

## **Instituting Change in the Spiritual Make-up of a University: The Case of Yale University**

**By Martha C. Highsmith**

Founded in 1701, Yale University's origins are steeped in religion. The original Charter, an important governing document to this day, identifies Yale as a place where youth "might be fitted for Publick (sic) employment both in Church & Civil State." The founders – a group of local congregational ministers – could not have foreseen the evolution of their "collegiate school" from a small parochial institution to a large university with global reach. And while they envisioned a continuing and central role for religion, they certainly could not have imagined the rich diversity of religious expression found on campus as Yale enters its fourth century.

Two years ago, the President and Officers of the University decided that Yale should assess its religious life initiatives for the purpose of creating the most vibrant programs of spiritual formation available in higher education. We invited a distinguished group of clergy, chaplains, and educators from a variety of backgrounds, representing Christian, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim traditions. (see note 1 below) This Committee was asked to create a new vision for how Yale could more ambitiously support the full range of religious beliefs on campus. In addition, we also sought a plan for strengthening Christian worship life on campus.

The Committee took up these initial questions with dedication, thoroughness, and creativity. Through this process, the Committee's recommendations focused on three major areas: (1) religious ministry to students from a variety of faiths; (2) worship at Yale; and (3) Yale's Chaplaincy program. The University's action in each of these areas is summarized in the sections below.

### **Religious Ministry to Students From a Variety of Faiths**

Consistent with its historic traditions, Yale has long provided religious ministry to Christian Protestant students. In more recent years, vibrant ministries were created supporting both Roman Catholic and Jewish students. As part of its mandate, the Yale Committee was designed to bring greater attention to the particular needs of religious groups besides those of the Christian and Jewish communities. The University has begun providing support for religious practice

to other groups that do not yet have the extensive and externally supported ministries of the Catholic and Jewish centers. These actions include providing a location and food, including halal meat, for Muslim students to break fast together during each evening of Ramadan. (Dining hall managers asked our Muslim students for family recipes and provided “home cooking” for these meals.) University assemblies, that have traditionally including prayers, hymns and participation from Jewish and Roman Catholic chaplains, are being redesigned to include more of a multi-religious presence. The challenge in this redesign has been to retain a service with integrity and dignity appropriate to the occasion, rather than presenting a smorgasbord of offerings that translate as individual performances. The approach we used for the most recent Baccalaureate services was to invite students who are leaders within the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim campus communities to read responsively from a shared sacred text. This year, three students read from Psalm 8, with accompanying program notes about the designation of the text in each of the three faith traditions.

Even with a small staff in the Chaplain’s Office, Yale had already introduced a variety of multi-faith activities and programs. As a way of expanding these services, we have reconfigured and increased our staffing. In addition to our University Chaplain, there will be two associate chaplains to our existing staff. One of the associates will work with multi-faith matters, and the other will be responsible for University Public Worship and related ecumenical programming. The associate chaplain for multi-faith matters will convene our association of campus ministers, known as Yale Religious Ministries, will continue to work with the group of student leaders that comprise our Multi-Faith Council, will take the lead role in planning multi-faith worship services and programs, and will provide support to student groups who do not have campus ministers or chaplains.

Even as we address how to provide adequate structural support to a diversity of religions, we are also planning ways to bring our religious community together as a whole. We will continue sponsoring a program for students of all religions to engage in community service and come together to discuss their reactions and experiences. We are also hoping to create an ecumenical climate that brings the numerous Protestant groups together for worship occasions. We began this last year with a service of Lessons and Carols and a Good Friday program that focused on Stations of the Cross throughout campus and the city of New Haven.

### **Worship at Yale**

Much of the recent public attention towards the Yale Committee’s efforts to strengthen the University’s religious and spiritual life has focused on changes to the Church of Christ in Yale, the University church which meets in Battell Chapel. The Church was founded in 1757 and is the oldest college church in the United States. For much of its early history, the church reflected the general religious, political, and social culture of the day, and was decidedly congregational in nature. In the late 1800s, however, Yale moved toward a more ecumenical

model which has continued in varying degrees up to the present. However, unlike many of our peer institutions, which do not have a denominational affiliation, the Yale Church was governed by an independent congregation of the United Church of Christ.

The Committee carefully reviewed the recent history of the Church of Christ in Yale and spent much time considering how best to structure the relationship between that resident congregation and the University. This was not a new issue. A prior external review had noted in 1990 that “having an independent self-governing congregation occupy Battell Chapel, even though related to the Chaplain’s Office and to Yale, in a sense deprives the University of the kinds of initiatives that otherwise might be taken.” The Committee recommended, and the University concurred, that the University should develop more ecumenical models of worship and not be tied to any one denomination in its public Christian worship.

