

Campus calling: Yale chaplain Sharon Kugler

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

This fall Sharon Kugler began her first academic year as chaplain at Yale University—the first woman, the first layperson and the first Roman Catholic to hold that position . When Yale president Richard C. Levin announced Kugler’s appointment, he called her “one of the nation’s most creative university chaplains.”

One of the stated goals for your chaplaincy is to create an "inclusive sense of community within a religiously plural population." How does one go about doing that?

First, one needs to make sure that people understand what this does and does not mean. It doesn’t mean the blending of all traditions into one, nor does it mean relativism. It does, however, mean relationship. Simply put, it is harder to fear what you have come to know. You start with creative and safe exposure to “the other,” to the stranger. A college campus is the perfect setting to work on crossing that divide and challenging people who might be more comfortable sticking with what is familiar and easily understood.

One of the most successful programs we had at Johns Hopkins, where I was chaplain, was an annual Diwali celebration, a Hindu festival of lights. When the event started in 1994, it was a simple gathering of about 50 Indian students and a few administrators. It has since expanded to draw a crowd of more than 1,500 from many different backgrounds. Orthodox Jews would ask me with great excitement when the next Diwali celebration would be. In it Muslims dance next to Hindus, Hindus next to Catholics, Catholics next to Jews and so on. The Hindus engage in the act of worship known as puja at the end of the evening, and the others, who are no longer strangers, are very respectful of the ritual. Now that is an inclusive sense of community, and it gives me a great deal of hope. When someone can acquire a genuine fondness for another’s tradition and actually long for its return, then you know you’re getting somewhere.

What is it like to assume the post once held famously by William Sloane Coffin?

I can't believe that I will actually be living in the same house that William Sloane Coffin lived in. His legacy has inspired me over the years, and I would be hard-pressed to find a colleague in this field who does not feel the same way. It takes great courage to speak truth to power, and that is exactly what he did. Each of the Yale chaplains tried to read the signs of the times in which they served, and I hope to as well.

What trends have you noticed in working with college students?

The students of today may not be considered activists in the traditional sense of the word, but I do not find it helpful to define *activist* by what that term might have meant 30 or 40 years ago. Today's students arrive already wired for service. For most of them, community service has been an integral part of their educational experience since middle school or at least high school. Students are looking for and are energized by opportunities to serve others quite soon after arriving on campus. They may not think that they can change the world, but they seem to understand that they are in the world, and therefore they seek to place their hands upon it to help.

My goal is to give students opportunities to integrate a social-justice perspective into their faith development or faith identity, and in broader terms to pave the way for further reflection on how those perspectives are realized within our varying religious and spiritual traditions.

What does it mean that you are a lay Roman Catholic woman in a position long held by male Protestant clergy?

This might be a question better answered by others. Personally, it has had no effect on how or why I do my work. There are those who are a bit preoccupied by it, though, which I find interesting—because I have been doing this work for a very long time and have known it to be a true vocation from within a very deep part of me. In many ways it is a “priestly ministry.”

I have never done anything that would lead anyone to think that I am pushing the limits of what is appropriate for a Catholic layperson to do, largely because I have not served, at least in the past 14 years, as a Catholic chaplain. A dear friend of

mine who is an Episcopal priest said to me once that the first time a young person called on me for help and I did not turn away, I was “ordained.” His words were a precious gift to me.

What religious thinkers or writers have played a formative role for you?

There are three in particular whom I carry with me in spirit almost daily. The first is Joan Chittister, who is like a spiritual vitamin pill for me. I rely heavily on her daily meditations. She has remained a faithful Catholic who is lovingly vocal about what could be possible for the church we both love. Another is theologian Raimon Panikkar, because of the unique way he understands the nuances of interreligious engagement. He tries to get people to see that they don’t stand alone in the center of meaning; in the end it is all about humility and love. I would also mention Howard Thurman, because of his soulful sense of justice and intellectual strength that holds as much relevance for our world now as it did decades ago. When I am looking to feed my soul, I look to Howard Thurman.