



Donna Schaper



The University Chaplains in word and deed

There was no University Chaplain at Yale until 1927. Before that date, an official chaplaincy would have been redundant. Who needs a chaplain if the whole institution is a fountain for faith—as once was Yale, founded to educate men for “Publick employment in Church and Civil State”? But in 1926 mandatory chapel was abolished, and a chaplain was the logical next step. A chaplain is needed when religion begins to be outsourced.

The Rev. Elmore McKee served, briefly, as Yale’s first chaplain. His grand dream was to build a new chapel across the quadrangle from Sterling Library—to “balance” it—but Yale refused. Each chaplain who followed McKee would understand his dream and his dilemma. All balanced between reason and faith, the ministrations of the pastor and the dynamic action of the prophet, service to the President and service to God. What each chaplain has done is to fit the job just enough to not quite fit: to stay just a little outside the university, an alternative to its mainstream.

THE REV. DR. DONNA SCHAPER is pastor of the North Hadley Congregational Church in Massachusetts and the author of 22 books. She served as John Vannorsdall’s Associate Chaplain at Yale.

“UNCLE SID”—**THE REV. SIDNEY LOVETT** ’13, chaplain in 1932–1958—is often considered the most pastoral and least prophetic of the group. Pipe smoking, football going, back slapping, “Uncle Sid” remembered names. People knew him, and he knew what it took to know them.

Uncle Sid fit his role and his times smoothly, yet his family model of ministry did not exclude prophetic action. His leadership solidified the Yale-in-China Program, which was a cut above a missionary effort—an early globalism that profoundly changed the lives of many Yale men. Uncle Sid also became a pacifist at a time when pacifism was deeply unpopular. When a man like Sid Lovett moves to pacifism, it matters to many.

In his prayer at the Inaugural luncheon for President A. Bartlett Giamatti ’60, ’64PhD, in 1978 (Sid’s retirement was not very serious), Uncle Sid showed his characteristic humor and his eloquence:

Almighty God, who sendest rain impartially upon the World Series and Mother Yale’s Inaugural Quilting Party, we ask thy Blessing. . . . Look with continued favor upon our good friend Bart Giamatti, about to don the presidential livery of Mother Yale. Let the wounds made by the recent defeat of the Boston Red Sox be quickly healed. . . . May there be nothing that he does not dare to doubt, nothing true that is afraid to know, and nothing false he would ever wish to believe.

THE REV. DR. WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN JR. ’49, ’56BDiv, chaplain in 1958–1976, was surely the most popular and, for his forceful public opposition to the Vietnam War, by far the best known and most widely debated of the Yale chaplains. While Uncle Sid, from his retirement, undertook in the 1970s to build an endowment for the Church of Christ in Yale, Coffin neglected institutional ministry on behalf of national ministry. Coffin, too, was responding to the call of his times. Had Uncle Sid ministered to the campus in the volatile ’60s, no doubt he would have had little time to sit on benches, pipe in hand, and consider with his flock the great meanings of life.

Coffin’s prayer at the Inaugural luncheon of President Kingman Brewster Jr. ’41 in 1964 was representative of his fiery prophetic stance:

In a world in which traditions need to be reshaped and purged as much as protected to support what

University Chaplains and Senior Pastors of the Church of Christ in Yale



Reverend Sidney Lovett,
1932–1958



Reverend Dr. William
Sloane Coffin Jr.,
1958–1976



Reverend Dr. John
Vannorsdall, 1976–1985



Reverend Dr. Harry B.
Adams, 1986–1992



Reverend Dr. Frederick J.
Streets, since 1992

we already hold . . . we seek a truth greater than anything we have yet conceived . . . for the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, too small for anything but love.

Yet Coffin’s ministry was also truly pastoral. His oft-repeated slogan is true of himself as well as good advice for ministers: “If you can be good at the bedside of a sick or hopeless person, they”—the authorities—“will let you get away with anything.” People’s strongest memories of Coffin today are of his many weddings and funerals and personal relationships. The dozens of pastors whom Coffin mentored keep, for aid and readings when they officiate at funerals, a dog-eared copy of his 1983 sermon on his own son’s death. In it, he made it clear that he did not think a young man’s car crash could ever be the will of God. He took on the sentimental cards some well-wishers sent him, suggesting that the tragedy was meant to be. He spoke from deep within his own faith, about life and death, meaning and chaos, and reached, at the end, the search for “consolation in the love which never dies, . . . peace in the dazzling grace that always is.”

THE REV. DR. JOHN VANNORSDALL, 1976–1985, had the burden and the opportunity of following Coffin. As a young associate chaplain in 1979, I witnessed a most interesting moment of pastoral transition. Uncle Sid died in April, and Vannorsdall, a meticulous man, carefully prepared the funeral service.

It was to take place at three in the afternoon. At five minutes to three, Coffin breezed into the Yale Chaplain’s office—fully expecting to perform the service. Vannorsdall elegantly included Coffin in the ceremony, and Coffin proceeded to dominate it brilliantly, yet humbly, with a reading from Uncle Sid’s own hand, “Apologia pro Vita Mea.”

