

# Office of the Chaplains

## Annual Report 2020-2021

### Mission Statement

The Office of the Chaplains serves the diverse religious, spiritual, and pastoral needs of the Davidson College community, with a distinct concern for students of every background and worldview. Inspired by the college's Statement of Purpose and its articulation of Reformed Christianity, our chaplaincy supports all people in expressing, exploring, and practicing their particular traditions, beliefs, and perspectives in a respectful and pluralistic environment.

### Chaplains' Office Staff

- The Rev. Robert Spach '84, D.Min., College Chaplain
- The Rev. Grace Burford, Ph.D., Associate Chaplain for Buddhist Programs, Director of the Davidson Meditation Initiative, and Coordinator of Interfaith Programs (until the end of September)
- Mr. Scott Salvato, Associate Chaplain & Catholic Campus Minister Rabbi David Lipper, Associate Chaplain & Campus Rabbi
- Mrs. Sally Fredricks, Staff Assistant

### Campus Ministers registered with the Chaplains' Office

- Mr. Tennant Brastow '11 (Campus Outreach)
- The Rev. Claire George-Drumheller (UKirk, PCUSA)
- Mr. Jordan Gealy (Fellowship of Christian Athletes)
- The Rev. Andrew Goyzueta '10 (Reformed University Fellowship)
- Fr. Stephen Lawrence (Orthodox Christian Fellowship)
- Mr. Paul Lee (Chi Alpha, Assemblies of God)
- Fr. Kevin Lloyd (Canterbury Episcopal Fellowship)
- Ms. Alyssa Wiggins (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship) (Fall semester only)

### Overview

The 2020-2021 academic year was fundamentally shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all programming, committee work, and interactions with students took place via Zoom. While this mode of engagement had its limitations, overall it worked well within the context of religious and

spiritual life. Student-led groups continued meeting regularly, worship services adjusted to a virtual format, and pastoral care and counseling continued (albeit with fewer interactions). The year was marked by tragedy towards the end of the summer when rising senior Isaac Scharbach died in a cycling accident near his home. His closest Davidson friends worked with Associate Chaplain Scott Salvato to organize and lead two outdoor memorial services for Isaac in mid-October. (The pandemic made it necessary to have two services in order to maintain small enough numbers at each service for appropriate social distancing.) His entire family attended the services.

An area of emphasis throughout the college, and specifically in Student Life, was learning more about and embodying an ethic of anti-racism and anti-oppression. Members of the chaplaincy staff participated in numerous educational opportunities provided by the college, including a presentation by Dr. T.J. Stewart organized by the Center for Diversity & Inclusion, and a presentation by Visiting Prof. Hilary Green about the history of enslaved persons in the town and college communities. Chaplain Rob Spach also sought to focus on anti-racism and anti-oppression through a religious lens, attending several virtual presentations by Presbyterian and Sikh speakers, as well as one by the South African pastor Allan Boesak offered by Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA.

Associate Chaplain Grace Burford decided early in the fall semester that she wanted to retire at the end of September. We held a "drive-or-walk-by" farewell event for her on September 28 behind the Alvarez College Union, thanking her for her 3+ years of service to the college. Her tenure here was fruitful as she guided the Davidson Dharma and Mindfulness student groups to become stronger and more self-sufficient. However, her time was also challenging because she had only served for just over two years before needing heart surgery in November of 2019. After months of recovery, she started back to work in March 2020, and a week later the college shut down campus presence due to COVID-19. The remainder of that spring semester was conducted via Zoom, as was the beginning of the current academic year, so her opportunities to directly interact with students essentially ended in late 2019.

We're grateful, though, for all that she brought to Davidson during her time here. Following Grace's retirement, Chaplain Rob Spach chaired a search committee to fill the position she had left. The committee consisted of three students and one faculty member. They met from mid-November to mid January, interviewing three finalists and offering the position to Ivan Mayerhofer. Ivan will join the chaplaincy staff on July 8, 2021.

