language” and/or “jargon”? and (b) What is the impact of discourse style, including silence (which may be related to race, ethnicity, national origin, language, socioeconomic class, and/or gender)?

Individual exploration of the first and second questions was uneventful, generating almost no discussion. Thus, we quickly agreed to move onto the third question, where it was clear everyone’s attention and interest was already focused, and recognizing that in discussing it we would also be discussing the first and second questions in relationship to it.

The third question, along with its ancillary ones, generated the most discussion. It also generated the most active participation from support staff who asserted, very decisively, that professional staff and graduate assistants’ use of “in discipline” language was not a barrier to their participation in discussions—they were quite capable of following discussions in which this language was used, and clearly understood what was being said. Related to this, support staff wanted it known that their silence in discussions in which such language was being used (which was what had largely provoked this line of questions in the first place) should be taken at face value—that they were actively listening but had no comment to make—nothing more, nothing less. It is important to mention that having this discussion not only generated the active participation from support staff in it but had the effect of substantially increasing their participation in all discussions from that point forward.

Other aspects of discourse style were also addressed, specifically proclivities for or against conversation in which multiple speakers jumped into discussion to clarify, redirect, or challenge, as well as the pro’s and con’s of waiting for a speaker to stop talking, raising a hand to gain access to a conversation, or sitting with an expectation of being invited to chime in. Many associated the former discourse style with certain racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic experiences, but it was hard to reach consensus on which experiences these were. For example, some thought jumping in was attributable to particular ethnic (i.e., Italian or African American) or working-class experiences in which people needed to be aggressive to be heard in large or hostile gathering contexts (i.e., family celebrations or community conflicts). Others saw this as a manifestation of middle-class and/or White privilege, taking a conversation over because of an inflated sense of the importance of one’s voice.

While it would have been impossible, as well as stereotypical, to come to a meeting of the minds on what motivated different people to participate differently—especially with respect to the possible role of social identity group memberships in this equation—what we were able to establish was that it was important that we were all more consciously aware of the range of differences in people’s interaction norms and that we work, to the extent we were each able, to improve the degree to which everyone got to participate in the manner most comfortable for them. This meant monitoring our own behavior and each other’s in a manner that facilitated participatory inclusivity.

After experiencing a degree of success with this first discussion, we continued the process on our own in deciding to look at one more question: How do we talk about religion, spirituality, faith, and secularity as both a concern and a controversy, while taking into account social identity group memberships? While we recognized that this question was, clearly, more directly related to the celebration conflict and, thus, could resurrect tensions toward an unproductive end, we agreed that we would focus our conversation on how we would talk about these things if we were going to; that is, the process, not the content. Discussion of this question led us to two major problems.

**Problem One:**

If we have a discussion about our religion, spirituality, faith, and secularity, are we willing to have our knowledge of our own affiliations—especially religious affiliations, and, more especially, Christian affiliations—challenged with new, additional, and/or alternative views of those affiliations that may be more religiously, historically, or otherwise factually accurate? With little equivocation, the Christians in the office were clear that this was not a challenge that they were open to experiencing. In addition to this point, however, four secondary problems emerged:

(1) What is the role that religion plays in defining other social identity group memberships? For example, how does being Catholic define Latina/o racial identity, or being Baptist define African American ethnicity? Or, what about non-religious Jews or Muslims who use the terms Jew or Muslim to define an ethnic or cultural, but not religious, identity?

(2) What about the services that churches, synagogues, and mosques provide beyond religion? For example, social support to individuals who live alone, or social service support to the poor, disabled, and/or disenfranchised (i.e., battered women or ex-convicts);

(3) Can religions be liberatory? For example, liberation theology-oriented Protestantism in which the tenets of Christianity are directed toward the teachings which emphasize self-determination and social justice; and, finally,

(4) If religions can be liberatory, what is the implication of having something liberatory challenged? For example, what might be the consequences of confronting Christian privilege for a Gay or female Presbyterian minister of a “Church of More Light.”