Vannorsdall was known for his prayers. This prayer of invocation for the commencement ceremony of May 24, 1981, carries his hallmarks:

O Lord, we do not pretend to be more than we are, grateful for what we have received, rejoicing this week in one another, and giving thanks for all the turbulence of mind and spirit which is Yale. Our thanks as well for other small and human things, for quiet conversations, the losing and finding of the self, the pleasures of running, visions; poems and play; for morning light and evensong. And since not far from New Haven, the road is lit by the fires of South Bronx burning, the sound of the gun is heard in the land, and great holes appear where there once was treasure, grant that in the years to come we find ways to embrace the world that is with integrity and healing.

Vannorsdall’s prayers have a simplicity that lets small details carry large concepts; a deep thanksgiving; and an even deeper need for forgiveness. Issues of social justice appear too, not as finger wagging so much as a yearning toward possibility. Vannorsdall was the most priestly or liturgical of the Yale chap-

1802: After a period of religious indifference, in which less than ten percent of students openly profess religion, the Second Great Awakening sweeps campus.

1805: Moses Simons, Yale’s first Jewish student, matriculates. It will be 17 years before the second, Judah P. Benjamin.

1822: Yale Divinity School is founded to provide graduate-level training for ministers.

1835: Carlos Ferdinand Ribeiro of Brazil becomes the first Catholic to matriculate at Yale.



1859: Compulsory evening prayer service is abolished; students are now required to attend church only once a day.

1869: Episcopal Church at Yale is founded as the Berkeley Association.

1876: Battell Chapel is dedicated as a memorial to Civil War dead.

1890: Yale College abandons its mandatory course in Christianity.

1907: The Hebraic Club, Yale's first Jewish organization, is founded; it is short-lived.

1922: T. Lawrason Riggs is named the first Catholic chaplain.

1923: Proportion of Jewish students in Yale College reaches 10 percent for the first time.

1926: Compulsory chapel is abolished. A year later, a full-time university chaplain is appointed.

lains, but he too modeled prophetic action—sticking with the workers of Yale quietly, carefully, and effectively in a time when the national movements had died down and there was little supportive applause.

In the 1983 “Prayer for the 50th Anniversary of the Colleges,” Vannorsdall deftly thanks all the masters, deans, and fellows of Yale’s undergraduate residential colleges, as well as the craftspeople who have worked to make the colleges what they are. This joining of the “big people” and the “small people” is common in his work. In the anniversary prayer, we also hear his characteristic quiet celebration:

O God, Ancient of Days, who was before Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, or Yale, who will be when all our splendid spires are down, free us from the burden of first and foremost, and grant us this time of rejoicing for the colleges we have made . . . these incubators of maturity.

WHEN VANNORSBALL LEFT, the Rev. Dr. Harry B. Adams '48, '51BDiv, became chaplain and served from 1986 to 1992. The chaplaincy was more than a full-time post for Adams. He was the Professor of Christian Nurture (preaching) at the Divinity School, and for five of his six years as University Chaplain he also served as master of Trumbull College. Adams, who describes himself as a pastoral chaplain, used his six years to consolidate the relationships between the university and the chaplaincy.

Looking back on his pastoral years, Adams remembers the ministry of hospitality that he and his wife sought to offer, and 3 a.m. visits to the hospital. The chaplains have not lived small lives: their management of large and complex schedules, as well as a “parish” of 20,000 people, is a pastoral service as important as any of their individual accomplishments.

THE REV. DR. FREDERICK J. STREETS '75MDiv has been at Yale since 1992. Asked to describe a normal day, he speaks of a 70-year-old professor emeritus seeking counseling for a second marriage, an Orthodox student worried about dating a non-Orthodox man, and preparations for what he hopes will be a revitalization of the University Chaplain’s office facilities. The Saint Thomas More Catholic



Chapel has a new building going up and the new Slifka Center is large and elegant; they make the crowded, active basement of Bingham Hall on the Old Campus look small in comparison.

As University Chaplain, Streets embodies some significant firsts: the first African American, the first Baptist. (Interestingly, several of the current Ivy League chaplains are black and Baptist.) Streets speaks of the irony that his unique background has allowed him to be “at home” at Yale. Here he strives to be “convicted but not dogmatic” and to offer the gospel as “an offering, not a command.” He believes that chaplains have a “major role as alternative hospitable voice”; his recent book, *Preaching in the New Millennium*, tells much of the Yale chaplaincy story.

Streets is known as the chaplain who has developed relationships in the wider Yale and the global Yale: he has done pastoral work in Colombia and Bosnia and recently led a service and learning trip of students to Cuba. He serves on the New Haven Board of Police Commissioners and the State Judiciary Selection Commission. And, when comparing his former congregational experiences with his experiences at Yale, Streets enlarges on the theme of the world community: “The sense of community among many members of black congregations is very relational and interpersonal and strongly nuanced by their shared cultural experience and history. The cultural experiences of those who worship here are not as homogeneous, and therefore, their relational styles vary. This variety brings a very rich multidimensional dynamic to the worship and community life of the congregation here. At its best, it could serve as a model demonstrating how different cultural and ethnic sensibilities can make valuable contributions to the life of the church.”

Since 1927, the chaplaincy as an institution has shifted from center to side, from foundational to optional. With Streets, the local, family ministry of Uncle Sid has opened to a wider world. The chaplains have created, each and together, a new kind of center for ministry at Yale, powerfully spoken from what only at first glance looks like the edge of the university. ▣

