

## Archives

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### Q & A with Dr. Ann Heekin

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At Sacred Heart U, seminarians and rabbinical students celebrate a decade of dialog

By Cindy Mindell

The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding (CCJU) of Sacred Heart University held its annual institute for seminarians and rabbinical students last month.

Now in its 10th year, the unique institute educates the next generation of religious leaders to critically and collaboratively engage in Jewish-Christian dialog.

The Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding is an educational and research division of Sacred Heart University. Established in 1992 by Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz and SHU president Dr. Anthony Cernera, CCJU is a direct outgrowth of the Second Vatican Council teachings which encourage interreligious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Jews. The Center promotes new scholarship, trains future religious leaders, educates teachers and serves as a leader in Christian-Jewish understanding in the United States and throughout the world. In 1999, to further the work of the Second Vatican Council, CCJU launched the annual Institute for Seminarians and Rabbinical Students, the first such program in the country. The three-day Institute brings together emerging rabbis, priests, and ministers to learn from one another about the faith and tradition of the other. Presentations on the history, theology, and current issues in Christian-Jewish relations are led by Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant scholars in the field and help to foster both dialog and a deepened understanding between the traditions. This year, the Institute included 36 participants from more than a dozen Jewish and Christian seminaries across the U.S.

Recently, CCJU director Dr. Ann Heekin spoke with the Ledger about the genesis and evolution of the program.

#### **Q: Why did CCJU create the Institute for Seminarians and Rabbinical Students?**

A: The Second Vatican Council issued three significant documents between 1965 and 1985: "Nostra Aetate," followed by "Guidelines" in 1974 and "Notes" in 1985. The first redefined the Church's perception of and relationship to Judaism; the second two documents constituted a movement to help the Catholic community understand the implications of "Nostra Aetate" and what was being asked for in terms of preaching and teaching and religious educational instruction.

After CCJU opened its doors in 1992, Rabbi Ehrenkranz and Dr. Cernera saw the opportunity to begin to help with the trickle-down effect that needed to happen, by creating an institute that would help to educate Christian seminarians along with Jewish seminarians. The curriculum would focus on the Church's current teachings in terms of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, the history of the relationship, and the new understanding of how we retext and understand each other's liturgies.

It was a recognition that as a university, we could help to further the transmission of the documents, that had emanated from the highest levels of the Church, and bring their message into parishes and congregations by educating the next generation of clergy. Each one of those clergy would be leading anywhere from a thousand to 5,000 congregants. So the way to reach the person in the pew, we saw, was through educating emerging clergy.

When we first announced the Institute for 1999, and were sending out invitational letters to directors of Catholic and Jewish seminaries, nobody knew us or what our platform was. Cardinal William Keeler, Archbishop of Baltimore, has been active for many years in Christian-Jewish dialog through his involvement with the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. In the early years of the Institute, he wrote letters to Catholic seminaries on our behalf saying, effectively, "I've worked with these people, this is a legitimate organization, I've seen the curriculum, and this is a good thing to do."

Just to get started, the Institute needed that sort of endorsement, because people weren't sending their students outside of their seminaries, Jewish or Christian, and educating them in the Christian-Jewish dialog was new. With his help, we were able to launch the Institute in 1999 and continue to expand the group that comes to us every year over the next 10 years.

**Q: Sacred Heart is a Catholic university, yet CCJU and its work are more broadly Christian. How does that affect the makeup of the**

## Institute?

A: Even before the Institute was established, we weren't limited to Catholic-Jewish dialog; hence the name, "Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding." Certainly in terms of scholars from the early days, Protestants have been a voice in this movement, from the time of "Nostra Aetate" and well before that. To talk about bringing two traditions into dialog with one another, you want to serve it up as broadly as possible on both sides - all Jewish and Christian traditions. Over time, we've gotten better at being able to go after all the different segments for the Institute. Last year, we very intentionally made sure that we had representation from the Evangelical Christian community.

Each year, we've tried to evolve and ask, "Who haven't we invited to the table?" Sometimes that can be a denomination; sometimes it's an attentiveness to gender-inclusiveness, and in certain of the denominations, that's more challenging women; and sometimes it's an attentiveness to racial diversity. That becomes more challenging to try to fulfill because you can't ask for that, but you can go to certain regions of the country where there is more diversity at a particular seminary.

### Q: What is the Institute's curriculum?

A: We focus on four areas: ancient through modern history of the Christian-Jewish relationship, scripture study, and liturgy are the three major areas we cover. For the fourth, we engage the seminarians in a contemporary issue around the Jewish-Christian dialog.