**Problem Two:**

In identifying the first problem and its subsidiaries, are we making assumptions about people’s knowledge of their own affiliations—especially spiritual, faith-based, and secular ones—that are both inaccurate and that reinforce race-based, ethnicity-based, and socioeconomic class-based forms of discrimination and oppression? For example, are we assuming that working-class African American Christians are unaware of the ways in which Christianity was, and continues to be, used as a colonizing doctrine? Likewise, are we taking for granted that working-class African American Christians have no positive understanding of pagan and/or atheistic traditions? Here, three secondary problems arose:

(1) Can people engage in a religion in a critically conscious way? For example, can a Muslim woman reconcile the passages in
the Qur'an that sanction male violence toward their spouses by engaging a feminist point of entry to the religion? Or, can a Lesbian Catholic resolve the Pope's position on homosexuality in order to maintain a positive self image as both Lesbian and Catholic?

(2) If people can engage religion in a critically conscious way, do we give people credit for being able to do this—to negotiate contradictions between their religion and self-determination and social justice—across demographics? For example, do we only assume well-educated, middle-class, and/or White people are capable of such kind of engagement? and finally,

(3) What are the assumptions that we make about the devoutness of people's "practice" relating to their religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular traditions? For example, do we assume religious, especially Christian, people are more disciplined and that their rituals are more legitimate, say, than Santeros or Atheists and their customs? What are the implications of religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular legitimacy for a "Sunday Christian," a highly disciplined Yoruban, or a non-practicing Jew?

Outcomes

Our purpose in the discussion of these problems was not to resolve all or, for that matter, any of them. Rather, in keeping with the commitment to focus only on process not content, our purpose was simply to raise these problems and explore, both as a group and interpersonally, what meaning various responses to them might have for ensuing, more direct, discussion on our celebratory conflict.

Stage Three: Reconceptualization

In having completed, on our own, what I have called "Stage Two" of this process by the end of January 2001, we found ourselves more or less ready to confront the celebratory conflict head on, but acknowledged that because tensions surrounding that conflict persisted, we would need the help of a skilled facilitator, obviously from outside the office and, preferably, from outside the campus to guarantee their professional detachment from our conflict and resolution process. With little effort, we identified a colleague at a neighboring university who we believed had the necessary content and process knowledge (in sociopolitically located multicultural and social justice education and group facilitation), and the right set of social identities (as an African American, Gay, self-proclaimed "born again" Christian, former Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, Choir Director of a inner-city Black church, and divinity school student).

We contracted with this facilitator for a first session in February of 2001, and, subsequently, for two additional sessions, in June and December of 2001. All three sessions included some context setting by the facilitator, and then was comprised of one or more activities for us, as the participants, to engage in. In moving from session one to session three, the amount of dialogue that we engaged in increased through a combination of pair, small group, and whole group work. One particularly salient outcome emerged from each of the three sessions:

Session one led us to the development of the following “Community Learning Norms:”

1. Develop the ability to acknowledge what you don’t know, don’t pretend you do know;
2. Give others the benefit of the doubt;
3. Suspend judgment;
4. Take away titles/positions;
5. Stop making assumptions and go to a source;
6. This process is not an avenue for religious “conversion”;
7. Be sensitive to the closeness of the issue to the person and of the person to the issue;
8. Seek first to understand, then to be understood;
9. Make a commitment to your and others’ individual readiness.

Some of us took this directive to heart, others of us did not. Despite this uneven follow-up, this activity was powerful because it illustrated to us that, in large measure, our celebratory conflict was the result of us not knowing—by design, default, or a combination of both—each other’s religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular identities very well.

Throughout the multicultural and social justice education literature, it is made clear that absent strong personal relationships—especially along the lines of social identity group memberships in diverse environments—conflict is more likely to emerge and have at its core resentment for those social identity group membership categories (Banks, 1997; Banks & Banks, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1996). While most of knew this research, it took this activity to help us recognize our failure to act on our knowledge. It revealed this to us simultaneously with offering us a practice strategy aimed directly at strengthening relationships along the social identity group membership categories most at issue. In so doing, it also helped us to move one step...
closer toward the resolution of our celebratory conflict: if through it we learned more about each other’s celebratory traditions, we could plan celebrations that took these traditions into account in meaningful ways.

