

Lunching with Scholars

By Timothy Chang, Rice University '16

Prior to the “Religious Responses to Human Trafficking” event on the evening of the 24th of October, several members of the RPLP team had the opportunity for an informal lunch at Benjy’s Restaurant in Rice Village with the evening’s keynote speakers, Prof. Richard Flory, Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern California and Prof. Kimberly Hoang, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Boston College. Joining the scholars and members of the RPLP team were twelve representatives from different congregations and faith-based organizations in the Houston area. The lunch facilitated the efforts of the RPLP team to encourage public sociology--connecting the world of academics with members of the broader community.

The luncheon began with Prof. Elaine Howard Ecklund outlining the mission and goals of the Religion and Public Life Program. Attendees flanked two long tables, each headed by one of the guest scholars. Julie Aldrich, RPLP’s Associate Director, welcomed those present and briefly introduced Flory and Hoang. Almost immediately after Julie completed the welcoming remarks, attendees quickly began engaging with one another over a delicious meal. Given the nature of the larger event scheduled that evening, conversation centered on human trafficking and, specifically, the research and experiences of Flory and Hoang.

Bringing in the local culture and tradition of their fellowship, many of the religious leaders took the luncheon as an opportunity to see how their anti-human trafficking ministries could grow from each other’s experiences, as well as the

knowledge and expertise provided by our guest scholars. While talking with Hoang, Reverend Linda Shelton from Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church brought up how Palmer was focusing on expanding their ministry on fighting human trafficking. One of the challenges, she noted, was connecting the issue of human trafficking to the congregation as a whole, while still maintaining a crucial emphasis on workable solutions. Others, like Brad Fuerst, the Lutheran Campus Minister at Rice University, used the luncheon as an opportunity to expand their personal understanding of the complexities of the issue of human trafficking by drawing on the expertise of the guest scholars.

Conversations among different religious leaders, scholars, and RPLP members also covered areas outside of the topic of human trafficking. Many attendees were interested to hear of the work that Pastor Harvey Clemons and Pleasant Hill Ministries are doing to continue the revitalization of Houston’s Fifth Ward. Additionally, several members asked Ecklund and the research fellows about the work of the RPLP, allowing us to continue our mission of connecting the discoveries and understanding gained through the research of the Religion and Public Life Program to the broader religious community. An insightful prelude to the evening’s events, the RPLP Luncheon allowed a diverse group of religious leaders to engage in thought-provoking discussions with guest scholars and one another, and facilitated the way for a successful “Religious Responses to Human Trafficking” event later in the evening.