As one of the college’s most recognizable landmarks, towering Dimnent Memorial Chapel makes the religious heritage of Hope College evident.

Hope was established in the 1860s by a people for whom the Reformed faith was paramount. They had left the Netherlands and founded the college’s hometown of Holland less than two decades previously in search of religious liberty. In their new educational venture they saw an opportunity to prepare leaders in the Reformed tradition that played a central role in their lives.

When some 70 years later he led the drive to build the chapel that now bears his name, President Edward Dimnent appreciated the vision. Some thought he overreached in constructing a chapel capable of holding the entire student body more than twice over. It was so expensive to build and the school’s finances so modest that he even funded some of the project himself.

Today that chapel is regularly filled to its 1,000-person capacity during the college’s four weekly religious services—chapel on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings, and the Sunday-evening “Gathering.” Significantly, attendance is voluntary.

Also significantly, more significantly, the robust student interest in the worship services reflects a more meaningful truth: that the members of the campus community are deeply engaged by the Christian faith in ways that run throughout the Hope experience. It is, in fact, a defining characteristic of the institution and a central component in the holistic, purposeful education that the college provides.

“There’s this sacred/secular dichotomy in a lot of people’s lives, and I think that’s what we want to help students get away from,” said Dr. James Boelkins, provost at Hope.

“What is a Reformed worldview? What I use in the simplest way is that it expresses God’s sovereignty over all of creation,” he said. “In that case, God is sovereign over all of the disciplines—they’re all part of His creation. It’s important, I think, for our students to appreciate that.”

“We want students to gain a personal, well-thought-out understanding of how they will live out their faith in God’s world, so exploring that within the academic program is an important part of what we do.”

– Dr. James Boelkins
Provost
Hope students are strongly committed to giving of themselves. The participants in one of this year’s spring break mission trip programs to Kentucky, for example, were inspired to find ways to continue serving together after returning to campus. In April, juniors Alicia Nieves and Nicole VanderZouwen led teams while volunteering at the Colter Farm in Zeeland, Mich., helping the site prepare for the fall season.
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The final Sunday night of the academic year at Hope, and students from every corner of campus are converging on Dimnent Memorial Chapel.

More than 1,200 students pack the chapel that night, with latecomers having to sit in the aisles. The students stand, many raising their hands in worship, as the praise band opens with U2’s “Beautiful Day.” The band then plays a medley of praise and worship songs, capped off by a stirring rendition of “How Great Thou Art.”

The students recite the Apostles’ Creed and Psalm 103, which begins “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name.”

It’s the final Sunday worship service, known on campus as The Gathering, and the Rev. Trygve Johnson is getting ready to preach. For the seniors in attendance, this is their last opportunity for words of encouragement from the pulpit.

“It’s time to put a period at the end of a sentence,” said Johnson, the sentence. At the end of a period is the “This place is a part of your story. You are part of it, and it is part of you,” he said.

For Johnson, 34, a self-described “theogeoek,” preaching is a passion. But he balances that passion with a cerebral approach to life and faith, and an accessibility to students, faculty and staff.

“He’s a deep thinker, but he connects well with students,” Hope President Dr. James Johnson said. “He wants very much to wed the intellectual and the spiritual.”

President Bultman says Johnson is a big-picture thinker, has a deep sense of calling for his ministry and is “very grounded in the best of theology.”

Samantha Miller, who has been a member of the college’s pre-seminary society, led by Johnson and his wife, Dr. Kristen Deede Johnson, echoes President Bultman’s sentiments.

“He is a person who loves and cares for each of his students, even the ones he hasn’t met personally,” said Miller, a double major in political science and the spiritual.”

Dr. Bultman was president of Northwestern, which like Hope is affiliated with the Reformed Church in America. In his three years at Northwestern, Johnson organized and facilitated the school’s daily chapel, served as resident preacher, co-supervised the campus ministry staff and program, provided pastoral care and served as a liaison to community pastors and the RCA.

