Religious Life 101

“Where Faith Seeking Understanding connects with Life”

These words accompanied every piece of correspondence and most materials produced by the Young Harris College Office of Religious Life during the 2009-2010 academic year. This phrase was adopted early in the academic year to frame the office’s thinking and the ministry’s programming.

This phrase, an elaboration on Anselm of Canterbury’s famous maxim, supplies a concise summation of the office’s three-fold ministry. First, Religious Life is an exploration of faith, both one’s personal faith and larger ideas of faith more generally described. Second, Religious Life is an intellectual exercise, pressing preconceptions and uncritically adopted beliefs. Third, Religious Life must be practical, engaging the world in ministry and service.

Seeking to integrate and expand these three areas of ministry and fill in some of the details of the portrait of Religious Life within that frame, the office organized all its programming around these three areas.

Faith and Spiritual Life

Many student-led and student-focused ministries continued to flourish, including the Wesley Fellowship, Baptist Collegiate Ministries and Bible Study. New programs were also welcomed, including Athletes in Action, a revived Newman Club for Catholic students, Souled Out drama ministry and 24/7 Prayer ministry. The year began in Fall 2009 with more than 70 students and staff attending the annual Spiritual Life Retreat at Camp Glisson for a wonderful weekend of faith, fellowship and fun.

As in years past, weekly chapel services were held on Wednesdays guided by the year-long theme, “I See All Things New,” which helped shape weekly messages, ranging from seeing strangers and family anew to seeing war and the environment anew. Many special guest preachers joined these chapel services, sharing their unique insights into how faith lets us see and expects us to act anew.

This year, chapel also went on the road. Well, not quite on the road. On several Wednesdays, the ministry traveled from spot to spot on campus, worshiping in O. Wayne Rollins Planetarium, residence halls, outside in the Enotah Hall amphitheatre, in Dobbs Theatre, in Myers Student Center and Grace Rollins Campus Restaurant. This “road show” was designed to take worship to the people and remove the potential obstacle created by having worship in a space felt too unfamiliar to some for their expression of faith.

Tuesday morning prayer services and Thursday afternoon communion services were added this year, regularly attracting small dedicated groups of faculty, staff and students, and helping to celebrate momentous days in the church calendar with special worship services, commemorating All Saints’ Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. The year culminated in the College’s ritual hike to Brasstown Bald and sunset vespers service on the eve of commencement.

Intellectual Exercises

Challenging faith and our intellectual lives, a panel discussion was held on concepts of atonement and salvation.

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Serving on the panel were a United Methodist minister, a Catholic priest, a Jewish lay rabbi and a leader in the Atlanta Muslim community. The evening’s discussions were complex but encouraging.

In addition to events like the panel discussion, the Hard Quest Group was formed and includes a bi-weekly physical gathering and a constant virtual community on Facebook. That group, consisting of faculty, staff and students, met and communicated regularly to discuss issues including abortion, the environment, same-sex marriage, the existence of God and more engaging and elusive topics.

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Engaging the World in Ministry and Service

The Office of Religious Life planned and served with several local mission events, including a volunteer workday at Hinton Rural Life Center in Hayesville, N.C., a Martin Luther King, Jr. day of service, and an Earth Day of service. Nearly 100 boxes were collected for Operation Christmas Child; over 100 emergency hygiene kits for Haiti earthquake relief were assembled; and letters were written to political representatives about current human trafficking legislation.

During the spring semester, the Office of Religious Life gathered an offering and planned events to fight human trafficking by teaming up with the organization Not for Sale, a non-profit corporation that attempts to identify and shut down trafficking rings around the world and support victims of human trafficking.

Weekly iChapel blog posts distributed electronically across the campus community linked all of this programming together. These “virtual chapels” invited all the campus into the Religious Life experience, preparing the YHC community for formative thinking and conversations.

These activities and programs paint just part of the picture. The more than 200 students that participated weekly in Religious Life programming and the countless faculty, staff, community members and church leaders who shared in this work offer the brightest, most vivid details of this year’s ministry. As the portrait exhibits, Religious Life has much to celebrate but still more to do.

