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Taking Journeys of Faith

For many IWU students, college is a time to both question and deepen their spiritual beliefs.



Rev. Hope Luckie (above) strives to make Evelyn Chapel a welcoming place for all students. At left, participants convene at a weekly Chapel Hour.

Story by AMELIA BENNER '09

Photos by MARC FEATHERLY

It's a chilly Wednesday morning, and Illinois Wesleyan's Chaplain, the Rev. Hope Luckie, is standing in the doorway of Evelyn Chapel. "Come in where it's warm!" she calls to students passing by.

Inside, about 30 students and staff have taken her up on her offer. They talk quietly, awaiting the beginning of the weekly chapel service, and every cough and fidget echoes from the vaulted ceiling. Religious life at Wesleyan has changed a great deal since the University's early days, when most students belonged to the Methodist Church and attendance at chapel services was mandatory.

But empty pews don't mean that religion at Illinois Wesleyan and other college campuses is dead or dying. A recent study by the Harvard University Institute of Politics found that 70 percent of college students say that faith is "somewhat or very important" in their lives, and another 25 percent said that college had deepened their faith.

Yet this quest for the spiritual often seems to take place quietly, away from chapel services and organized meetings. In an era when college students flaunt every detail of their lives on the Internet, faith may be the only thing that seems personal and private.

"I feel like people on campus sometimes don't want to talk about religion," says Amy Cochran, a member of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. "I think a lot of people here are 'closet Christians' who don't necessarily talk about their faith."

Chaplain Luckie notes that "most of our students who say they're Christians would probably also call themselves 'spiritual.' It's the idea that you can be spiritual without being committed to any one institution or doctrine." This resistance to labels is part of a national trend, says Luckie, as "denominationalism is starting to decline, while non-denominational churches are growing."

Luckie has served on both sides of the denominational fence. Prior to her appointment as University Chaplain, she was minister of the Lexington United Methodist Church in Lexington, Mass. Before that, she served as assistant dean and dean ad interim at the interdenominational Marsh Chapel in Boston. While she enjoyed those roles, Luckie found herself drawn back "to the rhythm of academic life, to the stimulation of new ideas and to the opportunity and struggle found in issues of justice, service and reconciliation," as she wrote in her letter of application for the Wesleyan chaplaincy.

Since her arrival at IWU in July 2007 (replacing retiring Chaplain Dennis Groh '63), Luckie has worked to welcome all of Wesleyan's students. She believes that her faith calls her to "radical hospitality," offering engaged and open fellowship with the entire campus community.

It's a philosophy that started early for Luckie, a born minister who baptized her cats when she was in first grade. Growing up in the racially divided South, "my parents were very welcoming and hospitable," she says. "They taught me that it wasn't what a person looks like on the outside but who she is on the inside that matters."

Her office is in Evelyn Chapel's lower level, a space that many students have yet to explore. Luckie wants that to change and invites students, via the University's Web site, to study in the chapel or just drop by for a chat.

Portraits of icons of faith, including Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther King Jr., hang on the walls of the Chapel Fellowship Hall, and couches and armchairs are arranged as for an intimate conversation.

On a sideboard is a bubbling coffeepot and a stack of mugs. Beside them is a little pitcher of milk — an oddly touching detail in this quiet still life of hospitality. Luckie has started a tradition of afternoon tea, inviting students to take a break from their studies for conversation and refreshments.

"It's just natural," Luckie says with a warm smile. "It's what I do. I try to bring people together."

Speaking students' language

As Luckie strives to broaden the perception of Evelyn Chapel as a welcoming center of spirituality on campus, several student groups are providing more specialized outlets of faith. If one judges solely by the number of fliers posted in Memorial Center and on the quad, the University's religious landscape appears dominated by three groups: InterVarsity; Death, Resurrection, Life (DRL); and the St. Robert Bellarmine Catholic Newman Center, which serves both IWU and Illinois State University by offering weekly masses and Bible studies.

While these groups have high profiles, they don't tell the whole story of religious life at Wesleyan. Events sponsored by smaller groups such as Hillel's IWU chapter and the Muslim Student Association often attract crowds — especially, leaders say, when a free dinner is served.

At the same time that more options are being offered to students, some of the more traditionally popular religious groups have seen a decline in numbers. Cochran '09, who is coordinator of InterVarsity large-group meetings, has watched membership erode over the past three years. In decades past, dozens of InterVarsity members gathered for large-group meetings every week. Now the 18 active members meet every three weeks.

