**Wendt Character Initiative Grant Final Report**

**Training in Courageous Conversations**

**CM-835-01 – D.Min. Crisis in the Church May 2023 Residency**

**Submitted July 12, 2023**

In May one of the University of Dubuque’s Doctor of Ministry cohorts met for their third and final residency. For 2023 their focus has been leadership in the midst of crises of estrangement. As part of equipping in their studies and in their ministries of pastoral leadership, the Wendt Character Initiative supported a workshop with Dr. Allen Hilton, founder of the House United Movement. With experience in both the academy (Yale) and theologically and politically diverse congregations, he now offers trainings and written resources for helping communities bridge polarization.

The 10 D.Min. students and two instructors read Dr. Hilton’s book *House United: How the Church Can Save the World* in preparation. One of his theses is that those across the church must and can relate meaningfully regarding differences – not just because absence of conflict is nice, but because God has woven diversity into the design of creation and the church and we cannot arrive at a good and full appreciation of truth apart from one another. On the Saturday morning of the residency Dr. Hilton zoomed in for a workshop. In the first portion he unpacked the latest research demonstrating how acute the socio-political divide continues to grow - and testimony of how people of good faith, when given a vision and the right tools, can reverse the growing animosity toward respectful, supportive and insightful dialogue. The second half of the workshop included two rounds of training in Courageous Conversations. In this Dr. Hilton paired participants to share with one another in a structured manner the personal experiences, concerns and values that inform their stances on gun control and immigration. In reporting out, people were able to represent their conversation partner’s point of view with sympathy if not agreement.

Following the workshop, Dr. Hilton met with four students individually for consultation sessions on current needs in their ministry contexts.

The student participants are still completing their follow up reflection from their work with Dr. Hilton, including both a written reflection on the text and a 5,000 page paper in which they will be drawing in part upon his writing and leadership. However, even now there is a wealth of feedback that the seminarians have found his thinking and training of both encouragement and practical benefit. Immediately after the workshop the cohort mused that a number of their members would be adjusting their doctoral proposals in order to take advantage of his material. Other applications are emerging over this summer – a book study, introduction of Dr. Hilton’s material and methods in classes and committees. One student represents a church that has been and will be using Dr. Hilton’s theology and methods to be a flourishing “big tent” congregation – it can be done. Finally, Dr. Hilton is being invited back as the seminary’s Warren Lecturer on Tuesday, August 8, 2023 in order to reach a wider audience. He will preach at 11 a.m. chapel, offer a workshop at 2:00, and speak following a dinner at 6:00. Registration is open to all.

The goals of the event were to revive hope for leading in the midst of polarization, to tap solid theology in that, to learn new facilitation skills, and to pay it forward by equipping others to do the same. Selections from preliminary student feedback are below and illustrate the fruit emerging from this offering:

* My church is in transition. Our minister of (many) years retired, and his replacement left after two years. We are fractured, as one long-time parishioner said. As a result, the session has established a compassionate witness team. I am a member of the team. Our job is to meet with members experiencing difficulties with the changes that have occurred in the church. As witnesses, we ask open-ended questions that help the person emotionally sort out in their head what they feel and are experiencing. The witnessing happens through the 5 Cs of Connect, Curious, Compassion, Community, and Encourage. We are encouraged to treat every member with integrity and compassionately.
* To spend a morning with (Dr. Hilton) was invigorating for my thought process. I have long thought that we are a society that continues to talk past one another and are so polarized no one has any interest in finding commonality. In our time together Dr. Hilton provided us resources to have open discussion without judgement. It’s about open communication, not necessarily agreement in positioning. I deeply appreciated that process as it also helped me reconsider how to engage in communication with those who may disagree. I hope to utilize Dr. Hiltons methods to round table discussions particularly around compassion for others. Society is choosing to blame others for positions that are opposing instead of looking for the commonality. This time was very powerful for me!
* As a Christian pastor, I appreciated a redirection of our calling as people who believe in Christ as our Savior. We sometimes forget that we are people who: “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” (Micah 6:8) In Allen Hilton’s book he says that “American Christians are kindling the fire of division in our land.” (50) This made me think deeply about who we are as peacemakers yet also as people who see others inflicting pain and oppression on the least of these. Personally, I seek to be observant in situations where there may be disagreement or conflict to strive to mediate and help others to see things in a different light.
* Although I think I have been a compassionate person through my life, this conversation with Dr. Hilton will reinforce the need for compassionate listening on my part and the part of others no matter what setting. There are increasing numbers of talks across the table that can lead to divisiveness and anger with fists in the air ready for a fight. Church congregations are not without fault. This is an ongoing struggle in churches, government, and organizations that have opposing sides. The conversation with Dr. Hilton helped to put into perspective the need for community respect and integrity for all who are involved. A huge thank you to Dr. Hilton.
* I was moved by the personal concern Hilton showed for (someone) he’d just met. His questions were quick and to the point – surprising. Our discussion of my concerns, especially my ambiguity regarding being seen as introducing conflict in the church, when my intent was simply to help us stop evading/avoiding existing conflict, was personal and encouraging. …that it was so clear to a stranger, gave me pause. It helped me begin to acknowledge ways that I might be able to serve in situations from which I had shied away: am seeing progress in that arena.

Many, many thanks to the Wendt Character Initiative for making this opportunity available to key leaders. In addition to the pastor participants and the churches they represent, we also heard talk of bringing these resources to the judicatory level where the benefits can have further ripples.

Yours in Christ,

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