Case Study for ANZATFE 2015 Number 2

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Jan, the field education director, met regularly with Greta, a young recent college grad who was uncertain of her career path, but trying out college chaplaincy. Jan’s regularly scheduled meeting for theological reflection began with Greta telling her she was feeling really confused. Jan encouraged her to tell her the whole story.

Greta had just recently begun her field education placement with an interfaith campus ministry group at a large urban university. The group met every week for worship in the university’s chapel and then shared a simple meal together. Ordinarily there would be anywhere from three to 10 students present. The students were a ragtag group of “misfits” who found their only sense of community by coming to these meetings. They had a quirky sense of humor, and Greta felt right at home, partly due to her own obsessions with anime and Star Wars. They were a cohesive group, technically hoping for greater attendance, but also really enjoying they had found each other. Greta described the situation in a way that Jan felt showed impressive self-awareness.

Last week, Greta was in charge of planning and leading worship for the group. It was just the second time she had led, and the first time she had done so without her supervisor present. A group of nine students gathered in the small, dimly lit chapel in a circle of chairs around a candle. Among them were only veteran members of the group, and everyone was planning to go out together after worship to view an early screening of the new Star Wars movie. Greta would be going along. By the time they were ready to begin, most of the students had already been chatting in the chapel for awhile so everyone had gotten comfortable. There was a feeling of “home” in the too large college chapel.

Just as Greta was welcoming the students to worship and about to begin the service, a stranger pulled the door open and stepped into the chapel. The man was clearly not a student; the large bag he carried indicated that he was one used to carrying his worldly possessions with him wherever he went, and he wore a heavy winter coat – too heavy for the late fall evening. He appeared to be in his early 40s. At first Greta thought he had simply walked into the wrong room, as several groups met in the various rooms in the chapel building, but he dropped his bag on a nearby chair and asked in a loud voice to speak to the pastor. Greta reports that she felt the students’ eyes turn from the stranger toward her, wondering what she would do.

Clearing her throat and smiling a smile she hoped was both authoritative and benevolent, she stood up and exited the circle of chairs in order to go talk to him near the doorway where he stood. She informed him that the pastor was not there that evening and asked whether she could help him, assuming that he would simply turn and go because the person he had asked to speak to was not present. He said he needed $50 to get a place to sleep for the night. Greta suggested that he could go to the homeless shelter hosted in the basement of one of the local churches, but he said he had tried that before and there was no room. He needed money so he could get a space at a motel. Greta reported she could feel the students’ eyes fixed on the situation unfolding near the chapel entrance. She told him she didn’t have the money but perhaps they could go to the chapel office and make a call to the church’s shelter to make some arrangements or find another place for him to stay the night. He again refused, saying the shelters would not take him in as they had already filled up for the night; he needed the money quickly so he could get to a motel before it, too, filled up. Impatiently he had demanded of her, was she going to help him or not?

Greta asked Jan: What was I to say to or do for this man? What was I to say to or do for the students who had gathered for worship? Greta also reported feeling guilty to perceive this stranger as “invading” their space, and possibly interrupting her exciting social plans for the evening. She had begun to wonder if she really wanted to do this pastor thing.