



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



When the Problem Is Where You Live

Nancy Lynne Westfield, Ph.D., *The Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion*

Blog Series: Teaching On The Pulse
October 01, 2023

Like many colleagues, a great joy of teaching is mentoring students into employment. I was well mentored, and I hope I have done well by my students. Recently, I received a call from a former student who has been serving in the local church and now wants to turn their attention to joining a faculty. While enrolled in graduate school, I knew them as a creative, capable, and dynamic student. I was delighted when they wanted to talk about the prospects of joining a faculty. During our conversation, they asked all the right questions and was well-prepared, having studied the school to which they were going to send their application. I knew the school and I thought they would make a good fit with the faculty.

But as we talked, I developed reservations. I realized that the school was in the middle of the country and in a rural section of the state. I asked my former student if they had considered what it would be like to live in such a different culture and be surrounded by such different political climate than the one they had known for the last ten years. With some hesitation, they said that they did not think the location of the school mattered if the position was a tenure track job in their field.

Ugh!

There is more to a successful career than the right job. What of the quality of life afforded to you by the geographic location of the school? Yes, learning to flourish on a faculty requires attending to the professional aspects of scholarship. Equally, or in some cases more

importantly, flourishing also requires attending to the personal and familial aspects of life. Where you reside, where you call home, where you locate yourself and your family is critically important to your teaching and teaching life.

Location matters.

BIPOC colleagues have a particular challenge when trying to live in rural areas, in middle America, or in predominantly white spaces where the police and the neighbors assume you do not belong in those neighborhoods simply by profiling your raced and ethnic body. What do you do when the quality of life within commuting distance of the school is inadequate - inadequate for the needs of your family, or even dangerous?

Racial ethnic colleagues struggle with:

- finding hair salons, barbershops, hair products,
- body care, medical care
- locating foods of their ethnic preference or religious need
- romantic options for socializing
- making friends from similar culture or backgrounds
- adequately prepared schools for children
- jobs for spouses
- religious temples and churches
- gyms and recreational spaces which feel welcoming
- holy day and holiday celebrations

Yes--we can always drive an hour or more for these services and products. But the critical question is--what is the toll upon us and our families when our job location means that we must live in hostile towns, hostile neighborhoods, or in spaces that are not attuned to our cultural identities and needs?

Issues of cultural compatibility, if not thought through, are potentially detrimental to a teaching career.

Consider...

Colleagues who are single or whose families have not relocated are especially vulnerable to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Trying to find community in spaces for which race and cultural identity are in the minority is especially challenging when living alone or apart from family and established relationships.

Colleagues have reported that their children attend schools as "the one and only" of the student body. Children feel isolated, exoticized, bullied and alone.

Colleagues have reported insufficient medical knowledge and medical care for ethnic specific ailments.

Colleagues have reported being afraid when people in the grocery store or hardware store ask, “where are you from?” or “why are you here?” The clear message is that you do not belong here. The message is that the stranger in the community is deemed as being strange.

Colleagues have reported being afraid to vote during elections for fear that they will be targeted for violence since their vote will not align with the popular vote in that town, county, or region.

Colleagues have reported receiving support from school administrators when abused by a local police officer. We are glad for the support from the school, but what does it mean for this colleague to continue to live in a place of fear--where the police are known to violate civil liberties of Black and brown bodies?

In some cases, the locations are familiar enough, and navigable enough, to sustain a modicum of wellness as you work a job at the school. But living in years of being uncomfortable and feeling alone can take a toll. It has a price.

What is at stake if you live in environments that you experience as being harsh, unwelcoming, harmful, or isolating?

I have heard of three kinds of approaches to engaging this complex problem of location:

- Plan for the place where you are uncomfortable to be only temporary; plan to remain in the location for only a short amount of time; plan for the next position where you are more comfortable and know that your discomfort is only for a limited amount of time.
- Develop a new imagination for culture; learn to accept the culture of the new location; find pockets of friends, allies. Learn the nuances of the town, neighborhood and adapt for the long haul.
- Commute - be in the space as little as possible through a hybrid schedule; commuting, digital workspace and flexibility might be a key to survivability. Negotiate at hire to work from home when home is a space of compatibility and safety.

In all cases, home must be a sanctuary adequate to sustain your teaching and teaching life.

By the end of the conversation with my student, I had persuaded them that investigating the town and imagining how they would live there is as important as preparing for the job. I am supporting my student through the interview process. Should they be invited to join the faculty, they will be ready with a strategy of ways to make that place their home.

<https://wabash.center/2023/10/when-the-problem-is-where-you-live/>