"All of life is spiritual"

By Greg Olgers ’87

A one of the college’s most recognizable landmarks, towering Dimnent Memorial Chapel makes Hope’s religious heritage 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 ’66, 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 ’66
Provost

The active campus ministries program, which includes weekday and Sunday-evening services that consistently fill Dimnent Memorial Chapel, is one component in the Hope mix, which emphasizes challenging students to develop an understanding of the Christian faith as a basis for academic excellence and the fulfillment of human potential. This day’s service having ended, two students linger just a few moments longer while their peers head toward the end of the day.
The college’s perspective is richly informed by Hope’s lifelong affiliation with the Reformed Church in America. At the same time, however, the college is not prescriptive in its approach to faith. Many traditions within Christianity are represented among the faculty, staff and student body and inform the community’s explorations.

For Colleen Kelly ’08 of Naperville, Ill., the college’s faith dimension was an important consideration as both a prospective student and during her time at Hope. She participated in campus ministries-organized activities such as Chapel, small-group discussions and the spring break mission trip program, as well as in student-organized bible studies. She also valued, however, that not everyone had to...

The student development program is a central component in the mix, working alongside the academic program and campus ministries to provide intentional lessons in what it means to live one’s faith in a community. For the first 18 years, their involvement with the church and the Christian faith has been guided by their parents or guardians. When they come to Hope, it really is about who they are and what their faith is in terms of their life,” said Dr. Richard Frost, who is vice president for student development and dean of students. “Our role, then, is to provide ways to challenge and support them in that, to model that, and then to participate with them.”

The means to this possibility is a hall program that includes inviting one of the chaplains for discussion with the student residents. It might be one of the 13 student organizations committed specifically to expounding a dimension of the Christian faith—such as the Reformed, or the Union of Catholic Students—or the many others that integrate faith into their activities. It might even be through the way that discipline is handled, when the focus becomes on exploring how the student reconciles the behavior with his or her faith values.

"That makes them a really exciting group of people to be educating, because they want to make a difference," she said. "They want their lives to have meaning, and that’s a really important thing.”