Radford University is not a religiously diverse campus, and some have seen tensions between religious groups flair up at RU from time to time. But according to those same people, that doesn’t mean there’s not a tone of overall acceptance.

Take a walk anywhere in Radford and it’s easy to tell Christianity is the dominant religion- churches abound. And the university reflects that culture. 18 of the 20 registered religious organizations on campus are associated with Christianity, either listed as nondenominational or under a specific religion such as Presbyterian.

Catholic Campus Ministries advisor Karen Melendez believes the religious affiliation of the university reflects the part of the country it’s in.

“Southwest Virginia is part of the Bible belt,” Melendez said. “It’s very heavily Christian.”

But inside this microcosm of the Bible belt, which encompasses regions in 16 mainly southern states, are minority religious groups

The two non-Christian religious groups at RU are Hillel, a Jewish organization found on campuses nationwide, and the Muslim Student Association, which is becoming active again after a lull in recent years.

Advisors and members of the non-Christian groups don’t feel threatened by how much they’re outnumbered, but they do feel their organizations are vital in representing the voice of their religion on campus.

“It seems to me very important to have that organization,” said Dr. Carter Turner of the Muslim Student Association to which he is an advisor. “I think it’s important to have a place for Muslim students here at Radford to feel some shelter.”

Hillel President Jacob Hedrick believes his organization is important because it provides a sense of community for Jewish students and keeps them in contact with the faith, something not always easy to do on a college campus.

\*According to advisors and members of religious organizations at RU, the diversity and acceptance found on a college campus should be what other areas of the world strive for. But that doesn’t mean campuses are immune to religious tension.

According to a recent poll conducted by Time Magazine and CNN, Islam is held in high regard by only 44 percent of Americans compared to an average of just under 70 percent for other major American religions. Turner said he’s seen shadows of this mistrust of Muslims in the classroom.

“I have sensed a greater impatience among my non-Muslim students toward Muslims,” Turner said. “There’s no doubt that the attitude is shifting and I’ve seen glimpses of it here but…I think my students probably won’t reveal it to me as quickly as they might do it someplace else.”

That said, he’s “cringed” at “generalizations” he’s heard in the classroom, such as statements like “Islam is a violent religion.” He’s also been left dumbfounded by the notions of some students.

Turner, who is not Muslim but whose sister is married to a non-practicing Muslim, said he was in class one day when one of his brighter students raised his hand. The student said he “knew for a fact that every major airline in the US had a policy whereby they had to have at least one non-Christian in the cockpit of every commercial flight” so that when the apocalypse came and the Christians were whisked up to heaven, somebody could land the plane.

“That’s just ignorance,” Turner said.

Hedrick has had his share of uncomfortable moments as well. Now a senior, Hedrick began dating his Christian girlfriend nearly three years ago. At the time, she was part of a Christian organization on campus, and her friends weren’t too pleased with the relationship.

“[They] were telling her to break up with me because I was Jewish and were saying it wasn’t going to last,” Hedrick said. “And here we are, almost three years later and we’re still together.”

The Hillel president went onto say he believes people who aren’t truly comfortable with being around people of other religions won’t just come out and say it. He says the percentage of people who have a problem being on the same campus as someone who’s Jewish or Muslim is small, but the percentage of those who would prefer not to be too involved with a non-Christian is higher.

Hillel advisor Dr. Carol Bienstock agrees that nobody knows how accepting they are until they have to deal with diversity head on.

“When it hits close to home, as in when parents see sons or daughters dating someone of a different religion, that puts it to the real test,” Bienstock said. “It puts to the test whether they’re truly open-minded.”

According to other members of Hillel, instances of obvious discrimination at RU are minimal. The only example in recent memory was a single incident of neo-Nazi vandalism in late 2009 when a Jewish student had their clothes removed from a washer and etched with swastikas. Though the act made some members of the organization nervous, it was isolated. More often than struggling against anti-Semitism, they battle to stay within their religion on a daily basis.

One of the biggest things they struggle with, Hedrick says, is staying kosher.

