



Associate chaplain and director of religious life Phil Smith offers communion in Holt Chapel. FILE PHOTO BY MOLLY CAREY



Elon students observe shabbat led by members of Hillel during the annual Hanukkah party. FILE PHOTO BY HEATHER CASSANO

# Progressive view of faith at Elon

*More than a century after its establishment, the university's vision and mission have shifted from training leaders of the church to forming citizens of a diverse world*

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The founders might be surprised to see how the small Christian college they birthed from a church became a place where no one deity holds preeminence.

There was a day at Elon College when chapel attendance was a requirement, a day when college trustees were elected by the local church and professors had to be members of that church.

More than 120 years have passed since Elon was founded as a training ground for young ministers of the Christian church. The identity of a once exclusively Christian college has evolved into that of a university with acclaim for its effort to foster religious diversity.

But change didn't happen overnight. "It was the church's school," said Earl Danieley, Elon University president emeritus. "The early documents say that this school would be owned and operated by the church. Not just related to, not just an institution with obligations to, it was owned and operated by the church."

When Danieley took over as president of the college in 1957, the position still required traveling up and down the East Coast speaking in churches about Elon, as had Leon Smith, who became the college's fifth president in 1931.

At that point, the majority of leaders in the Southern Conference of the denomination, which became the United Church of Christ the same year Danieley took office, were graduates of Elon College.

"We were training them and then we were sending them out to lead the Church," Danieley said. "In Smith's time, if someone had mentioned multi-faith — no, no, no. He actually would refuse to employ a Roman Catholic to teach. It was his church college."

The institution started receiving new faculty members from other universities and new students from other Christian denominations. Though today the inclusion of Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists might fall short of constituting diversity, Danieley said this move allowed for a gradual weakening of the institution's ties with the church.

Not long after former president Fred Young came to Elon in 1973, the college's procedure of having the church elect trustees changed. The board became self-perpetuating, Danieley said. No longer

would the Board of Trustees have to be dominated by church members.

"We know the church is where we came from," Danieley said. "But we have gone through an evolution from being a church college, to being a church-related college, to being a college historically related to the church."

## The Truitt Center is born

When Richard McBride became the chaplain at Elon 27 years ago, he began each Fall Convocation with the phrase "Welcome seekers." That greeting, according to Anthony Hatcher, associate professor of communications and adviser to the university's interfaith student group, Better Together, was a simple representation of McBride's attitude toward helping students along their faith journeys.

"He was telling students that this is a place where you can seek and find yourself in a safe environment for figuring out who you are," Hatcher said. "I think the tone was set."

The tone that McBride, now chaplain emeritus, set for religious life at Elon and the vision he cast for future developments stemmed from his own interactions with students from religious minorities, who gradually began to attend the college.

He spoke with a Jewish mother who took photos of her son playing football for the Elon College Fighting Christians, only to show them to family and friends back home who didn't understand why he would

attend a college that appeared to be so vocal about its Christian values. McBride soon began to question the appropriateness of having such a religious school mascot.

"That name had reflected our outlook," McBride said. "But as the college began to realize it wanted to position itself as an East Coast school beyond North Carolina and Virginia and have a national outlook, we recognized that that sports mascot didn't work anymore."

He spoke with a Jewish male cheerleader who, after cheering for the Fighting Christians week after week, came to McBride and asked if the Jewish students could have their own organization. McBride saw to it that the organization, now known as Hillel, would immediately be formed.

He spoke with a young Jewish woman who, while singing in the choir at the college's Blessing of the Christmas Trees program, pulled McBride aside and asked if he could also wish the Jewish students a happy Hanukkah when he went to the front to speak.

"Those kinds of experiences helped to

expand our awareness," McBride said. "If we were going to become an institution that really welcomes people from all over, we would have to change our behaviors, change customs, change attitudes. I think we began that process in my 25-year tenure, but it's not finished yet."

And after alumna Edna Truitt Noiles gave a \$1 million endowment and the Truitt Center for Religious & Spiritual Life was established with the goal of allowing students to "learn about their own and other faiths and to live lives of reconciliation," the face and mission of religious life at Elon changed.

## Preparing students to be global citizens in a religiously diverse world

Since the 2010-2011 academic year, the population of Muslim students at Elon has risen 250 percent, growing from a few students to 14 students on campus who identify themselves with Islam, said associate chaplain Phil Smith. A part-time imam now comes in on Fridays to lead students in Jumu'ah prayer.

The number of Hindu students also grew from a handful to nearly a dozen this year, he said, and the university recently held its first Diwali festival of lights celebration.

"The needs of people have changed," Smith said. "The world is global. Fifty years ago, chances were, you would graduate and the co-worker sitting beside you was probably not from another country or culture or faith tradition. So I think the nature of the education that Elon is trying to provide has changed, and our religious life opportunities are just keeping in line with that."