A significant event in the life of the college was the decision by the Trustees to change the by-law requirements that 80% of the board be active members of a Christian church and that the college president affiliate with DCPC during their tenure at the college. The by-laws related to religious affiliation requirements for trustees and president have been a contentious issue for decades. This year several students continue to push the issues at the same time the Board was reflecting on changing the by-laws. Leading up to a decision, the Board of Trustees sought input from the wider college family, offering opportunities for all constituencies to become better-informed about the issues and questions at hand. College Chaplain Rob Spach was

asked to serve on two panel presentations centered on the Reformed Tradition and church-relatedness that took place in November and December.

The trustees announced in late January that they had amended those by-laws on January 28, 2021, eliminating the religious requirement for the president, and opening up 75% of board membership to individuals of any or no religious tradition. (The remaining 25% are to be members of the PCUSA.) The trustees also reaffirmed Davidson's foundational ties to the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Reformed Tradition, and its ongoing commitment to the current Statement of Purpose. The trustees formed a Working Group on the Reformed Tradition to explore appropriate, meaningful ways that the college can continue to articulate and embody how its values and vision are connected to the Reformed Tradition. This working group consists primarily of Davidson alumni who are ordained PCUSA ministers, including Chaplain Rob Spach.

Reaction to the by-law changes was largely positive within the college community. In April, a student named Ross Hickman '22 published a thoughtful article in the Davidsonian questioning why the college needs to be related to any particular religious tradition. Rob Spach wrote an article in response which appeared in a subsequent issue of the Davidsonian. Clearly, issues surrounding church-relatedness will continue to be of concern to the college community going forward.

Chaplains' Office Staff Assistant Sally Fredricks was very involved in the college's efforts to identify and support students who tested positive for COVID-19 or had had contacts with such students. As a member of the Isolation and Quarantine (IQ) team at the college, she provided non-medical support for students. Sally created the signage for isolation housing and organized the center of operations. She delivered meals and packages to students in quarantine and volunteered weekly at the onsite testing center.

One other important event in religious life: Campus Rabbi David Lipper will be leaving his appointment at Temple Kol Tikvah in June. Like Associate Chaplain Grace Burford, his time at Davidson was marked by the pandemic; he was only able to have direct personal contact with students for  $\frac{3}{4}$  of his first year, and none at all during his second year. He offered the opening prayer at Commencement this year, but the pandemic has prevented him from being a greater presence on campus than we had hoped. Temple Kol Tikvah is seeking an interim rabbi for the coming academic year.

The Rev. Robert C. Spach, D.Min.  
College Chaplain

# Student Organizations

The chaplains serve as liaisons for all 16 student-led religious and spiritual organizations on campus, assisting them with budgeting, program planning, and other organizational needs. Due to the COVID pandemic, the Religious & Spiritual Life Council did not meet this year.

- Better Together Campus Outreach
- Catholic Campus Ministry Canterbury Episcopal Fellowship Chi Alpha
- Davidson Dharma Davidson Mindfulness Davidson Wesley
- Fellowship of Christian Athletes
- InterVarsity Christian Fellowship
- Latter-Day Saint Student Group
- Muslim Student Association
- Orthodox Christian Fellowship
- Reformed University Fellowship
- UKirk
- Young Life College

## Better Together

Better Together was led by Jaime Felipe '23, Erin Mansell '22, Nada Shoreibah '23. They hosted interfaith discussion dinners via Zoom once a month throughout the academic year.

## Catholic Campus Ministry

Catholic Campus Ministry hosted activities via Zoom throughout the year, and when conditions permitted, they had celebrations of Mass outdoors.

## Davidson Dharma

Davidson Dharma was led by Cassandra Blau '23 and Brien Culhane '22, via Zoom. Associate Chaplain Grace Burford served as Dharma teacher until her retirement. From then on, Cassandra led the meditation time each week, and she and Brien alternated leading weekly discussion of Buddhist concepts and texts. Chaplain Rob Spach served as advisor beginning in October and attended Dharma meetings regularly. Average attendance was 5.

## Davidson Mindfulness

Davidson Mindfulness was led by Maiya Gar rett-Peters '21, Ben Haden '22, and Taryn Johnson '21. Associate Chaplain Grace Burford provided leadership until her retirement, after which Chaplain Rob Spach served as advisor and attended Tuesday afternoon meetings regularly. All sessions were via Zoom until April, after which the group met in person. Attendance averaged 5-6.

