

## The Value of the Master of Religious Education for Today

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*Dr. Kathy Winings, Vice-President for Academic Affairs at UTS, explains the different degree programs to incoming students.*

In an age of division and strife among various mainstream religions, it would be easy to dismiss the study of religion as somewhat quaint and out-of-touch with the daily barrage of death and destruction filling our airwaves.

In reality, however, it would be wiser to assume that religious studies are precisely the antidote for today's misdirected attempts at promoting one's religion at the expense of God's good name and reputation.

While it may appear insignificant in comparison to current events, the Master of Religious Education (MRE) program at the Unification Theological Seminary (UTS) is a prime example of how religious studies are pioneering new roads in the implementation and practice of both teaching and learning and also interfaith peace building.

The MRE's two concentrations - each a two-year program - allows students to pursue either a path focused on teaching or organizing educational programs in one's Church or faith community: Religious Education; or, pursue inter-religious peace education with the express purpose of building bridges and promoting dialogue, understanding and respect between different faiths: Interfaith Peacebuilding.

The core of interfaith peace building at UTS - which was introduced into the curriculum in the 2005-06 academic year - lies in its three-dimensional approach:

1. peace within the individual
2. peace in the family
3. peace among nations, societies, races, religions, and with the environment.

Students are also required to study two religious disciplines other than their own in this concentration.

At its conclusion, the student will be prepared for various professional educational roles in religious organizations, NGOs (Non-governmental organizations) and the public sector.

"How can we do interfaith really?" mused Dr. Winings, Vice-President for Academic Affairs at UTS. "What we are doing is encouraging students to study something that can be useful. Our concentration on interfaith peacebuilding makes us distinctive in the metropolitan area. It really is a great resource in the marketplace because we all have to live in an international world."

She noted that many businesses are looking for people with knowledge and skills in inter-religious relationships and dynamics.

On the other hand, the Religious Education concentration is designed to provide the individual with a career in the church or faith community as a teacher, counselor, mediator or organizer of vital education programs centered on faith formation, spiritual development or social action.

At the heart of the MRE program is the Religious Education Project that Dr. Winings helped design and implement. For the project the student creates either a mini-thesis or a written project directed “to contribute to the theory, philosophy or practice of Religious Education.”

Projects have included how-to manuals, training manuals, a four-issue, eight page marriage and family education newsletter for families in their community, a study on the use of language by showing the impact positive and negative words have on us that was based upon the ground-breaking work by Dr. Masaru Emoto involving water crystals, and a 10-part, multi-lesson power-point educational program for young adults by a group of Korean students who each took a specific period in the life of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the co-founder of UTS.

“The MRE degree is invaluable for those who are connected to a faith ministry,” said Dr. Kathy Winings. “You can teach in a community college or undergraduate school, lead a youth ministry or Sunday school class; create educational programs; there are many options. There’s also the appeal of personal enrichment as well as further post-graduate study.”

Not long ago the MRE made up only about 10% of the class size, with nearly half of the students enrolled in the Master of Divinity program. With the opening of the Maryland campus last fall, and new trends on the New York City campus, however, that number has jumped to around 36%.

“Our Maryland campus is gravitating toward the MRE, using it for a specific reason. The focus is on specialized types of counseling in the job market. They’re doing pastoral counseling, addiction education and counseling, and marriage counseling. They’re able to integrate specific counseling courses with the MRE’s basic courses.”

Dr. Winings, and UTS, are also on the “cutting edge” when it comes to innovation in the field of teaching and learning, utilizing “neuro-education,” a brain-based scientific approach that emphasizes greater diversity in teaching methods, hands-on learning and practice while de-emphasizing the lecture model. As a former experienced Divine Principle lecturer, Dr. Winings is acutely aware of the strengths and pitfalls inherent in the age-old practice of classroom lecturing.

“There is only about 5-8% retention with lectures, 10% at most,” noted Dr. Winings. “And power point is just a fancy lecture. Ninety per cent retention comes from immediate use of content; practice of new elements increases retention.

“What makes our MRE field of study distinctive is the neuro-education, brain-based teaching theory. Two other adjunct professors also teach some of these courses that we have helped develop in this field, and we’re the only seminary I’m aware of emphasizing this in the metropolitan area.”

With new programs and new types of teaching methods, UTS is positioning itself as a leader which can offer solutions to the recurring problems inherent in today's complex world.