Numen Lumen Pavilion, Elon's multi-faith campus, which will be located in the center of campus and serve as a space for students of all religions to dialogue, worship, meditate and spend time, is a manifestation of a philosophy the university has been encouraging for the past decade: students must be prepared to live in a world with other cultural and spiritual traditions and understand and value the traditions of others.

"The university is willing to put its money where its mouth is, and resources where its ideology is," said Jan Fuller, university chaplain. "I see so many possibilities in this building. We're going to live together. There will be challenges. But what I love is that the university wants to support this, and we are a part of a place where these ideas are not just said, but done."

## The UCC's own multi-faith initiatives

The congregation now known as Elon Community Church, located directly across the street from the southwest part of campus, met in Whitley auditorium from 1891 to 1959. Though Elon's historical association with the United Church of Christ has changed during the past several

decades, many of the goals and priorities the church and university have developed have remained consistent with one another, and Elon as an institution hasn't fallen too far away from the church it once housed.

ECC is also making strides to promote religious pluralism.

"Our hope is that through the years, we're going to be able to build a sense of knowing and understanding between religions," said the Rev. Randy Orwig, senior pastor of ECC. "We're very multi-faith oriented as a church, but we also understand that we are Christians first. Our Christian roots are a very important aspect to our understanding of faith."

Some university administrators and faculty members who identify themselves as Christians see the promotion of other faiths as a seamless extension of the church.

"I believe that God is very big and very powerful, and I don't pretend to understand all the answers," said President Leo Lambert. "I want to be humble enough to be open to other points of view and listen and try to

understand and not judge. And I think the Christian path is a wonderful path. It's the path I try to be on — very imperfectly. But I think we have to be open to hearing other voices in our lives."

Fuller, an ordained Episcopalian priest, said she sees part of her duty as chaplain to model a Christianity in which people from all religions are respected and their beliefs seen as equally legitimate — an attitude reflective of both her religion and the values of the university.

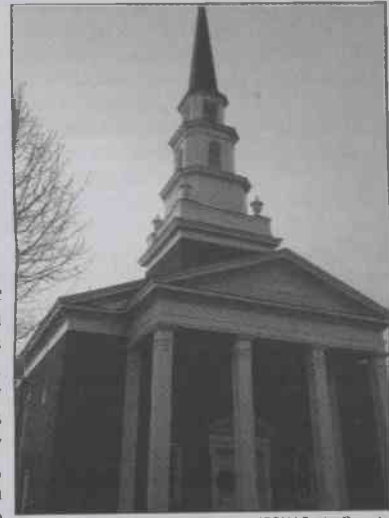
"I think that God is powerful enough and clever enough to reach us all in our individual ways," she said.

Hatcher said a multi-faith focused chaplain is unconventional for some colleges, but has allowed Elon to become the type of school it is known to be among other collegiate religious life programs.

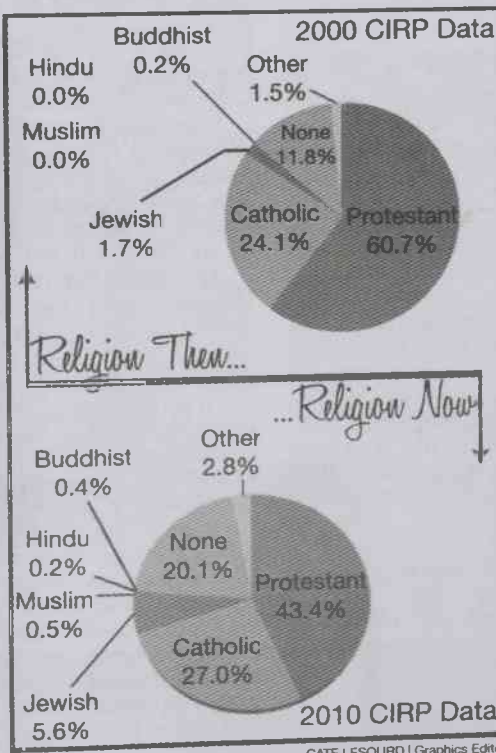
"I think our campus is going in the right direction, and I think a lot of that has to do with the fact that we have not banished the office of chaplain," he said. "But we probably have the most open-minded view of what a chaplain does of almost any university."

Lambert said his desire for a university that grew its way out of training Bible-minded Christians and into liberally educating informed global citizens is that students would find ways to live out these missions and philosophies in practical ways.

"I would hope that, in the end, we would actually be living out the dream that Edna Noiles articulated," Lambert said. "I hope that, during their time at Elon, students will explore their faiths and other faiths, and go into the world and live lives of reconciliation. That's one of the most beautiful thoughts I've ever heard in my life, and I hope we can become that place. I think we are becoming that place."



Elon Community Church met in buildings on campus from 1891 to 1959. NATALIE ALLISON | Senior Reporter



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