Session three led us to a two-pronged approach for celebration that honored religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular diversity. The first part of this strategy involved dedicating time during our biweekly staff meetings for people to share whatever they happened to be celebrating at that time. The second part of the strategy established that we would have three parties a year—one in May, one in September, and one in December (all three of which were piloted in 2002)—to which everyone would contribute a decoration, a piece of music, and a homemade food item, each commemorating something they celebrate at that time of year.

This strategy was developed with three purposes in mind. The first purpose was to make celebration something that occurred year round, instead of only when the Julian and academic calendars, reinforcing Christian privilege, dictated that it occur. The second purpose was to make celebration a community responsibility, instead of the responsibility of one or two people, to ensure both the inclusive spirit of celebration across religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular affiliations, as well as to encourage office-wide engagement and investment in celebration. Finally, the third purpose was to afford people the opportunity to teach others about their own celebrations, and learn about the celebrations of others—reinforcing the religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular relationship-building objective of the activity from our second facilitated session. This enabled us to bring along those who resisted engaging this activity with co-workers after the session as directed by the facilitator, having the effect of more symmetrically augmenting our knowledge of each other’s religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular identities across the staff, thus, strengthening our interpersonal relationships along these dimensions, throughout the office.

Three important outcomes emerged from the facilitated sessions. The first was that we all became more aware of, knowledgeable about, and understanding of each other’s religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular identities and traditions. The second was that non-Christians could embrace expressions of Christianity by Christians in the office without feeling as though those expressions were an insult to them as non-Christians. Likewise, the third outcome led Christians to more consciously recognize their Christianess, and Christianess in general, and the non-universality of both for others in the workplace and society at large.

Stage Four: Realization

As alluded to in the previous discussion, the celebratory conflict that arose in December of 2000 precluded our office from celebrating anything, other than birthdays, until the Spring of 2002. In moving through stages one, two, and three between December of 2000 and December of 2001, by 2002 it was time for us to put our new strategies for celebration into action.

Our sharing about our celebrations during bi-weekly staff meetings began strong—non-Christians especially went to great lengths, typing up and distributing information sheets about their celebrations. Over the year this enthusiasm has tapered off, partly because of the pace of work in the office, and partly because most Christians failed to invest reciprocal effort in the sharing process. Regardless of the current lower level of investment in this practice, it continues to be a part of every staff meeting agenda. As with other regular practices, I am certain that this one will experience periodic ebbs and flows of enthusiasm. In arriving at such a rhythm it will finally become an institutionalized practice of the office—a practice, like all practices, that is sometimes resented, sometimes taken for granted, and sometimes appreciated. Achieving commonplace status in the office culture, while seemingly an anti-climactic by-product of a great effort, is actually a positive accomplishment because it confirms that something that was once quite threatening, for Christians and non-Christians alike, to talk publicly with co-workers about, has become at least familiar, if not yet wholly comfortable.

The first of our tri-annual celebrations was held in May. All of the full-time staff and many of the graduate students not only attended, but fully participated by bringing decorations, music, and food reflecting their celebratory focus at that time of year. Three staff members shared their musical talent with us through their voice, guitar, and harp. We also danced, talked—about our celebrations as well as about our work and our lives outside of work—and we laughed. This party was clearly a success, though it was somewhat obvious that we were all feeling our way around it. While we had a good time, there was an element of manufacturedness to the celebration—it did not flow naturally and/or effortlessly.

The second tri-annual celebration took place in September. At this party we repeated all of the successes of the first one and added more. Everyone on the staff attended and almost everyone fully participated in the formal part of celebration process. We also invited staff family members, OHRP alumni, and a few “friends of the office” to attend which added to the climate of festivity. In addition to our staff’s musical talent, guests shared their talents as well. The staff vocalist, a guest vocalist, and the staff harpist even teamed up for a couple of impromptu duets and trio numbers to rave reviews. We also played games. This party was truly a success. Everything we had worked to accomplish through celebration was realized in this party.