## Jewish Student Union

Alexa Green '21 and Josh Lodish '22 served as co-presidents in the fall, and Josh and Dahlia Krutkovich '21 in the spring. The JSU sponsored virtual gatherings via Zoom. They celebrated Passover in person outdoors. Due to the need for social distancing, Passover was celebrated on two nights to allow as many students as possible to attend.

## Muslim Student Association

Muslim Student Association was led by Rasikh Hamid '22 and Hana Kamran '23. They organized a few in-person gatherings in the spring as pandemic protocol permitted. They also joined with DIA and the Chaplains' Office to co-sponsor a Halal Food Truck on campus on April 9, a few days before the start of Ramadan.

## Chaplains' Office Grants & Vocational Exploration

The Chaplains' Office was unable to award grants in the usual way this year due to the pandemic. One student, Julia Balick, received grants for a project about Jewish cooking over winter break and again over spring break. She engaged in research and created a website called "GoldyLox."

## Davidson Congregational Fellows Program

2020 Fellows: Laura Auberry, Rebekah Bass, Clare Mackie, and Yara Quezada. This year's fellows conducted their summer congregational internships entirely via Zoom. They all said that they went in with low expectations, but were impressed by how meaningful the experience was despite being virtual. Chaplain Rob Spach met weekly with the fellows throughout the summer and monthly in the fall semester as they continued discerning a call to theological education and ministry. Laura has received a scholarship to Duke Divinity School and will begin her M.Div. there in the fall. Yara plans to spend a year or two working, and then intends to attend a PCUSA seminary on the ordination track.

## 2021 Congregational Fellowship Selection Process

Nominees: 47; Applicants: 11; Recipients: Carson Crochet, Ben Haden, Cadie McNaboe, ChiChi Odo, and Coy Williams

Chaplain Rob Spach coordinated the advertising and selection process for the 2021 Congregational Fellows, assisted them in locating congregations in which to intern this summer, and convened a Zoom orientation retreat on May 1. We are delighted that the new Griffin Family Endowment will now fund one fellow each year.

## Church in Vocation Scholarship Program (Challenge Call Scholarship)

Chaplain Rob Spach participated on this committee and served as a liaison for discussing the scholarship with potential recipients. None of the students to whom it was offered accepted the scholarship.

## Stapleton/Davidson Urban Service Internship

Due to COVID-19, the internship was cancelled for the summer of 2020. The 2020 recipients were invited to be interns this summer, and four accepted: Kevin Chen, Anna Katherine Kilby, Cate O'Malley, and Gabby Morreale.

## Cook Family Summer Fellowship

This new fellowship, funded by the Cook Family, is awarded to Davidson students for self-designed internships in non-profit organizations (including churches) that demonstrate a Christian commitment through their mission statement, their stated goals and objectives, or their embodiment of values that they distinctly associate with Christian faith. We received four applications, awarded the fellowship to two students, and one of those accepted. Josh Martin '21 will intern at the Christian Immigration Advocacy Center in Pittsburgh, PA this summer.

## Programming, Pastoral Care, and Other Activities

### Campus Ministers Gatherings

Chaplain Rob Spach organized a monthly Zoom gathering of all chaplains and campus ministers for conversation, fellowship, mutual support, and opportunities for possible collaborations and to learn about college resources, policies, and issues.

### Bible Study

"Bread for the Journey", our ecumenical Bible study, took place via Zoom on Tuesdays at 11:30 a.m. It is facilitated by the college chaplain and the Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian campus ministers.

### Weekly College Worship

This ecumenical service led by students and the chaplain met via Zoom on Wednesdays at 5:00 p.m. The student leaders were Rebekah Bass '21, Elizabeth Brubaker '23 (fall semester), Jack Swinson '21. Two first-years joined the leadership team for the spring semester: Allie Hay '24 and Ellie Stewart '24. Because the services were remote via Zoom, two alumnae (Ela Hefler '17

and Grace Woodward '18) and our former Catholic Campus Minister Karen Soos participated frequently. Average worship attendance was 16.

## Chaplains' Communique

We published 10 newsletters with informational content to 630 subscribers. The section "Student Voices" featured videos from students describing their spiritual life on campus. To help connect students during this challenging year, the newsletter provided links to the 16 student-led religious and spiritual life organizations.

