

## DAVIDSON'S RELIGIOUS TRADITION DEBATED - WILL THE - Charlotte Observer (NC) - November 27, 1995 - page 1A

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With Davidson College fast approaching a crossroads, some students, teachers and alumni are trying to push the tradition-laden school toward change.

But 157 years after Davidson President Robert Hall Morrison called the Bible the college's first charter, defenders of the past are pushing back.

At stake in the narrow sense is whether Davidson will continue requiring that its president be Presbyterian and its trustees and religion professors Christian.

At stake in the broader sense, said college chaplain Rob Spach, is whether Davidson can continue to blend faith and learning, heart and mind.

No wonder the issue that's building to a February resolution stirs such deep feelings on the picture postcard-perfect campus 25 miles north of Charlotte.

“So many people in culture think in terms of polarities - either we're going to be a Bible college or a secular school that values learning,” said Spach. “I don't think that's a good option. The good option is bringing together learning and faith.”

A better option, countered Davidson freshman **Cintra Pollack** of Denver, is dropping the prohibition that forbids anyone but a Christian from being president, trustee or religion professor.

“I don't think the board of trustees should be exclusive,” said **Pollack**, who is Jewish. She almost didn't come to Davidson because of the prohibition that could keep her from one day becoming a trustee. “I think diversity and richness helps everywhere,” she said. “In the big picture, everything is becoming more inclusive.”

**Pollack** is one of about a dozen Jews enrolled at Davidson, compared to some 400 Presbyterians.

“I know what the board fears,” said **Pollack**, 18, who argued her case in a recent guest column in The Davidsonian student newspaper. “They don't want to lose the tradition.”

Said junior biology major **Truc Bui**, 20, a Buddhist from Charlotte: “This is strictly a Presbyterian, Christian community. They should have more programs (and) places people like me could go.”

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The role of religion

This being buttoned-down Davidson, the debate over religion's role is intense, yet civil.

About the closest the campus of 1,600 came to fireworks was last Easter, when several students put up crosses to mark Jesus' death and resurrection. Irlked by the outward display of Christianity, three other students erected an alternative cross satirizing holiday commercialism. They stuck discount-store fliers on theirs.

The long-standing debate is so restrained that no one in power - including President John Kuykendall and board Chairman Craig Wall - will say anything except that the 54 trustees will confront the issue in February.

Gauging opinion at the college might not help settle matters either. A survey of students, reported in the summer issue of the Davidson Journal campus magazine, indicated a slim majority - 54.5 percent - want to drop the requirement that the president be Presbyterian. Larger majorities want to drop the Christians-only rules for trustees and religion professors.

Religion department Chairman David Kaylor said his department favors dropping its Christian-only requirement. ``It's a hang-on from the past," said Kaylor, who's been at Davidson 32 years. ``It might be better having a Buddhist teaching New Testament and a Christian teaching Buddhism."

As it is, an Episcopalian teaches Jewish studies at Davidson.

Despite some support for change, however, nearly 200 students signed a petition opposing any breakdown of traditions dating back to Davidson's founding by the Concord Presbytery in 1837.

``Davidson should be tolerant and respectful of all traditions," the students wrote in the petition. ``But it should also be proud and unapologetic of the tradition it grew upon and stands for today."

Said junior Ashley Wright, a 21-year-old English major from Houston: ``I love our Southern ties and our Christian ties. We're trying to stray too far. We're trying to follow the trend toward multiculturalism. We're selling out."

Another possible factor: development officer Jamie May said many loyal Presbyterians who just contributed to a six-year drive that raised \$160 million also won't like any severing of church-college ties. ``Many of our important donors," said May, ``value the church connection."

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A campus of Christians

Despite her call for change, freshman Pollack has enjoyed her first semester at Davidson, even that tricky calculus course that seemed to leave her in a daze one recent weekday morning.

She loves the academics, enjoys campus life and feels comfortable being a Jew in a world of faithful yet respectful Christians: ``I don't find anybody trying to convert me," she said, ``or force their religion on me."

And even if the trustees decide to drop some of Davidson's traditional requirements, **Pollack** doesn't think the school will ever stray too far from its Christian and Presbyterian roots.

“There are girls on my hall who actually go to church,” she said. “I've never seen so many people who actually believe in God.”

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### Church-college ties

Among colleges with ties to a church, religious requirements vary. Here's a sampling:

\* Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., requires faculty to sign a statement of Christian faith. Trustees also must be Christian.

\* Princeton University in New Jersey, which has ties to the Presbyterian church, long ago dropped any Christian requirements for trustees, faculty or staff. President Harold Shapiro is Jewish. Davidson likes to call itself “Princeton of the South.”

\* Wingate University, affiliated with the N.C. Baptist State Convention, has no requirement for religion professors. The president, by tradition, is Baptist. State Baptist funding to the university, in Union County, is based partly on the number of Baptists on the board.

\* Queens College, another Presbyterian school in Mecklenburg, has no Christian requirements for its president, trustees or professors.

\* Wake Forest University has ties to the N.C. Baptist State Convention, but no formal religious requirements for its leaders. The Winston-Salem school of 3,700 even has some coed floors in its dormitories.

- By Ken Garfield"

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