We try to provide a foundational understanding in the theology of the Christian-Jewish relationship. We go back to first century CE and begin with an understanding of the relationship in ancient times, and follow it through up to the modern period, and look at what's happened since the Holocaust and the Second Vatican Council to contemporary times. Then we take a close-up look at some of the major steps forward since the Second Vatican Council and since the time the Church institutionalized its relationship with the Jewish community and since its theology vis a vis the Jewish community changed. We look at major documents from all three traditions on the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

The second area we focus on is joint scripture study. We typically take a shared text of Hebrew scripture and help both groups understand how we read scripture differently, what interpretive tools we use, and examine related commentaries, leading to a richer understanding of how we use common texts very differently, and why and how each tradition reads it differently.

We spend a good deal of time on our liturgies. I teach a course with Ruth Langer, associate professor of Jewish studies and a associate director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, taking a historical look at the continuities and discontinuities of our liturgies. We end that session with visits to a church and a synagogue, to hear from the clergy about life and worship in those places.

For the session on contemporary issues in the Jewish-Christian dialog, we usually focus on the inherent tensions. This year, we took up the whole discussion around the Church's excommunication of the St. Pius X bishops, which helped disclose that one of them was a Holocaust denier. The discussion looked at the many sides of that issue in terms of the Church's response to the Jewish community and what accountability the Church necessarily had in bringing that society back but not knowing that one of them was a Holocaust denier.

One of the great gifts of the program is that we are able to invite the best thinkers in all of these areas. We generally open the Institute with a big-picture look at the theology of inter-religious dialog, which is a work in progress. This year, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg of the Jewish Life Network was the speaker. Dr. Gene Fisher, formerly of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, is the person we usually invite to talk about the history of Christian-Jewish relations, which he does in tandem with Dr. Judith Banki from the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding.

### Q: Are there plans to expand the Institute to include Muslim seminarians?

A: CCJU has a couple of different models. One is the Institute. We also do conferences with scholars, both to bring scholars in dialog with one another, and also to use papers that they present to produce scholarship in the field. In that area, we've consistently had Muslim involvement.

The challenge on the level of the Institute is that there is no comparable institutional, seminarian structure in the Muslim world.

When we started doing this 10 years ago, the intention was just to do Christian-Jewish work; there was enough work to be done right there. Over time, and especially since we've started to talk with Muslim scholars in these other models, we've looked at how to begin to bring in a Muslim voice to the Institute. I think the issue is still the same issue, that there's not a comparable system to recruit students out of. There is an experiment on the West Coast, which is an Americanized version of a Muslim seminary.

Then the question becomes: Do you do "trialog," or do you say there's enough to be done between Christians and Muslims, and Jews and Muslims on their own - two extensions of the Institute, rather than trying to jump over all of that history and work that needs to be done tradition to tradition before you get to all three traditions together.

In 2005, we opened a second institute, because we realized that students were coming to us for a year or two, but then that was it. We opened "Colleagues in Dialog," a continuing education in the dialog for clergy. Participants have to have come through the seminarians' program, but once they are ordained and working in a professional setting, we invite them back every year for a separate institute, where they go more in-depth on theological and practical issues. Eighty percent of the participants are repeat visitors; some have been with us since the Institute opened in 1999. The benefit of the program is that they become each other's resource when they're in their congregational settings.

Discussion around the Muslim dialog doesn't come up in the Institute, but you do see it with "Colleagues," because the participants are out there in multi-faith settings, and some are on multi-faith clergy councils.

### Q: How do you see the Institute influencing the curricula of U.S. seminaries?

A: Ten years out from when we started, we're starting to see efforts within the seminaries themselves to try to form their student population to be able to minister in a multi-faith world. Seminaries are beginning to recognize that it's not enough to educate our future clergy in their own faith tradition, but they have to have some exposure to these other traditions. We're not preparing them well enough for the real world if we're not giving them this understanding of the other and some exposure to dialog with the other.

It's beginning to percolate out there. There are all sorts of issues, because these curricula are already overloaded, but they need to teach how to work this part in. The discussion is happening and experiments are taking place and seminaries themselves are becoming more responsive to this area.

JTS is helping to create that understanding of the other. They have a very strong inter-seminarian program with Union Theological Seminary, where students can take courses at each other's seminaries, because the schools are right across from each other; they have extra-curricular dialog groups.

Another example is Hebrew College in Boston, which is on the same grounds as Andover-Newton Theological Seminary and they're also doing some fascinating things in terms of exchange and dialog.

I think that those will be the places that will probably take the lead in terms of interesting curricular and extra-curricular ways of educating for the dialog. The next level will be to help seminaries without that proximity to one another, and that will be more of a challenge. Eventually, do you have a situation where every Catholic seminary has a Jewish scholar on its faculty?

God is in the details, so the rush to the finish line is not the best route, because it's what we're finding out about each other, whether it's good times or times of tension, because of things that went on at the hierarchy level of the Church. But that's where you go deeper. You are in it for the long haul, and there's stuff to be learned in the moment, and there are revelations at those moments, even at the moments when we're not at our best.

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