Welcome FROM THE CAMPUS MINISTER

Something is only first once. Those firsts can be memorable: a first day of school, a first car, a first kiss. This past year was filled with firsts. The 2009-2010 academic year at Young Harris College marked our first as a four-year college in nearly a century, our first year occupying our new environmentally friendly residence hall—Enotah Hall, our first year with late-night dining in the Grace Rollins Campus Restaurant and my first year as YHC campus minister. At the end of first academic year, we have one more first to celebrate: the creation of our first Office of Religious Life newsletter.

A campus minister’s job is multifaceted. We preach at chapel, go to meetings, plan retreats, work with students, pray with faculty and minister with staff. One important part of my job is connecting the mission and ministry of the College with the mission and ministry of the larger church. In my thinking, this is not just part of my job, but an essential part.

Over the coming years, I hope to deepen and strengthen that connection through a variety of offerings: by providing on-campus continuing education events for pastors, by offering vocational discernment programs for students exploring calls to ministry, by opening our campus for church youth camps and retreats in the summer and by sending student interns to work in churches and other church-related institutions. This newsletter is our first effort at strengthening our connection with you.

Published twice a year, this newsletter will contain summaries of the College’s Religious Life programming and alert you to upcoming opportunities where we might share in ministry. I look forward to staying in touch through this newsletter and to our expanding work together. For more regular contact, join our Facebook group (Young Harris College Religious Life) or follow my weekly blog (www.icChapel.wordpress.com).

Let’s stay connected!

Rev. Dr. Tim Moore
Campus Minister
In Christian theology, we regularly turn to biblical texts as the first stop in the long, creative process of articulating doctrine. Often, we turn and return to particular texts, as those particular texts provide a rich resource that is abundant in insights and that informs divergent yet indispensable theological positions. Many analyses of these texts and the positions they underscore are ancient, supplying the foundational claims for central doctrines. Yet, when a separate or new issue arises about which the church has less frequently or never definitively spoken, theologians will, again, turn to these seminal passages, extrapolating a new doctrine from ancient doctrines emergent from these primary interpretations.

The above text from Genesis is just such a text, poured over and sifted through for the seed of such pivotal and ancient doctrines as the Trinity and the imago dei (i.e., our being created in the image of God). In more recent years, theologians have turned to this text as a means to imagine how we might speak to issues of ecology. Frequently at question is how to deal with our being conferred “dominion” over creation.

Does having dominion mean domination? Does having dominion mean humanity is justified in exploiting the environment for whatever (short-term) benefit might be gained? Unfortunately, more times than can be recounted, the answer to these questions has been “yes.” Yet, such a reading of the text is only a partial interpretation of the text. The text provides a balancing, additional source for theological guidance.

Returning to those two pivotal and ancient doctrines possibly alluded to within the text (i.e., the Trinity and the imago dei), we find the governing concepts for what it might mean to have dominion. If (1) the concept of the Trinity speaks to the character of God and (2) the concept of the imago dei speaks to the derivative character of humanity relative to that character of God, then transitive logic suggests an indelible, essential correspondence between who God is as Trinity and who we are as persons created in God’s image.

If, as many have understood the doctrine of the Trinity to suggest, God’s unique character is to be simultaneously both uniquely one while corporately many, then God is an essentially and intimately intertwined sociality. In technical language, God’s character is expressed perichoretically. In more accessible language, God is one while, also, many. Moreover, if we are created in that image, then quite possibly, we, too, exist fundamentally as corporate individuals.

Such a doctrinal notion places a great deal of significance on our sociality and the social systems generative of and created by our sociality. Further, the care for those systems becomes paramount because those systems must exist in order that we exist. Said more positively, such care seems a natural outgrowth of our own recognition that systems are essential to all life and that having dominion is more about responsibility for those systems and sustaining those systems than it is the exploitation of those systems. Such exploitation would be out of character for a people who understand their very essence to be wrapped up in the sustained presence of systems.

Because of this possible essentiality of systems within Christian doctrine, I have entitled this piece a “theology of ecology.” Ecology is the study of systems; the study of the interrelatedness of various things. Interestingly, if not purposefully, the word “ecology” derives from the same Greek root for our word “church,” oikos.

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The church is understood to be a vibrant, diverse, dynamic yet singularly interconnected entity. (As Paul reminds us, the church is, after all, one body with many members.) In other words, while we discover the very essence for what it means to be the church, we also discover what it means to be ecological. For Christian theology, this means that being interested in and passionate about the environment should be a natural and inevitable outcome.