In 2002, Johnson left Northwestern to pursue a doctoral degree in theology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. It was there that he met Kristen Deede, a University of Virginia graduate who had already spent two years of study at St. Andrews.

“It was clear that he had a deep faith and he was very thoughtful, but he had a fun-loving spirit,” she said.

The couple married a year later and completed their studies at St. Andrews.

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Andrew Mead, Jeffrey Skaff and Dan Claus.

Samantha Miller, who has been a

Lilly Endowment that seeks to help students develop connections between their faith and the RCA.

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Since its inception, Hope has served as fertile ground for students who’ve sensed a call to enter vocational ministry. Although theological education has evolved over time, the importance of preparing future church leaders has not diminished.

“If we don’t provide education and support for these students, we will be turning our backs on the heart of our clearly stated and communally embraced mission, which is...to educate students for lives of leadership and service in a global society through academic and co-curricular programs of recognized excellence in the liberal arts and in the context of the historic Christian faith,” said the Rev. Dr. Tim Brown, former dean of the chapel at Hope and newly named president of Western Theological Seminary.

Dr. Brown is thrilled by how God has raised up a generation of “widely and differently gifted” young people coming out of seminary today. Among them, one common trait seems to emerge - their ability to effectively share the Gospel with diverse audiences. This skill, Dr. Brown contends, is due in part to increased opportunities for students to travel abroad, learn new languages, and experience diversity of all kinds. And a solid liberal arts education at Hope is at the core, he believes.

Through the years, many hundreds of alumni have chosen to serve the church—and not only the Reformed Church in America (RCA), which is the college’s parent denomination, but other denominations as well. As Hope prepared to host the denomination’s General Synod recently, the college gathered reflections from just a few of the young graduates who have answered the call to pastor in the RCA in particular.

For the Rev. Karsten Voskuil, Hope laid vital groundwork for his current work as pastor of Trinity Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Mich., an urban church with a diverse congregation.

“So much of my daily work with different people and situations isn’t found in a textbook,” he said. “So when you’ve had a liberal arts education, you really are much more equipped to use your gifts to respond. I’ve come to appreciate both Hope and Western Seminary for giving me that broader range of education that has prepared me for the different curveballs of urban ministry.”

Although Voskuil had planned to become a lawyer, while pursuing an internship with Hope’s Washington Honors Semester he realized the church, more than any other institution, needs to be the “episcopacy” for social justice. And so, he pursued vocational ministry instead.

“The religion department had some of the sharpest minds I’d ever seen,” he said. “Some Christian institutes have a reputation of being conservative, but I didn’t find that at Hope. What I found was an openness to the types of questions 18- to 21-year-olds ask.”

Today, Voskuil and his wife, the Rev. Stephanie Voskuil, co-pastor the Reformed Church of Highland Park, a racially diverse congregation in Central New Jersey. Stephanie came to Hope thinking about pursuing social work, medicine or youth ministry, but once she met some female religion professors and pastors, she chose a path toward ministry instead.

“In seminary and beyond, [Seth and I] have realized how fortunate we were to have had the kind of experience at Hope that we did,” she said. “To have a religion class with eight students and to have professors who were interested not just in our grades but in our development as people and in our faith and future - this was such a gift.”

The Kaper-Dales’ relationships with some Hope professors continue to this day. For example, Dr. Steven Bouma-Prediger, chair of the department of religion, led a seminar on ecology and theology at the couple’s church. And the Kaper-Dales have connected being conservative, but I didn’t find that at Hope. What I found was an openness to the types of questions 18- to 21-year-olds ask.”

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The mission of Hope College is to educate students for lives of leadership and service in a global society through academic and co-curricular programs of excellence in the liberal arts and in the context of the historic Christian faith.

Thank you for lifting up Hope in your prayers as the college seeks to foster development of the whole person — intellectually, spiritually, socially, and physically.