Aaron Mallehan, who serves as staff coordinator for InterVarsity at IWU, has some theories about this decline. "For Christians actively involved in high school youth groups coming into college, I'm not sure that campus ministries can offer the same high-energy, highly organized experience that they're used to," he says. "For students who aren't Christians but might want to learn, I think we need to work hard at speaking the language of today's student generation."

Mallehan believes that speaking students' language doesn't mean changing the message, but adapting existing ministries to appeal to young adults.

"I know that students care a lot about authenticity, relevance, community and experiential learning," he says. "If they smell even a hint of religiosity or judgment, they lose interest quickly. They really want to make friendships where they can discover and live out their beliefs together."

Charlie Welke agrees that a low-key approach is best in reaching students. A linebacker for the Titans who led DRL before graduating in May, Welke notes that DRL began as a small-group Bible study eight years ago and is now the largest evangelical Christian group on campus. DRL's Thursday night large-group services can attract more than 100 students, while weekly Bible studies and prayer meetings appeal to those seeking a more personal connection.

"It's very rare to find so many different beliefs and practices within Christianity in one place," Welke says. People outside the group often assume that because DRL is evangelical it must also be politically conservative. Welke insists that is not



Charlie Welke '08 (center) leads a meeting of the evangelical DRL. "It's very rare to find so many different beliefs and practices within Christianity in one place," Welke says.

the case. Indeed, for those accustomed to one particular denomination or style of church service, he says, DRL “appears a very liberal group representing various kinds of worship.”

“It’s not an overbearing, churchy feel,” Welke adds. “It’s not your parents’ faith, it’s not a specific denomination — it’s a chance for exploration.”



At Hillel’s annual Passover Seder, students are invited to learn customs that celebrate the Hebrew exodus from Egypt. During the ritualized dinner, Laura Bales ’08 (left) and Christine Anderson ’10 remove a drop of juice (substituting for wine) with their fingertips.

While evangelical groups such as DRL strive to present an aura of inclusiveness, students of non-Christian faiths are forming communities to provide a sense of shared identity on a campus where the vast majority of students come from a Christian background.

Julie Regenbogen ’10 — president of Wesleyan’s Jewish association, Hillel — says that the group’s focus extends beyond worship to encompass all facets of Jewish identity.

Regenbogen herself joined Hillel as a way to “keep up with traditions while I was away from home,” she says. “I’m not religious at all, but Hillel has made me a stronger Jew. I’m understanding and appreciating customs and traditions that I used to take for granted now that I have to seek them out for myself.”

After two years of inactivity, the Muslim Student Association (MSA) has found new leadership in Mujtaba Isani ’11, a student from Pakistan.

“I think there are about seven Muslim students on campus. We have six members, so I think we have the highest participation of any religious group,” Isani says with a laugh.

According to Isani, MSA has two goals: to provide a place for Muslim students to gather and worship, and to educate the campus about Islam. He hopes to start Friday services of recitation from the Koran.

“When you’re in a minority you want to stick to your beliefs,” Isani says. “After the things that have happened in the world, and the War on Terror, Muslims in general feel a bit insecure. It’s brought them closer to their religion instead of taking them away.”

Not all non-Christian students see their relationship to religion the same way, however. Among them is Kundan Chaudhary ’11. Although he a member of the Hindu Student Association, Chaudhary says, “I don’t want to have any nametags on me. I just call myself human.”

“Humanity and unity,” he adds, “are the real themes of Hinduism.”

Meanwhile, members of one new student group are spreading the message that those ideals of humanity and unity aren’t limited to religious tradition. Joey Schmitt ’10 founded the IWU Atheist, Agnostic and Non-Religious organization so that students could have a place to discuss their beliefs in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

“One of our main goals is to let people know that there are agnostic and atheist people on campus,” Schmitt says. “Most of our members are just looking for other people who believe what they believe. Most of them have grown up Christian, Catholic or Jewish and have since decided that’s not what they believe.”



Munib Said Abdulrehman ’01 gave a chapel program, co-sponsored by the IWU Muslim Student Association, titled “Ramadan Traditions among the Swahili of Kenya,” his homeland.

Schmitt says that the average attendance at meetings is about 20 students, but the organization's page on the social networking Web site Facebook has 53 members. They recently sold T-shirts that read "Have you hugged a heathen today?"

"Coming to college has been an opportunity for me to meet more people who believe the things I believe in," he adds. "I can just say what I believe instead of worrying about how people are going to react."

Learning and believing

This fall Chaplain Luckie founded the Multi-Faith Peer Council to encourage students to talk honestly and openly about their own beliefs and explore those of others. Abby Mohaupt, who graduated in December and now plans to attend a Presbyterian seminary, was one of the initial members of the group.