## Pastoral Care and Counseling

Chaplain Rob Spach provided an average of 3 hours of pastoral counseling to individual students each week. Over the course of the year, he counseled 37 students and 6 alumni.

## Chaplains' Committee Work

The Chaplain chaired the search committee for a new Associate Chaplain in the Buddhist tradition and the selection committee for the Congregational Fellows program. He was appointed by the Trustees to the 2021 Working Group on the Reformed Tradition that met throughout the spring semester. He also served on the following committees: 1) the Students of Concern Committee; 2) the Council for Campus and Religious Life; 3) the Belk Scholarship committee; 4) the Challenge Call scholarship committee; 5) the Baccalaureate planning committee; and 6) the Commencement planning committee.

## Holistic Advising

Chaplain Rob Spach served as adviser for 10 sophomores.

## Chaplain Rob Spach's Speaking

*All via Zoom*

- Presented information about the Reformed tradition, Davidson's Presbyterian church-relatedness, and religious pluralism for new employee orientations (Aug. 17, September 21, October 19), the staff of College Relations (October 14) and new Trustee orientation (November 19)
- Presented training sessions about campus religious life and the college's Presbyterian heritage for admission guides (April 20)
- Served as a panel member for trustee-sponsored Zoom sessions about changes to the Trustee By-laws (November 19 and December 1)

# Conferences, Continuing Education and Engagement With The Wider Community

## Conferences | Continuing Education (all virtual)

Chaplain Rob Spach attended:

- The Montreat Anti-Racism Conference (October 24)
- Columbia Theological Seminary Certificate in Spiritual Direction sessions (September 27, December 29, January 10, and the week-long virtual residency April 25 - 30)
- Lake Norman area clergy group retreat with NT Prof. Jane Patterson (November 11)
- The Chaplaincy Innovation Lab anti-racism session led by Dr. Simrat Singh (December 14)
- The Union Presbyterian Seminary-sponsored session on "Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation" led by Allan Boesak (May 24)

Chaplain Rob Spach's engagement with the wider community:

- Officiated at the outdoor wedding of alums Christine Diaz and Elijah Mofe (August 2)
- Led five sessions of the DCPC Connections Sunday School Class via Zoom (February-March)
- Presided over a virtual celebration of Communion for the Reformed Studies group at Yale Divinity School on May 2.

## Upcoming Opportunities & Challenges

We have a range of challenges and opportunities. We will onboard Ivan Mayerhofer when he joins as Associate Chaplain in the Buddhist tradition in July; we may be orienting an interim Campus Rabbi depending on what decisions are made by Temple Kol Tikvah; we should continue exploring ways to provide appropriate religious support for students of color; and we will continue to emphasize embodying anti-racism and anti-oppression in all activities of the Chaplains' Office.

Among our challenges are: 1) developing relationships with students, given that we were unable to meet many of this year's first-year class, and we will also be meeting next year's first-year class; 2) re-invigorating in person programs that have not taken place in a year or more (including Thursday Night Praise & Worship, which has lost all of the student leadership it had before the pandemic); 3) possibly engaging in ongoing conversations about the college's church-relatedness and connections to the Reformed Tradition with a range of college constituencies, in part based on suggestions made to the Board of Trustees by the 2021 Working Group on the Reformed Tradition this summer.

# Appendices

## Convocation Awards a Recognition of Achievement in Extraordinary Circumstances

The college honored Isaac Scharbach '21 posthumously with the Ben Callinder and the Charles Malone Richards awards. The college presented those and other Spring Convocation awards virtually on Thursday.

"Isaac Scharbach embodied selflessness in all that he did. At no moment was he too busy or too important to help a friend," the Ben Callinder award states. "He consistently did the right thing without any thought of worldly recognition, and the light of his life was a glowing example of a life spent in pursuit of truth and goodness."

Scharbach, an art and classic studies double major, died last August when a car struck him as he biked near his Maryland home.

"His deep faithfulness was directed towards his fellow students, for whom he regularly prayed and fasted," the Charles Malone Richards award states. "His untimely death brought a terrible grief, but his belief in the life to come with God brings great comfort to those who loved him."

