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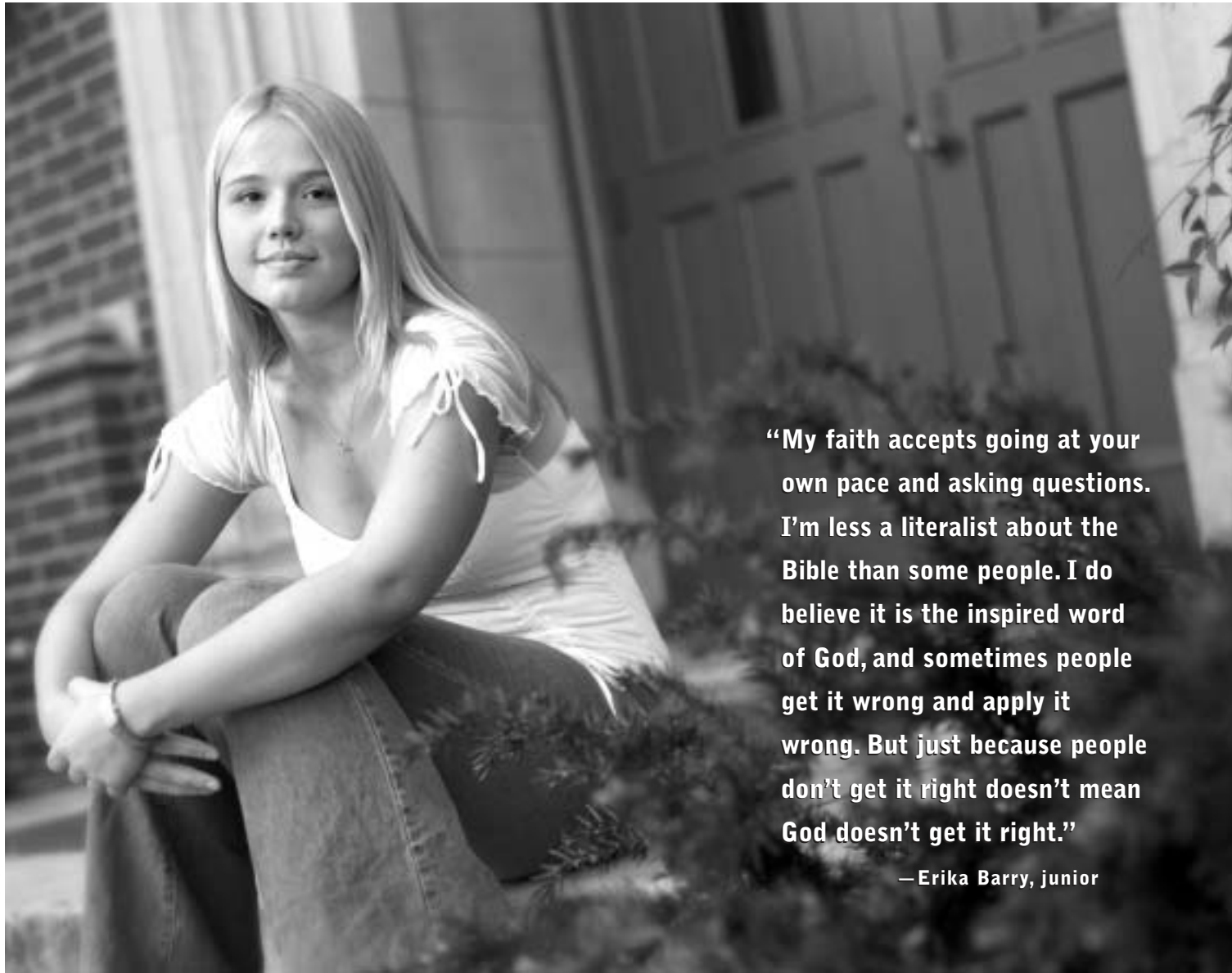
—Hamad Al-Rugaib, senior

The Search for GOD at Vanderbilt

THE WALL AT RAND IS A REASSURING chaos of the latest campus announcements—a weathered smear of posters for lectures, pizza joints, war protests, concerts—the life of the mind, the life of the senses, the life of Vanderbilt, a barometric shorthand of student preoccupations, circa 2003.

It’s not all politics, music and food.

