This is an interview with Wake Forest Chaplain Tim Auman. Would you like to talk about your family background and where you grew up?

Yeah. Originally from southern California. La Mesa, which is just outside of San Diego. I was out there because my father was in the Navy, but our family is originally from back east North Carolina and in Eastern Tennessee. Came back east as a child. I was very young. We came back to Black Mountain, Carolina, which is outside of Asheville.

From there, we came actually to Winston-Salem. My dad is a graduate of the medical school at Wake Forest and Bowman Gray. We moved over to the Miller Park Area. Some of my early memories of that particular community. Had a grandfather who was an associate minister at Centenary United Methodist Church, downtown.

I have some roots in the city and then my dad practiced medicine and high point for 40 years.

You went to away to school, to Wofford?

I went to Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Went there because I was hoping to go to a smaller school and probably, partly, because my sister was currently enrolled at Converse College. Did my undergraduate there, at Wofford, and had a fantastic experience. That was a good match for me, I think, at that point in my life.

What was your major?

I was a religion major. I had enough to be a minor in biology. I had interests in that. Actually, my grand plan, at that point in my life, was to go into forestry or land management. Religion was just something I had another interest in, but could not imagine, at that point, that would be a career choice that I would want to make.

How did you end up choosing that?
Tim Auman: Yeah. It's a really good story. I grew up in a very religious family. As I said earlier, my grandfather was a Methodist minister. He had a huge influence on me, but also love the outdoors. I went through scouting and spent a lot of my afternoons, as a child, running around in the woods, wherever they might be available and so the thought of spending a career out in the natural world seemed really appealing to me.

I remembered the day very well. I was in my spring semester of my junior year. I was taking a religion course. In fact, I remember the professor, Dr. John [Buller 00:03:05]. The class was great. We had a guest lecture that day from Duke Divinity School. After the class, I was talking to some of my friends, made my way down to the end of the hall to the men's restroom on the second floor of Old Main. As I walk in, here's the visiting professor from Duke Divinity School washing his hands at the sink.

I walk in. He immediately recognizes me and engages me in conversation. He asked me about where I was from and what my major was. Somehow, we got into a conversation about my involvement in the church as a child and my grandfather being a major influence in my life. I told him that I was actually heading up his way to Duke and to NC State, to visit some [00:04:00] of the forestry schools in the area.

He said, "While you're up there, why don't you come by the Divinity School and I'll take you up to lunch and then you can sit in on one of my classes." I did exactly that. At that moment, when I arrived at Duke and sat in on the classes and began to spend time with him, all of a sudden the trajectory of my life began to shift. That was a huge moment in my vocational life. In fact, I laugh just a little bit any time I walk into a men's restroom. I assume that some kind of divine call is going to be made upon my life and that my career, in fact, may change at that moment. I get a little bit anxious when that happens, but yeah.

Tanya: What appealed to you? Why make the switch?

Tim Auman: Yeah. Part of it, I guess, at that point in my life, I didn't have a lot of experience with leadership within the church. I really didn't have anything to compare it to. I think I've always been curious about the existential questions that hold all of us. The questions that we should be asking at every ancient stage of our life.

For whatever reason, I gave myself permission to ask myself those questions early on. Questions like, "Why are we here? What's the point
of this very brief life of ours? What does it mean to love your neighbor? Especially, your neighbor who is alarmingly different than you are," and with whatever gifts and graces we have, what are we to do with that in the world?"

I wanted to be in a career that allowed me to ask those questions of myself, but also, [00:06:00] to be with others who are asking those same kinds of questions, because it seemed to me that the answers informed our outward experience of life. I found that incredibly exciting. I was probably less interested in the institution of the church, but I was very interested in the conversations that came out of that institution. I think that's where the interest came from.

Tanya: What do you remember from your time at Duke Divinity?