Scharbach was also a Davidson Outdoors leader, and often came to Sunday night Mass after a day of hiking, rafting or biking; clean and well-dressed, "sun-burned, scratched up and bone-tired, but very contented," said Scott Salvato, the Catholic Chaplain at Davidson.

"He was an amazing kid, extremely nice, and supremely gifted in so many ways it was just a wonder to behold," Salvato said. "He had so many gifts-physical, intellectual and as a leader. He always pushed himself but never complained about being stressed or overwhelmed. He walked around with a smile on his face and that ever-present sense of contentment."

## Davidsonian Articles

[COVID Care In Our Community](#), featuring Sally Fredricks

[Another Look at "Heritage" and Church-Relatedness](#), by Rob Spach '84

# Davidson's Reformed Heritage and The Bylaws Currently Under Discussion

Twenty-eight years ago, during my first year as Davidson's chaplain, a healthy debate took place on campus about the bylaw requirement that members of the Board of Trustees be active Christians. The bylaw had been developed several decades earlier in an effort to safeguard Davidson's connection to the Reformed Tradition within Christianity at a time when many colleges cut ties with their religious roots. Clearly, our context in 2020 is different from when the bylaw was written, as well as when it was revised in 2005. As our society in general, and the college community specifically, becomes more diverse, many Davidsonians ask whether it's appropriate to base our identity on, and have an ethos be shaped by, a faith heritage to which ever-fewer members of our community belong.

Given where we've come from and where we want to be headed in our increasingly globalized world, we need a grounding that fosters inclusiveness, integrity, and empathy. Graduates should understand and appreciate diverse cultures, religions, and worldviews, as well as have outstanding communication skills to bridge differences and find common ground between people with varied perspectives. I'm convinced the Reformed Tradition gives Davidson just such a reliable, gracious foundation.

A Trustee-appointed Working Group on the Reformed Tradition presented a report to the Board in 2017 describing how Davidson today is shaped by its religious heritage. Four facets of the tradition and their impact on the college bear mentioning. First, a commitment to academic excellence and an unfettered quest for truth rooted in broad learning that does not, however, privilege intellect above all. Humane instincts and civic engagement for the common good are at least as important to a Davidson education as disciplined and creative minds. Second, the Reformed principle that every person is created in the image of God and has dignity and worth. This principle should be embodied through a commitment to social justice, equity, and respect for all people. Third, the Reformed vision of a holistic education that nurtures body and spirit as well as mind. The college therefore offers robust opportunities for athletics and diverse spiritual practices. Fourth, the Reformed precept of *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* (the church reformed, always reforming). This tenet pushes Davidson to continually draw on its particular Reformed heritage and the values and concerns of its diverse contemporary community members so as to engage current realities in each successive generation.

The Working Group also looked at Reformed theological commitments in the college's Statement of Purpose which read: "The Christian tradition to which Davidson remains committed recognizes God as the source of all truth, and believes that Jesus Christ is the revelation of that God, a God bound by no church or creed." This sentence presents three

significant Reformed ideas. First, since all truth comes from God, we search for and accept truth from any source, whether religious or not. Second, people in this tradition believe God to be disclosed in a particular and powerful way in the incarnation, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Third, God is not limited by any religious community or their understanding of the divine, all Christian denominations included. Therefore, the statement continues, the loyalty of the college extends "to the whole of humanity and necessarily includes openness to and respect for the world's various religious traditions."

The Statement of Purpose is the Preamble of the Davidson College Constitution.

When the college president and Trustees are installed, they are asked: 1) "Do you approve of and pledge to support the purpose of Davidson College as stated in the Preamble of the 2 Davidson College Constitution?" 2) "In accepting the office of Trustee, will you be faithful in promoting the purpose of the College, seeking to honor the traditions that have shaped Davidson as a place where faith and reason work together in mutual respect for service to God and humanity?"

By answering in the affirmative, presidents and Trustees promise to support and honor Davidson's Reformed heritage, including its theological vision. Given the Statement of Purpose's declaration of openness to and respect for all religions, and the pledge of loyalty to all humanity, the people assuming these offices can reasonably make these vows in good conscience regardless of their personal religious beliefs or practice. Granted, having some Trustees who are deeply knowledgeable about and speak from a personal experience in the Reformed faith may remain important. But the assurance that future leaders will make these pledges, together with the Working Group's observations of how Reformed values are currently embodied in the life of the college, show that Davidson's commitment to the Reformed Tradition and affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (USA) are firmly embedded in a variety of ways.

