

Gay Welch puts faith into practice as VU chaplain

By Monica Coleman

I am scheduled to meet with the new university chaplain, Gay Welch. I eagerly walk into the building to find Gay Welch in fitness attire offering me a cup of tea as warmth for the rainy day outside. As she escorts me into her office I can't help but notice the decor: her bookshelves are lined with authors Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich; titles include *Earth and Ethics* and *Southern Folklore*; posters on the wall are titled "Women's Resources" and "Celebration of Womanhood." It is evident that Welch cares not only for religion, but also for women, health and wholeness.

Welch represents an impressive combination of administrative, ministerial, academic and interpersonal skills. She has served as a high school counselor and on the faculty at St. Luke's School of Theology at the University of the South and Scarritt College. She teaches courses on "Women in Religion" and "Ethics and Women." An ordained Methodist minister, she has worked

at Vanderbilt on and off since 1979. Last spring she was appointed university chaplain and director of religious affairs. So who is the woman behind the impressive résumé and the cozy office?

Welch attributes her success to incredible timing and outstanding mentors. Attending school in the 60s, Welch says, "The time was right for relating one's faith and education to what was going on in the world." She has always been interested in connecting theory with praxis. "I was interested in political realities," Welch states, "but also in acting out my faith." She saw no better arena for that than the study of ethics and the field of education.

Welch speaks lovingly of her undergraduate and graduate school professors who successfully combined intellectual mentoring with religious

mentoring. "They were faculty as well as functioning chaplains," Welch reminisces. It was the influence of these mentors that led Welch to her sense of vocation.

Feminism, on the other hand, caught Welch by surprise. When she began graduate school, the women's movement was just beginning. She met her first feminist professor in graduate school and was impressed that this woman thought of gender as a category. Welch replies, "I had thought of race and human rights and all that stuff . . . but I had not really applied anything to gender, which was one of those things I hadn't really noticed. Which is odd to say now because once you start noticing gender, you can never un-notice it."

Since that time, Welch has noticed gender everywhere.

In her studies, Welch realized that her whole education had been the education of white males. In the formation of women's studies curricula and women's rights, Welch has loudly

spoken out. In rearing her four children, she has challenged cultural norms for what is appropriately male and female.

Welch treasures her time teaching as an assistant professor in Religious Studies and says her access to students keeps her grounded in the life of the Vanderbilt community. She speaks of the classroom as a place of growth for both student and professor: "It gives me a place to test out my ideas and it gives me a place to challenge those students daily both intellectually and with regard to my own values and lifestyle. It's my functional equivalent of a pulpit, except my pulpit is more like a dinner table. I learn as much from the students as they learn from me."

The same passion and energy that sustains Welch's academic and personal interests carry over into her dis-



University Chaplain Gay Welch

cussion of religious life at Vanderbilt. She identifies one major issue for Vanderbilt students—how to put religious faith into practice. "Vanderbilt students tend to think more about individual private morality than they do about the public sphere and the common good," she notes. Her vision is to see conversation between students' personal religious convictions and what they learn in the classroom.

Welch also believes that patriarchy must be battled in the realm of religions. "Our religious traditions have imaged the Deity or the Sacred Source as male and that is a blow to a woman's self-image at no matter what level she deals with it," Welch argues. This has given her a special challenge in terms of leading female students: "I would like to help women claim their own sacredness."

Given her myriad commitments and experiences, I ask Gay Welch to label herself. For the first time during our dialogue, Welch becomes silent and pensive. Finally she says assuredly, "I'm religious but not doctrinaire. I am staunchly feminist, but I don't hate men. I'm a Southern white Protestant democratic, middle-aged wife and mother with pagan leaning." ■

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