



Emory Henry College's United Methodist Memorial Chapel. *(Photo courtesy of Justin Hartsell.)*

Walking a Tightrope for Religious Inclusivity

By: Justin Hartsell

EMORY, Va. — [Emory & Henry College](#) is a private liberal arts college affiliated with the [United Methodist Church](#) in rural Southwest Virginia. Though it has a chapel on campus and maintains its continual relationship with the Methodist Church, the college welcomes students and faculty from all religious backgrounds. Just how does it maintain such a balance between its church affiliation and tolerance of differing beliefs?

Christian Roots

“We affirm the Christian faith as our spiritual and knowledge heritage and encourage all our members to grow in faith as they grow in knowledge,” reads the first line of Emory & Henry’s [mission statement](#). “We believe in the worth of each person’s religious and cultural heritage, inasmuch as that heritage leads to service to others in our region and the larger world.”

Whenever events are held at the college—such as convocation, Martin Luther King Day, or the first day of orientation being examples—an invitation to pray with the chaplain is offered. The chaplain, [Mary K. Briggs](#), will then lead those in a prayer—typically giving a

prayer of thanks, asking for peace and requesting for clarity and direction. She then concludes with “Amen,” which is simultaneously matched by a murmuring crowd, “Amen.”



Methodist cross in the E&H Chapel for students to pray at in private prayer room. (Photo courtesy of Justin Hartsell.)

Religious Diversity

How then does the school approach religious diversity? “While rooted in the United Methodist tradition, Spiritual Life and Emory & Henry College embrace people from all faith backgrounds, traditions and observances,” says E&H’s [Spiritual Life](#). It goes on reading, “Student groups, programming and student leadership actively represent that religious diversity.”

The challenge in this approach is that the diversity is brought about from active student-led groups on campus. Currently, there are [various Christian student-led groups on campus](#), such as Encounter, Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Campus Christian Fellowship, Kerygma and a weekly prayer group. For students of different faiths, there is only one group on campus, Interfaith Student Union. Essentially all faiths—including Christianity—are lumped into one service.

[Sharon Wright](#), Associate Chaplain at Emory & Henry College, has worked at the college for five years. Wright shared that she grew up in a church that was not inclusive of others and she always knew—even as a kid—that something was not right about that approach. She always wanted to be accepting of others without pushing her faith or beliefs on others.

Wright shared that a turning point for her came in college. “My best friend in college was an atheist,” said Wright. “We had a lot of deep talks, and one night, she asked, ‘Why do you care so much about Jesus?’ I responded, ‘Because he died on the cross for your sins!’ And do you know what she said, ‘So what?’ I was floored,” said Wright laughing. Wright credits this moment as an eye-opening experience for challenging yourself to both respect your own beliefs but also the beliefs of others.



Interfaith Room in the bottom of the Chapel for students of all religions to come and practice their respective faith. (Photo courtesy of Justin Hartsell.)

In regards to how she sees Emory & Henry’s performance with religious diversity, Wright said, “We would love to have more voices on campus from people of different religious backgrounds. I have had Christian students and non-Christian students both come into my office and tell me they long for interfaith diversity.

White contributed the college’s location and the number of students coming in has proved to be the biggest obstacles in increasing religious diversity. In contrast, though,

Wright also shared, “If you build it, they will come,” explaining that “a strong interfaith study group on campus” would help better attract students of different religions.

"Invisible Diversity"

[Mark Finney](#), who has his doctorate in mass communication, is an associate professor at the college and is Jewish. “I came to work at a liberal arts college that happens to be Methodist,” said Finney.

In applying for a position as an associate professor in the [mass communications department](#) at the college, Finney said that he was “reassured” that his Jewish faith and the college’s roots to the Methodist church would not be a problem.

Despite the reassurance, Finney said, “There have been some moments when it’s been a problem. There’s been one instance where a woman who had power over me...attempted to make me feel like my objections [to attending Christian ceremonies] were inappropriate.”

Finney went on to share that the difficulty in finding inclusivity has not only resided amongst fellow colleagues and supervisors but also the classroom. “There’s an assumption among students that others share their beliefs,” said Finney. “They are sometimes intolerant of the things that they say.”

Finney concluded that the college has “an invisible diversity” of varying religions on campus.

Tugging At The Roots

In addition to the college’s challenges to exemplify a spirit of religious diversity is its own relationship to the Methodist Church. Wright shared, “The Methodist Church is somewhat divided right now—especially on issues with human sexuality.”

[In the spring of this year, the United Methodist Church ruled](#) that it would maintain its stance on prohibiting gay marriage and would continue to now allow gay clergy members to serve within the church.

Following the UMC ruling, Emory & Henry issued emails to students, faculty and staff that it disagreed with the UMC’s ruling and was disheartened by the decision.

Wright expressed that the college refuses to take [the stance of the United Methodist Church on the issues of homosexuality](#) that are laid out in the UMC’s [The Book of](#)

[Discipline of The United Methodist Church](#). “We have a faction [in the church] for inclusivity, and we have a faction not for inclusivity,” said Wright, highlighting that the college stands with the inclusive side of the divided church.



LGBTQ support sticker outside of faculty member's office door. (Photo courtesy of Justin Hartsell.)

Due to the UMC's ruling regarding the LGBTQ community, Wright said disaffiliating from the Methodist Church “has been talked about” but that there has not been “any formal steps taken to disaffiliate.”

Wright highlighted that the college receives a “modest amount of money” from the UMC because of its affiliation.

“The hardest part of disaffiliating would be how the alumni would feel about it. I think it would be hurtful to some and be a wonderful decision for others,” said Wright. “I think some would grieve and some would celebrate. I think a decision to disaffiliate would require thought and care.”