The third and final tri-annual celebration took place in December. This party was very low-key for several reasons. A number of staff members were absent on vacation or due to illness (both legitimately and less so, to evade participation in the celebration). The majority of those in attendance were pre-occupied with end of the semester deadlines and, thus, also very tired. And, we had missed holding the staff meeting immediately prior to the party (at which we typically review the plan for the party), thus losing some of the momentum for it. Nonetheless, some people brought food, some brought decorations, and some brought music and we ate and talked, and then ate again and talked some more. A few OHRP alumni dropped by and joined in the conversation, offering the opportunity to reminisce about OHRP past, and share about OHRP present and its plans for the future.

Under the circumstances, this last party was a success, though of a different ilk of success than the first two—more “natural” than the first, but less spirited than both the first and the second. There was also an undercurrent to this party that did not exist in the other two, related to its proximity to Christmas. In the weeks prior to this party, some Christians expressed uneasiness about the timing of it, suggesting that we should wait to have it in January, even though, as a part of our conflict resolution process, we had very clearly agreed to hold it in December precisely so Christians could embrace the celebration.
of Christmas. It is obvious from this uneasiness that it is going to take some time for the Christians in the office to figure out how to celebrate, and how to enjoy the celebration of, Christmas at a party that is not expressly a Christmas one.

Given the understated end to the year of celebrations, it will be important for us to make our May 2003 party more upbeat to hang onto the positive momentum the parties earlier in the year generated. At the same time, not every party can nor should be exactly the same, nor could it or should it seek to top the previous one. In the long run, the same ebb and flow of enthusiasm described in relationship to sharing our celebration at staff meetings will eventually settle into this endeavor as well. Here again, when this occurs, it must ultimately be viewed positively as a true sign that we have finally resolved our celebratory conflict.

**Conclusion**

OHRP's celebratory conflict resolution process led us to a new way to celebrate. Key to this outcome was everyone's willingness to take at least some responsibility for arriving at it.

It is important to reiterate, however, that the taking of partial responsibility in this process is still not engaged by everyone in the office unilaterally. As has been the case throughout this process, the majority of the resistance hails from a small number of Christians and is largely directed toward our new ways of celebration. It manifests itself in various forms of either compartmentalized participation or non-participation in the new celebration process.

Clearly, like every other multicultural and social justice educational issue, the struggle to achieve full and affirming religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular inclusion is on-going, and dependent on the degree to which the practice of democratic citizenship, by every member of the office community, is realized.

To achieve this realization, we, as an office, but especially I, as its leader, must create a workplace climate in which people are able and motivated to participate—that the resistance persists is an indication that such a climate has not yet been adequately created to effectuate the motivation toward participation. Beyond individual and leadership responsibility to contribute to the creation of this climate, there is the responsibility of both those traditionally denied, and those traditionally afforded, access to full participation in democracy based on their religious, spiritual, faith-based, and secular social identity group memberships, as well as their race-based, ethnicity-based, national origin-based, and socioeconomic class-based ones. Responsibility must be engaged and undertaken by everyone along all of the complex dimensions of individual and group identity if this climate is to become a reality.

Perhaps most important in this process was our goal to be more inclusive in celebrating, not less, and to be more celebratory, not less—ultimately, to engage the conflict toward inclusion, not retreat from it toward isolation. In the spirit of esteemed syndicated columnist, author, and lecturer, Roberto Rodriguez, we must seek out joy in our lives to balance out our struggle for self-determination and social justice (Rodriguez, 2001). Absent that joy, our struggle reproduces the dehumanization it seeks to eradicate. Celebration is the key to joy, full and affirming inclusive celebration is the key to progressive multicultural-oriented and social justice-oriented joy. It is toward increasing that joy that our on-going celebration process is directed and dedicated.

**Notes**

1. While there is irony in this, OHRP is clear that teaching by example is paramount to engaging its stakeholders in multicultural and social justice education-oriented change processes. Thus, we use our own struggles, be they successfully resolved, on-going, or at a stage of contentious impasse, as educational examples with our constituents. In so doing, we reinforce the reality that commitment to multicultural organizational development is commitment to life-long learning, not a static destination in which one day we will be able to proclaim that we have "arrived."

2. Churches of More Light are individual Presbyterian churches that, contrary to the national Presbyterian church, view homosexuality, like heterosexuality, as a normal sexual orientation.

**References**


—Christine Clark is director of the Office of Human Relations Programs at the University of Maryland, College Park.