“Staying kosher” means abiding by Jewish dietary laws that mandate, among other things, they cannot eat pork or any meat and cheese simultaneously. RU doesn’t offer a kosher meal plan so, college dining options being what they are, staying kosher is an issue.

“Eating on campus, it’s impossible [to stay kosher],” Hedrick said. “It’s impossible because if a knife was used for dairy it can’t e used for meat. Or, if anything has touched pork, it can’t be used at all. If any of that cross-contamination has happened, even if something were kosher, it’s not anymore. Basically anything on campus is off-limits for a strict kosher meal.”

Hedrick has explored kosher options around Radford, but found only a tiny kosher section in Kroger. Without a place that provides a plethora of kosher options, he says, staying kosher becomes a full-time job.

“You’d have to get a lot of things shipped in, just because certain things aren’t offered for a traditional Jewish meal,” Hedrick said. “It is possible, but it takes a lot of attention.”

As a compromise to himself, he keeps within the simplest restrictions.

“I don’t eat cheeseburgers, I don’t eat bacon,” Hedrick said. “Just the very basic things that it’s plausible for me to follow.”

Although it’s not a huge deal to him, keeping kosher is something Hedrick wishes the school would help with. He also wishes Hillel had a place to attend religious services on campus, like CCM does in Heth Hall, and a space for the organization to meet regularly.

The nearest Synagogue is in Blacksburg, just 20 minutes away. For many local Jews, such as Bienstock, that’s not a big deal. She lives in Blacksburg, and even if she’s away from her hometown, she has a car. Many students don’t have cars. Hedrick offers rides to attend services in Blacksburg every week, but, as he points out, there are bound to be times when he’s unavailable. And, after all, a car only holds so many people.

Hedrick and Hillel treasurer Mike Salomon point out that a lack of place to hold services on campus is one of the reasons the organization is so small. How will practicing Jews know a Hillel exists if there isn’t a central place to host Hillel and other Jewish students?

“I think just a section in a building would be nice,” Hedrick said. “It doesn’t have to be a large area, but because it is a campus organization…it’d be nice.”

That said, Hedrick is quick to point out how helpful Center for Diversity and Inclusion Director Adrien DeLoach has been this semester.

The only allotted space for Hillel on campus is a small office in the CDI; one they share with CCM. On top of supplying the office space, DeLoach got everything organized for the sukkah the Jewish organization set up this year outside The Bonnie.

A sukkah is a small enclosure where Jews go to eat, sleep and partake in other activities during Sukkot, an important Jewish holiday. The club wanted to set one up this year to raise awareness.

According to Hedrick and Salomon, plenty of people came up to the sukkah the first day it was set up and asked what it was all about. They were pleased that people were interested, and had many students talk about their own connections to Judaism.

Salomon hopes the awareness generated by the sukkah leads to them hosting more on-campus events. Plans are in the works for renting out Muse Banquet Hall for Hanukkah and bringing a menora to campus for the occasion.

Bienstock, who has been their advisor for five years and noticed an increase in activity over the last two, is excited about what the exposure could do for generating interest in Hillel.

“It takes a lot of effort over the course of a period of time to raise that profile,” she said. “I think we’re off to a good start.”

Muslim student Mohammad al-Sawwaf concurs that the idea behind a religious group on campus is to raise awareness. “The ultimate goal,” he says, would be to raise religious awareness to the point that people recognized religion as a choice and respected that choice.

That’s why Omar Hossino founded the Muslim Student Association. He wanted to show people who weren’t familiar with Islam what the religion was about.

“Our group was never a Muslims only group,” Hossino said in an e-mail interview. “We always wanted to invite as many people from different groups as possible.”

They picked Carter, a non-Muslim, as their advisor to make sure they never forgot their focus. Their constitution stresses the idea behind the organization is to show the different cultures of the Muslim world to RU. In fact, the club was founded as the Islamic Cultural Association.

Becoming cultured, Carter says, is a hugely important part of being a college student.

“What we are doing in addition to training our students to have vocations and learn how to do certain jobs; we’re also training them to be good citizens of democracy,” Carter said. “We’re training them to be able to live in a diverse world where they can work with people who have different religious traditions.”

Bienstock agrees.