Tim Auman: Wow. That's a really good question. First thing, of course, you begin to realize is where your fears are and anybody who's working on a master's of Divinity, immediately, at some point, has to begin to think about that first homiletics course. The fear of public speaking, I think, was certainly a fear that I entertained on a regular basis. The idea of getting up in front of a group of people and trying to share your truth or to tell your narrative that seemed really intimidating to me.

Also, I think, one of the memories I have there, was you take courses in church history and you sort of begin to get a richer or fuller appreciation for history of the church and to realize that your experience of that is fairly, fairly limited and naïve and that the church, itself, actually reflects the struggles of the human experience. Some of that is incredibly engaging and inspiring in other aspects of church history are not that.

A lot of what I had come to believe as a practicing Christian was challenged right out of the gate. [00:08:00] I immediately found myself in an existential crisis in that first year of Divinity School and really began to wonder about what is this journey? Assuming that God is an enticing, a calling and inviting God. What am I being invited into? What am I to d with this experience? That master's in Divinity that I was seeking? How was I to use that in the world once I graduated?

Tanya: After you left Duke, you went on and you had a variety of a positions. Associate pastor, campus minister, senior pastor. What stands out for you when you think about all these various positions?

Tim Auman: The first thing that comes to mind, of course, is just people. It's a ministry, chaplaincy is really about people and engaging people long
enough to sort of find out what their story is. Not so much what their story line is, the story line. It's what we put out there for public assumption. Anybody can do that, but it's someone's actual story. To sit down and to talk to them to find out what are the fears beneath the fears, beneath the fears that people have. How do we find language to talk about that? Eventually, you get to a deeper conversation about woundedness and brokenness and how does healing ... How does healing come to that in your own experience? For me, it was learning the art of kind of resisting that temptation to label people or categorize people, which we so easily do and to engage people around their humanity. [00:10:00]

It's the people that I remember. The students, when I was at the University of North Carolina, in Charlotte, I remember those students and I keep in touch with them, or the parishioners, who were sitting in the pews and people that are incredibly amazing, and yet, at the same time, they leapt through life like everybody else I know, including myself.

It's the individual encounters. I can't remember a single sermon I preached while I was serving at the local church. I'm sure if I were to read some of them, I'd be horrified by what I said, but it's really those conversations that don't happen in the pulpit.

Tanya: What initially brought you back to towards ... Not back, but to Wake Forest?

Tim Auman: You know what? Part of it is just that with my Dad graduating from the medical school, while we were living in this area, my father would drag me and my siblings to all Wake Forest sporting events, so I kind of grew up as a Wake Forest fan. That was part of it, but it actually was David Rife. Reverend David Rife. He's an ordained United Methodist minister. He's retired now and is at Arbor Acres Retirement Home.

David was a mentor for me. I really admired him. I admired his ... I still, I admired his intellect and his deep faith. We have these people in our lives, periodically, who see more in us than we actually see in ourselves. David was actually one of those folks, for me. He encouraged me, when he retired, from Wake Forest, as the United Methodist Campus minister. That's also referred to as the Wesley Foundation. He invited me to apply for that position. I did. I ended up becoming United Methodist Campus minister at Wake Forest. That's how I got involved in the life of the university.

Tanya: What do you remember from [00:12:00] your first days at Wake?
Tim Auman: How little I actually knew that Wake Forest students are different than University of North Carolina and Charlotte students. Not better, not worse. Just different. Trying to get a sense of what the community is like. Schools like Wake Forest can be a little bit intimidating because you’re surrounded by really brilliant people. I still feel that way. I always feel intimidated when I interact with faculty and staff. I'm just amazed at how bright and insightful people are.

I think there was a sense of appreciation and gratitude for being in this environment. I've always wanted to surround myself with exceptional people and I found that to be the case here. People who could challenge you a bit, when that was needed. I don't mind riding on people's coattails, when that seems like a helpful direction to go in. Again, it was the people I met here that I immediately were intrigued by.

Tanya: Do want to talk about how you became chaplain? Main chaplain?

