Religious and Spiritual Life at Elon—the Past, the Present, the Future

Elon University has an unprecedented commitment to multi-faith engagement. The first of the university’s eight strategic commitments includes expanded support for religious and spiritual traditions, religious diversity and multi-faith engagement, including support for those who are secular or spiritual but not religious. In Spring 2013, Elon dedicated a new “multi-faith center” — The Numen Lumen Pavilion — to promote rich dialogue between traditions and worldviews, to champion interfaith understanding and respect, and to foster peace-making and reconciliation (see The Elon Commitment). Elon is committed to seeking and supporting encounter in religious, spiritual, and secular life. We further seek to create and sustain a center that will be a national model for interfaith dialogue, understanding, and engagement.

History

Elon’s founding by the United Church of Christ paved the way for an understanding and acceptance of religious diversity in its “vision of an academic community that transforms mind, body, and spirit” (Elon Mission Statement). Bill Sharpe became Elon’s first full-time chaplain in 1980, after the university had part-time or shared chaplains since its founding in 1889. Richard McBride became the University Chaplain in 1984 and led religious and spiritual life at Elon for 25 years and laid the foundation for multi-faith engagement with his vision for a central shared space for religious and spiritual life, and programs to match it. In 2002, Elon hired its first Assistant Chaplain to help lay the groundwork for an expanding religious life program. The next year, in 2003, Edna Truitt Noiles ’44 and Doug Noiles endowed the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life to enable members of the Elon University community to “learn about their own and other faiths, and to live lives of reconciliation.”

In 2009, under the leadership of President Leo M. Lambert, plans began in earnest for a multi-faith center. Elon’s generous community of donors, including members of the university’s board of trustees, responded by providing the necessary funding to make the Numen Lumen Pavilion possible.

In 2011, Jan Fuller became Elon’s third full-time University Chaplain, hired for her experience in building multi-faith programs on other campuses.

Chaplain Fuller grew up in Beirut, Lebanon, where, by the time she was 22, she had lived through four Middle Eastern wars and become an expert in artillery. She is bilingual in Arabic and English and knows that respect between religions is necessary to the survival of the human race. As a young adult, she
engaged in a long search for a spiritual home, and eventually settled in the Episcopal Church, the denomination in which she is now ordained. Along the way she found much to appreciate in many different spiritual communities. Jan is a certified trainer for Crucial Conversations, a model for using conflict to enhance dialogue, is an experienced counselor, and likes to laugh. She has degrees from Wesley School of Theology, Yale University, and Hollins University.

Chaplain Fuller arrived at Elon just as the building of the Numen Lumen Pavilion began. Completed in March 2013 and dedicated on April 30, the Numen Lumen Pavilion now houses the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual life, the professional staff of all religious and spiritual life groups and student religious organizations, as well as the Center for the Study of Religion, Culture, and Society, which highlights and promotes interdisciplinary research, teaching, and dialogue about religion in all its facets and contexts. In addition, the new Sklut Hillel Center opened in December 2012 and was dedicated in March to foster Jewish identity and practice on campus. The Hillel Center joins the Newman Center (Catholic) as Elon’s second religious identity house.

Initiatives and Programming

Since 2011 the Truitt Center’s program has grown and changed significantly, with highlights including:

- The development of a seven year plan for continued growth and depth in religious diversity;
- A new vision for Numen Lumen, formerly College Chapel, a weekly time for spiritual reflection;
- The creation of The Better Together multi-faith Living and Learning Community;
- Increased programming and support for Muslim students, including formation of a Muslim Student Association and hiring a part-time Coordinator for Muslim Student Life;
- Creating three new Associate Chaplain positions to support Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant Life respectively, and to involve each of these communities in multi-faith engagement;
- Launching the Multi-faith Engagement Program (MFEP) to develop interfaith student leaders, supported by a new Multi-faith and Intern Coordinator;
- Offering interfaith service opportunities, including a multi-faith alternative spring break;
- Participation in the national Presidential Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge, as well as Interfaith Youth Core’s Interfaith Leadership Institute;
- Developing a campus multi-faith educational calendar, with greater support for student observance of major religious holidays;
- Addition of new student organizations to support Greek Orthodox Christians, Presbyterian Christians, Secular Students, Buddhist Students, and Yoga as a spiritual practice;
- Greater support for Hindu community with annual celebrations of Diwali and Holi;
- Programming and dialogue on faith and sexuality, including “The Sexy and Genderful God” series;
- A seven week co-curricular series entitled “A Whirlwind Tour of World Religions”;

...
• Programming and engagement inclusive of those who are not religious, including a panel discussion entitled “Good without God”;
• Formation of a faculty, staff, and student advisory committee to advise, support, and steward the campus multi-faith initiative;
• Hiring the inaugural director of the Center for the Study of Religion, Culture, and Society.

These initiatives and others symbolized by the Numen Lumen Pavilion are steps toward meeting Elon’s goals and intentions for students to develop their own personal spirituality or religious identity, and to understand others’ faiths and cultures. We plan for students from different religious (and non-religious) traditions to have opportunities to engage with each other in deep and meaningful ways for encouragement, dialogue, interfaith service, disagreement, and to learn from each other along the way. We will continue to deepen religious and spiritual life programs to inspire individual students to become global citizens, and to alter the campus climate toward real inclusiveness and respect.

To assist in these efforts, since 2010, Elon has collaborated in partnership with Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) to lay out strategic goals, outcomes, and assessment plans for multi-faith initiatives. We are strategically situated to build and sustain a remarkable program of spiritual and religious deepening, cooperation, and engagement.

**The Future**

As we look towards the future, we are building collaborations to foster multi-faith engagement across campus at all levels. Together we seek to guide students toward, at a minimum, peaceful coexistence and curiosity, and more ambitiously, mutual respect. We invite all members of our community to partake in conversations related to the hope that peaceable multi-faith relationships bring, as we seek to elevate and sustain conversations that matter to Elon, the world, and our futures together.

Increasingly, we seek to accomplish our mission through relationships and collaborations with other centers and departments, including the Kernodle Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement; the Center for Race, Ethnicity, and Diversity Education (the CREDE); Inclusive Community at Elon; the Gender and LGBTQIA Center; and faculty departments, such as Religious Studies, Jewish Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies.

Elon is committed to building and nurturing religious diversity and the leaders to serve it, and now offers a common home for these priorities. In Spring 2015, Elon reaffirmed its commitment to multi-faith engagement with a new campus-wide strategic plan for Engaging Religions and Building Community that outlines the respective roles of the Truitt Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, the faculty (including Religious Studies), and the Center for the Study of Religion, Culture, and Society. We are poised to become a national model among universities for interfaith leadership and multi-faith engagement.