The Wall’s crowded kiosk pluralism yields another 21st-century pursuit as well—a renewed stress on news of the spirit.



“My faith accepts going at your own pace and asking questions. I’m less a literalist about the Bible than some people. I do believe it is the inspired word of God, and sometimes people get it wrong and apply it wrong. But just because people don’t get it right doesn’t mean God doesn’t get it right.”

— Erika Barry, junior

In recent weeks, a wanderer at the Wall would have noticed a half dozen or more fliers of religious innovation contending for space with a Cornel West lecture, a Sweet-T concert, and a new student production of “Two Gentlemen of Verona.”

“A Christian Fraternity?” one poster teased. “Find out more at www.geocities.com/vandy-wantsbyx.”

“Catholic and Don’t Remember Why? New 10 p.m. Mass! Contemporary music, new environment — It’s really cool — Come!”

There were others:

“Worship and Bible Study every Thursday, 8:15 p.m. — Live Band — Free Food!”

“First meeting of the Vanderbilt Socratic Club: ‘Can atheists justify or explain the origin of their morals and ethics?’” announced

a flyer about a new debating society.

Sophomore Phillip Albonetti, a Christian, started the Socratic Club this semester, based on the British university model associated with C.S. Lewis at Oxford. The idea is to defend Christian belief with the intellectual rigors associated with a debating venue.

“In college, people begin questioning their religious beliefs, and some people pull away,” says Albonetti, from Memphis, Tenn. “We need more outlets for people to re-engage those questions about God or pluralism or science.”

The search for God at Vanderbilt, for students who pursue it, takes place in a campus climate rich in paradox.

Vanderbilt: A private university (originally Methodist) committed to academic freedom in the heart of the Bible belt. Vanderbilt:

A traditionally conservative campus that is home to one of the nation’s eminent liberal divinity schools. Vanderbilt: A southern school steeped in fraternity and football and a busy Ivy League intellectualism, too. Vanderbilt: A predominantly Protestant place where the single largest religious group is Catholic, but which also boasts a new high-profile Jewish student center on Greek Row and lately a student-body president who is Muslim.

“What I say is they didn’t elect me because I’m a Muslim, and they didn’t elect me because I’m not a Muslim — they saw me as a human being,” says Samar Ali of Waverly, Tenn., president of the Student Government Association this past year. “There’s religious interest here, in pockets. There are lots of programs you can attend. But people don’t always know

about it. So five people will attend an important program on religion when 2,000 ought to be there. Everybody’s overbooked.”

The spiritual search at Vanderbilt is a diffuse thing, a hands-on thing, a many-splintered thing. Since the 9/11 terrorism, it has become a more serious thing.

Some chaplains talk of pensive undergraduate inquiries into the details of theology or the complexities of religious pluralism. On a given night, two or three student-led Bible studies are likely under way in the dorms. Students sign up for service work — blood drives, tutoring, house building, feeding the homeless. Divinity students lead city marches against war with Iraq.

“The students I see these days are less afraid to pray publicly or privately; they want to know the Bible better; they’re more interested in seminary,” says the Rev. Drew Henderson, the Presbyterian (USA) chaplain on campus for the last 10 years (he recently left Vanderbilt to take a church position in North Carolina).

“In my generation, we wanted to walk our own way, choose and reject what we wanted,” says Henderson, who is in his 30s. “With this generation, there’s been a shift from the question ‘Why be Christian?’ to ‘I’m Christian: Tell me what it means, give us the tools to go deeper.’ ... And when students have experienced divorce or a major shift in caregiving or uncertainty about parental authority, they want to put their hearts down in something that’s permanent and stable. They appreciate consistency, boundaries — the belief that God’s love will not fail, God’s love is unending and reliable.”

At Vanderbilt, there are two university chaplains, as well as chaplains for seven faiths, funded by those organizations — United Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian (USA), Presbyterian Church of America, Episcopal, Catholic, Jewish — and at least 19 student-led religious organizations, including the Baptist Collegiate Ministry, Vanderbilt Meditation Group, Asian American Christian Fellowship, Voices of Praise, Christian Business Association, Christian Legal Society, Ozark Commodores, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Campus Crusade for Christ, Victory Campus Ministries, Commodores for Christ, Young Life, Orthodox Christian Fellowship, and Lord Jesus Christ Ministries.

