Religious Life

Oberlin was founded on deep spiritual convictions and a passionate desire to make the world a better place; religious life at Oberlin takes shape in an exciting multitude of religious, spiritual, and philosophical identities, communities, and activities, many of which have service and social justice as a core component. The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life (ORSL) oversees, coordinates, and supports this great diversity of spiritual life communities and programs, and provides a number of direct services, such as pastoral care, connections to graduate programs in theology and ministerial studies, and ecumenical and multifaith programming that seeks to educate and engage the whole campus in critical thinking and action about religious, spiritual, and ethical issues. Although religious life at Oberlin has become increasingly diverse since the College was founded, religious life at Oberlin today is as lively and engaged as ever before.

ORSL is ecumenical and multifaith. It is led by a Director, Reverend Greg McGonigle, who supervises the team of chaplains and affiliates, supports students and communities not served by the other chaplains and affiliates, and promotes ecumenical and multifaith exploration and engagement.

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL DEMOGRAPHICS

Many people ask about the religious and spiritual identities present on campus, and especially among the student body. Our largest populations are Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, and Oberlin has one of the largest and most active Jewish campus life programs of any of our peer institutions. Within each of these broad categories, of course, there is considerable diversity of belief and practice—ranging from conservative to liberal. Oberlin has a small but consistent Muslim community and larger numbers of Buddhists, Friends, Pagans, and Unitarian Universalists. Communities of Eastern Orthodox, Latter Day Saints, and other traditions ebb and flow over time, but ORSL seeks to make sure every student who desires to find or explore a religious community has that opportunity. Finally, Oberlin has a considerable number of students who do not identify with one religious tradition and who may be “spiritual but not religious.” ORSL seeks to serve these students through our general programs.

JEWISH CAMPUS LIFE

Cleveland Hillel sponsors a Jewish Chaplain at Oberlin College, and Oberlin’s Jewish campus life encompasses all Jewish points of view, including Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist perspectives. Jewish student organizations include: Hillel, Oberlin Zionists, Queer Jews and Allies, and Tzedek. Programming includes: Shabbat and other holiday observances, the Kosher-Halal Co-Op, a Hebrew Program House, and countless educational and social activities. Reform and Conservative synagogues are within driving distance of campus. The Jewish Chaplain is Rabbi Shimon Brand, (440) 775-8128.

CATHOLIC CAMPUS LIFE

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Cleveland sponsors a Catholic Chaplain who supports the Newman Catholic Student Community. Activities include: weekly Mass and holy day observances, leadership development and vocational discernment, spiritual direction and access to the sacraments, retreats, service projects, educational programs, and social events. Sacred Heart Catholic Church is also located in town. The Catholic Chaplain is Debbie Dacone, MA, (440) 775-5190.

PROTESTANT CAMPUS LIFE

Oberlin’s Protestant campus life is coordinated by Chaplain Affiliates—one position to serve the evangelical Protestant community (sponsored by Intervarsity) and one position to serve the mainline/progressive Protestant community. These Chaplain Affiliates support the Protestant student organizations Oberlin Christian Fellowship (OCF) and Ecumenical Christians of Oberlin (ECO). There are also a number of other Protestant student organizations that relate with ORSL through its
Director, including: Agape (African-American), Credo (classical), and Voices for Christ (a gospel choir). OCF sponsors many events during Orientation, weekly small groups, occasional large groups, service projects, and special events. ECO sponsors a weekly Sunday evening dinner and discussion, Taize worship services, retreats, book studies, cookie bakes, and other special events.

There are also many local Protestant churches, of virtually every denomination, and representing conservative, mainline, liberal, liturgical, evangelical, African-American, and Pentecostal traditions. Students are welcome and sought as members, participants in student ministries and other programs, and musicians. ORSL is happy to provide referrals to appropriate churches. The Protestant Chaplain Affiliates can be reached through ORSL Director Rev. Greg McGonigle.

MUSLIM CAMPUS LIFE

Oberlin’s Muslim Students Association (MSA) provides religious, spiritual, and cultural opportunities for Muslim Obies. Our MSA is diverse in race, ethnicity, Islamic interpretation, practice, and politics, but is united by a common faith. Jumah prayers are held Fridays in the Muslim Prayer Room near ORSL on Wilder Hall’s second floor. Muslim students also eat in the Kosher-Halal Co-Op. MSA can be reached through ORSL Director Rev. Greg McGonigle.

SACRED SPACES ON CAMPUS

Oberlin College is blessed with multiple sacred spaces. These include spaces used for Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim practices, as well as many other pleasant places for prayer and meditation including Tappan Square and the Arboretum. ORSL coordinates the care and use of Fairchild Chapel, which is the main chapel regularly used as such. Finney Chapel, originally built for religious purposes, continues to house many performances and programs that inspire members of the campus and larger community.

MULTIFAITH CAMPUS LIFE AND BEYOND OBERLIN

ORSL sponsors and supports groups and initiatives that allow the campus to engage with the religious diversity at Oberlin and beyond. Within the Cleveland area there is much religious diversity that can enhance the Oberlin experience. For more information, contact Rev. Greg McGonigle.

THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

In addition to the educational programming offered by ORSL, Oberlin’s Religion Department, which was among the first in the country, offers high-quality courses in the academic study of religion. Students may also enroll in or teach interesting alternative courses on religion in the Experimental College. And some students make use of the January Winter Term and summers to study and explore spiritual questions and commitments. Both ORSL and the Conservatory offer many opportunities to engage in sacred music traditions.

WHY GET INVOLVED IN RELIGIOUS LIFE?

Many students naturally connect with religious communities at Oberlin because they came to Oberlin practicing a faith and want to continue doing so. Others may have grown up with one faith tradition or none at all and want to learn more about spiritual life. Practicing a faith and learning about faiths are good motivations for participating in religious life, and with them many students also find supportive mentors and friends, the ability to engage with faith traditions in new ways as adults, opportunities to recharge their souls, and the ability to connect their studies and lives as a whole person.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information, please contact ORSL at Wilder Hall 217, (440) 775-8103, via email at orsl@oberlin.edu or visit our website at www.oberlin.edu/orsl.