

Capital interns learn to mix faith and policy: Religious organizations sponsor training programs

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Maggie Machledt says she experiences God in her internship at Joseph's House, a community-based hospice for formerly homeless people. The recent Hope College graduate mops floors, does clerical work, cleans bedpans—and on a recent scorching afternoon took some residents out to the National Zoo.

“It just feels really holy being with them at that time, and just seeing where God meets them,” said Machledt of the dying residents.

She and her five housemates at the Bon House, named after anti-Nazi Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, have yearlong Washington internships through the Lutheran Volunteer Corps.

LVC is one of dozens of religious organizations that seasonally turn the capital into a training camp for scores of college students and recent graduates, some of whom visit Capitol Hill to advocate for policies reflecting religious values. The internship programs cross religious and denominational lines.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has three such interns, or legislative assistants. Each commits to two years working on policies related to women's issues, civil rights and religious liberty, or international issues.

Meredith Schonfeld-Hicks, 23, the UUA legislative assistant working on women's issues, helped to organize an interfaith worship service with a coalition of national religious groups concerned with reproductive health issues on International Women's Day last March. They promoted legislation that would authorize money for voluntary family planning programs in developing countries.

The spiritual nourishment of these interns is crucial enough for the UUA that it hired a minister whose sole job is to provide them with pastoral support.

“She helps us answer the tough religious questions like: Is there a God? What is human nature? What is the meaning of life? What happens when I die?” said Schonfeld-Hicks.

Forty students attended this summer’s Washington Seminar of Brigham Young University, a Utah school affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Students attended a political science class on Fridays and interned during the rest of the week for various public offices or nonprofits. Some interned on Capitol Hill for Senator Bob Bennett (R., Utah), Senator Joe Lieberman (D., Conn.) or Representative Jeff Flake (R., Ariz.).

The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism had 35 students in its summer internship program. The interns took a course titled “History of the American Jewish Social Justice Experience” and were placed in various internships through the Jewish Coalition for Service, a national umbrella group of Jewish volunteer programs. The Religious Action Center kept three of the interns for its own offices.

“Working here has helped me to get a better grasp on how obvious it is that Jewish values relate to everyday life,” said Wes Peskin, a junior at the University of Rhode Island, who interned at the center office.

At the United Methodists’ General Board of Church and Society, the Ethnic Young Adult Summer Internship brought together nine students from the denomination’s black, Hispanic, Asian-American, Pacific Islander and Native American caucuses in Washington for the summer. They interned at social justice-oriented nonprofits and explored how intentional diversity can enhance their faith.

“Going to different Methodist churches with very different worship styles has truly [helped] me see, understand and embrace our cultural differences,” Sade Young, a 20-year-old summer intern from Los Angeles, said in a posting on the group’s official blog.

Other Washington organizations with internships include the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the Southern Baptists’ Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington and the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahais of the United States.

Some former interns enter related career paths. “When I started looking into human rights, I was doing it in a very secular way,” said Erick Veliz, a participant in the Methodist program last year. “But I wondered how my activism fit my spiritual vision.” Currently working at a nonprofit in Nashville that focuses on enforcing fair housing laws, Veliz also volunteers as a national board member of Amnesty International, a human rights group.

Megan Joiner was a legislative assistant with the Unitarian Universalists last year and will begin classes at Union Theological Seminary in New York City this fall. “I know that I want to be in the pulpit because I get to talk about the things that matter,” Joiner said. *-Religion News Service*