

## MATTERS OF THE SPIRIT

It was February 1973 when an alarming headline in *The Phillipian* identified a “crisis” on campus. The times were rife with change, to be sure, but it wasn’t the impending switch to coeducation that constituted this particular crisis. Nor was it students’ hair length or dissatisfaction over the Vietnam War or the social malaise that followed the Watergate scandal—though all of those factors may have played a role.

No, the crisis in question was both more abstract and more immediate. Religion instructor Jesse Vaughan was quoted as saying that “PA is currently undergoing a spiritual crisis,” one whose apparent cause (or perhaps first consequence) was the abolishment of compulsory chapel attendance, two years earlier. Then, as now, the Academy found itself grappling with the role of the spiritual and religious in an Andover education.

Since the abandonment of compulsory chapel, said the *Phillipian* article, “religion” at PA has been limping along, with sparsely attended weekly services and a few extra-curricular groups.” Yet the decision to end mandatory chapel had come to seem inevitable, as students chafed against outmoded strictures. Vincent Avery, former instructor in philosophy and religious studies, who arrived at PA in 1976, says he heard that the services had become “untenable.”

# Religious Inclusion on Campus, Then and Now

by Jane Dornbusch

“The students were acting up and disrespect was huge,” says Avery. “It was not a battle worth fighting, and not a battle [then headmaster] Ted Sizer wanted to fight.”

Instead, after a few years of spiritual drift—the “crisis” years—Sizer convened a committee and instituted the school’s first tripartite chaplaincy, prompted by the changing times and by the death of Andover’s longtime minister, the Reverend James Whyte. For the first time, PA hired a rabbi

and a Catholic priest to work with the Protestant chaplain in tending to the spiritual needs of students. Says Avery, who served as the first Catholic chaplain (he left the priesthood a year later but stayed on to teach at PA until 2010), “I think it was essentially a statement that the school itself was no longer affiliated with a particular tradition...a decision that the school was now going to be a secular institution, as far as its allegiance was concerned.”

That decision was in some ways remarkable, given the school’s lengthy association with Protestantism. After all, the era when Andover imposed an unofficial quota on Jewish students was still within living memory. But Rabbi Everett Gendler, who filled the role of Jewish spiritual leader in that first tripartite chaplaincy, says he felt welcomed when he arrived on campus in 1976.

“I had no idea what to expect,” admits Gendler, who was brought in as a six-month fill-in and ended up staying at PA for 19 years. He says he found Andover to be “receptive to a more audible and visible Jewish presence on campus.” There were exceptions—though not, he says, because anyone was specifically unhappy about a “Jewish presence.” Some, says Gendler, were leery of *any* turn toward religion on campus. “Along with this receptivity, there was a certain wariness on the

part of some faculty that the religious dominance might be in the process of reasserting self,” he says. “There was that wariness because Andover had been founded by religiously committed Christians with a great deal of religious intentionality. And I suppose over the decades, the secularists had had to struggle for freedom from that particular enclosure.” But, he says, though a few “made known their intellectual reservations, overall it was a warmly welcoming atmosphere.”

In a departure from earlier practice, the three chaplains were also called upon to do classroom teaching, which served to integrate them further into the life of the school. Philip Zaeder was the Protestant member of that early tripartite chaplaincy; for the onetime English major, the opportunity to teach was part of what drew him to Andover from Yale, where he had served in the chaplain’s office.

Zaeder sees the 1976 institution of the tripartite ministry and the school’s broader embrace of spiritual traditions as emblematic of the times. “Societal changes were strong. Andover was no longer that monolithic boys’ school.... Coeducation was part of the new vitality of Andover, of which the tripartite chaplaincy was a beneficiary. It was an extraordinary era; I had never been involved in an adventure as ecumenical as that was.”

Perhaps it was a sign of the times, too, that Rabbi Gendler served as advisor to the Muslim student group on campus, organizing Ramadan celebrations and chanting from the Koran. “It was one of the quirks or happenstances, or I’d call it a blessing, of the expanded ecumenical chaplaincy,” says Gendler.

The legacy of the tripartite chaplaincy of the ‘70s persists today. Their efforts lent a spiritual dimension to the school’s observance of Memorial Day; they instituted the candlelight baccalaureate service held the night before graduation. Zaeder credits Gendler, a longtime supporter of the civil rights movement, with helping create PA’s scope of MLK Day activities.

Spiritual crisis averted, or so it seemed. But flash forward to 2007.

Somewhere along the line, the custom of having chaplains serve as classroom teachers had dwindled. The campus rabbi position had been cut to one-fifth time. The Catholic student group had become just a small social club, says current Catholic chaplain Mary Kantor, who arrived in 2009. And once again, a concerned head of school saw a need to intervene.

As Ted Sizer had before her, Barbara Landis Chase decided to reassess PA’s approach to religion. Students were coming from an ever-broadening range of faith traditions; at the same time, many students—more so than in the



From top to bottom, the members of Phillips Academy’s tripartite chaplaincy, now in 1976: Catholic Chaplain Vincent Avery, Rabbi Everett Gendler, and the Reverend Philip Zaeder



2006

Trustees endorse a pilot program to address the growing preparation gap. The ACE Scholars Program aims to “accelerate, challenge, and enrich.”

2007

A need-blind admission policy is adopted: 43 percent of students are already on some level of financial aid.

2007

PA creates a new faculty position—director of spiritual and religious life—to address the needs of all campus faith groups.

2009

Associate Head of School Rebecca Sykes helps launch the Girls’ Leadership Project to encourage girls to pursue leadership roles on campus and beyond.

2010

The Access to Success committee is formed to help scholarship students acclimate more fully to life at PA and delve deeper into Andover’s curriculum.

2010

A group of full-scholarship students creates the “Outliers” affinity group to confront the ways in which differences in socioeconomic class affect students’ Andover experience.