Consequently, the central question may be whether or not the current Presidential and Trustee bylaws are a necessary or even effective means of maintaining a vital, meaningful connection to the Reformed Tradition. For many students, faculty, staff, and alumni, these bylaws inadvertently create needless animosity towards the religious heritage of the college. If, because of the bylaws, the Reformed faith is seen (justifiably or not) as purposefully excluding people from institutional leadership specifically because they're not Christian, it's unlikely that the college will be able to draw on its Reformed heritage in ways that inspire future Davidsonians. The current discussions about the Trustee and Presidential bylaws, therefore, may not represent a turning away from the college's heritage, but rather a reconsideration of how that heritage can be faithfully, generously, and fittingly manifested in our contemporary, pluralistic context.

Certainly, we can't predict what will happen down the road; nor, in truth, can we control it. Reformed faith emphasizes trusting God to be at work in the midst of changing circumstances. So it's worth considering that it may be more in keeping with the Reformed Tradition to trust that God's Spirit will continue to achieve God's good purposes through diverse leaders who have integrity and a love for Davidson, than to allow conjectural anticipation of losing something

precious to keep us from living in the present and into the future guided by the vision and values of which our Statement of Purpose speaks.

Robert C. Spach College Chaplain  
Panelist for Conversation about college by-laws  
November 2020

## What Might and What Ought to Be

*Jeremiah 14:8-9 & 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 13*

Twenty years ago, a Davidson senior named Liz was sitting where all of you seniors are today. Well, she wasn't actually sitting where you are, since you're spread out all over the place because of the pandemic, but you get the idea - metaphorically speaking she was where all of you are.

Over the course of her time at Davidson, a certain vision had been growing in her mind and heart. That vision was to help end homelessness. Liz had worked with people experiencing homelessness the summer after her first year at Davidson. She got to know their stories, their struggles, their joys, their failings, their aspirations, their perseverance, their exhaustion, and their faith. She came back her sophomore year and started the Room in the Inn program here, and over the next three years she spent countless hours at the Urban Ministry Center in Charlotte interacting with people who were homeless who'd become her friends. She even wrote her senior thesis on how those friends interpret the creation stories in the Bible.

As Liz was about to graduate, several strands of her life were coming together: her understanding of God's concern for every person and for a just society; her gratitude for friendships with people experiencing homeless; and the heartache she felt because of the obstacles, prejudice, and suffering that her friends constantly face. Although she wasn't sure how it would be possible, Liz was setting out to spend her life living in the hope that one day no one would be without a place to live.

That word "hope" seems particularly relevant as I think you seniors graduating at this specific, unique time. We've been living through the pandemic for almost a year and a half. Though there's still a way to go before we're out of the woods, and while I know that many people are still grieving losses or struggling with lingering health problems, overall I think there's a sense of hope that's growing.

You seniors are remarkable, the way you've persevered through almost three semesters of facemasks and Zoom meetings and never-ending handwashing. But seriously, you've given a lot of us in the Davidson community a sense of hope because of what you've faced and dealt

with and overcome, not only during the pandemic, but throughout your time in college, as you've dedicated your time and your passion for what's right and just.

I chose this passage from 1 Corinthians with an eye to what's been going on in your lives and in our world over the past few years. It's a Christian text by the Apostle Paul expressing something that the early followers of Jesus had come to understand through their faith in God, but at the same time the message is universal. With its focus on what it means to love well, it's probably the passage in the New Testament that you hear most often at weddings and other happy occasions. And while of course love is crucial to human life, at the end of this passage Paul mentions three things: faith, hope, and love. Given the realities we're living with right now, maybe of those three, this is a time to emphasize hope.

From the pandemic to climate change, from the unjust deaths of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, and so many more people of color to the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ+ rights; from the ambushing of police officers who are just sitting in their squad cars, to violent attacks at high schools, synagogues, mosques, churches, and most recently our Capitol - well, it's clear why some people might feel despair. So this may be a moment when it's essential for hope to carry us forward. And as I think about all of you seniors, I'm convinced that one of the things our world needs right now is your hopefulness.

