

CIRCLE House Established on Faith Hill: Historic President's House Converted to Interreligious Living and Learning Center

Editor's Note: This piece was written in the fall of 2014. Professor Jennifer Howe Peace is on sabbatical during the Spring 2015 semester.



Jennifer Howe Peace

I walk slowly through the empty house with Celene Ibrahim-Lizzio, our new jointly appointed Islamic-scholar-in-residence and third CIRCLE co-director. Sunlight floods the large, gracious living room. Empty bookshelves line the walls on either side of a green tiled fireplace.

It is a warm June afternoon, but we both get goosebumps because we can see something that is not-yet but already there in our imaginations. We see these rooms filled with students — Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Unitarian Universalist and more. We see the possibility of something new. Something hoped for. A vision of what might be. And we share a deep desire to do what we can to make it so.



Celene Ibrahim-Lizzio

Seven years ago, the Center for Inter-religious and Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE) figuratively opened its doors, ushering in a new phase of institutional commitment to inter-religious education at Andover Newton and Hebrew College. Now, after an historic vote by the Andover Newton board of trustees

in June 2014, CIRCLE will be able to open literal doors with the establishment of CIRCLE house — a center for inter-religious living and learning.

Perched on the hilltop next to the Interfaith Garden on one side and stairs connecting Andover Newton and Hebrew College on the other side, CIRCLE House is poised to become a hub for new and ongoing interfaith activity. A mixed-use model will create space for residents and offices for mission-aligned religious and inter-religious organizations.

With Nick Carter's retirement and new president Martin B. Copenhagen's decision to remain in his family home not far from campus, conversations began about how to repurpose the existing President's House. The idea of creating a vibrant center for inter-religious living, learning, and research for Jewish, Christian, UU and Muslim community members on our hill-top has inspired many in our community for years. Even in the initial proposal to the Henry Luce Foundation, back in 2008, a desire for an inter-religious resource center — a physical space on campus — was expressed. The opportunity to use the President's House for such a purpose has given new life and energy to this longstanding vision.

Not only will CIRCLE house be a space to gather and concentrate the energy of the various interfaith activities that already occur at both Hebrew College and Andover Newton, it will create space for new partnerships. In coming months we will be slowly and intentionally filling the house with individuals and organizations that both share CIRCLE's vision and bring innovative ideas for expanding that vision.

With CIRCLE's commitment to inter-religious learning through relationship building, we have benefited from the institutional parity and physical proximity of Hebrew College's and Andover Newton's neighboring campuses. At the same time, this can make it challenging to expand in authentic ways beyond the Jewish-Christian-UU engagement that has been at the heart of our work. Over the past several years, we have increasingly worked with Muslim community members, including scholars, religious leaders, and practitioners in the greater Boston area interested in inter-religious education and engagement.

Beginning in 2012, we added Muslim community fellows to our CIRCLE fellowship program. The fellowship program provides yearlong inter-religious leadership development opportunities for Hebrew College and Andover Newton students through a competitive application process. Including Muslim community members in this mix has greatly increased the richness of the dialogue and the quality of our inter-religious learning. With the historic joint appointment of Celene Ibrahim-Lizzio, we have another opportunity to deepen these connections. As we populate CIRCLE house, we plan to pay particular attention to creating space for mission-aligned Muslim educational organizations along with new interfaith partners.

We see enormous potential for CIRCLE house as a kind of living laboratory to test models of inter-religious learning and engagement. It creates much-needed community-building space for Hebrew College, Andover Newton, and our Muslim partners. It extends the possibility for new partnerships as community-based organizations doing innovative interfaith and/or Islamic educational work move in. It creates a natural space to host inter-religious events and group meetings. The decision to convert the President's house also signals an ever-deepening institutional commitment to the inter-religious work we are doing on our hilltop.

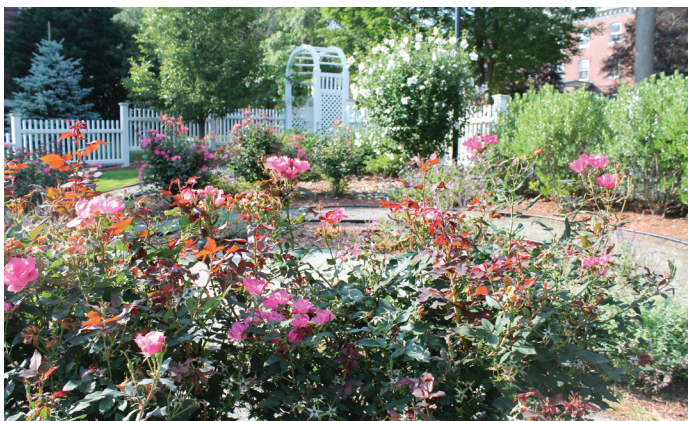
Looking out the window over the rows of bookshelves, I have a view of the Interfaith Garden. Dedicated in 2010, the garden was inspired by Andover Newton student and interfaith pioneer Edie Howe — also my mother-in-law. For so many reasons, I would not be here at Andover Newton, standing in the President's House with goosebumps, if it had not been for Edie. Wanting to honor her work of building bridges across religious



Historic President's House

divides even as she was battling breast cancer, friends, fellow students and family members spontaneously donated money to create what they called informally “Edie’s garden.”

On the stone marker at the entrance to the garden are these words from Isaiah 58:12, “And you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell.”* I can’t help smiling, knowing how happy Edie would be if she could see this new dwelling place dedicated to building connections across religious lines. Even in the midst of daily news about religiously motivated violence, standing in the soon-to-be CIRCLE house, I see a vision of something not-yet but already here; a model for how we might live together, guardians of each other’s well-being, united by our belief in the sanctity of human life and our shared promise to repair the breaches.



“Edie’s Garden”

The Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE)

is a collaborative effort of Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College. CIRCLE’s co-directors are Dr. Jennifer Howe Peace, Assistant Professor of Interfaith Studies at Andover Newton; Rabbi Or Rose, director of the Center for Global Judaism at Hebrew College; and Celene Ibrahim-Lizzio, an Islamic scholar-practitioner who is in the first of a three-year joint appointment at both schools.

Learn more about CIRCLE by visiting www.antshc-circle.org.

In addition to the work of CIRCLE fellows based at Andover Newton and Hebrew College, the program also owns and operates a blog, *State of Formation* (www.stateofformation.org), and a peer-reviewed online academic journal, *The Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* (www.irstudies.org).



Celene Ibrahim-Lizzio, Dr. Jennifer Howe Peace, and Rabbi Or Rose



*Written by the prophet Isaiah in 700 BC, distraught by the violence and chaos he saw around him, these words strike a chord even now as we consider current events. The verse quoted comes at the end of a passage worth ruminating on in its entirety: “Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; You will cry, and He will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you remove the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, And if you give yourself to the hungry, And satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then your light will rise in darkness, And your gloom will become like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you, And satisfy your desire in scorched places, And give strength to your bones; And you will be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. And those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; You will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the breach, The restorer of the streets in which to dwell” (Isa. 58:9-12).