



OUR RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The fourth in a series of articles profiling those who help to enrich our spiritual lives

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we conclude this year-long series by visiting with three individuals devoted to helping others in our communities, guided by their faith: Father Paul Kilroy, Rabbi Moshe Bleich, and the Reverend Sara Ascher.

FATHER PAUL KILROY

Catholic Chaplain / Campus Minister

Regis College

“The ministry is a way to help people find deeper meaning in life, to help people through their highest and lowest moments,” says Father Paul Kilroy, Catholic Chaplain at Regis College in Weston. “I’ve been blessed with great experiences, combining both parish and campus ministries.”

When he was invited to be the Catholic chaplain at Salem State College in 1981, initially he was afraid of working with students. He

didn’t know what to expect. But he quickly realized it was fun to be part of their world. Still, he loves parish work, and it beckoned him back. He left the college after two years to serve first in Lynn, then in West Newton, for 12 years. When he added campus ministry into the mix at Northeastern University from 1993 to 2001, Father Paul found the variety it offered worked well.

Meanwhile the Archdiocese of Boston was closing parishes. Then the crisis of abuses in the Church began making headlines. “It was time to move on,” he recalls. In 2007, when Regis, a small Catholic college, needed a chaplain, he remembered how energizing it was to work with students. The former women’s college was going coed, and he knew he could help. He applied.

Father Paul says the crisis of abuse in the Church felt like a personal attack. “It has been a blight on our Church,” he says. “But it’s not a big part of students’ lives. A lot of them missed the sacraments because as teens they didn’t care. I tell them, ‘I’ll help you bridge your adolescent faith to your adult faith.’ We don’t all believe the same way our parents do, but we believe.”

facing page, top to bottom: Father Paul Kilroy, Rabbi Moshe Bleich, and Reverend Sara Ascher

Our Religious Leaders



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– Father Paul Kilroy

Among his tools to teach about faith and life are mentoring programs that put college students in leadership roles.

“Men were drawn to Regis by the opportunity to play sports. My job is to get them off the playing field and into spiritual life,” says Father Paul, whose ministry includes faculty, staff, and all students. “Several times a year, the mentoring program brings 12 to 15 high school juniors to campus. Some of them are questioning whether college is right for them. Others are the first generation in their family to consider going to college and think it’s beyond their reach. When they talk with Regis students one-to-one, have lunch, and participate in Q & A sessions, the experience draws out the potential of everyone involved, giving them energy to grow.”

His office also coordinates service programs in places from South Dakota to South America. For 11 years, Regis students have helped improve conditions in a poor community in Peru. On four of those

trips, Father Paul has been an eyewitness to the transformation that takes place when students of all backgrounds see how people manage with so little. He says, “Their eyes are opened. They return connected to the wider world.”

Raised in Dorchester and Quincy, Paul Kilroy received a bachelor’s degree and a Master of Divinity degree from St. John’s Seminary in Brighton. He lives at St. Anthony Parish in Allston and assists St. Clare Parish in Braintree and the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Boston, who founded Regis College.

Outside the church, he enjoys skiing, hiking, cycling, and walking as part of his focus on staying healthy through exercise. Since taking up cycling in his late twenties, he has enjoyed 10-day bike trips along most of the rivers in Europe with friends who also are priests.

Four days a week he’s at Regis where today student enrollment is 33 percent male and more than 50 percent not Catholic. Recently, an

Our Religious Leaders



impromptu conversation with Muslim students led him to create the Peace Room, a nondenominational reflection space for anyone who finds the college chapel an uncomfortable place to pray.

After nearly 40 years, with no talk of retirement, he says campus ministry has kept him young. “I’m here to motivate and assist people—whether it’s the president of the school, faculty, staff, or students. It has given me hope and affirms the value of higher education.”

