

Berlin students examine Va. faith

By Jessica Kitchin
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For five days last week, the city of Charlottesville served as a petri dish for a small group of students studying religion in the state their professor calls "the buckle of the Bible belt."

"I was told Virginia might be the exact right place to study religion in North America," said Harald Wenzel, a sociology professor at Free University Berlin in Germany.

So Wenzel brought 13 graduate students with him to the United States, where for several weeks the group is joining in all sorts of religious activities in four Virginia cities: Lexington, Roanoke, Lynchburg and Charlottesville. They also spent some time in Washington, D.C., and Virginia Beach, and the students said that so far they're surprised by how candid Americans are about religion.

"A big surprise to me is that the media in Germany does not tell the whole picture [of religion on the United States] at all," said sociology student Matthias Bauschulte, 39, who is in his final year of study. "People here are very open in sharing their way of approaching religion. We have this view that it's all fundamentalists who would be hard to understand, but it's very easy to connect to religion here."

The group has visited a variety of religious activities and places: soup kitchens, Bible studies, prison ministries, religious services, Regent University and even Pat Robertson's "The 700 Club," a Christian television program based in Virginia Beach. During their time in Charlottesville, Bauschulte and fellow graduate students Simone Grellmann and Rahel Sieghartner were based out of St. Mark Lutheran Church on Alderman Road.

Bauschulte saw a contrast between Charlottesville and Washington, and it was a deep difference in the way residents of the two cities approach religion. "I was surprised at how many religious-minded people were trying to have political influence in Washington - people seemed to have a need to be close to politics," he said. "Here people use religion with their concerns about social issues. ? They are looking at how they can make a difference."

Specifically, Bauschulte pointed to groups such as a new inter-congregational group IMPACT, which aims to address social justice issues in Charlottesville, and PACEM (People and Congregations Engaged in Ministry), a group that provides shelter and food for homeless men at night through different congregations in the city.

"I think religion is very much a part of daily life for people here," Grellmann said. "People search for what religion means to them and their values and make it work for them."

How Charlottesville will compare with the other researched cities isn't clear yet - the group plans to spend a few months analyzing their observations once they return to Berlin.

The visit is funded by the Marshall Plan, which helped Europeans rebuild after World War II. "Only a very small number of Americans know that plan still exists," Wenzel said. "I hope it's doing some good work still."

Whatever they conclude, Wenzel said just reaching out to understand religion in North America is important. "Religious life in the United States is very different, it is usually much more lively and energetic than in European countries, and this liveliness and energy radiates into all aspects of life," he said. "In Europe there is too little knowledge and understanding about these ways of American religion."

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