All people, regardless of our faith commitments, would benefit from such a shift in emphasis away from “dominion as domination” toward “ecology of care.” If the excerpt from the creation story previously cited narrates anything, it is the reality that we are, literally, in this together, and creation care is our common concern.

If the church and institutions of the church like Young Harris College are to be faithful to our created imaginings, then we must be environmentally responsible, engaging proactively in social and political systems seeking to care for creation.

This complicated and important topic is rapidly gaining attention both inside and outside the church.

To read more about theology, ecology and the Christian faith, I recommend finding an essay by Wendell Berry. If you are to read just one essay, I would read his “Christianity and the Survival of Creation” in his collection *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*. While profound and provocative, Berry’s work remains eminently accessible. Being a novelist, his essays are a pleasant encounter.

If you want to push a little deeper into both Berry’s work and the theological issues underlying and encompassing conversations about the environment, try Norman Wirzba. Wirzba is both an excellent theologian and an expert on Berry. In analyzing Berry’s thoughts, Wirzba supplies theological depth and language to Berry’s engaging prose. As an initial read, I recommend Wirzba’s *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*. While these readings are just two of the many works in this expanding area of theological inquiry, these two authors provide useful avenues into this vexing world of conversations about faith, creation and our proper role.

To ask questions, comment or further discuss this topic with Dr. Moore, email him at tsmoore@yhc.edu.
Several Young Harris College students chose to spend their spring break in Washington, D.C., this past spring, taking part in a transformative and empowering mission trip along with YHC Campus Minister Rev. Dr. Tim Moore and Senior Admissions Counselor Julianna Barron, March 7-12. The vision of the Office of Religious Life at Young Harris College is to foster an environment where faith seeking understanding connects with life, and the spring break trip fell directly within the sightline of that vision. Made possible by a grant from the Chatlos Foundation, the trip gave the students an opportunity to learn about how to end and prevent human trafficking in the United States and to learn more about Not for Sale, a non-profit corporation that attempts to identify and shut down trafficking rings across the country and support victims of human trafficking.

Earlier in the academic year, the Inter-Religious Council (IRC), a student group responsible for helping oversee religious life at YHC, met to discuss what issues interest students and what students might be interested in for a spring break mission trip. The group made several suggestions, including the issue of human trafficking. Dr. Moore pursued the various suggestions made by the students, ultimately deciding on a trip to Washington, D.C.

The group stayed at First United Methodist Church in the D.C. suburb of Hyattsville, Md., while participating in a two-day seminar hosted by the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, an agency that seeks to empower college students to take actions to reshape society. The seminar was held at the United Methodist Building, a large complex located beside the Supreme Court and across the street from the Capitol Building. It is also the only non-governmental building on Capitol Hill.

Susan Burton, the director of the program, helped arrange a seminar that consisted of informational sessions on the issue of human trafficking, group discussions and meetings with various agencies working to end both domestic and international human trafficking. The seminar drew heavily upon the scriptural witness of prophets like Amos and Micah and the gospel witness of Jesus both to generate and to underscore the rationale for the work. Additionally, experts in the area of human trafficking described the present and unpleasant reality of domestic and international human trafficking. Two organizations sent representatives to speak directly with the YHC group including Men Can Stop Rape and National Consumers League.

The seminar also included trips to agencies including Shared Hope, an organization that rescues and restores women and children in crisis, and International Justice Mission, a global organization that works to prevent human trafficking, primarily focusing on third world countries.

The group also attended a fundraising informational dinner for Courtney's House, a local Washington, D.C.-based agency that provides a safe home, education and restorative environment for children who are victims of trafficking. The YHC students also met with U.S. House Representative Paul C. Broun and U.S. Senator Johnny Isakson to discuss the issue of human trafficking and upcoming Senate bills regarding the issue. These meetings were emotional, informative and, hopefully, transformative.

The seminar closed with the opportunity for the Young Harris College group to participate in art. In an initial effort to help move the students' knowledge and newfound concern from internal emotions to external expression, local poet and community activist Quique Aviles addressed the students. He explained his work with marginalized constituencies of Washington, D.C., and how art provides a voice to express internal frustrations and concerns. The theory behind his work is that once voiced through art, participants will be empowered to express their feelings at other venues and in other constructive ways.