"We have students who are Buddhist, animist, Protestant Christian, Catholic and atheist," Mohaupt says. "Our conversations aren't just about the tradition, but also how each of us came to be in that tradition. Those journeys are incredible, because they're all different and all valuable."

Chair and Professor of Physics Narendra Jaggi has served on the Evelyn Chapel Advisory Committee for the past 14 years and is also advisor to the Hindu Student Association. He says that that role of the chapel committee is to support students of faith and create a community where all beliefs are respected.

"I think our students want exposure to faiths other than their own," Jaggi says, adding that the committee tries to make the chapel schedule "as diverse as possible."

But Jaggi would like to see religious discourse on the Wesleyan campus go beyond what he calls "polite acceptance" into a deeper understanding of faith.

"Our campus has a culture of inclusion," he says. "This acceptance is positive, but what is missing is a culture of interaction."

Dozens of courses across a spectrum of disciplines at Wesleyan do address religious beliefs and their impact on human history and culture, from "Introduction to Biblical Studies" to "Religion in Contemporary Japan" to "God and Science."

Jaggi says that the spirit of inquiry inherent in the liberal arts isn't necessarily incompatible with religious belief.



Following the tragic shootings at Northern Illinois University last February, special chapel services were held to offer prayer and support for the NIU community.

master's student at Yale University Divinity School.

"There are certain ways of holding faith that are in violent opposition to the liberal arts, but others that are not," he says. "It's not what you believe that creates this opposition, but how you believe."

As chair of Illinois Wesleyan's Religion Department, Professor Brian Hatcher has encountered many students who have been "taken outside their boundaries" by examining their religious beliefs in an intellectual setting. But he says that most "are able to come through."

"Our goal isn't to convert people away from faith, but to get them to think about their faith in a critical way," Hatcher says.

Josh Evans '05 majored in religion at Wesleyan and served as a leader in FOCUS, a campus Catholic fellowship. He is now a

Although he says "there's no doubt that certain American religious groups have a hostility toward academic life and the uncertainty inherent in it," he adds that he "certainly never felt a tension between being a believer and a studier."

“To me, it’s always seemed somewhat odd that people would spend their lives studying a religion in which they had no personal stake,” Evans adds. “For me, my Christian identity made my studies possible.”

Across the country, schools from the University of Wisconsin to Harvard are expanding their religion departments and reporting higher enrollment in religion courses. At Wesleyan, Hatcher says that he’s also seen “increased interest” in religion classes during the past few years.

“In the post-9-11 world, so many conflicts around the globe hinge on religion,” he says. “People want to understand where these conflicts are rooted, while they’re also turning to positions of faith for solace in a world that’s looking unstable.”

A time for discovery

No matter their beliefs, students who are active in campus religious groups agree that college has both deepened and broadened their faith.

“College is a time of discovery and inquiry, so many students take the opportunity to step away from the traditions of their parents, to find new beliefs or to take a break from religion,” Mohaupt says. “Other students find it a time of religious rebirth, when they become more deeply committed to the faith they grew up with or find a religious tradition for the first time.”

“You become so independent in college,” Welke says. “You really take ownership of your faith. You either say ‘This is something I believe in’ or ‘No, it’s not.’”

“I’ve met people here from so many walks of life,” Cochran says. “It’s made me into more of a person of the world. I’ve realized there’s not just a single way to do things.”

Across campus from Evelyn Chapel, the meditation room on the Memorial Center’s second floor is still and silent, a place of quiet reflection amid the bustle of campus life. Dust swirls in the shaft of sunlight that streams through the small, stained-glass window high above the altar, illuminating an open Bible surrounded by tangled strands of plastic rosary beads.

A rough, wooden cross, so large it scrapes the ceiling, leans against the wall. Pinned to it are dozens of colorful scraps of paper bearing the scrawled messages of Wesleyan students: prayers for loved ones, confessions of failings and appeals for guidance. These notes seem timeless, reflecting the same uncertainties that students of 10 or one hundred years ago must have felt.

As Welke puts it, “I wouldn’t say that God is absent from this campus, but I’d say you have to find God for yourself.”

And Luckie is more than willing to help students in that search.

The college years “are a time in a person’s life when they’re living on their own, learning more about life and finding out where they want to be,” she says. “It’s natural to have a crisis of faith.”

As chaplain, Luckie hopes to guide students through those crises, listening as they struggle with issues of vocation, identity and belief.

“I often say that I have no answers,” she says. “I’m not directing. I’m not leading. I understand my role as a companion on the sacred journey of helping students to discover who they are, who they want to be and how they can add value to their chosen communities.”



Members of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (above) are stirred to offer support to one of their group.