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U of L Interfaith Center doesn't 'force a belief'

By MONICA TATE
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The Interfaith Center at the University of Louisville is a stone-gray building dug into the ground. It resembles a bomb shelter.

To the ministers and coordinators who represent the seven denominations housed there, the comparison is appropriate.

"This is a safe place for students to question (issues of faith)," said the Rev. Carol Hooe, who represents the Triologue Ministries, a shared ministry of the Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ faiths. "We don't force a belief."

Catholics, Jews, Episcopalians and Methodists also are represented at the center.

"Our intent is to make this a place of hospitality," said the Rev. Bruce Boss of Church of the Advent, who serves as the Episcopal representative at the center.

The building is bereft of stained glass and religious symbols. A visitor is more likely to hear the sound of bouncing pingpong balls than discussions of faith.

"Yes, day-to-day, it's a lot of pingpong," said the Rev. Lou Meiman of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church, who represents the Roman Catholic ministry.

The center has even welcomed the Student Pagan Union, which practices Druid traditions.

The ministries believe that a policy of openness is the right approach for the people they're trying to reach.

Hooe recalled what her own religious life was like in her youth: "They told us what to believe. You were spoon-fed. You weren't supposed to question anything. Questioning was a sin."

Some students do use the center for religious purposes — they regularly attend a 5 p.m. Saturday Catholic Mass, are baptized and learn of other faiths. However, many students also frequent the center without thinking about faith.

"I was going from one building to another and stopped in for a few minutes," Alex Edwards, a junior who is Jewish, said during a recent visit. "The coffee is cheap."

"I am a minister without using God," said office manager Bart Brauner. "In my opinion, I can be Christlike and not have to crack open a Bible. Christ accepted people for who they were and where they were. Here, we accept people the way they are."

The ministries at the center want students to learn that ideas are more important than rules, and that religion teaches tolerance. These are the things they think will bring the youth of today toward God.

"Is your objective (as a minister) to have people belong in your den?" Hooe asked. "Or is it to lead people to a deeper sense of faith?"

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