

## 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.

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—The Reverend Philip Zaeder

past—did not identify strongly with any religion and lacked a framework for exploring questions of spirituality. Chase and Associate Head of School Becky Sykes created a committee that spent a year in consultation, seeking a new direction for addressing these concerns. The result was an approach that—like the tripartite chaplaincy of 1976—was uniquely consonant with the times.

“My being here is actually a very important and critical lens on how Barbara Chase and Becky Sykes felt about the space and role of religion and belief systems,” says the Reverend Anne Gardner. Arriving in September 2008, Gardner was the first person to hold the newly created position of director of spiritual and religious life. (She also serves as the school’s Protestant chaplain.) “There was a feeling from Becky and Barbara that this needed more focus, more attention, more resources—that the spiritual life of this age group was important enough, and that the world was changing enough, that there needed to be a new vision.”

Today, much of that vision involves meeting students where they are, spiritually, and tending to their needs both inside and outside the structure of organized religion. “Kids who come here and are brought up in a faith—those are the easiest pegs to align,” says Gardner. “But more and more, I find fewer students who come from that structure. What do we do about the students who are outside of that parameter?”

Gardner answers her own question by providing examples of spiritual support and inquiry that take place far from the confines of the chapel. Culture, Politics, and Religion (CPR) is a weekly dinner-time discussion group that tackles thorny questions like free speech, the death penalty, and abortion. Gardner spearheaded an effort, tied to PA’s Veterans Day observance, to break Guinness’s world record for push-ups. For the Hindu festival of Diwali, she strung lights from the columns in front of Samuel Phillips Hall. And, she notes, the school has held an Islamic Awareness Week for many years.

Rabbi Michael Swartz, PA’s current Jewish chaplain, has also taken a big-tent approach. “To be Jewish is not just a religious phenomenon but an ethnic and cultural one,” he notes, and as such, he and the Jewish student group have mounted a broad array of cultural programming, with speakers, films, and even the occasional comedian. Kantor, the Catholic chaplain, has—with the help of three Abbot Academy Association grants—created a slate of campus events, bringing in international music groups, dancers, and artists to celebrate and highlight the cultural diversity of the Catholic Church.

For all that, though, and for all the support that the chaplaincy both receives and provides, there can still be moments when religion seems a slightly uneasy fit on campus. Can a place that so values intellect also give matters of the spirit their due? For her part, says Gardner, “One of the things I’ve tried to preach and embody is that there needn’t be a divide between those two things. You needn’t be a person of intellect or a person of faith.... We needn’t check our mind at the door when we come to church.”

Kantor says that while she’s pleased with the growth of the active Catholic community in her time on campus, she would like to see the work of the chaplaincy integrated into the broader life of the school. “For me,” she says, “the ideal would be that the religious or spiritual or spiritually seeking aspects of students would be as welcomed and integrated in the school’s life as their ethnic identity, national identity, sexual orientation, and so on.... With the new wellness center and the focus on equity and inclusion, I’m hopeful that this recognition of students’ religious and spiritual interests will not be limited to the time they spend with their religious communities once or twice a week.”

The tensions Gendler once remarked upon—between the secular and the spiritual—may have their present-day counterparts. Equity and inclusion form one pillar of the new Strategic Plan, but what does that mean in relation to religion? Paying attention to the calendar is one important aspect. Gendler recalls a time during his tenure when a crucial student activity was scheduled during Yom

Kippur, the most solemn of Jewish holidays. “For the Jewish students, it was a terrible conflict,” says Gendler, though, he adds, “The intensity of the crisis sensitized everyone to the importance of being aware. It was an instructive moment.” Nonetheless, the event wasn’t rescheduled. More than 30 years on, Swartz bookends that with an experience from his time at PA: Again, an important student activity conflicted with Yom Kippur. But this time, he says, students brought it to the attention of the administration, and the date was changed.

When the tripartite chaplaincy was formed, addressing the needs of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish students was deemed sufficient. But today, many more faiths are represented on campus, and today’s chaplaincy is working toward greater inclusivity. Kantor notes that current chaplaincies have worked together to create inter-faith projects, activities, and dialogues. “Students have an eagerness and deep interest in getting to know one another’s religious traditions,” she says.

Equity and inclusion, though, may also mean casting spirituality in much broader terms—more inclusive terms, if you will. Says Gardner, “As director, I’m charged in essence to think anew about how to answer these big questions: Who am I? How do I decide how I’m going to walk in the world? What value system do I follow? What kind of person do I want to grow up to be? These are deeply spiritual questions.... My continuing challenge is to service those people who have a particular practice and, for those who don’t, to keep the conversation going.”

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—The Reverend Anne Gardner



Phillips Academy’s current tripartite: the Reverend Anne Gardner, director of spiritual and religious life (center), Rabbi Michael Swartz, and Catholic Chaplain Mary Kantor



2013

On the eve of the Academy’s first copresidential elections, 12 seniors write to *The Phillipian* endorsing the new copresidential policy as a way to reverse the historical gender imbalance in leadership positions. When the only two-male team wins, the *New York Times* reports on the heated campuswide debate on gender equality that ensues.

2013

CAMD distributes a copy of *Out of the Blue* to every PA community member and makes it freely available online. The culmination of a two-year student project, the 223-page book is a compilation of student and alumni experiences related to diversity and self-discovery.

2013

Sixty students, faculty, and alumni march in Andover’s first campus gay pride parade in honor of the 25th anniversary of the GSA (now known as the Gender and Sexuality Alliance).

2013

PA marks 40 years of coeducation.

2013

At a faculty meeting, student leaders of Andover’s feminist group (Feminism = Equality) describe ongoing gender-related issues—some shocking—and suggest ways faculty can help achieve gender equality on campus.