Tim Auman: It's a funny ... It's actually a funny story. When the position came up open, when Chaplain Ed Christman retired, a couple of people encouraged me to apply for the position. Frankly, I didn't feel like I was actually a candidate for it, because I'm not Baptist. I could not imagine Wake Forest hiring a United Methodist to service or chaplain.

Although, clearly, on other campuses, they were already doing that and so what I decided to do was to apply for the position because I realized that it would give me an opportunity I hadn't had up to that point to interview [00:14:00] with some of the decision makers, the policy makers at Wake Forest.

Even though I didn't expect to get the job, I really liked the idea of sitting down and talking about it and formulating it in my own thinking about what chaplaincy and ministry should look like in a higher education setting.

That was my intent, was to experience Wake Forest from that perspective. Tom Hearn also asked all the applications, the final applicants, to write a position paper on chaplaincy, which I had never experienced before or been asked to do. I was really excited about putting into words, my faults about chaplaincy at a place like Wake Forest.

That summer, I'm an avid outdoors person. I had gone on a canoe chip up in the Boundary Waters, up in Minnesota, on the Canadian border, for ten days. I had been out for, I think, the first five days and had come back
to resupply at a convenience store. When I came back, I was checking some messages and found out that Vice President Zick had been trying to get in touch with me.

I was standing there, outside of a convenience store, at a payphone talking to Ken Zick and he said that the job had been offered and that he'd like to know my answer by tomorrow. I was just completely unprepared for that. I could barely hear him, because there was a pickup truck beside me, playing [00:16:00] country music really, really loud. I had to ask him over and over again, "Are you telling me that I was ... That President Hearn wants to me to come and be the chaplain?" He said, "Yes."

I spent that evening thinking about it and prayerfully and talking to my wisdom people, my family and people's whose opinions actually make a difference in my life. That's how that decision was made. Then I got back in the canoe and went out for another five days.

Tanya: You've been chaplain for about 15 years. How has the work changed?

Tim Auman: Yeah. It's changed a lot. I remember Barbara Brown Taylor was speaking at one of our professional conferences and she said that chaplains today at colleges and universities are making it up as they go.

She compared to the little rovers that NASA has put up on Mars, that they can actually get the rovers up there, but once they get there, they're like children playing, trying to figure out what it is that their seeing.

I think that's true for chaplains. One of the things was really obvious when I came into this role was that we needed to move quickly from being actively, intentionally ecumenical, which assumes that Christianity is the dominant culture. It is permissive of other faith traditions that we needed to move from being ecumenical to be intentionally interfaith.

That is no small task. Many of our peer institutions were a little bit ahead of the curve on that. We needed to catch up just a little bit. That meant staffing differently, finding a different language to talk about difference. Not simply talking about religion, [00:18:00] but talking about faith and spirituality, philosophical difference and acknowledging the fact that we have more and more students that are calling Wake Forest home, who resist any labels that we might want to put on them.

That was one of the first things we had to look at and try to figure out what would that look like? That transformation of consciousness? What
would that look like at Wake Forest? That was really exciting, a little bit scary, because there was some push back in trying to figure out how to do that.

Tanya: What kind of push back?

Tim Auman: I think for some people, there's an assumption that Wake Forest is actually still Baptist. That certainly ... that blood runs in our veins, for sure, but of course, we broke our formal ties back in the 80s.

Part of it was educational, letting people know what our community actually looks like. What does it mean to be hospitable to people who may not fit the model of the traditional Wake Forest student? As we looked at our recruiting patterns, as we looked at making Wake Forest an attractive place for people of all faith traditions or no faith traditions.

Then what did that need to look like and how are we to talk about that? That was challenging to a lot of people and still is challenging to a lot of people. To think of our beloved Wake Forest as a place where we have not only Christians, but we have Orthodox Christians and Evangelical Christians and Catholic Christians, but also Hindus and Muslims and Jews and Bahá'ís and agnostics and atheists and secular humanists and people who are not really sure what to say about themselves when it comes to purpose and meaning and world view.