RABBI MOSHE BLEICH

Wellesley Weston Chabad House

“Chabad offers a very informal, nonjudgmental place where anyone can feel comfortable regardless of political or religious beliefs, although obviously more are Jewish,” says

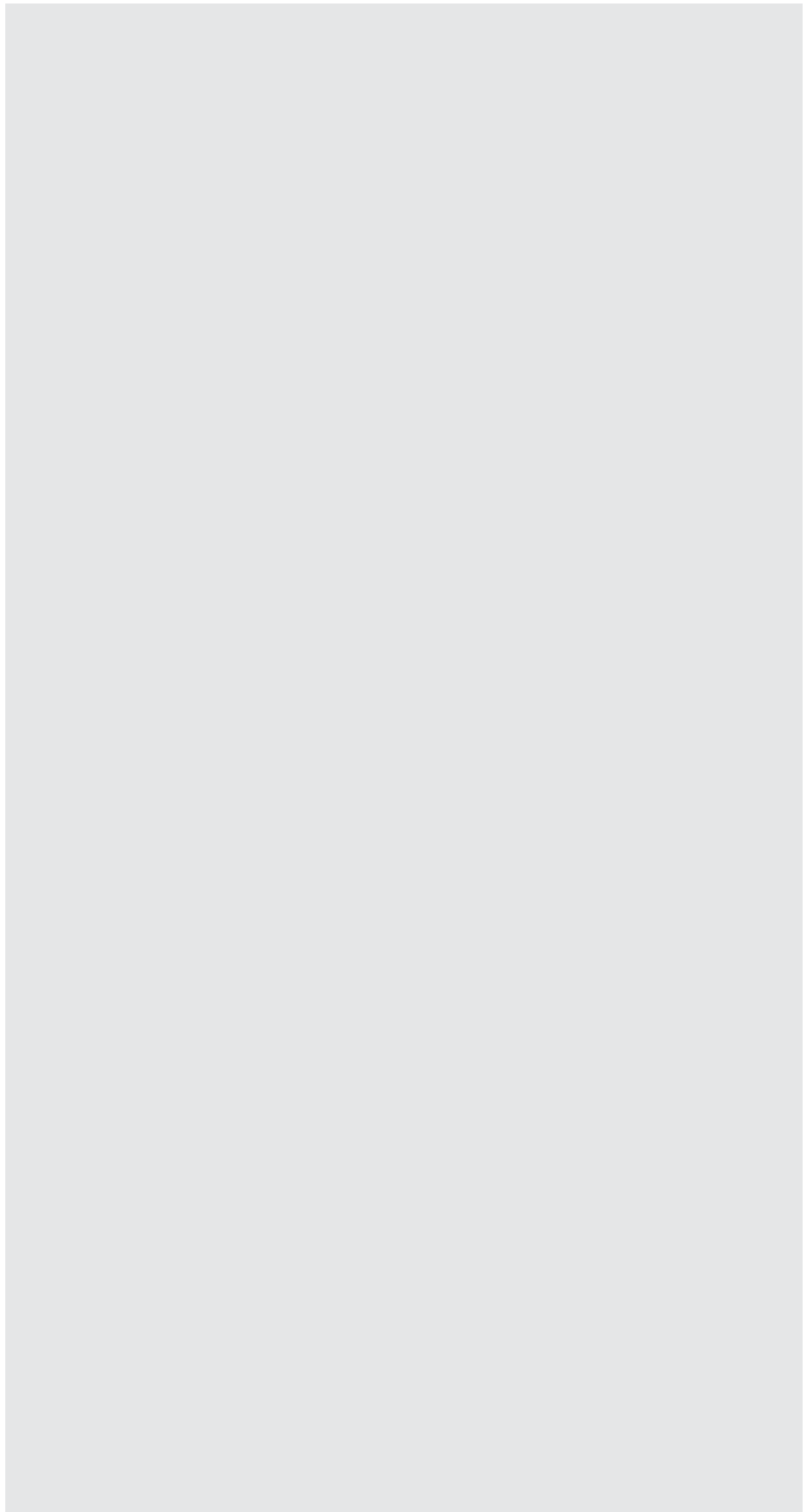


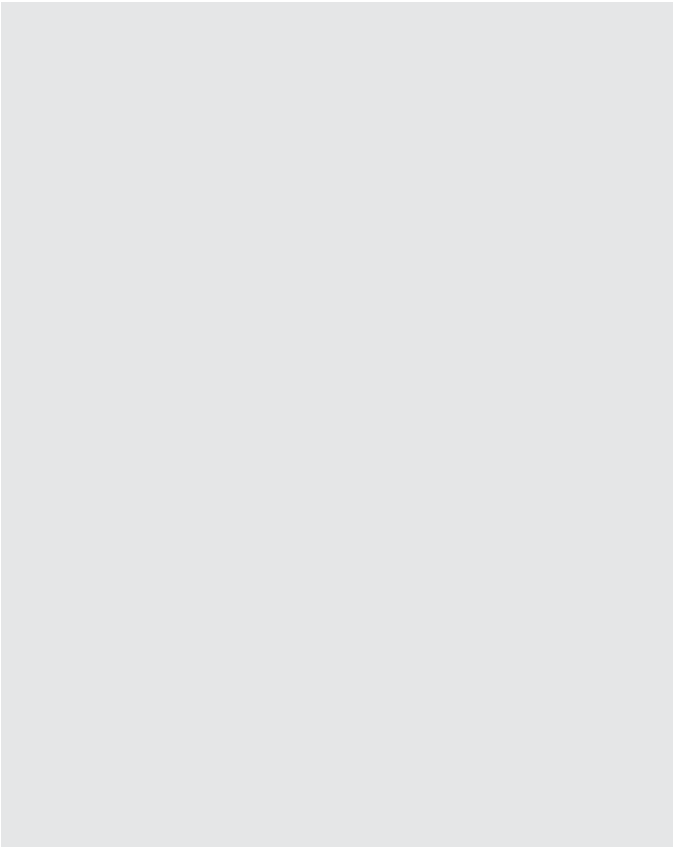
“The driving force is to help as many people as possible in any way, shape or form, especially the downtrodden.”

– Rabbi Moshe Bleich

Rabbi Moshe Bleich. “A big misconception is that this is an Orthodox Jewish congregation. If it were, we’d be in Brookline where there’s kosher food. It would be much easier! People look at me—I wear a yarmulke on my head, I have this beard, the way I dress, and how I try to be observant. They think we’re Orthodox, and my family and I are. But the people who come here are Reform, Conservative, or unaffiliated,” he says, referring to other movements within Judaism.

Chabad is an acronym of the Hebrew words for wisdom, comprehension, and knowledge. The movement was founded 250 years ago as a branch of Hasidism. Rabbi Bleich and his wife, Geni, co-direct Wellesley Weston Chabad House which they founded in 2000.





“We’re not missionaries,” he says about another misconception. “We don’t proselytize. If people come to us with religious questions, we teach them about Jewish tradition as it’s been done for thousands of years. But often what my wife and I do has nothing to do with religion. The driving force is to help as many people as possible in any way, shape or form, especially the downtrodden. Being a religious leader is a means to an end.”

Raised in Brooklyn, Rabbi Bleich was ordained in Jerusalem after studying for two years in London and the Ukraine where his brother is also a rabbi. After the fall of communism, 18-year-old Moshe Bleich founded the Jewish community of Kremenchuk, Ukraine. He returns periodically to bring books, clothing, and supplies funded by the Wellesley Weston Chabad community. Whether to lead similar missions to Cuba, Israel, and beyond; to further his studies, or simply because he loves to travel and learn about different cultures, he has visited 60 countries, to date.

