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Minister hopes to expand religious studies

By *Jennifer Charney*, OU Staff Writer

Charles Mabee has a vision for Oakland University. He sees it as the leading center for the study of religious pluralism in the Detroit metro area — one that draws on the resources of one of America's most culturally diverse metropolitan areas.

As a special lecturer in religious studies and the Protestant campus minister at Oakland, Mabee is working toward that long-term goal.

His more immediate goal is to build on the strengths of the current religious studies concentration so that a religious studies major eventually may become a reality at OU.

Religious studies are important, Mabee says. If more people studied Islam, he explains, they would not have jumped to conclusions about that faith after the September terrorist attacks on the United States. A developing curriculum in religious studies would be particularly effective because it would draw on Islamic leaders and Muslims in the metro area, the center of the Muslim world in America.

The current concentration in religious studies is growing year by year. Mabee teaches all the core courses: Introduction to Religious Studies, Introduction to Sacred Texts, Religion in the Modern World and the new course, The American Religious Experience. Mabee helped to design the concentration for OU's **Department of Sociology and Anthropology**, with Gary Shepherd, director of the religious studies concentration.

In "The American Religious Experience," offered each winter term, Mabee augments lessons by inviting followers of a specific religion to share their perspectives and way of life. The first course covered Islam. In 2002, the class will study the Sikhs of India and will visit a Sikh community in Rochester Hills.

Another course, offered for first time in fall 2001, will be available to students in winter 2002, with a grant from the Catholic Church through the aid of former Catholic campus minister Sister Mary Bodde. Mabee helped arrange for a Catholic priest to teach the course, "Catholicism and American Society."

In spring 2002, Mabee will teach a course on Jesus and Mohammed to further his efforts to shed light on Islam. In the summer 2002 term, he will teach "Great Religious Traditions," to explore not only the core teachings of the world's major religions, but also what they might become.

"I don't think we know what these religions have the potential to grow into," Mabee said. "We'll look at the faiths' core values and core perspectives that make sense in the modern world. What are those things that are negotiable — things that in America and in the modern pluralistic setting that you simply have to either give up or de-emphasize, such as limiting women's roles as leaders. Islam has a lot of potential for women playing a leader role. America is a place for women to come out of the closet, so to speak, with regard to leadership roles in the community."

As an instructor, Mabee believes in the power of personal interaction to teach students about different religions. That's why in 1999 he started Oakland's **Spirituality in Service program**, in which OU students provide community service while interacting with congregation members. Recently students in the program visited a mosque in Dearborn to learn about Islam and to help congregation members set tables for a large dinner.

Amanda Montei, an elementary education sophomore, took Mabee's "Introduction to Religious Studies" course and participated in the mosque service project.

"I've always really been interested in religions, being religious myself. I'm a Protestant," she said. "I just like to learn about other peoples' religions."

Montei had never been in a mosque before the visit. "It's basically something that I've always wanted to do — compare myself to other religions and see if there are differences or similarities."

A grant from the Metropolitan United Methodist Church in Detroit funded the first year of the Spirituality in Service program, in which an intern was paid to organize such visits.

Later, with support from Jean Ann Miller, director of the **Center for Student Activities (CSA)**, the program became a joint effort of the CSA and the campus ministry. Now the CSA provides the internship for the student.

"The idea of the program is that you can learn better from a religious community if you roll up your sleeves and work with them instead of sitting in a classroom and taking notes," Mabee said. "We do one service project a month during the school year."

Mabee runs another program that promotes discussion of religion and science. He and Chemistry Professor Mike Sevilla plan two such discussions during the winter 2002 term. One event will cover Islam and science. Mabee also will help Sevilla teach an **Honors College** course on religion and science in winter 2002.

As a campus minister, Mabee is available by request for Oakland students who want individual counseling. He usually meets students after they contact him at (517) 944-5550 or cmabee@oakland.edu.

Mabee joined Oakland's UMHE campus ministry in 1989. A consortium of churches funds Mabee's position, just as other religious organizations fund Oakland's other ministries. Mabee's primary support comes from the Presbytery of Detroit, the statewide Methodist Church and local churches, including First Congregational, St. Luke's United Methodist, St. Paul's Methodist and First Methodist.

The university doesn't take a position on the validity of any religious tradition, Mabee said.

"It enables spiritual resources so the student can choose them if they want. It's part of the support system at the university to help students," he said.

Before he started his work at Oakland in 1989, Mabee was a professor and chair of the religious studies program at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. Now, he also works half time at the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, where he is an instructor and director of the master of divinity program.

Mabee holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in religious studies from Northeast Missouri State University; a master of divinity degree from Dubuque (Iowa) Theological Seminary; and a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies from Claremont Graduate School in California.

For information on other campus religious organizations, visit the **Student Organizations** Web site.

SUMMARY

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