That's actually the world that we live in. Once people actually engage in the conversation, they start to understand that and the resistance lessens. When you first hear about the route that we were planning to go in, it's actually not all that surprising that some people would say, "Wow, that's different. It doesn't sound like the Wake Forest that I, perhaps, remember when it was primarily Christian and Baptist."

Tanya: Can you really briefly describe, what is a typical day for you? Is there is one.

Tim Auman: I'm not sure that there is a typical day for us. We have a programmatic piece to the work that we do. That's predictable. You plan for that. You shape your calendar around the programmatic piece. That's campus directed. We'll do panel discussions and have book studies and small group kinds of things.

Both in our office, but also the work that we facilitate with our denominational campus ministers, but we also provide pastoral care to the larger university, which is somewhat daunting, because if you think of
Wake Forest of a city about 7,000 people, at any given moment, someone’s going to be in crisis. Usually, it’s a lot of people in crisis. Part of the work that we do is to work with our campus partners for this and student health or/and University Counseling Center, the Dean's Office or in Academic Advising and other places to identify people and to see how we can be of assistance to them.

A typical day would be ... it's often, actually, a typical night, our chaplain's are on call 24/7, all year long. I was on call last night and I had ... starting around 2:00 AM, had four calls involving transports to the hospital. The kind of normal things that happen to people in general. Nothing exceptional there. People have accidents and people have all sorts of crisis that require intervention. We try to be aware and to offer support, not only to the student, but we also offer support to families, sometimes the faculty, sometimes the staff.

When those things happen, as one might imagine, you drop the programmatic piece and then you show up and see what you can do to be of assistance.

Tanya: You said before at Wake, students were just somewhat different, just being in a different location. Have they changed over the years, to you?

Tim Auman: Yeah. They have. It's ... Socioeconomically our students have changed. I don't think that's a surprise to anyone. We certainly have students that come from some degree of privilege. That's not necessarily bad thing, but it brings a set of its own challenges and its own baggage, if you will. I think we're coming, traditionally, just more diverse, slowly, but surely.

In our world, that means religiously and spiritually diverse. We certainly have more and more students who consider themselves spiritual, but not religious. That makes some people crazy [00:24:00] to hear that, I know, but it's actually true.

Impermanence is language that we use in our work. It comes more out of an eastern tradition, but impermanence is the norm. Change is the norm. With each year, which each generation of Wake Forest students, because of technology, because we communicate with people in real time around the world, people bring a new set of knowledge and skills and wisdom with them. That informs our community.

We're constantly changing and trying to adjust to new ways of being in a world that becomes increasingly more complex. It’s actually kind of exciting.
Tanya: What role do you think spiritual development plays in a Wake Forest institution?

Tim Auman: For me, it's the underpinning of everything that we do. So much of what we do academically, is a mental construct. It's what happens when we engage the thinking mind. We're constantly thinking all the time about things that matter and often things that don't matter. Especially, since 90% of our thoughts are redundant.

Into the world of spirituality and faith, we make the assumption, I make the assumption, that someone is watching that process happen and that we're actually more than the thoughts that go through our head, that there's something deeper inside of us.

In my Christian faith, that would be the Kingdom of God that is within. In Buddhism, it would be Buddha's nature. Each faith has a different language for that. That [00:26:00] part, I would understand to be eternal and our thinking might eventually ... It fails us, at some point, as we get older, but that deeper self seems to last and perhaps last forever.

The spiritual piece is the part that survives the earthly experience. It's also the hardest part to talk about. What does it mean to be spiritual? It's hard to think about it sometimes. It's hard to create constructs around, but often, we can feel it. When we under stimulate ourselves long enough, we can feel that happening inside of us. For me, it actually is the most important thing that we do as human beings, is to explore that spiritual side to ourselves.

Sometimes it involves religion, but I think we're hardwired for that exploration for that conversation and it can shape everything else we do in our life.

Tanya: You mentioned Reverend Rife playing a role as a mentor? Did you have any other mentors at Wake Forest?

