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## Belief, faith and action: Center's programs prompt conversations about what matters

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## Belief, faith and action

### Center's programs prompt conversations about what matters

Those of you who attended Furman in the 1970s may remember “Soup Group.”

The group was started by freshmen in a humanities course who wanted the lively conversations begun in class to continue. With the support of religion professor Albert Blackwell, philosophy professor James Edwards, and English professors Duncan McArthur and Stanley Crowe, among many others, the group gathered once a week for a simple meal of soup, bread, iced tea and cookies. Someone (usually a student) brought a “thesis” to the table and offered it to the group for discussion. Whatever topic had captivated the attention of the presenter — politics, ethics, theology, philosophy, literature — was fair game for the dialogue.

There was something special about “Soup Group,” and consciously or unconsciously, I have used it since as a standard of comparison for other groups. Sadly, I have not often encountered that rare combination of ingredients: critical examination of significant questions, multiplicity of perspectives, vulnerability and long-term interpersonal commitment. I hope that the Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation, funded during the Forever Furman campaign by a \$2 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., has begun to open the way for a “Soup Group” vision of community at Furman that is evolving across a broad range of programs.

To see the center’s impact for yourself, you might drop in on a session of the Lilly Faculty Seminar, led by religion professor John Shelley. You could hear physicist David Turner offer a scientific analogy to clarify some points about religious pluralism, or mathematician John Harris develop a literary metaphor. Later in the day, you might hear faculty share their personal “credos” or tell about their most transforming life experiences. On another day, you might find a musician, a political scientist, a French professor and others balancing on rocks in a creek to examine salamander habitats, or tromping through a marsh to look for an almost-extinct plant with biologist Wade Worthen.

Are important “theses” being presented and critically discussed from a multiplicity of perspectives in these contexts? You bet!

The “Soup Group” sense of community is similarly at work in the center’s international service-learning program. Groups



Street musicians taught Brandon Berry '04 a tune during his visit to Havana last spring.

of faculty and students have spent the last three winter breaks in Cuba engaged in intergenerational and cross-cultural conversations about the value of humanitarian service as vocation. Some of the travelers return with a significant change in their vocational direction, and others develop a new understanding of how their vocational inclinations fit into the world’s needs. Participants engage in serious talk about vocation — who, what, how and why — long before they travel to Cuba, and the discussions continue long after they return.

Other richly textured conversations about belief, faith and action occur during the center’s summer theology institute for incoming freshmen, now in its third year. During the two-week residential seminar, participants work with Furman alumni and faculty and with community leaders such as former religion professor Jeff Rogers, now pastor of Greenville’s First Baptist Church, and Ed Marshall, director of the Northwest Crescent Child Development and Family Services Center.

The students, from all over the country and from different faith traditions, share their quest for self-understanding through theological study, expressive activities and community service. Whether they are sitting in a classroom, surveying a landfill, shoveling mulch or making masks out of milk jugs, the conversation continues about what really matters.

Perhaps the best example of diversity-in-community occurs in meetings of the

center’s advisory council, composed of students, faculty, trustees, alumni and community leaders. This group creates a natural bridge from the academy into the community — an important vocational link. Plans are under way to form leadership teams to explore critical needs in the Greenville community and to propose projects that could be carried out with funding from the Lilly grant. These projects will undoubtedly create even more realistic conversations about what matters and how one ought to live in the world.

This is only a sampling of Lilly projects at Furman. Alumni will be the focus of future programs, because vocational questions and transitions are not limited to those making first-time career decisions. Through their actions and deeds, many Furman alumni prove that it is possible to find that place in life where, as Frederick Buechner puts it, “your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”

Together, we can continue to find ways to expand the Furman “Soup Group” vision of community.

— Elaine Nocks

*The author is professor of psychology and co-director, with Spanish professor David Bost, of the Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation. For more information about the center and its programs, visit its Web site ([www.furman.edu/lilly](http://www.furman.edu/lilly)) or contact the center’s coordinator, Ann Anshus Quattlebaum '64, at (864) 294-2511 or at [ann.quattlebaum@furman.edu](mailto:ann.quattlebaum@furman.edu).*