Faith and the liberal arts

Birmingham-Southern educates students as whole persons by teaching the liberal arts. In fact, it takes a lot of faith just to attend a liberal arts college, says Birmingham-Southern’s longtime chaplain and now Dean of the Chapel Dr. Stewart Jackson.

“To come here, you have to think critically, be historically aware, be artistic, be scientifically challenged . . . this college trains you in more than the immediate kinds of things you need to get a job. You learn to think, solve problems, and see the other person’s point of view,” he says.

“We are a secondary educational institution, and we are not in the business of shaping our students’ views of the religious world,” he continues. “We are in the business of teaching them how to think about it.”

Wesley, Methodism’s founder, read widely in both secular and religious literature, drawing upon scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in formulating a broad worldview. In the Wesleyan tradition, free inquiry is the central educational task. Birmingham-Southern therefore encourages the expression of diverse faiths in a community committed to academic freedom, justice, and common pursuit of truth.

Jackson has seen the faith community on campus grow and transform since he came to the college 24 years ago.

“There has been a long, gradual transformation from a white, Christian-only school to a multi-faith college. While the majority of our students are still from the Methodist tradition, our campus community includes Southern Baptists, Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, a smattering of Lutherans, and a growing population of Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Jain (an originally Indian faith blending Hinduism and Buddhism) followers. And, we have approximately 10 percent of our students who list ‘no preference’ as their religious affiliation,” Jackson explains.

“The important thing is that we strive to help all students see their college experience as part of their faith development and journey.”

Religious life thrives

Students at BSC have no problem finding opportunities for practicing their faith.

A meaningful college experience is marked by relationships, discovery, and transformation. This experience takes place in and out of the classroom, and the college’s Office of Religious Life staff supports students undergoing these profound changes by offering opportunities for fellowship and safe spaces to seek new questions and answers.

“It is gratifying to see the progress that has taken place in this area over the years,” says Berte. “For a lot of reasons, when we came in the mid-1970s, we did not have a chaplain, there was no director of church relations, no weekly worship services available in Yeilding Chapel. It is exciting and inspiring that we now have five different worship services a week including several faiths and denominations. We have a dean of the chapel, a full-time chaplain, a director of church relations. I think those are very tangible commitments on the part of the college to our church-relatedness.”

Jackson, the dean of the chapel, and Rev. Brian Erickson, college chaplain, along with a team of four campus ministers, comprise the religious life staff. While each campus ministry represents its particular denomination, every member of the religious life staff works to create community and cooperation between the various groups.

Jackson oversees the work of the Interfaith Religious Life Council, comprised of members of every faith tradition on campus. The council operates under the Religious Life Code of Ethics, created to respect each student’s opportunity to develop his or her own faith. Jackson also works closely with the Counseling Center, offering one-on-one pastoral care to students seeking support and guidance.

Erickson, as chaplain, works through worship, small group study, and individual mentoring to nurture the spiritual development of the college community.

Opportunities for faith practice at Birmingham-Southern:

- Chapel at Six every Monday night in the Yeilding Chapel
- Wesley Fellowship—weekly
- Catholic Campus Ministries—twice monthly
- Baptist Campus Ministries—weekly
- Episcopal Campus Ministries—weekly
- Intervarsity Christian Fellowship (non-denominational)—weekly
- Covenant Bible Study—weekly
- Discipline Group—weekly for 10 weeks each semester
- Fellowship of Christian Athletes—twice monthly
- Interfaith Room in Hanson Residence Hall—available daily, 24 hours a day

Jackson and Erickson also serve as pastoral leaders for the wider campus community, offering occasional prayers and invocations to mark transitions in the life of the college. These prayers, while offered by Christian pastors, are intended to foster a sense of campus-wide inclusiveness through both language and spirit.

In 2000, an Interfaith Room in Hanson Residence Hall was made available for non-Christian students so that they could have a place to worship and practice their faiths.

After 9-11, members of the Birmingham-Southern campus community shared mutual sympathy and grief. Students of many faiths came together expressing their feelings in their own personal ways.