Still, the impression remains strong among some that this is a campus of “organization kids” who are bent on fast-track success and executive-style workaholicism, with matters of religious practice languishing on the periphery. “Such students might seek out religion when they suddenly need a base, or if they’re in a crisis,” says Associate University Chaplain Gary White. “Otherwise, they are focused on preparing for a career, and they’re overworked, overscheduled.”

Student attitudes themselves are mixed, impossible to reconcile. Some complain there’s not enough religion at career-driven Vanderbilt. Or that there’s too much quick-fix fundamentalism, too much arrogant disdain for free-thinking non-believers. Or that it’s too easy to keep one’s childhood faith in a box, unchallenged by new questions, unbothered by a wildly hypocritical party life.

The pluralism that students suddenly find when they arrive on campus is disorienting — or invigorating.

“I looked forward to coming to college to interact with the other side and test arguments for the faith that I learned in earlier years,” says Albonetti, who attended an Assemblies of God-oriented high school. “I knew non-Christians before. But here, they’ll argue and defend their positions. It helps me understand the sincerity of their beliefs. I used to believe other religions were inherently evil, just lies. But now I realize there are quality teachings in other religions, and some overlap with my beliefs—like the Golden Rule. Nevertheless, I can still see where they don’t overlap.”

Erika Barry, a junior from Tampa, Fla., and a Presbyterian, exhibits a faith that’s strong on action. She is student director of the Room in the Inn program, a citywide program that shelters homeless people on winter nights.

“My faith accepts going at your own pace and asking questions,” she says. “I’m less a literalist about the Bible than some people. I do believe it is the inspired word of God, and sometimes people get it wrong and apply it wrong. But just because people don’t get it right doesn’t mean God doesn’t get it right.”

For the weekly Room in the Inn stint at St. Augustine’s Chapel, Barry helps rustle up student volunteers, cooks a big breakfast for the homeless guests, and gets them back downtown by 6 a.m.

“It’s a way to connect my religious values to the world in an active way,” she says. “We do their laundry, which reminds me of the Christian tradition of foot washing—humbling yourself to serve others.”

Others on campus want to establish new ways of intensifying religious *esprit de corps*—like starting a Christian fraternity.

“What I want to do is try to fill a gap, create a deeper sense of Christian fellowship,” says sophomore Dillon Barker, who has received permission to explore possible campus interest in starting such a fraternity. “I’m definitely not anti-Greek. I don’t want to draw people away from that. We just want to create an organization of men that will deepen their walk in faith.”

The fraternity, Beta Upsilon Chi (BUC), was started in 1985 in Texas, where most of its 10 university chapters are concentrated. At Sarratt in February, 30 undergraduate males committed to joining a prospective Vanderbilt chapter.

BUC (also called “Brothers Under Christ”) would have some traditional fraternity elements—rushing, pledging, secret rituals, semi-formals, perhaps a house on campus some day. But its real aim, Barker says, is to glorify Jesus Christ by building Christian camaraderie and encouraging moral accountability through small cell groups that meet weekly.

“We’d have parties, but there is a code of conduct,” he says. Members would not be forbidden from drinking, but BUC events would be alcohol-free. The tone of the national organization is evangelical Christian, but it’s open to a wide range of believers. Doctrines center around basic Christian creeds.

Barker admits that obtaining or building an actual house for a Christian fraternity at Vanderbilt wouldn’t be plausible, for now. “We realize that a house isn’t a realistic short-term goal,” he says. “There’s no land anywhere.”

But he dreams of such a house fitting in nicely with Vanderbilt’s characteristic “geographical paradox,” where a Jewish student center and an Episcopal church are fixtures on Greek Row, signals of an intriguing spiritual and cultural mix.

“Vanderbilt is special,” says Barker, raised a Southern Baptist in Rogersville, Tenn. “There’s an intersection of world views—the south-

ern character, the Ivy League character. Here I can be comfortable as a southerner and a Christian meeting someone who is Jewish from New England or someone who is agnostic from California.”

The recent hopes for a Christian fraternity at Vanderbilt might be seen as a sign of the strength of evangelical Protestant energies on campus. There are about a dozen organizations on that side of the Christian spectrum, and they attract hundreds of students weekly to study groups and worship.

