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Rebranded Hartford Seminary to help businesses include religion in workplace diversity discussion



HBJ PHOTO | TERRY CORCORAN

Joel Lohr, president of the recently rebranded Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, wants to bring religion into workplace diversity discussions.

By Terry Corcoran

A boss who gifts his employees with a bottle of wine may have the best intentions, but a worker who doesn't drink for religious reasons could feel confused or even insulted by the gesture.

The same is true for a company that holds Christmas-themed events: Workers who aren't Christian or even religious might feel slighted or disrespected.

While many workplaces embrace diversity, equity and inclusion, one aspect of DEI that can get overlooked is religion.

It's why the Hartford Seminary — which recently rebranded itself as the Hartford International University for Religion and Peace to reflect its experience with DEI and conflict resolution — will establish a consulting department to make religion part of the workplace DEI discussion.

The consulting service will generate income for the university, a not-for-profit organization that employs 42 full- and part-time workers in addition to seasonal staff.

“If people feel they have to check their religion at the door when they come to work, and they can't be supported in it, or they have a supervisor who, when they ask for a day off for a religious holiday, says, ‘It's a busy time, we can't,’ that can be a problem,” said Joel Lohr, university president. “You want a supervisor who'll say, ‘I know how important this is to you. Let's work this out.’ We're thinking about ways to help businesses, HR departments — the spectrum of workplaces — learn about religious diversity so they can feel more comfortable and confident.”

It also makes good business sense, said Katy O'Leary, the university's director of executive and professional education.



Katy O'Leary

“There's a business case for this when you look at the kind of work environment you want to create, an environment that is attracting and retaining top talent, and is competitive,” said O'Leary, who added consulting and training services are tailored to clients' objectives and priced competitively, including for-profit and not-for-profit rates. “What do you represent to your employees? They have choices and they want to be where they feel they belong.”

The issue of workplace religious diversity has gotten more attention in the last year. In 2020, for example, the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation launched a Corporate Religious Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Index (REDI), which measures the religious inclusion of Fortune 200 companies, including whether they have religious employee resource groups or offer religious diversity training.

Connecticut companies have actually been well-represented on the list.

Bloomfield-based health insurer Cigna ranked No. 7 on the 2021 Fortune 100 index. Insurers The Hartford and Travelers Cos. both ranked No. 10 on the Fortune 200 index.

Overall, the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation concluded that religion stands out as being under addressed by American companies.

‘Creating an atmosphere’

The goal of adding religion into the DEI conversation is that it creates an atmosphere where employees feel welcome and comfortable enough to ask co-workers respectful questions about their faith and beliefs.

“There may be employees in your organization who don’t orient around the traditional cultural type of holidays that the rest of us do,” said Susan Schoenberger, director of communications for the university. “We’re trying to increase awareness so that people say, ‘I never even thought about that.’”

O’Leary tells of a friend and former colleague who is devout Muslim but always kept her religion to herself at work.

“She wishes her young adult children would not have to do that,” O’Leary said. “She wants them to feel more comfortable in fasting and also have managers know that meetings at the end of the day during Ramadan are tough, or that happy hours are not a good invitation.”

O’Leary also knows a Jewish man whose staff felt safe enough to ask him about Yom Kippur, what it means to him and if they could wish him a happy holiday.

“Respectful curiosity is what we’re going for,” O’Leary said. “That’s the kind of climate we can help create.”

The consulting department created a program for UConn entitled, “Faith in the university: appreciating UConn’s multi-religiousness” to help students understand that many different religions and faiths are represented among the student body.

“The purpose is to allow students to have respectful, courageous conversations about the multiple identities of faith we have on campus,” said Nadine Brennan, associate campus director for UConn Hartford.

The department also created a workshop for a healthcare facility so its workers could better understand the different views religions have on death and dying.

Embracing diversity

Lohr, who's been at the university a little over three years, notes the institution's long history of embracing DEI.

"We were the first seminary in the country, in 1889, to welcome women. Nowhere else in the country was a seminary caring or looking at Muslim-Christian relations. We started studying Islam here in the late 1800s," he said.

"This is a place that cares about difference, that cares about diversity."

Lohr said part of Hartford International University's rebranding aims to bring awareness to the Hartford community of what the institution has to offer.

"We're known all over the world but not so much here," he said.

Lohr said the institution's 188-year history has shown that establishing friendships leads to a culture where DEI can thrive.

"We've seen a population of students that's 40% Muslim, 40% Christian, and 20% other — Jewish, Hindu, even non-religious — learn from and with each other and care for each other," he said. "That's a message of hope. That's a message of a world we all long for."