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A Matter of Tolerance

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Tolerance

A series of programs opens the door to conversation about the need for greater understanding and acceptance of diverse beliefs at Furman.

By Hal Frampton

With a title like “Going to Hell at Furman,” it had to draw a crowd. And draw a crowd it did.

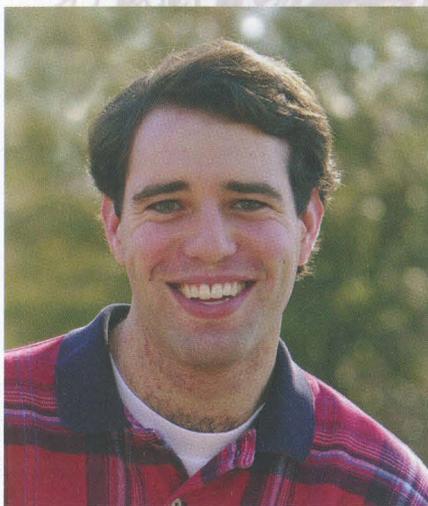
Students, faculty and staff packed McEachern Lecture Room on a cool evening last October, lining the aisles and crowding around the doorways a solid half-hour before the 8 o’clock starting time.

The program, the banner event of Religious Council’s Beyond Tolerance Week, featured a panel of five students, all of different religious faiths and commitments, who talked openly and candidly about their experiences with intolerance on Furman’s campus. And while the provocative title helped spur audience interest and made it the week’s premier attraction, it was just one of several thought-provoking programs designed to increase awareness and dialogue on campus.

Although planned well before the school year started, Beyond Tolerance Week took on added poignancy and interest, coming as it did just a month after the events of September 11. Its impact seems apparent in the subsequent establishment of new campus groups whose goal is to promote the kind of productive dialogue and exchange of ideas that emerged from the programs.

Beyond Tolerance Week began last spring as the brainchild of English professor Melinda Menzer and Carmela Epright, a philosophy professor. They took their ideas to Religious Council, which agreed to fund and help coordinate the events.

Menzer says that her motivation emerged from conversations with students of many faiths. “I wanted to raise the issue [of intolerance] so that



CHARLIE REGISTER

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people would know that it is an issue,” she says.

The week was especially geared toward freshmen, Menzer says, because much of the harassment at Furman occurs on freshman halls. “A lot of the stories from freshman halls were well-known and on the level of campus myths,” she says, “and we wanted the Beyond Tolerance events to bring the discussion about intolerance up to an intellectual level.”

Junior Erin Scheider, president of Religious Council, agrees: “We wanted

to open the door to serious discussion of the issue of tolerance so that people wouldn’t be afraid to talk about it openly.”

In addition to “Going to Hell at Furman,” the week included an appearance by Omar Shaeed, Imam of the Majid as Salaam mosque in Columbia, S.C., who spoke on “Islam and Tolerance.” He told of growing up in a Christian household, coming to Islam through the Nation of Islam, and eventually converting to mainstream Islam and becoming a cleric. He also spoke on a basic level about what the Islamic faith really is and debunked a number of common myths regarding what Muslims do and do not believe.

Another program featured Rabbi Marc Wilson of Congregation Beth Israel in Greenville, who spoke at an open forum about how difficult tolerance is and encouraged students to engage in true dialogue about their feelings on the issue.

Menzer says that she was impressed with the candor of the conversation that ensued. “Talking openly about one’s faith is very stressful for many people,” she says. “But doing so allowed us to have a very good, albeit painful, conversation.”

In addition, Jeff Rogers, former associate academic dean at Furman who is now senior minister of First Baptist Church in Greenville, returned to campus to speak on “Baptists and Tolerance.” Rogers addressed the Baptist faith’s historical tradition of religious tolerance and its tenet of the sovereignty of the individual believer.

But the week’s centerpiece was clearly “Going to Hell at Furman.” With Menzer as moderator, five students — a Catholic, an agnostic, a Jew, a Muslim and a Protestant — told their stories and responded to questions.

All of the panelists discussed the intolerance they had experienced as freshmen. Senior Cody Groeber said that he was troubled by fellow students who simply could not accept his belief in Catholic doctrine and refused to leave him alone on the subject. “Often,” he said, “the person would counter everything I said with, ‘But don’t you think this or that,’ and no matter how many times I just said, ‘No, I don’t think that,’ they wouldn’t accept it.”

