

Charting a course for the ministry

The Rev. Jan Prentace '93 considered becoming a medical doctor, but decided to become a pastor because she could reach more people on a Sunday morning than a doctor does all week.

“Planting seeds of faith and seeing them come to fruition in people’s lives is very rewarding,” said Prentace, associate pastor of Sydenstricker United Methodist Church in Springfield, VA.

Prentace had not originally looked toward a career in ministry, explaining that she came from a very traditional Southern Baptist background that did not encourage women to become pastors. “I had to become a Methodist to find grace,” she joked.

When Prentace attended Virginia Wesleyan, she was an older student, going back to school after 17 years. She said Wesleyan challenged her because her academic background was not as strong as some of the younger students. “But the rigorous courses prepared me well, and I didn’t have as hard a time as other students did in seminary.”

The college has more than 60 clergy alumni serving United Methodist churches in the Virginia Conference and an additional 20-30 serving in other conferences and denominations. Of the 40 total preachers in the Portsmouth District, 12 are Virginia Wesleyan alums.

Some of these clergy came from the college’s religious studies major. Other graduates discovered their way into church-related careers through a different path.

The Rev. Rob Woodfin '91, pastor of Salem United Methodist Church in Mathews, is another graduate who worked for several years in a different field before realizing and accepting his call to ministry.

Woodfin was a liberal arts major with a concentration in criminal justice. After he graduated, he worked for a credit union where he started as a teller, then moved on into training to become a teacher and class facilitator/instructor.

But Woodfin was not satisfied. “I still felt spiritual unrest and knew I was supposed to be somewhere else. I was praying about it for a year and realized I was called to be a minister.”

He left the business world and went to seminary, graduating in 2000. Now in his fourth year at Salem, he feels well prepared for the tasks of ministry.

“As a pastor, I do a lot of different things – administrative work, counseling, delegation. There isn’t anything that I’ve been called to do that I don’t have some familiarity with as a result of my liberal arts degree.”

The Rev. Frank Jennings '86, pastor of Covenant United Methodist Church in Chesapeake was already in the pulpit as a student pastor in Knott’s Island, NC, when he enrolled at Wesleyan. Jennings took several years to complete his degree, and during that time, also worked in the Chesapeake Fire Department full time as a chaplain, the department’s first. He later moved to a church in Brunswick County and continued to finish his degree, driving two hours each way.

Besides pastoring his church, Jennings also serves as the Virginia Conference’s “disaster pastor,” an unofficial title, but a job that’s taken him from severe flooding in

Franklin, VA, to hurricane clean-up after Isabel last fall. He coordinates volunteers from United Methodist churches to provide various forms of disaster relief. And, as a trained EMT, Jennings jokingly calls himself a “prayer-a-medic.”

“Ministry is not for the fainthearted,” he said. “But you’ll experience things that the average person never will, and that makes it rewarding.”

Jennings recalls two of his Wesleyan professors, Dr. (Charles L.) Kessler and Dr. (William R.) Shealy, with fondness. “In Dr. Kessler, I saw a tremendous humility for Christ, and he was very compassionate and supportive. Dr. Shealy taught challenging courses that I put off until I couldn’t put them off anymore. He told us we might not understand now, but would understand later, and he was right.”

The Rev. Ted Smith ’84, pastor of Saint Stephen’s United Methodist Church in Burke is just one of many graduates who agree that Wesleyan’s rigorous academic program provides a good foundation for seminary.

“Virginia Wesleyan provided excellent preparation, with a lot of liberal arts courses that are relevant, such as history, political science, math and science.”

The Rev. Phyllis Earley ’92, pastor of Epworth United Methodist Church in Norfolk, also came to the pastoral ministry later in life. For her family, Wesleyan has become a tradition. Her husband Jim ’77, is pastor of Park Place United Methodist Church in Norfolk, and their daughter Alacia ’03, who graduated in May, now serves as program director at a United Methodist camp.

“I really liked the low student-teacher ratio and knew I’d have a solid foundation for graduate school,” Earley said.

Like several other alumni, the Rev. Bob Chapman ’79, Wesleyan’s campus chaplain, came to the ministry through a more indirect route.

“I actually majored in communication studies and had been working in commercial photography for two years,” Chapman said. “I was going through some very difficult and trying circumstances during that period, and I looked for some guidance.

“I turned to a United Methodist pastor, who directed me to talk to another pastor, who was a tremendous help. I sought help from the church and the church responded, and it was time for me to do likewise. That’s when I discerned a call to enter ordained ministry.”

Chapman is in his seventh year as campus chaplain. “I’ve pastored a couple of churches, but it’s a more relational-type ministry here now,” he said. “I work with young people primarily, who are at a very interesting stage in their lives.”

Chapman spends much of his time just being available to individuals in need of a friend; however, he is a far cry from the traditional guidance counselor-type. In addition to a weekly service, Chapman has made his presence on campus well known by starting a variety of student clubs, photographing students in their natural state and creating the beloved “Chappy’s Cantina” at which he serves hot chocolate or lemonade, depending on the season, to the campus community.

“I just like to make a positive difference in a person’s life,” said Chapman. “It makes my day when I go out and make a cup of hand-squeezed lemonade and a student says he’s never had that before. It’s such a simple and profound act.”

Although he was not a religious studies major, Chapman has high praise for the program at Wesleyan and the college. “We have excellent religious studies professors who do a great job laying the groundwork for people. When you look at why so many Wesleyan graduates enter the ordained ministry, I think it comes down to the historical relationship of being related to the United Methodist Church.”

There are two good arguments for why Virginia Wesleyan does a good job preparing people for the ministry, said Dr. Craig Wansink, religious studies professor. “One of these is the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom. Having this on campus creates a lot of opportunities for students to hear from top-rated scholars. The caliber of people that the center brings in rivals any research university.”

Wansink also said that Wesleyan’s location in southeastern Virginia, which has a rich variety of religious traditions, plays a role in helping to prepare students.

“This area has a Hindu temple, eight Buddhist communities, eight Muslim mosques and many engaging, growing Christian churches and Jewish communities,” he said. “Our students have opportunities to visit these places, which makes religious studies infinitely more real to them.”

Dr. Ted Vial, associate professor of religious studies, echoes these comments and also pointed out that the program is very rigorous. “Our students know more about theology going into seminary than other students might. Plus, we have great students coming in. Some of the best students are drawn to our classes,” he said.