

## Comments from the Chair

By Stephanie Mitchem

**“What kind of major research university would not have a strong department of religious studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?”**

This sarcastic comment came from one of the noted scholars in the field of religious studies, one who has also been a dean and a president, even as she currently leads into new arenas of research. During the annual American Academy of Religion, held in November 2011, I have many opportunities to discuss with colleagues and mentors the challenges that I face as chair of this department. Right now, this department has four (4!) full time faculty members in addition to myself. Thanks to the Provost’s faculty replenishment initiative, we are able to hire one new faculty member in Buddhism who will begin in 2012. But this remains the only department in our college without a graduate program. And of course, we have fewer faculty than any other. The lack of faculty is not really the reason for no graduate program here:



after all, the school from which I graduated, Northwestern University, has a very small religion department faculty, but several strong strands of graduate programs. Faculty and their departments everywhere across the country are doing more with less, the times and the citizens demand greater accountability. But that same accountability returns the question asked at the conference: “What kind of major research university would **not** have a strong department of religious studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” That question has played repeatedly in my head since returning, perhaps indicating why this woman has been such a leader.

The members of this department are working to build, in spite of our small number.

The challenges facing all of us in the future are

great, both at home and abroad. All of the institutions of our lives—from families to education to religion—are being reshaped. There are new questions being asked about human rights, interfaith dialogues, religious movements, politics, nationalism, international developments, race, gender, education, the military, spirituality, to name just a few.

And then there is the old split between religion and science, one that dates back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thinkers such as Spinoza, Locke, and Kant led the West away from religion as a metaphysical study into a nearly exclusive focus on reason. For a long time, “real” academic institutions did not talk about religion

and spent time talking about science. This approach is inherently flawed, because human beings continued to be religious. In the South, we are grounded in our religious lives and the various religious institutions become bases for decisions and actions. The questions from the religion and science connection as well as the old split between reason and religion are too long to list here, but have begun with religion and science thinking through the very question of being human. “What kind of major research

university would not have a strong department of religious studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?” Why any university, especially a flag-

ship university for the state, would not have a strong department is indeed a question that must be asked.

There are new questions being asked about human rights, interfaith dialogues, religious movements, politics, nationalism, international developments, race, gender, education, the military, spirituality . . .

The members of this department are working to build, in spite of our small number. This year alone, we have accomplished a great deal. Three of the department members (including one who accepted a position elsewhere) received research grants from the Provost’s office. One has received the highest teaching award—the Mungo—from the University of South Carolina. The Bernadin lecture was held and a noted speaker filled the room to capacity, and thereby connecting community, students, and faculty. All the department’s faculty attended American Academy of Religion and most of us gave papers, taking a prominent role in our disciplines. Most of us are internationally known scholars. We bring all our gifts to our students and to our work in the state of South Carolina. This year, we re-wrote our Mission Statement to reflect who we are: *The Department of Religious Studies at University of South Carolina offers interdisciplinary approaches to the academic study of religious beliefs and practices, through a variety of theories and methods*

In 2010, the founder of the Department of Religious Studies, Dr. Lawrence Brubaker, passed. From 1949 to 1980 when he retired, he led the University in the development of studying religion as an academic critical area. But the current department is not the department of the past nor should it be. After all, our students are not the same, more likely to listen to Lady Antebellum and Lady Gaga than the Kinks and Deep Purple. Like the rest of society, religion and its study have changed. The faculty and our areas of study have changed, most of us did not know Dr. Brubaker. But his and other scholars’ influence continues as we remain grounded in religion as an academic discipline. “What kind of major research university would not have a strong department of religious studies in **the 21<sup>st</sup> century?**”

The Department of Religious Studies looks forward to becoming all that the state and the University of South Carolina expect of us.