THE NOTION OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE isn’t just a politically correct blurb in the College’s mission statement and strategic plan – it’s a central characteristic common among students, faculty and staff.
Mathematics and religion are two subjects that rarely intersect, but for Rob Stolzman, it was an unexpected friendship he forged with the late Dr. Alaric Bowman, his math professor at Bridgewater, that had a positive effect on his spiritual growth.

Stolzman, a Jew who admits to having an aversion to math, recalls meaningful conversations with Bowman, who was Brethren, about their respective faiths. These discussions never centered on Bowman trying to convert his student, but rather were challenges for Stolzman to embrace his Jewish heritage and to explore the role of religion in his daily life.

“To be encouraged to think about my spiritual growth in my terms by people of other faiths – and people I know felt deeply about their faith – I remember being impressed by that,” says Stolzman, a 1983 graduate who now serves on the College’s board of trustees. “I left Bridgewater more receptive to religion being part of my life than when I entered it.”

Religious tolerance and spiritual development have been core values at the College since its founding in 1880 by Church of the Brethren leader Daniel C. Flory. He had a vision of establishing a school where young people in the church could attend and receive “a broad, liberal education while surrounded by ‘wholesome moral and religious influences,'” wrote Francis Fry Wayland in his book, Bridgewater College: The First Hundred Years, 1880-1980. Though the school was started with Brethren youth in mind, Flory welcomed scholars from all sects and creeds. In fact, the five students in the College’s first class were not all Brethren.

The College’s historic affiliation with the Church of the Brethren provides the foundation for its culture and academic programs. The Brethren, whose evangelistic efforts throughout history have primarily taken the form of offering service to those in need, generally do not strive to convert the world to their beliefs. Instead, its members are encouraged to serve as role models of the Christian values of simple living, humility, service and piety, while encouraging respect and appreciation for other faith traditions. This approach to religion has been a constant at the College and one of the reasons senior physics major Mohammed Haroun, a Muslim, has felt right at home during his four years on the campus.
“Bridgewater is a very welcoming Christian campus...The students and faculty have been like a family to me.” – Mohammed Haroun, ’08

“Bridgewater is a very welcoming Christian campus,” says Haroun, who comes from the Gaza Strip. “I have not met any student who was directly unwelcoming. The students and faculty have been like a family to me.”

The notion of religious tolerance isn’t just a politically correct blurb in the College’s mission statement and strategic plan – it’s a characteristic Haroun says he’s found among students, faculty and staff on campus. Not only have fellow students been eager to ask Haroun questions about Islam, but also members of the faculty and staff have been supportive. Two years ago, he recalls, a convocation addressed the topic of the Arab-Israeli conflict. After the program, the Muslim students decided to gather for prayer, and Dr. William Abshire, chair of the department of philosophy and religion, joined the group. Haroun was touched by the Brethren professor’s gesture. And most surprising, Haroun has found support in the campus dining room. Dining services director Haitham Shtaieh, a fellow Muslim, has encouraged Haroun to keep the faith and connected him with Harrisonburg’s Muslim community at the Shenandoah Islamic Center.

“Bridgewater was a good challenge for my faith, and still is,” Haroun says. “A new environment opens the door to challenges, but being here in Bridgewater has strengthened my faith. The ideas, the customs, the norms that I practiced back home with everyone, now I have to practice with no one around – just me. So it has to be a self-motivating thing.”

While the College does not require students to attend regular chapel services or engage in religious activities, chaplain Dr. Robert Miller points out that a wide variety of religious activities and worship opportunities are available to students. These include religious groups that meet weekly; peer-led Bible study groups in the residence halls; weekly chapel services; and three campus worship services that provide convocation credits. The Personal Development Portfolio program, a cornerstone of the College’s academic program, includes a spiritual and ethical wellness dimension, and Miller has given presentations on the topic for PDP groups.

“I think the students who are consciously seeking to grow spiritually are quite receptive to some of these opportunities on campus,” Miller says.

Though faculty are not required to teach their subjects from a religious or spiritual perspective, many have influenced their students through personal connections made outside the classroom, just as Alaric Bowman challenged Stolzman more than 20 years ago. He also recalls the influence of Dr. Martha Thornton, professor of religion from 1968 to 1986, who taught the class, “Understanding the Old Testament,” and celebrating Passover with retired Prof. Daniel Bly. Religious activities, such as the Christmas luminaries on the campus mall, and the presence of the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren, where doors were always open to students, gave Stolzman a glimpse of the role that religion and spiritual growth can play in a person’s life.

“I had not been exposed to serious Christians prior to Bridgewater,” says Stolzman, a principal with the law firm of Adler, Pollock & Sheehan, P.C., in Providence, R.I. “The notion of a church or a synagogue or any religious person being more interested in day-to-day deeds, rather than proselytizing creeds, was a new concept to me. The Brethren way of using religion as more of a way of life and less a system of beliefs to be stated—I didn’t realize at the time, but now with hindsight and reflection, I think that was a powerful influence on me.”

College trustee Larry Johnson, ’75, shares a similar perspective. Growing up as the son of a Catholic father and Presbyterian mother, Johnson was given the freedom to explore both faiths. Though he most often attended a Presbyterian church as a child, he began to focus more seriously on Catholicism at Bridgewater. The College was supportive in many ways, he recalls, including allowing him to sign out one of the College-owned vans each week to transport his Catholic peers to Mass services in Harrisonburg.

Johnson felt his faith strengthened during late-night discussions about religion with his hallmates—several of whom were Brethren. He discovered that they had many misconceptions about Roman Catholicism, and these discussions gave him the opportunity to correct those misunderstandings.

“What I found at Bridgewater were people of faith, especially Christian people of faith, who challenged
me that if I was going to identify myself as a Catholic, then do something about it,” says Johnson, a priest who believes the seeds for his calling were planted at Bridgewater. “To live it and be it and develop it and know it … No one put pressure on me to be anything other than what I was.”

In light of the world’s conflicts these days, which are characterized by religious overtones and rigid dogmas, the current generation of college students must learn to relate to and appreciate points of view very different from their own. Practicing tolerance of and appreciation for other religions becomes critical in today’s global community, where diversity is an unavoidable challenge.

“However deeply committed our students may be to their own faith traditions, they are going to encounter and work with and live beside persons of other faith traditions,” Miller says. “So it’s absolutely essential that our students graduate with an openness and acceptance and appreciation of other religions.”

Just as many Christians disagree on social issues and religious practices, Haroun and the two other Muslim students currently on campus come from different cultures and take very different approaches to their faith. In the same way that the Bridgewater community has offered warm acceptance to them, the trio has been inspired to focus on their commonalities and to be open to learning from each other. It’s these kinds of relationships that, hopefully, will make the world a more peaceful place, and Bridgewater College strives to model that for its students.

“We (three Islamic students) came to the understanding that if the Bridgewater community was able to welcome us,” Haroun says, “it is a very nice thing to be welcoming to each other.”

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