Tim Auman: No, the mentors show up at the strangest times. Certainly, I really thrive in an environment where I'm pushed and challenged a bit. Accountability is really important to me, so Ken Zick has been a mentor to me. I probably need to tell him that at some point. Ed Christman was that for me. Our new Vice President for Campus Life, Penny Rue has been a real mentor for me. I really am excited about working with her and interacting with her.
Sometimes, that mentorship is long term, but often, it's simply an encounter, interaction with someone [00:28:00] who puts into words something that you have been feeling or thinking about but couldn't quite conceptualize, or someone who offered an appropriate piece of advice or a critique, or simply celebrated something that you did or said or a way that you turned a sentence and decided to comment on it.

That's mentoring. That's what I've experienced at Wake Forest and almost to the point where I'm not surprised by what happens.

Tanya: Would you like to take some time to talk about the challenges faced in Wake Forest?

Tim Auman: That's a really good question. I think the challenges are legion and actually, they should be. It's appropriate to be challenged in the world that we live in. We talk a lot about being extraordinary. We talk a lot about the exceptional nature of our students. I understand that. I get that. All that is true, but from my perspective, I think one of the challenges is the fact that, while want our students to be exceptional, I think what we really want to be is fully human.

There are things that we all do that were exceptional. Those are our superpowers and I love to see them when they're displayed on campus, whether it's our students, faculty staff, administrators, but it's also those things that we're mediocre at. Things that we're not so good at. Places where ... that we're not quite so proud of. We bring that on the campus with our superpowers. That's our kryptonite, if you will. [00:30:00]

William [Clafin 00:30:01], this is a paraphrase of something he said when he was a chaplain at IDL. He said we all like to put our best foot forward but it's the other foot that's really interesting. Being fully human, as a Wake Forest student, as a faculty or staff person, as a graduate, as an alum, I would hope, includes standing up on both of those feet and saying, "Here's what I do really well."

This is the stuff that shows up on Wake Forest Magazine. Then there's other things that, actually, we all share in common. These are the places where I struggle. These are the things that wake me up in the middle of the night that I get anxious about and I'm uncertain about. My hope would be that as part of the Wake Forest experience, we see the value of being truth tellers. That takes some fearlessness and encouragement on our part.
That we can find ways to celebrate disappointment. That might be the first lesson you learn when you come to Wake Forest, that we make false starts and we think we know more than we actually do and so that what we would perceive as our failures, whether that’s institutionally or individually, actually are our greatest strengths.

In a world that's constantly telling us that we're not enough, that we're inadequate, that we're impoverished, I would love to be at a place like Wake Forest who says, "Not so fast." You know what? There's something more to us than meets the eye. Yes, let's go out into the world and use our gifts and our talents, get the best job you can get, but there's some other callings upon us, as well. [00:32:00]

They come out of that deeper, spiritual side of who we are that makes us fully human, which is incredibly liberating, when we know that we don’t have to be perfect in this life. Sometimes all we need to be is good enough and to show up and to treat our neighbor, whoever that neighbor may be in the same way that we would want to be treated.

That's a challenge for us, because that is counter-cultural in many ways in the world that we live. I think [inaudible 00:32:38] fundamentally, is counter-cultural. I’d love to see us embrace that at every possibility.

Tanya: Can you talk a little bit about your programming work? I think, especially, just briefly in response to human behavior that can become ugly, mean spirited on campus?

Tim Auman: Correct. Yeah. Part of the work that we do, of course, is around interfaith or multi-faith capacity building. That's our gift back to the university, frankly. The reality, of course, is every time we turn on our televisions or turn our computers, our stereos, smartphones, we're seeing something about religious conflicts around the world, whether that's in Middle East or Africa or even within our own communities.

Part of our responsibility, I think, and also the chaplain, is to help teach the necessary skills, competencies, literacies around how do people of different faith traditions, philosophical traditions, actually communicate with each other. Not simply communicate, how do we explore [00:34:00] the shared values that actually are important to all of us? The shared values may be systemic poverty or a concern about the environmental sustainability.

