BEYOND THE MISSION FIELD

Every student in Drew’s Theological School embarks on a cross-cultural trip and a year of supervised ministry. As these four profiles attest, the assignments expose them to new cultures, new practices and new ways of thinking.
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Sullivan and about two dozen of his Theological School classmates spent two weeks in the Sooner State in 2013 for a real-world learning experience, something all seminary students complete before graduating.

The program they chose, “Native American People and Place,” one of many experiential opportunities the Theological School offers, explores how native people have been affected by Christianity, racial prejudice and cultural imperialism. Traveling in a 3,300-mile loop, the group met with members of several western tribes, including the Chickasaw and Yuchi, who shared their histories, cultures and present-day struggles. The students’ goal was to incorporate what they learned into their ministry.

Sullivan and his project partners were shaken by their visit to Fort Sill, a U.S. Army installation about 85 miles from Oklahoma City. Fort Sill, during the era of Custer and Crazy Horse, was home to the famed black cavalry unit dubbed the Buffalo Soldiers. While many of these black fighting men were undeniably brave and heroic, Sullivan says, there was no denying they helped enforce a government-sanctioned ethnic cleansing campaign against native people.

A snapshot taken of Sullivan and his classmates at the Fort is telling. “If you look at the picture, none of us were smiling,” he says. “Their grave expressions speak to the conflicting emotions the visit stirred, and their questions became the basis for their class project.”

Sullivan wondered about the role the first black chaplains played in their work with the Buffalo Soldiers. “What was it that they talked to each other about?” he says. “How did they communicate the faith when folks came back and they were talking about the things that they had to do?”

Sullivan, 44, is still wrestling with those questions. Now an associate minister at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Hackensack, New Jersey, he’s grateful the Theological School places such an emphasis on experiential learning opportunities like the one he had.

“We don’t know it all,” he says, “and if you haven’t spent the time to be with people who aren’t who you are, who are different, who tell different stories, you may be missing a major point of your ministry.”

As an African American, the Rev. Fred Sullivan thought he had a solid grasp of black history. But he confronted an overlooked chapter of that history—the role the Buffalo Soldiers played in the subjugation of Native American tribes during the Indian Wars—during his experience in Oklahoma.
In Ghana, the greeting *akwaaba* means far more than hello. It conveys a bond, a kinship, a sense of community. Kai Greer experienced *akwaaba* in a profound way on a learning experience run by Theological School faculty members.

Titled “Ghana: Bible and Urbanization,” the program examines the interplay of biblical worldviews and transnational migrations in sub-Saharan Africa. Greer and her classmates lived in a small village and learned about Ghana’s culture, economy, and religious traditions in the nearby capital, Accra.

She describes the concept of *akwaaba* as “an overwhelming sense of hospitality” that permeates everyday life in Ghana. “We encountered that from the moment we landed to when we departed,” she says. More than any souvenir, it was that attitude that she most wanted to bring home and share. Greer tries to incorporate the lessons she learned in Ghana into daily life, particularly in her supervised ministry with Mosaic Ministries, a Methodist church initiative that helps support four small congregations in Monmouth County. Greer helps with youth programs, liturgies and a weekly breakfast for the homeless.

She says she often thinks of her time in Ghana—especially the brilliant blue sky, the rich, red earth, the spicy street food. But a year removed from her trip, some of those memories began to fade. So, in March of this year, she returned. She brought her father, the Rev. Dr. H. Ward Greer, who, she says, was eager to experience *akwaaba* himself.

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The Rev. Gerard Jameson suspected that as a black man he might be something of a curiosity to people in Turkey. He was right.

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Early in the trip, he recalls, someone pointed him out on the street and said, “It’s Obama!” He wasn’t a minority; he was an anomaly—an experience he says helped him better appreciate what it means to be a true outsider.

“I’ve never been an ‘other’ so much,” he says. Jameson visited Turkey with other Theological School students, part of Drew’s “Turkey at a Crossroads” program, and met with academics, social activists and Muslim, Christian, and Jewish groups. Their focus was on how Turkish people view and experience diversity and multiculturalism.

“I’ve always had this deep-seated interest in Islam,” Jameson says, explaining why he chose the Turkey program, “especially as it relates to Christianity.”

The following year, while still at Drew, he spent a semester in Switzerland, studying and working with the World Council of Churches. He lived with several dozen students from around the world, and their conversations amounted to another sort of graduate program.

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Now the pastor of two Baptist churches in Baltimore, Jameson, 33, says he often draws on the experiences he had abroad as a Drew student.

“It gives you an opportunity to reflect back, and tap into all of your experiences, because ministry is very experience-based,” he says. “Both of these experiences showed me a lot about who I am.”
Real-World Ministry
Theological School students take 400 hours of training as hospital chaplains—a job that one alumna calls “a spiritual fireman.”

Sebrina Trent T’15 can trace her path to her position as a chaplain at Morristown Medical Center back to a conversation she had with a Theological School classmate. She remembers being struck not so much by the words he was saying—as he told her about his experiences in the school’s clinical pastoral program—as by the passion in his voice, the light in his eyes.

“He was totally engulfed,” Trent recalls.

“He looked like he was satisfied. Like he was living out his calling.”

Trent enrolled in the program, which proved to be as rewarding as it was rigorous. The 400 hours of training she received as a Theological School student at Overlook Medical Center in Summit convinced her this was the kind of ministry she wanted to pursue after leaving Drew.

Today, Trent, 53, is a full-time resident on the pastoral care staff at Morristown Medical Center. She likens the job to being “a spiritual fireman,” rushing from one crisis to the next.

“We’re there to listen, to recognize spiritual strengths, spiritual connections that the patient has,” she says. “You’re there to be a non-anxious presence.”

As Trent and Boram Lim T’14, her colleague at Morristown Medical Center, can both attest, it’s taxing work—physically, spiritually and mentally. Both women say the training they received at Drew helped prepare them for these challenges.

“It’s very intense,” says Lim, 34. “Some calls last for hours, when there’s a big crisis and the family is going through intense emotions. That’s where the chaplain needs to be.”

“When it came time for Chelsea Jackson-Loesch to embark on her year of supervised ministry, she was already working at the United Methodist Church adjacent to campus.

What more could she learn? Quite a lot, it turned out. Working with a faculty supervisor and meeting regularly with a group of congregation members who sat on her teaching committee gave her a fresh perspective on the work she does at the church.

“I’ve found ways to meet people where they’re at,” says Jackson-Loesch, who is 26, “but also, as a leader of the church, how to gently challenge and make sure we’re always improving.”

Jackson-Loesch got real-world practice with the “gently challenge” part when she returned last year from an eye-opening trip to El Salvador with a group of students and faculty from the Theological School. She was eager to share what she had learned about the role the United States played in the civil war that devastated El Salvador for 12 years beginning in 1980. She gave a presentation at the church, hoping to get people thinking about a still-struggling country that America seems to have largely forgotten.

“Drew Theo is big on experiential learning,” she says, “so that you come out a better leader and really just a better thinker. It’s a school that focuses a lot on critical thinking.”

Jackson-Loesch, who is married to fellow Theo student Parker Loesch T’16, hopes to focus on social justice issues after she graduates this spring, perhaps as a community organizer or in some other advocacy role.

“Both my time at Drew and my job at the church have helped me do that, and see how to connect what goes on in the church with what goes on outside of it,” she says, “and hopefully be a bridge.”

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