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Chapel Embraces Diversity, Social Justice Mission

Jan. 31, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Standing at the intersection of Park Street and University Avenue, Evelyn Chapel is a relatively hidden gem of Illinois Wesleyan University. It is home to two offices actively contributing to IWU's commitment to diversity and social justice -- the Office of the University Chaplain and the Student Volunteer and Resource Center, both headed by the Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger.

Not many students are aware of the range of services offered at Evelyn Chapel due to its religious nature. Open to everyone seven days a week, from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., the Chapel has rooms and space available not only for meditation and services for all religious traditions, but can be a place for quiet studying as well. The Chapel also hosts non-religious activities, including meetings for Residential Student Organizations (R.S.O.).

"I want to encourage students to use the Chapel; you don't have to be a spiritual or religious R.S.O. to utilize this place. I understand that this building is a beautiful symbol of one religious tradition; it is architecturally a Christian place so I understand the barriers. However, my goal is to make the Chapel a welcoming place for all students in keeping with the increasing diversity on campus," said the University Chaplain Nelson Winger. One such example is IWU's Pride Alliance, which is one of the non-religious R.S.O's that has used the Chapel as a meeting place for years. Upon the Chapel's construction in 1984 at the Consecration Service, then University Chaplain, William White noted, "Future generations may yet find other meanings here..."

Nelson Winger further explained, "In the mid-eighties this place was being designed to be a Christian ecumenical space, but even then, there was an openness and understanding that as the times change, this place would need to be re-imagined. I feel like we are living in the spirit of the Chapel in wanting to make this a multi-faith space for everyone who wants to have a spiritual home."

After becoming the University Chaplain in August 2011, in keeping with her predecessors, Nelson Winger has taken steps towards making the Chapel truly multi-faith. She has also introduced new programs encompassing diverse spiritual traditions.

program that addresses the common issues faced by the world today from a multi-faith perspective, is the "First Wednesdays" Chapel from 11 p.m. to 12 p.m. on the first Wednesday of each month. During these services, themes that are common to one or more spiritual traditions are chosen and explored by means of music, sacred texts and speakers. Topics in the past have included "Gifts of the Animals: A Native American Celebration," focusing on Native American tradition that relates to animals, and "The Green Rule," where ecological reverence and justice were explored through excerpts from various religious traditions.

The Chaplain introduced two new programs in 2012 as well.



Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger

Student Volunteer and Resource Center

The **Student Volunteer and Resource Center** is located in the lower level of Evelyn Chapel. Headed by the University Chaplain Elyse Nelson Winger, it oversees matching students' passions with local community needs and is also responsible for arranging the Alternative Fall Break and Alternative Spring Break.

Alternative Spring Break involves an intensive weeklong direct service experience, in addition to pre-break training and post-break activities. The Alternative Fall Break is a new program introduced in Fall 2012, in collaboration with Illinois Wesleyan University's Action Research Center and the West Bloomington Revitalization Project that focuses on serving the Bloomington community.

In accordance with the University's commitment to diversity, social justice, and environmental sustainability, the center facilitates campus opportunities for local and national service.

Another task undertaken by the Multifaith Ambassadors is the creation of a multi-faith calendar. Sophomore chemistry major and international student Jialu Li, who is working to create the calendar said, "My specific job is to set up a multi-faith calendar, because we have experienced that important events on campus sometimes conflict with the important non-Christian religious holidays. We want to avoid scheduling conflicts in advance, in order to provide a supportive environment for all religious and cultural celebrations." The Multifaith Ambassadors program is a leadership program designed to raise multi-faith awareness. Five students are currently enrolled in the program as ambassadors and according to Nelson Winger, the Ambassadors' focus has been on learning and getting to know each other during the Fall 2012 semester. They have also participated in programming or events such as "First Wednesdays" and "Light the Night"-- a multicultural celebration of the December holidays of Hanukkah, Christmas and Kwanzaa.



Multifaith Ambassadors, left to right, Lisa Mishra '15, Brianna Birt '15, Hannah Eby '15, Cathy Liu '13 and Jialu Li '15.

The Multifaith Ambassadors also participate in ReligioisITEA. Every Thursday, students come together for tea, coffee and cookies in the basement of Evelyn Chapel and join the Chaplain and Multifaith Ambassadors in exploring varied topics related to faith and spirituality, through group discussion.

Multifaith Ambassador Hannah Eby, sophomore music and Hispanic studies major, explained why she became a Multifaith Ambassador.

"I am interested in learning about different traditions and love having conversations about peoples' faith and why they believe what they believe. I also think it is really important right now that we have these conversations that can lead towards mutual understanding and respect between people and between traditions. Our world is so interconnected right now and we have to learn to live like that."

In 1985, Evelyn Chapel received the Interior Architecture Award from the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and a similar award for the entire building in 1987. In 1985, the building was also featured in the American Institute of Architects journal. The writer praised the architect of the Chapel, Ben Weese, and his solution to the challenge of designing an "image that expressed the Methodist architectural tradition as well as providing a strong focal point for the campus," describing the building as simple and elegant with "a strong sense of belonging."

For additional information about programs and services offered at Evelyn Chapel, contact Nelson Winger by email at chaplain@iwu.edu.

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