“My wife is my partner in everything,” he says. “I lead the services, both of us teach here, and she does a tremendous amount behind the scenes.” Not least are her homemade meals on Fridays when Babson and Wellesley College students join the family at home in Chabad House for Shabbat dinner. For Passover this year, she cooked for 95 people who attended their two seders. Geni Bleich also teaches at New England Hebrew Academy. She and her husband have seven children, ages 2 to 17. At home, the family speaks Yiddish. “It is my children’s first language, but they also speak Hebrew and English fluently,” says Rabbi Bleich who, like his wife, speaks several other languages.

An avid sports fan, he follows all of New York’s major league teams but nonetheless has developed relationships with Jewish players on the Red Sox. He’ll proudly tell you that Wellesley Weston Chabad is one of six founding teams in a 50-team synagogue-affiliated men’s softball league and that on Sunday mornings he also enjoys playing football, basketball, or baseball with congregants and local college students. It’s a great way for people to connect, he says.

His conversations are frequently laced with humor, from the play-

ing field to sermons on the High Holidays. He even shares his favorite Jewish jokes on Wellesley Weston Chabad's website because he says no one should take themselves too seriously.

"I'm always happy to sit down with anyone of any faith," says Rabbi Bleich. "Many of my long-term relationships began when someone thought they had nothing in common with someone who dresses like I do. I reach out to say, 'You don't know who I am. Let's have a cup of coffee.' It's an important part of my life."