Probably the biggest regular worship gathering on campus draws about 200 students to Branscomb on Wednesday nights. It's sponsored by the Reformed University Fellowship, a ministry of the conservative-minded Presbyterian Church of America.

“I'm trying to encourage folks to engage the culture from a vantage point,” says the Rev. Brian Habig, the RUF campus chaplain. “I'm admittedly not neutral.”

He counsels with two or three students a day and stays in regular contact with dozens of others. His assessment of student spirituality: Lots of résumé-ready Vanderbilt undergraduates inevitably feel a void in life if they neglect the divine dimension. Habig's task is to give them biblical answers to life at a time when a predominant moral ideology and style, customarily called postmodernism, an attitude of skeptical irony and relativism, is exhausting itself, he says.

“It seems that postmodernism has overplayed its hand. When you just squint at everything and nuance everything and explain everything away—well, after a while human beings can't live that way.”

According to the latest annual freshman survey, 56.9 percent of the incoming class in fall 2002 claimed a Protestant identity. Despite turbulent shifts and declines in American religious loyalties in the past generation, the Protestant religious spread at Vanderbilt hasn't changed dramatically in 30 years: It was 60 percent Protestant in 1972. The largest Protestant groups on campus today are Baptist (11.8 percent), Presbyterian (11.3 percent), Methodist (10.2 percent) and Episcopalian (7.76 percent), according to the freshman survey. The category “other Christian” is 10.46 percent.

Those declaring no religion (14.6 percent) hasn't changed much in three decades, either

(16.2 percent in 1972). What has changed is the number of Catholics, which has doubled in 30 years. Catholic students now make up 20.4 percent of the latest entering freshman class and represent the single largest religious denominational group on campus. The trend might be explained as the mainstreaming of Catholics into non-Catholic university life, and the mainstreaming of Vanderbilt into national life.

“As Vanderbilt has moved from a southern regional school to a national university, the proportion of students is starting to reflect the spread of 18- to 22-year-olds nationally,” says Associate Catholic Chaplain Jim McKenzie.

Some estimates put the number of Vanderbilt Catholic students at closer to 30 percent.

“I'm amazed at how spiritual they are, how they have a relationship with God that they're willing to talk about,” says McKenzie, referring to the Catholic students he works with.

Perhaps it's the swing of the pendulum, he suggests. Today's students often appear to be more pious, more service-oriented than the older Gen-X demographic, or more theologically conservative than their parents. Also, the shock of 9/11 terrorism cast a new shadow of sobriety and fear over religious life, a new search for the image of God in a time of suffering.

“Students, like everyone else in the country, started to look around and think harder about their relationship with God, what that relationship should be not only in times of prosperity but in times of disaster,” says McKenzie.

Freshman Victoria Stevens, in any case, was active in her parish back in high school in the Fort Lauderdale, Fla., area before she came to Vanderbilt last fall. Already she is president of the Vanderbilt Catholic student community. With her music background (mezzo-soprano), she helped spice up the 10 p.m. Sunday Mass at Benton Chapel with contemporary sounds (guitars, drums and singers).

Her attitude: “Live your faith out loud, and don't be afraid to go for it,” she says. “We live in the Vanderbilt bubble, but there's still a lot of religious support if you are looking for it. Being in a pluralistic setting, you scrutinize your faith in ways that don't happen in high school.”

There are three Masses per week at Ben-

ton Chapel (attendance at each is 70–100 people). On Wednesday nights, Stevens and 15 other committed Catholic students meet for dinner and a program of discussion, a gathering called Nourishment of Soul and Body.

Recently, they met as usual at their designated Wednesday night gathering place for pizza and evening prayer. Where they meet might sound incongruous, but the Catholic kids like it just fine: The Ben Schulman Center for Jewish Life.

The Schulman Center opened in August 2002 at the corner of Vanderbilt Place and 25th Avenue South, with notable fanfare (Vanderbilt graduate Ben Schulman, class of 1938, donated \$1 million to launch the \$2.2 million construction). The Schulman Center has quickly become a cross-cultural reference point on campus.