Junior Zac Raby, who describes himself as agnostic, said that members of the housing staff on his freshman hall would bang on his door and wake him up every Sunday morning to ask if he would go to church with them, even after he had asked them to stop. These same people, he said, made a habit of leaving Bible verses and other religious material — usually about the damnation of non-believers — on his door. Raby said that he considered transferring because of the harassment.

Similar thoughts occurred to senior Lindsay Dodson. A Jew, Dodson said that when some of her hallmates learned that she had a Christian father, they asked her over and over again how he could deal with knowing that his daughter was going to hell.

The questioning became so intense, Dodson said, that she finally placed a call to her father and sobbingly asked if he thought she was going to hell. He was outraged that anyone would suggest such a thing, she said, and encouraged her to leave Furman, which she almost did. Despite her parents’ pleas to find a new school, however, she said she chose to stay because she didn’t want to be scared away.

Ayesha Ahmad, a junior, described dealing with a student who relentlessly tried to convince her that her religion, Islam, was wrong and that she must become a Christian to avoid going to hell. She said that whenever she tried to turn the conversation into a real dialogue about the differences and similarities between Christians and Muslims, the student simply told her that she was wrong and that he could not respect her wish not to be harassed because he loved her so much.

Senior Peter Lord talked about intolerance within the Protestant community at Furman. He said that he became involved with a number of Protestant groups on campus that belittled his faith because he didn’t proselytize in the highly aggressive manner that they advocated. These groups, he said, recruit a large number of freshmen each year and shame them into proselytizing their way. He also said that many of these groups try to convince freshmen that unless their version of Christianity aligns perfectly with that of the group, they are not truly Christian.

After all the panelists spoke, the floor was opened to questions. They included queries about Furman’s policy toward religious harassment, its support system for students who believe they are being harassed, and why the students on the panel chose to remain at Furman instead of transferring.

But the seminal question, according to Menzer, came from a student who asked how he should look at tolerance given that he feels it is his duty as a Christian to try to bring people of other faiths to Christianity. “That is the big question for many Furman students,” Menzer said, “and I don’t think we can get anywhere on the tolerance issue without addressing it.”

Ahmad’s response was that she was not offended by the call to spread the faith, and that she understood it. But, she added, when she explicitly says that she has heard all that she wants to hear, she expects people to respect her right to be left alone, just as she respects their right to approach her. “People have to realize that no means no,” she said.

Having had some time to reflect on the program, all of the panelists describe it as a good starting point for real dialogue at Furman.

“I thought that it really started people thinking and talking about tolerance on Furman’s campus,” Raby says. “Months later, people are still coming up to me and talking about the things I said on the panel.” Lord agrees: “I had students and professors stopping me in the hall

for weeks afterwards to talk about the issues raised in the forum.”

Senior Adair Ford, who attended the event, says she was particularly impressed with the panelists. “It attested to the strength of the students that they were willing to be on the panel in front of a potentially antagonistic audience,” she says. “Their stories were poignant and often heart-wrenching, and provided heightened awareness of the pain caused by callous evangelism.”

Since Beyond Tolerance Week, other Furman groups have sponsored on-campus events with a similar theme. The Mere Christianity Forum, formed after the October programs were held, brought Boston College philosopher Peter Kreeft to Furman in March. He spoke to a packed house for more than two and a half hours about the intersection of reason and faith.

Another new organization, the Interfaith Dialogue Group, launched its efforts in March by bringing to campus Carl Evans, chair of the religious studies department at the University of South Carolina, to introduce the concept of interfaith dialogue. He and five panelists — a Christian, a Muslim, a Baha’i, a Buddhist and a Hindu — demonstrated how they think interfaith dialogue should work.

Tracy Wells, a junior and founder of the Interfaith Dialogue Group, says that she was inspired by the Beyond Tolerance Week and hopes that her group will build on the discussions that emerged from the week’s programs.

“Learning to really listen to someone with a different religious experience than your own, and to practice empathy toward that person, is a difficult and touchy subject at times, but it is so important for any foundation of mutual respect or perhaps even appreciation,” she says. “One is much less likely to discount someone if they hear them speak as a person with very real experiences than if they hear them speak as a talking head of theological language.”