“This is an institution of higher learning, and one of the most important reasons that students come to seek a college education is to broaden their horizons,” Bienstock said. “I believe that the university as a community has an obligation to make sure that they are more open, they are more accepting, they are more encouraging of all view points because it is a university. Our currency is ideas and knowledge.”

With 14 involved members, RU’s Hillel is more active than it ever has been. The MSA was inactive for a time after Hossino graduated, but plans to start meeting again this week.

“What we are doing in addition to training ou students to have vocations nad learn how to do certain jobs, we’re also training them to be good citizens of democracy, we’re training htem to be able to live in a diverse world where they can work with people who have different religious traditions, they can work with people who have different values and customs, habits. So I think that exposure to those different ways of being in this world prepare us.”

“I think it’s good for the community, the Radford university community. This is an institution of higher learning and one of the most important reasons that students come to seek a college education is to broade their horizons, to make them see parts of the world they’re not familiar with, to expose them to different ideas.”

“The university ehre at Radford reflects that. Again I believe that the university as a community has an obligation to maek sure that they are more open, they are more accepting, they are more encouraging of all view points because it is a university. Our currenc is ideas and knowledge. I think the university has an obligation to make sure the environment is welcoming for a variety of ideas, whether it’s religious diversity or other things.”

Dr. Turner

“I think I see more of it on the national level than I see on campus, only because in my classes, we all agree at the beginning that we’re going to be respectful. I think my students probably are cautious about saying something that would offend a group like that. But with that said I have sensed a greater impatience among my non muslims students toward muslims. I think it’s certainly happening on the national lee, there’s no question about it.”

GW said this isn’t a war between muslims and Christians, think republicans are OK with implying that now, it’s becoming more acceptable.

“There’s no doubt that the attitude is shifting and I’ve seen glimpses of it here but…I think my students probably won’t reveal it to me as as quickly as they might do it someplace else.”

Faculty advisor for muslim student association

Inactive, but now they’re starting back up, meeting by end of this week

“It seems to me very important to have thar organization I think especially with the national climate against muslims I think it’s important to have a place for muslim students here at Radford to feel some shelter.”

“I don’t think I see any outright hostility, I think the problem is we’re not particularly diverse religiously.”

Tech has more

“I don’t think weve had to learn to be comfortable with people of different religious faiths here.”

Student in class generalized Islam

Many muslims in this nation think their religion is completely compatible with democracy

“My sister is married to a Moroccan. I thik I’ve seen to the degree that a non muslim could, a little bit of the discrimination people face. My nephews are told are the time ‘you’re gonna go to hell’.

“I’ve seen firsthand the judgement toward my family.”

“I think after 9/11, the tensions were ratcheted up and I just felt that there needs to be some organization that could have the weight to defend muslims if they needes osme sort of defense.”

If a professor attacked islam student would be more empowered if they had an association backing them

“I think it was the right thing to do for muslims.”

Said people much more likely to be prodigious anonymously or amongst fellow prejudiced people

Christians make up 75% of pop nationwide

Said he’d be surprised by a mosque in R

“It can still be a problem even if it’s not a readily fixable problem.”

Mike Saloman Hillel Treasurer

“It’s the same thing as being with any religious group, it’s a sense of belonging.”

“Parents did it, there’s no synagogues around here, might as well join it.”

Hillel is open to anybody, 13-14 members, 2 aren’t jewish

“This is my fourth year here at Radford, my first two ears we really dind’t do anything. This year we’ve been more active than we’ve ever been in the past.”

Sukkuh on campus

“all we’re trying to do right now is create a bigger presence on campus. Our president ida really great job of bringing us together this year.”

They drive 10-12 people out to tech for services now

They want to rent out Muse for hannukah, get a manora

VT has a sorority and frat (jewish), hillel and habat

“It never really phased me being different. The only way people know I’m Jewish is if I put myself out there. I’ve nee had any problems here on campus. I didn’t really feel any different being”

“No matter where you go thre’s going to be hatred. That’s the only incident I’m aware of. I felt bad for the student but, if it happens it happens. We work through it, educate others and move on.”

