

# College students cross faith boundaries

Presbyterian-related colleges take an increasingly interfaith approach to religious life.

BY GARY LUHR

As part of a senior project at the University of Tulsa (TU) last fall, Emily Stern, a Presbyterian from Waco, Texas, invited students from TU's various campus ministries, including Hillel (the Jewish student association) and the Muslim Student Association, to be part of a campus-wide faith celebration. The students were invited to show how they celebrated a major religious holiday and to provide food traditionally associated with such celebrations. Each student was also given a crayon and asked to draw a picture of his or her favorite memory of a religious observance. Appropriately titled "Celebrating Our Faith," the event attracted more than 75 people.

"The greatest success was showcasing the diversity of faith-based experiences," Stern said. "My heart was warmed when I saw students mingling with people from different faith groups after the event was over. This isn't something that happens every day. At that moment, I realized that giving people knowledge is the best weapon to fight fear."

Celebrating Our Faith was entirely student organized and led. "It was a wonderful example of emergent leadership, the only type of leadership that ever continues to develop and sustain itself," said TU's chaplain, Jeff Francis.

As non-Christians make up a growing segment of society, it is not surprising that Presbyterian-related schools such as Tulsa are taking an increasingly interfaith approach to religious life. It may include bringing

speakers to campus to talk about the role faith plays in world affairs. It often involves sharing a meal or gathering in small groups to discuss different faith traditions.

"Meals are a big part of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions," says John Williams, chaplain at Presbyterian-related Austin College in Texas. "There is a lot of that in the Bible and the Qur'an."

"Every year we have freshmen who need to be convinced that interfaith dialogue is a good idea. Others show up understanding its importance," he says.

"As we look at our values, it just makes sense," says Doug McMahon, chaplain and director of campus ministries at Eckerd College in Florida. "Our Reformed tradition includes reaching out to students of all traditions."

Though the number of students of non-Christian traditions is small at

most Presbyterian colleges, interest in interfaith activities appears to be growing at many of these schools. "When our Muslim students put on a fast-breaking meal at the end of Ramadan, we might get 80 to 100 people, even though we only have about 20 Muslim students on campus," says Walt Tennyson, chaplain at Rhodes College in Tennessee.

Last year, Rhodes's Muslim Student Association invited students to spend a day experiencing *hijab*, the practice of Muslim women who wear a headscarf in public. More than 200 students participated. "During our reflection time afterward, some of the most surprising comments were from some of our Muslim students telling how often they are targets of hostility," Tennyson said. One young woman told of her mother being verbally accosted while filling up her car at a



Christian students interact with a Sikh student at the College of Wooster's interfaith open house.