All the faith traditions that are present at Wake Forest have something to say about that. That's part of our responsibility, I think, to teach some of
those skills, so programmatical, we have been working with the Interfaith Youth Corp in Chicago, which [inaudible 00:34:32] started and we're right in the midst of a year long campus engagement, where we've done a ... actually, Wake Forest first, spiritual and religious lives climate survey to get an idea of actually what ... What does our community look like? Which is really exciting. It's more complex and diverse than we could have imagined.

We're letting that ... our work with the IFYC help us shape our programs as we look toward the future. How do we educate each other? How do we create opportunities to talk about things that actually that may include things like Islamophobia. What does that mean and why should it be important to us? It should be important, because we have Muslim students here and we have Muslim students, faculty and staff and Muslims live in our community.

They are family and our brothers and our sisters and perhaps, future employers, or employees. We have a responsibility to interact with each other. Not simply to be tolerant of each other, but in the spiritual of pluralism, to be able to sit at the table together, to share our stories.

Not simply to share my story repeatedly, but to listen to your story and to show [00:36:00] how we can communicate with people who are different than we are, who see the world differently, to explore shared values and to realize that extends our circle of friendships. As we do that, then it ultimately transforms the world that we live in. That's kind of exciting.

Tanya: Thinking about your career, what do you think your greatest contribution to Wake Forest has been?

Tim Auman: That's a really good question. I think that it's really hard to answer. The reason I say that is that usually when we grow spiritually, and I'll use that language, we're the last person to notice that or to recognize that. It's usually someone else who notices the changes that are happening inside of us.

What I think my greatest contribution is and what others may be the same, but probably not, you could certainly point to a paradigm shift from being ecumenical to more interfaith. Perhaps, that might be it. Perhaps, it's certain programs that seemed really important or expanding our staff to include any mom or a Jewish program director, or whatever, but my guess is that what people will remember are interactions. Individual interactions, standing the parking lot or after an event took place.
A phone call. A retreat that we were on. Showing up at the hospital, the emergency room. Those individual interactions, actually, are what people will remember. The only reason I say that is that's been true for me.

[00:38:00] I really don't remember a lot of the words that people who were important to me at just the right time said to me, what I remember is they showed up. They were there.

For me, that was a really nice reminder that if chaplaincy is anything, it's showing up in people's lives.

Tanya: Are there any further experiences that you would like to share that you felt we haven't covered?

Tim Auman: Yeah. One of the ... our motivations for the work that we do are often selfish. So many of the programs that I am involved in planning with others around or conversations that I'm having, really, come out of my own curiosity. It's really interesting when you sit with people who perceived the world differently, whose family of origin was different than your own, whose education was different.

One story I'll never forget. I was with a group of Wake Forest students and with Dr. Newell, we were in Egypt. We were over at a college university in Cairo. We were sitting having lunch with each other and there was a Muslim man sitting across the table from me.

We were eating and we were both involved in interfaith kinds of work. He in Egypt, and me here, in the United States at Wake Forest. We were doing our little interfaith dog and pony shows. "This is what we do here."

[00:40:00] He was telling me what he did. Eventually, we just sort of ran out of things to impress each other with. We sat there and started staring at our food. Eventually, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He said, "I have two sons and their names are ... "

He told me their names. He showed me their pictures. I said, "How old are they?" He told me how old they were and then reached into my wallet and pulled out two pictures of my sons. Our sons were the exact same age. The whole conversation shifted, at that point, around raising boys and, "What are your boys into? Let me tell you what my boys are into. These are the things that I worry about sometimes."

It was a fantastic conversation and it was that moment I began to understand what the work of chaplaincy and the interfaith work that we engage in is really, ultimately, all about ... It's not about doctrines. It's not about creeds. It's not new and different models. Although, that can be
helpful. All of those, I think, probably point to that moment of sharing our narratives, sharing our stories around things that actually matter. I think of that as an important moment in my own maturity as the chaplain at Wake Forest.