Reflection on Experiences as CEDAR Fellow
by RPLP visiting research fellow Rachel Schneider

This summer, I had the privilege of participating as a fellow in the Communities Engaging with Difference and Religion (CEDAR) Program. CEDAR is an organization dedicated to helping people learn to live with difference, particularly religious difference. Throughout the year, CEDAR runs several programs that bring people from around the world to learn about what it means to build civil society without denying difference. This year's summer school was based at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas. It was focused on the theme of hospitality and the stranger.

For two weeks, I lived with a diverse mix of academics, students, activists, and NGO leaders. Our group spanned a wide range of religious affiliations, including Christian and Muslim, and came from places like Romania, Kosovo, Uganda, Tajikistan, and different regions of the United States.

Through group discussions, lectures, and site visits, our group reflected on what it means to build inclusive, welcoming societies and work towards the common good. Our itinerary allowed us to hear from groups like Ma'ruf, a Muslim organization working to resettle refugees in Dallas, and RAICES in San Antonio, which provides legal services to refugees and immigrants in Texas. One highlight for me, given my research on religion and race, was wrestling with the legacy of colonial missions in San Antonio.

While not always easy or comfortable, what I learned through my CEDAR experience is how important it is not to make assumptions. Part of CEDAR's philosophy is that we cannot build civil society without first confronting our differences. Inevitably, difference will produce discomfort, but discomfort is not the same thing as danger. The more we can distinguish between the two and learn to live with discomfort, the more we can build hospitable communities for all.

CEDAR allowed me to experience this process firsthand. In learning about the various ways Texas churches, universities, and organizations navigate the challenges of difference, our group was able to critically reflect on our own communities and learn from one another. Over time, we discovered that it was indeed possible to acknowledge our differences while facing common challenges and questions together.

I met my fellow CEDAR participants as strangers. I left with new colleagues and friends.