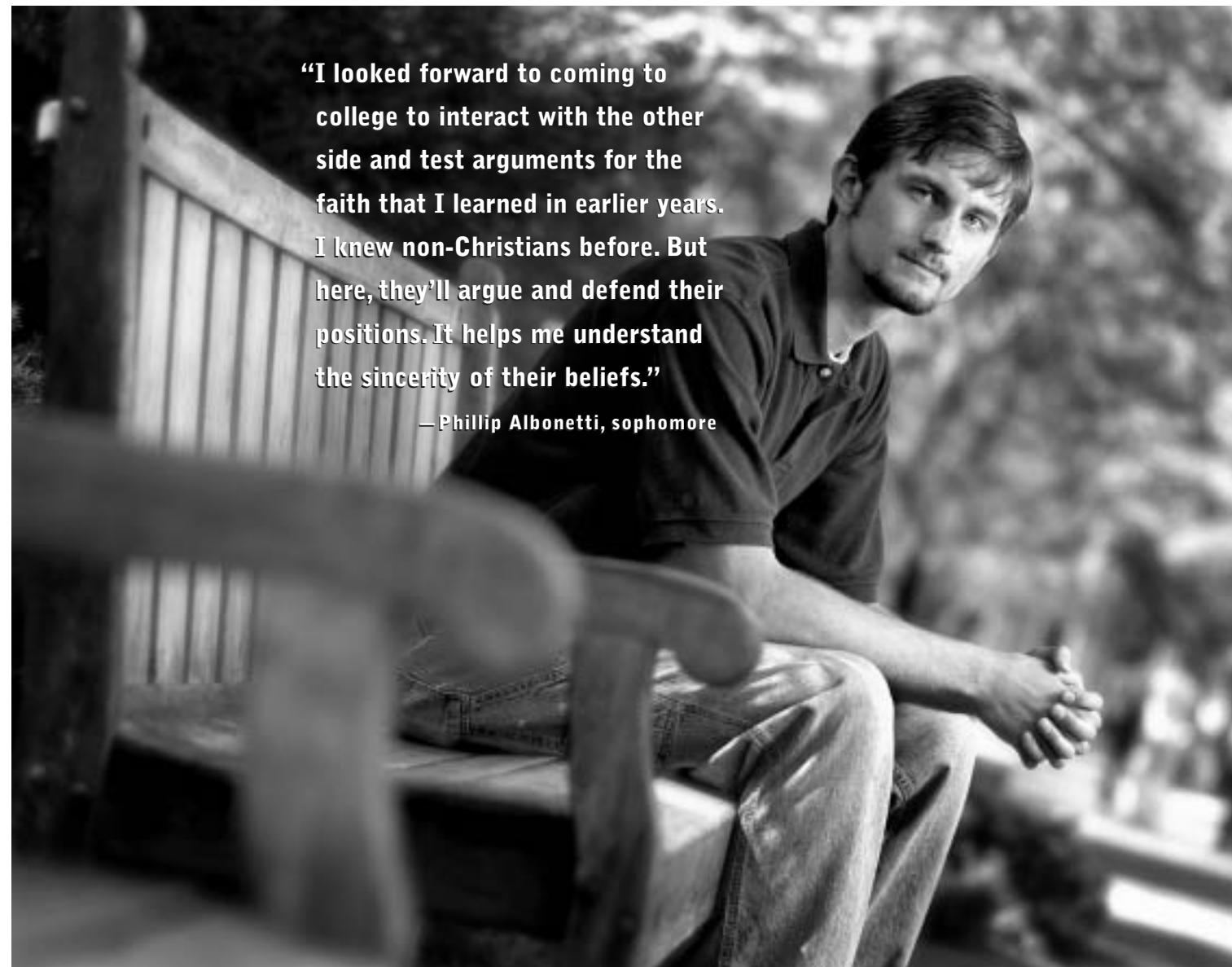
“The center has made us more visible. It makes it easier to find us,” says sophomore Hannah Bloom, vice president of Vanderbilt Hillel, the Jewish student organization.

It's a place where Jewish students can attend regular worship services and connect with their religious identity as a tiny minority on campus (they represent about 4 percent of enrollment). More Jews—a number fluctuating between 15 and 150—attend Friday night Sabbath services now that the center has opened.

It's also a place that welcomes non-Jewish students: Classes are conducted here, and campus groups (like the Catholics) can reserve space to hold their own sacred or cultural events. Grins Cafe, the city's only kosher-certified restaurant, is now a lunch routine for hundreds of students. It's part of the center's mission to educate a traditional southern campus about Judaism.