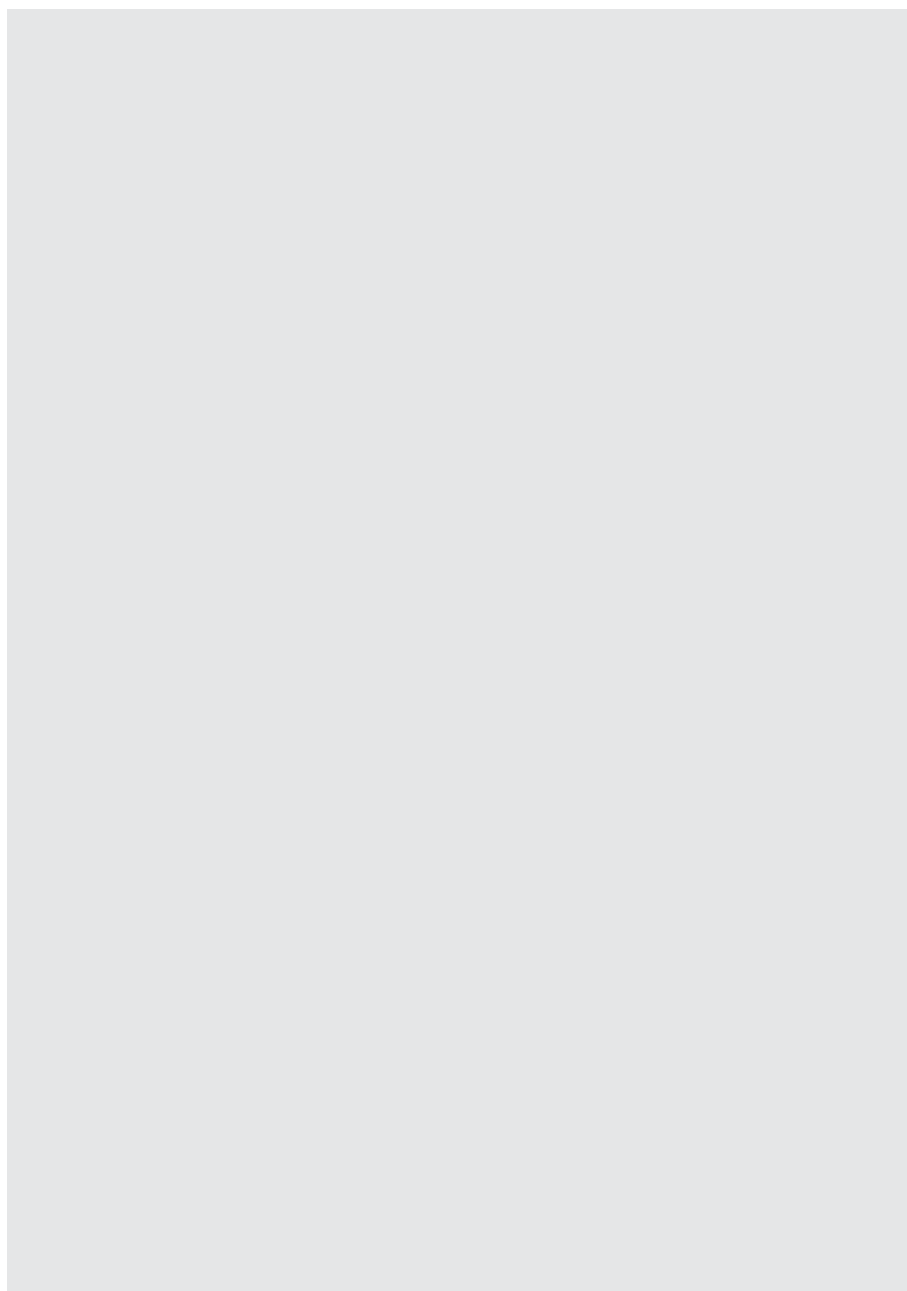
REVEREND SARA ASCHER

Unitarian Universalists of Wellesley

"The Internet is going to change how we do church," says the Reverend Sara Ascher. "You no longer have to belong to a brick and mortar house of worship to access our sermons and programs because it all gets posted online. You never know who you are affecting or how you will be affected in return."

In many ways, the uncertainty of the Internet parallels what she loves about her faith—its limitless possibilities. Reverend Ascher recently announced that after five years as senior pastor of the Unitarian Universalists of Wellesley, she is leaving the community to become interim executive director of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists. Technology will help her serve UU's roughly 400,000 members worldwide.

"This was a really hard decision," says Reverend Ascher. "But I preach that it's important to take risks, to thoughtfully jump off the cliff, and I'm at a point in my career and my personal life when if I am to continue, it's hard not to do that myself. International work is pulling me to bring liberal religion to places where freedom of belief and freedom of expression are under threat, politically and societally. Mistrust of others seems to be growing in this country and abroad. Our world needs a message of oneness and compassion."



Our Religious Leaders

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– Reverend Sara Ascher



Unitarian Universalism has no creed or dogma, says Reverend Ascher. “UU is an attempt to understand the world we live in and how we fit into that world. It draws from many religions—Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Humanism—and from the great thinkers. The biggest puzzlement people have about UU is that we acknowledge we really don’t have answers. We don’t know if there is a God, or what happens after death. We ask you to find your own answers to what is holy. That can be scary. Most people want someone to tell them what is true. That’s fine. But joining us in the not-knowing can be freeing. My job is to help them understand the experience they alone have.”

Growing up in Chelmsford, Reverend Ascher recalls being the only child who willingly attended her UU church regularly. “I loved it,” she says. “It felt like this magical thing that happened to all of us in the sanctuary for that short time on Sunday mornings.” At 12, she knew she wanted to be part of that experience forever. At a UU Youth Conference when they were 14, she met her husband, David Jarratt, a website designer and e-learning graphic artist. Since graduating from

Lesley University and Andover Newton Theological School, she has served UU congregations for 16 years.

“There are few jobs that allow you to serve people as intimately as parish care. I don’t know if the ICUU job is the right way for me to practice my faith, but I’ll be serving a wider audience around the world,” says Reverend Ascher who in August took the helm after five years as an ICUU volunteer. “I’ve posted things on UU Wellesley’s Facebook page that get shared hundreds of times. Someone in, say, Thailand might see one and ask me a question that’s fascinating, wanting to know how we deal with it here. I’d bring it to the congregation for discussion. For us in Unitarian Universalism, this is part of the adventure.

“Ministry is fundamentally about relationships,” she says. “So how do we prepare to connect with people who will never sit next to us in the pew? The Internet is making our community bigger and more diverse. It makes us be creative and realize the power of being connected to each other.” [WW](#)