Karen Melendez , CCM advisor

CCM established at RU in 1978

Church was in Calhounnnn

Sold church to university

Historically Radford is about 10 percent catholic

200 students that attend mass on a semi-regular basis, 75 that do more activities regularly

50 students go to mass on Sundays with them (heth 014?) and 20 go to St. Jude’s

“to build the kingdom”

Main event is Sunday mass on campus, Sunday suppers following mass, some program in addition to mass

Outreach projects in R community

Handful of non-Catholic members

Part of RUCMA Radford university catholic ministers association

Office in CDI that they share with Hillel

St. Jude supports CCM financially

Once a week the CCM has a two hour lunch period on campus (used to be t shops, now it’s muse)

“The last couple of years it’s been wonderful. I just think Radford University, the student body is very tolerant student body. I think it has to do with the way your generation has been raised. It’s very open and accepting. I also think religion is very much a personal choice and that’s what your generation sees. So there’s no pressure to be one faith…or another.”

“I just think because a college is a breeding ground for so many people of so many different beliefs.

College is a place where you’re supposed to develop yourself, your whole self.”

Jacob Hillel President

.. Sometimes it even gives people who never had a jewish slife to begin with to start one.”

That’s the case with one of the students here. Wears yamaka

Regular meetings cut down to once every other week

“You can only talk about so much, I’d rather start doing things instead.”

Jacob offers rides to Blacksburg for Shabat dinners

Sukkah on campus

Joined Hillel sophomore year, halfway through

“We really didn’t do anything.”

His mom camd down and cooked Passover dinner, but that was about it

Bowling, movie nights, game nights, games are regular meetings

“It’s pretty interesting. The only organization that has actively contacted us to want to do something is the Canterbury house.”

Had their pasover sader there’re

“They’re really interested in working with us. Everone else just kind of ignores us for the most part.”

The CDI has helped us out a lot

“We haven’t gone to them, they haven’t gone to us. There’s really no need for us to do things with each other.”

CRU has so many members that they’d have 100 people participating in joint event, hillel would have 10

Quest assistants as of two years ago didn’t know there was a Hillel on campus, nt very exposed. Why would you not go to tech?

Drunk people walked up and asked about the sukkah when they put it up on a Friday night

“Oh! I’m half Jewish”

Synagogue in Radford is a ways away, but Habat might consider it if they keep growing like they are (exponentially)

Mohammad

“I would think it’s really important to have it.”

“I don’t know many muslims here in Radford”

“For this organization, if they were really active in making information sessions and stuff, they could be able to get some good information or good impression about Islam and change some of the bad stuff.”

“It is something nice for any Muslim to be able to know ‘Oh, there is a Muslim organization.’”

“It could be of the diversity in a college atmosphere. There are people from all over the world, allthe religions out there. And you can get in touch with faculty, staff, students and you can access

“Freedom of choice is one of the things that everybody should have. Especially with religion, you have to believe in something in order to do it. If this kind of organization can increase the awareness to that level, that’s the ultimate goal I would say.”

“There’s always a possibility beause it doesn’t require anything to build a mosque. It could be anything. Any bilding, any apartment, any store that could be basically a mosque. I gues sit depends on how many muslims live around the area.”

Al Ihsan N Main

Al Hidaya S Main

“I actually don’t know. I would say there is this feeling, just like there’s people who are still against

As long as there are people who think race is an issue, there are people who think religion si an issue. I’m sure there are people who think that way, but why? I actually have no idea.”

“It could be lack of awareness that could be an issue.”

Dr. Carol Bienstock

“They hve the opportunity to associate with people who have the same religious tradition as they do. I think it’s important for that to be offered here.”

“As a faculty advisor it’s not my organization.”

“It’s a lot of the same challenges that there are in being jewish in an overwhelmingly Christian-oriented society.”

The university obviously mirrors the society in which it’s embedded

“I think the Hillel organization this year has made some pretty significant strides in kind of raising the consciousness of the university that ‘we’re here’, theat there are other view points.”

“I think it should be because that’s the hallmark of an institution of higher education. The most important thing in having a healthy Hillel organization here is offer Jewish students a place where they can belong if they so choose.”

Organizations raise consciousness