“One of the biggest problems at Vanderbilt is you have students who come out of a vacuum, without contact with other groups,” says Shaiya Baer, executive director of the Schulman Center and Vanderbilt's Jewish chaplain. “In the South, Jews are part of the diversity equation. It's up to us to engage the majority, invite them to work with us. We want to build relationships.”

The center has given Jews a higher profile on campus. New connections with non-Jewish groups are unfolding. Last fall Jewish and Baptist students collaborated on a home-



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coming float (theme: the Ten Commandments). Miraculously or not, it won first place.

“Who would ever have thought the Baptist and the Jewish students would work together on a float?” Baer exclaims.

Hannah Bloom, a New Jersey native, turned down other universities with sizable Jewish enrollments to come to Vanderbilt because she wanted to be part of a re-energized Jewish student community. “We're a spanking new organization and can go in any direction we want,” she says.

Her goals for campus Jewish life: heightened religious observance among Jewish students, more inter-community campus discussion, and more programs so the Schulman Center is constantly in use.

Being surrounded by so many Christians

at Vanderbilt led Bloom to deepen her connection with Judaism, she says. “Coming down here has made me appreciate more the positive aspects of Judaism in my life and want to share them with others. A lot of people here identify themselves as Christian, and that influences me to learn more deeply what I believe, my own religious principles.”

Other religious minorities round out Vanderbilt's student spiritual spectrum: Buddhist (.59 percent), Eastern Orthodox (.76 percent), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (4 percent), United Church of Christ (1.6 percent) and Muslim (.59 percent), among others, according to the freshman survey's religious preference data.

There are also small numbers of Christian traditions such as Quaker (.25 percent)

and Seventh-Day Adventist (.34 percent), and non-Christian traditions, too—Hindus, Wiccans, Baha'is, atheists.

“We're not trying to preach, but we are trying to present a clear picture of Islam,” says Hamad Al-Rugaib, a senior from Saudi Arabia and an officer in the Muslim Student Association. That means sponsoring Islamic information programs and panels and cultural celebrations that dispel media misconceptions of the religion, especially after the terrorism of 2001.

“We need to communicate better,” he said. “We're competing with other organizations, other entertainments and festivals. I'd like to see more programs that talk about the various religions. We should share experiences.”

The Muslim students' meeting place for



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Friday noontime prayers might sound as incongruous as Catholics praying at the Jewish center: The Muslims meet at Vanderbilt Divinity School, at least for now. The Muslim student group is asking the University’s help to find a more permanent space for gatherings and prayer time.

A lack of communication between religious groups frustrated student Frank Lee, a Catholic, into joining the Interfaith Council, of which he was president this year. “We keep using the word ‘diversity,’ but there was a lack of communication, a lack of expression between groups,” says Lee, a senior originally from South Korea.

He credits Chancellor Gordon Gee for stirring new student interest in the many threads of Vanderbilt life, the adventure of learning.

Gee’s own identity as a Latter-Day Saint heightens curiosity about religious diversity.

The Interfaith Council held a panel of world religions in the fall, representing Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Muslim, Hindu, Mormon, Baha’i, Wiccan and Buddhist perspectives. More and more people are turning out for such events, in Lee’s view. This spring the council was busy planning a music night, with a wide range of expressions — Mormon, Muslim, contemporary Christian and others.

The point is somehow to expose students to fresh perspectives on the spiritual quest amid the daily demands on one’s time and talents, the stresses that plague 21st-century student life.

“A lot of students care, and they struggle with the issue—should you do service when

there’s an exam to study for?” Lee says.

Meanwhile, the first meeting of the Vanderbilt Socratic Club did indeed assemble one snowy February night. About 25 people showed up. The organizers were pleased, perhaps relieved, at the turnout.

“Someday, I’d love to see the Socratic Club debate twice a month,” says organizer Albonetti.

Consult the Wall at Rand for further developments, further signs of the times. ▼

The former religion editor at the Tennessean, Ray Waddle is a freelance writer for national newspapers, denominational magazines and Web sites. He has a journalism degree from the University of Oklahoma and a master’s degree in religion from Vanderbilt. He and his wife, Lisa, live in Nashville.

In all sorts of weather, MarLu Scott, a Divinity School student, has stood on the streets of Nashville to protest capital punishment and, most recently, war with Iraq, alongside kindred souls.

