

# Choate's Muslims get their own chaplain

By Samaia Hernandez

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**WALLINGFORD** — Wearing a black kufi cap, smiling freely, enjoying supper and casual conversation with six students, J. Ibrahim Long easily blends into the scene in the historic Hill House dining hall at Choate Rosemary Hall.

To the untrained eye, he might look like a student or adviser to the primarily international students. But the 28-year-old master's candidate at Hartford Seminary is the school's first Muslim chaplain. For years, leaders from faiths including Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism have tended to the spiritual needs of students, but this marks the first year that Choate's Muslim population—representing the Sunni and Shiite sects — has been larger than just a few students.

Framed descriptions of Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam hang from the walls inside a common room that bears trustee Bill Spears' name and is used for moral and spiritual purposes, as Spears desired. After weekly informal dinner meetings, the newly formed Muslim Student Association, with a membership of 13, heads to the multi-purpose space to pray, discuss the Qur'an and what it means to be a Muslim in America, and plan interfaith events.

"It's not my job to actually force anyone to go either way, but to actually respond," said Long, a California native and convert to Islam, on promoting religious views.

The new association and chaplain are part of the school's response to a changing international population. Several religious officials have called the move proactive and forward thinking, in line with universities such as Yale, Princeton and Duke, which have all recently hired Muslim chaplains, graduates of Hartford Seminary's program.

"We have more and more international students who do not come from Asia," said Stephen Farrell, Choate's dean of faculty. "Twenty-five to 30 years ago, almost all of them were Asian students. But we've really moved into the Middle East and Africa." International students make up 14 percent of Choate's 850 students.

Students from as far away as Saudi Arabia, Kenya and Malaysia reached out to the Rev. Marc Trister, the school's Protestant chaplain and head of campus ministries, early in the school year. Trister led the group to Hartford, where it met with Mumina Kowalski, assistant director of the Islamic chaplaincy program.

After several interviews, Long, a first-year master's degree candidate in Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian relations seemed to be the perfect fit. His youth and way of coming to the religion likely play a role in his ease with the diverse group. "Everybody agreed that this was an important step for the school to make," Trister said.

Unlike public institutions, which are prohibited from supporting similar religious-based initiatives, schools such as Choate have much more flexibility. The school hired the part-time leader using funds from Spears' endowment with no accompanying controversy. The opposite was the case

when construction of a mosque was proposed for Leigus Road; residents organized and complained about potential traffic problems, with organizers maintaining that the resistance was not rooted in religious prejudice.

Issues in the media and public are part of the reason the need for Muslim chaplains has grown across the country, said Kowalski, who is in the midst of surveying 26 working Islamic chaplains. With the country at war in two Islamic nations, Iraq and Afghanistan, the seminary's 10-year-old program was driven mainly by the needs of the U.S. military, she said.

"The military really wants as many Muslim chaplains as it can get," Kowalski said. "University chaplains are a new sort of exciting area and that would include Choate, which includes private schools that are looking. The school is really forward-looking in wanting to meet their needs."

Having a chaplain makes it easier and more comfortable to adjust to a new culture, said Adilla Jamaludin, a student from Malaysia. "We want to make our presence known on campus, to educate people about our religion, so we feel confident being Muslims on campus," she added.

For Long — a former middle and high school teacher in Sacramento who was raised Christian and converted to Islam five years ago — his new role is a way to help strengthen his own relationship with God. "I became convinced that the Qur'an was/is a revelation," he said. "Times are changing. People are becoming a lot more open and understanding about Islam."

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J. Ibrahim Long, center, Choate Rosemary Hall's new Muslim chaplain, meets with member of the school's Muslim Students Association Thursday. From left, they are Ahmed Kibwana, Hyder Hyder, Layal Ismail and Adilla Jamaludin.