Toward a Great Commandment campus

Roland Porter Directs Union’s Center for Racial Reconciliation

Campus citizens – the group Mosaic, Greek letter and non-Greek letter organizations, as well as individual students, staff and faculty – are proactively seeking to broaden relationships with people who are racially different from themselves.

Racial reconciliation has practical value beyond obedience to the Great Commandment. It is also preparing students to live and work in a world much different than the place where young Roland Porter grew up. It will be essential for them to interact with people from a wide range of backgrounds and native languages.

“I think that will help us to prepare our students better to go out into a world that is becoming different than the world I grew up in,” said Porter.

But he also observes many do not participate. Otherwise, it’s the status quo. If things are going reasonably well, why bother?

One of Porter’s goals during the Center’s first year is to encourage further diversity in Union’s student population. But the goals don’t end there.

“I would hope people can have more African-American and other non-Caucasian staff,” he says. “I would hope we could have more African-American students in flatsmates and sororities.”

The Center has plans to host “brown-bag” and other gatherings in connection with Black History month, Campus-wide discussions of George Yancy’s book, “Beyond Racial Gridlock” and planned chapel services.

“Toward a Great Commandment” campus: A Day of Community Service

A day of community service was held Feb. 11 with Frank Anderson, pastor of True Light Baptist Church in Memphis as the featured speaker.

“We have to acknowledge that we have been parties to each other’s pain,” said Porter. “If we do that and then say ‘we really want to move forward from here’ we can move forward from here by generally caring for each other.”

Caring strategies are already unfolding at Union.

Roland Porter grew up in a segregated state of Mississippi. “None of that is due to our sinful nature. Otherwise, it’s the status quo. If things are going reasonably well, why bother?”

But even in those discouraging days, he dared to dream of a society with expanding opportunity. “I thought we would have black senators some day. I could see that as a possibility,” says Porter, now associate professor of business in the McAfee School of Business Administration and director of Union’s new Center for Racial Reconciliation.

“I dared not hope for or imagine a black president,” Porter continues. “Obama heard about the American dream, and he believed it fully. I believed it, but with reservation.”

In the election of Barack Obama, Porter sees an important opportunity for American society that has nothing to do with partisan politics. He sees a chance to change the way people from diverse backgrounds get along together.

“We just about have everything we’re going to get, doing what we’ve been doing,” he says. “So, if we want something different, we’re going to have to have something different.”

Porter sees the next step in race relations to be candid and ultimately productive discussions in which people put aside their fears of discrimination and to prevent their recurrence.

Within the Center, the people will develop a model of trust and acceptance. At Union, Porter sees the new Center for Racial Reconciliation as a place where that level of discussion can be encouraged.

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