She also helps organize the eclectic line-up of Wednesday worship services at the school’s All Faith Chapel, a staging ground for crosscurrents of the spirit and prayers for the healing of the world — a simple room of gray neutral colors adaptable to a Methodist service one week, or Catholic, Lutheran or Cherokee the next.

Both activities, outdoors and indoors, connect her to Divinity School values that have helped her clarify her vocation—the religious conviction to speak out for justice, and the consoling miracle of community.

“This is what the Divinity School gives me: Even when it gets crazy out there, we have a faith and community that under girds us,” says Scott, a United Methodist who graduates this spring, on track to be an ordained minister. “Activism stirs us to make the world better. And it comes out of a sense of ritual, a sense of sacrifice. It means giving something of yourself that you cannot express in another way.”

The Divinity School is a mystery to some on campus—a graduate school where they study scripture and the wide world of faith. Is it a monastic Bible school? No. An academy of sainthood? Not exactly. It’s a training ground for ministers and others who have a sense of religious calling. It’s a multi-layered place of serious theological study, passionate debate, critical inquiry, and diverse attitudes about God, politics, sacred texts and congregational life.

Inside, religious tradition and pluralism co-exist, jostle, mutually probe—the way they do in the 21st-century global world outside.

“Our job is to help religious leaders prepare for lives of commitment and devotion—in a world where not everyone shares those same commitments,” says Divinity School Dean James Hudnut-Beumler.

The Divinity School is ranked with the nation’s top graduate schools of theological education, and it’s one of the few, along with the divinity schools at Harvard, Yale and Chicago, that have no official denominational sponsorship. (The school was started as Vanderbilt’s Biblical Department in 1875 and was under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, until university and Methodists dissolved ties in 1914. The Divinity School since has been under the direction of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust. It was named the Divinity School in 1956.)

“An advantage to being ecumenical is that we live in an increasingly non-denominational world—that is, a majority of people don’t draw sustenance from a single religious tradition now, and so at an

ecumenical divinity school, we’re allowed and even encouraged by our diversity to draw on the many sources of wisdom and spiritual practice,” explains Hudnut-Beumler. “What we have here is an incredible range of students and viewpoints.”

Denominationally untethered as it is, the school’s statement of commitments declares its active opposition to racism, sexism and homophobia. This framework of progressivism, forged in the heart of the Bible belt, gives the school a reputation for liberalism, at least locally.

“Some people might believe these values of diversity are lofty and academic, but we see our preparations as extraordinarily realistic for the real world,” says Chris Sanders, director of development and alumni relations for the Divinity School. “More than 50 percent of our students are women, and more than 50 percent of people attending worship, whatever the tradition, are women. We have a significant number of African Americans here. The issue of race isn’t

going away in the world. Look at the scandal that brought Trent Lott down. And gay men and lesbians are winning rights in city after city in this nation, and that issue isn’t going away, either.”

About 200 students are enrolled in the Divinity School (for the master of divinity degree or master of theological studies degree). Another 100 or so are studying for a Ph.D. or master of arts degree in the Graduate Department of Religion.

Graduates work as ministers or chaplains, or in nonprofit ministries, social services or law, or in teaching and academic research.

The single largest group of divinity students is United Methodist, but 25 denominations are represented.

Recently endowed faculty chairs in Jewish studies and Catholic studies, as well as Methodist tradition, commit the school to a future of built-in diversity. (There’s also a Disciples of Christ concentration.)

As a Unitarian-Universalist, student Jason Shelton, director of the Divinity School choir, could have pursued a Unitarian seminary but decided on Vanderbilt’s multi-faith climate as better preparation for his ministerial future. “Being here makes you realize there are always perspectives different from yours,” he says. “It makes me more cautious about speaking in broad sweeping terms about what ‘everyone’ believes.”

When he graduates this spring, he’ll officially have his master of divinity diploma. But, he says, what he perhaps has truly mastered in a school that endeavors to produce “ministers as theologians” is the art of asking questions.

“We are constantly engaged in asking questions,” he says. “We are prepared here to ask better questions.”

SEEKING GOD AGAINST THE GRAIN

*Vanderbilt Divinity School’s
pluralistic approach to theology*

BY RAY WADDLE, MA’81