Religion majors and minors on the rise

Due in some part to the comprehensive faith environment on campus, the number of religion majors and minors at Birmingham-Southern has more than quadrupled in the past three years, going from nine students in 1999 to 42 today. Dr. Larry Brasher, Denson Franklin Professor of Religion, also credits that increase in part to a trend going on nationwide.

“Beginning in the 1990s, there has been a gradual increase in young people choosing to study religion. I think part of that is a pendulum swing of the culture. In the ‘60s, social involvement and concern for the political and economic welfare of the whole population of the country and world issues related to that were very much in the forefront. Much of the activism of the ‘60s was rooted in religion; for example, the civil rights movement actually came out of the black church. There was a marriage of social activism and religion during that time. In the ‘70s and ‘80s, there was a drift away from that among college-age students especially. People were interested primarily in making money, and the whole yuppie culture surfaced in the ‘80s,” Brasher says.

“At the same time, religion departments across the country saw a downturn in the number of students. Today, I think we’re seeing a burgeoning interest in religion, especially coming out of a period when the culture has been awash with materialism and competitiveness and getting ahead in one’s career. Religion deals with ultimate meanings of existence; it touches our deepest questions.”

Brasher also says that being in the Bible Belt means that a large percentage of BSC students come out of traditional faith backgrounds in their family and church communities, so that there is a natural interest in the subject.

But perhaps even more important, he says, is “the unique combination of people and programs on the BSC campus that make the offerings that we have here in religion unusually rich.”

“We have a fine religion faculty, but in fact, we are in critical need of more faculty in religion. We can’t even handle the number of upperclassmen trying to get into religion classes, so the freshmen are almost completely shut out. All of our courses are filled to overflowing.”

Dr. Roy Wells, professor of religion at BSC since 1967 and a 1957 graduate of the college, believes that the increase in students studying religion is based on an educated middle class that has become increasingly interested in understanding their faith, as well as a need to fill church pulpits.

“I sense that among the laity there is a desire to know more about their faith. There also is more recruitment for ministers within the different denominations. There were many ministers who started working in the ’50s and ’60s and they are coming to the ends of their careers. Churches need ministers to fill those pulpits,” he says.

“There has been an old tradition at Birmingham-Southern that the motive of an education from the college was to give a good academic education to those preparing for the ministry and I don’t think that has changed at all. Anyone who receives a degree from Birmingham-Southern, whether it is in religion or not, is prepared for study at any seminary in the country,” he adds.

Of the 42 students majoring or minoring in religion, Brasher estimates that approximately 30 are committed to some form of church, medical, or counseling ministry. A few hope to teach religion at the college or graduate level. “There are about 12 non-religion major/minor students who also are planning on going to seminary, but with history, business, and other degrees from BSC,” he says.

Brasher says that the goal of the Religion Department is not to proselytize, but to teach the critical study of religion. The department offers a variety of courses in Biblical studies, religious thought, ethics, and history of religion to aid students in interpreting the religious dimension of life. Focusing on the critical study of religion, classes create an inclusive and open-minded atmosphere in which students are encouraged not only to analyze religion, but also to make connections between their learning and their own experience. Recognizing that the study of religion often coincides with the search for vocational identity, religion faculty are available to counsel and advise students who wish to pursue graduate studies in religion or who are considering church ministries or other vocations.

In 2000, the department saw the addition of Bishop Robert C. Morgan as bishop-in-residence at the college. Morgan, a 1956 graduate of the college and a BSC Trustee, has served four pastoral appointments in North Alabama, five years as a district superintendent, and is former president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops, the highest elected office in the church. He teaches...