“The experience was inspirational, educational and shocking. Learning about sex trafficking opened up our eyes to a whole secret world, and having the opportunity to make a difference was amazing,” said then-sophomore music major Lizann Weisssinger, of Tucker. “We have to realize that the battle is not over, and this trip helped us understand how big the problem of human trafficking really is and that it will take much more involvement for a solution to this very disturbing problem.”

Although the week was primarily devoted to missions work, the students also had the opportunity to spend several hours each day touring the city and taking in the historic sites of the nation's capital.

“Members of our group went to museums, skated at the Smithsonian ice rink, toured the Capitol building, took in the botanical gardens, rode the elevator to the penthouse viewing lounge of the Bank of America building and walked to the White House to see if the President was home,” Dr. Moore said. “Each night, we gathered at our church home to catch our breath, reflect on the day's work and pray.”

Then-sophomore business and public policy major James Tripp, of Fayetteville, called the trip “an amazing experience.” He continued, “It was so great to see how just a few students from Young Harris College could make even the smallest difference.”

Upon returning to YHC, the students began the effort of turning their knowledge into action by holding a special chapel service in which the group shared their stories and also by writing letters to state and federal representatives.
Kyle Hatley, a rising senior biology major from Kennesaw, was one of 30 students in the country selected to participate in Common Ground: Interfaith Engagement and Environmental Responsibility, a summer program co-sponsored by Andover Newton Theological School, Hebrew College and Yale University at the Incarnation Conference Center in Ivoryton, Conn., June 7-11.

This innovative pilot program brought together a diverse group of college and seminary students interested in the relationship of environmental responsibility and interfaith cooperation. The program was a week-long summer camp experience for 15 college students and 15 seminarians representing diverse religious and spiritual traditions.

“My hope is that Kyle will not be the only one to benefit from this experience; I hope our entire religious life program will benefit from this summer’s experience, challenging us all to engage more intentionally and authentically with faith and the wonderful intersection of faith and reason,” said Rev. Dr. Tim Moore, YHC campus minister.

A five-day retreat experience, the Common Ground project included exploration of sacred texts and contemplative practices, scientific research and models of effective interfaith action. Learning took a number of different forms, including classroom learning, guided nature walks, artistic explorations and service learning.

Time was spent together as a whole group and in various smaller groups, including seminarian and undergraduate cohorts and intrafaith groupings. A team of experiential educators served as the core faculty with guest scholars, activists and artists joining the program for specific experiences. Core faculty members will continue to mentor participants throughout the upcoming academic year.

“The chance to study with leading scholars from such prestigious institutions while immersed in that diverse and dynamic environment cannot help but be transformative,” Dr. Moore said.

Core faculty for the program included Abdullah Antepli, Duke University’s first Muslim chaplain, Sharon M. K. Kugler, university chaplain of Yale University, Jennifer Howe Peace, the managing director of the Center for Interreligious & Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE) and Or N. Rose, associate dean of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College and co-director of CIRCLE.

“It was an honor and a privilege to be part of the Common Ground project this summer,” Hatley said. “The time I spent in Connecticut was great. I was able to meet new people with different perspectives and learn how different religions can work together to maintain the beauty of God’s creation.”

Kyle Hatley

Young Harris College is a college of the church. As such, one of the primary tasks of the Office of Religious Life is to align its mission and work for the benefit of the larger mission and work of the church and the kingdom. To further this alignment in Fall 2010, the office will offer continuing education events for ministers.

These once-a-semester workshops will address current issues and skills development relevant for ministering in today’s evolving and dynamic cultural climate. Educational themes will be identified by workshop participants, and YHC staff and faculty with expertise in those subject areas will design and lead the workshops. Lasting approximately five hours, the on-campus events will begin in the morning with light snacks and a greeting followed by a session led by the workshop leader. Participants will gather for a meal at the conclusion of the workshop.

The first workshop, scheduled for Thursday, Sept. 23, will focus on new forms of media and communication for reaching new generations for the church. Assistant Professor of Communication Studies Nicholas Bowman, Ph.D, will lead this first workshop. For more information, contact The Office of Religious Life.