A Letter on Religion at Trinity

September 2009

Dear Friends:

Hoping to foster a shared understanding of religion’s special place at Trinity School, we write to offer to you useful ways to think and converse about the School’s distinctive religious identity and the ways in which this identity manifests itself in our common life.

People of all faiths are welcome in this school that understands and lives its religious identity in ways that are all its own. As a school community and as individuals, we place ourselves in conversation with principles that grow from Trinity’s history, the histories and traditions of our families, and the history of Episcopal schools.

Trinity’s mission statement, Our Idea of Excellence, promises that, in the context of intellectual, emotional, physical, and civic development, we will enlarge our students’ spiritual lives and lead them to do right. The statement represents a school aspiring to the good.

The founding history of Trinity is unique among schools in New York City in that it was begun as a charity school, supported by an Anglican missionary society, and given space and funding by the vestry of Trinity Church, Wall Street. Some of our traditions have grown out of our history, though of course our practices have changed over time. At present, attendance at weekly chapel is required of all students and teachers. Students are required to take three courses in religion between grade 5 and grade 12. The religion department is independent of the chapel. The chaplain is an Episcopal priest, and the Rector of Trinity Church is a trustee of the school, ex officio.

And yet, while Trinity is an Episcopal school in these predictable ways, it also extends this identity in ways that are perhaps less expected. Trinity is not a parochial school, governed by a parish. We are proud of our independence from church and state. We do not assume or desire that all who work and study here share a common belief or support a common doctrine. Instead, the unity of the school is based on tradition and common practice. Our people are remarkably diverse, and we set great store by the wide range of religious and philosophical commitments of our faculty, staff, parents, and students. We seek to learn together and to teach one another about the wisdom in the religious traditions of the world. We cherish values that unite rather than divide people of different traditions, and see the opportunity to live, learn, and work together as a great hope for the future. In class and in chapel, reason and experience yield an academic rigor that feeds the life of the mind, the heart, and the spirit. We believe in the power of love—the bonds of family,
the desire for wisdom, the centrality of friendship in school, the need for respect and compassion. We take religion, the religious lives of our students, and a religious presence in school seriously, in part because we were founded and at the beginning sustained by a parish church, but as importantly because we think that religious traditions should be included in our conversation about what it means to be human. We study world religions (historically, philosophically, comparatively) and their ethical and artistic expression because we believe that such understanding will be essential for effective citizenship in an increasingly complex and challenging world. We use chapel to explore questions of faith and doubt, morality and ethics, and forms of worship and celebration, so that our students can arrive at their own, independent answers to basic questions about themselves, their lives, and religion with relatively deep understanding of what they are doing.

The basic forms of chapel, which grow from The Book of Common Prayer, sustain an interfaith dialogue among several world religions that is broad enough to encompass agnosticism and atheism; we intend the forms and the dialogue to be open enough that we all can feel at home and in fact own the institution of chapel. Dialogue among the faith traditions represented in school is partly intellectual but partly aimed at creating resonance out of the differences and similarities among language, sacred texts, prayer, ritual, music, dance, ethical perspectives, and stories. The experience of chapel is richer, the finer the balance we strike among traditions; and we understand that the finest balance of all may be between public teaching and the opportunity for private worship, between knowing and believing.

We very much hope that this letter will be useful to you, that it will provide guidance where you feel you need it.

Cordially,

John Allman
Headmaster

The Reverend Timothy L. Morehouse
Chaplain