In making the recommendation to phase out this historical relationship with the United Church of Christ, the Committee noted that the resident congregation had dwindled in size and was in need of reinvention. The Committee further noted that the “tie to a particular denomination, and the existence of individual official ‘members’ in a university chapel, hinder the re-imagination of University ministries.” The Yale Corporation, the University’s board of trustees, endorsed this ecumenical approach and affirmed the existing University by-laws for the Church which provide for governance of the church within the University rather than through a single denominational structure.

For those in the resident UCC congregation, which included many local community members within New Haven who were long-standing members of the University Public Worship, this change was very difficult. As a consequence, a small group decided to leave the Church to establish its own separate UCC congregation. While many in the University regretted this departure, it was clear within the senior leadership on campus that the Church needed to return to its founding purpose – that is to say, responding to the needs of Christian students, faculty and other members of the campus community in order to facilitate greater opportunities for religious expression, spiritual formation, and faith development.

In carrying out these recommendations, the University hoped to provide a more welcoming worship environment for Christians in the University community, especially those from progressive and liberal traditions, to increase student participation in the Church of Christ in Yale, and to reinvigorate University Public Worship. By focusing on liturgical renewal, we are calling on faculty leaders from the Yale Divinity School and Yale’s Institute of Sacred Music to play a central role in liturgy and music beginning in the fall semester. We are also increasing student participation in the worshipping community. We have reinstated the office of student deacon, a role that has had great historical importance in the Church but that had lapsed in recent years. The deacons will provide leadership

in worship, programming, and outreach to the student community. In addition, the weekly offering and pledges of financial support will be used, in part, to fund a grant program to assist students in carrying out various service projects in the larger community.

The location and amount of space dedicated to particular university activities speaks volumes about the importance of those activities to the campus as a whole. On our campus, as on others, it has become increasingly difficult for religious groups to find appropriate prayer, worship and meeting space. Battell Chapel, which was originally built as Christian worship space, is being used more and more by groups from many religious traditions. With minor changes in furnishings and arrangements, this space can become even more welcoming for student groups. We are also exploring expanded space for the chaplaincy programs. These efforts speak to the renewed commitments of the University to religious and spiritual life, and the centrality of these practices to the growth and development of our students.

### **Yale's Chaplaincy Program**

Many good programs and events are sponsored by the Chaplain's Office, but we need to do more to publicize these. There is a great deal of competition for student time and attention beyond the classroom. We are launching a major communications effort aimed at letting students know of opportunities related to religious and spiritual life, increasing their participation, and broadening awareness on campus of the chaplaincy programs. The percentage of Yale students participating in community service is very high. We are now looking at ways to combine those experiences with spiritual reflection for participating students. The Chaplain's Office is also expanding its services as a facilitator: helping students carry out their own fund-raising, community service, and social justice projects.

### **Conclusion**

Many of us who have been working to bring about these changes believe that the full development of our students must include rich and vibrant opportunities for spiritual formation and religious practice. While not all students will choose to pursue these opportunities, they must exist for those who do. We work very hard to create the best environments possible for intellectual and academic pursuits; we provide support for physical development through athletics programs, health care, sports, and exercise; we have a wide array of extracurricular programs, including world-famous student singing groups; we offer undergraduates a residential experience that promotes their social development.

By initiating this historical set of changes in religious and spiritual life, we have made a similar commitment to the spiritual development of our students. In a time when some colleges and universities are curtailing support for religious

practice in general and worship in particular, we have redoubled our efforts in these areas. We believe that our approach is consistent with the values and ideals that were present at the founding of Yale, and that we are continuing to work toward providing the best environment possible for the full development -- intellectual, physical, and spiritual -- of our students.

<sup>1</sup>**Fred Borsch**, Chair: former interim Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale and former University Chaplain at Princeton, retired Bishop of Los Angeles, now New Testament Professor and the Chair of Anglican Studies at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia; **John Bryson Chane**, M.Div. '71: Bishop of Washington and Dean of Washington National Cathedral; **Sarah Drummond**, B.A. '93: professor at Andover Newton Seminary, previously served as campus minister of the University of Wisconsin, as Chaplain for Religious Education, Memorial Church in Harvard Yard, and Assistant Dean of Freshman, Harvard University; **William Gipson**: University Chaplain and Special Advisor to the President at the University of Pennsylvania and former Associate Dean of Religious Life and of the Chapel at Princeton; **Susan Henry-Crowe**: Dean of the Chapel and of Religious Life at Emory University; **James Jones**, J.D. '71, M.A.R. '93: Chair of World Religions and Associate Professor of World Religions and African Studies at Manhattanville College, teaching and conducting research in Muslim-American identity development and former member of New Haven School Board; **Susan Laemmle**: Dean of Religious Life at the University of Southern California; **Leo O'Donovan**: former President of Georgetown; **Barbara Brown Taylor**, M.Div. '76: professor of religion at Piedmont College, adjunct professor of Christian spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary, and former Beecher Lecturer at the Divinity School.

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