Hope is a curious thing because it only emerges out of struggle. It's never some easy peasy attitude towards life; the people who have hope also have wounds. They've lived with fear or anger or shadows - but without either denying them or succumbing to them.

I think of the passage we just read from the Hebrew Prophet Jeremiah who lived in the 6th and 7th centuries BCE. The people of Israel faced brutal enemies that were unquestionably stronger than them. Their world was uncertain and dangerous, and it was just a matter of time until Jeremiah and everybody around him was going to be violently killed, or captured and taken into exile. Jeremiah is stuck with being a prophet, which means he's got to do what prophets do: deliver the word of the Lord in the midst of the hard realities of human life and human societies. So for starters he tells the richest and the most powerful people that they're the ones bringing this political crisis not just on themselves, but on all the other people, who they've cheated or neglected or mistreated.

Then he talks about what he himself is going through. I appreciate that he expresses something that I think most people of faith can relate to: he questions God. He says:

O hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land ... Why should you be like someone confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot give help?

Things are bleak, and God seems inattentive, or confused, or like a warrior who is weak and helpless. You get the sense Jeremiah is almost ready to just throw in the towel. But he has called God the 'hope of Israel', and so he cries out:

Yet you, O Lord, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name; don't forsake us!  
Don't forsake us.

Somewhere deep in his heart and his bones, Jeremiah believes there are possibilities beyond the coming destruction. Having faced the worst, he still believes that something better is possible, and not just possible, but is really the foundation for whatever lies ahead. That kind of hope isn't cheap. Hope is what a realist has. Jeremiah's hope is that the Lord is still among the people, not magically taking away all suffering, but nevertheless grounding and upholding purposes that are good, just, and sacred that will shape their community.

Peter Gomes, who was for many years the Minister at Harvard's Memorial Church, once wrote this about hope: "Hope...is an act of imagination and of courage...Hope allows us to see beyond what is and to imagine, to see with our inner eye, what might and what ought to be." In addition to imagination and courage, I would add hope has persistence.

I think of that alumna Liz and her hope of ending homelessness. After graduating, she spent time working directly with people who were homeless, encouraging them, helping them with their mental health and addictions, praying with them, working to reunite them with family, and standing at their hospital bedsides as they died way too young. After studying public policy at Duke, Liz came back to this area and took on a variety of leadership roles to address the needs of homeless neighbors. She recruited and organized volunteers, supervised interns, did fundraising, made city leaders more aware of issues facing homeless neighbors, and helped bring new approaches like the "housing first" model to get people from the streets into safe, supportive, dignified accommodations. Imagination, courage, and persistence.

In 2021, Liz is still living the hope of ending homelessness as the director of an organization in Charlotte called Roof Above. A few weeks ago, she was interviewed about her work and what keeps her going. She said: "Homelessness is solvable. It is not an inevitable reality. I deeply to my core believe we could be a country without thousands of people in shelters and on our streets... When people say, 'What can I do?' It starts with recognizing the full humanity of someone experiencing homelessness, because when you really feel the weight and value of a human life, it changes everything." [SouthPark Magazine](#) (04/17/2021)

This may be the key to hope. Its deepest roots are grounded in the dignity and worth of every life. When we "really feel the weight" of that truth, as Liz says, it changes how we look at and live in the world, whatever your particular hopes may be. It makes us feel the urgency of using our imagination to widen the vision of what's possible; it gives us an unassailable reason to be brave even when we feel vulnerable and face adversity; and it strengthens our commitment to endure despite setbacks, disappointments, and grief.

I wish for all of you seniors this kind of hopefulness as you leave Davidson. Feeling the weight and value of each life, and remembering we are never abandoned by the One who forever grounds and upholds purposes that are right, just, and greathearted, may you keep on using

your imagination, drawing on your courage, and persisting in your determination to live towards what might and what ought to be. Amen.

Robert C. Spach Davidson College  
2021 Baccalaureate Service

---

*To receive a print or electronic copy of the complete, in-color Annual Report, which includes the 2020-2021 Religious/Worldview Preferences of Davidson College Students, please contact Sally Fredricks at [safredricks@davidson.edu](mailto:safredricks@ davidson.edu).*