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MLK Teach-In Addresses Prison Reform, Political Prisoners

Jan. 22, 2013

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Monday’s activities at Illinois Wesleyan University honored the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and advocated human rights both locally and around the globe.

Illinois Wesleyan has traditionally honored Dr. King’s contributions to civil rights with a Teach-In. This year’s theme focused on prison reform and human rights. Keynote speaker John Maki, executive director of the John Howard Association of Illinois, a group advocating prison reform, said punishment and prison are not the same thing.

“Punishment and prison are used synonymously,” said Maki. “In reality, prison is just one form of punishment. We are good at incarcerating people,” adding that incarceration does not do much for rehabilitating people to re-enter society.

Maki lauded McLean County, however, as a model of political cooperation for the entire state. The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) of McLean County was created in 2009 as a response to chronic jail overcrowding, rising costs to house inmates out of the county and a lack of communication between different components of the county justice system, according to Bob Sutherland, a member of the CJCC.

Both Maki and Sutherland addressed the importance of defining what a jail is for and who should be incarcerated. Prison should hold those we as a society are afraid of, those who pose a threat or danger to society, said Maki. Low-level offenders should be diverted into the community – a strategy that is more successful and less expensive than incarceration, Maki said.

In introducing the speakers, Jim Simeone, chair of the Department of Political Science, spoke of the social justice and human rights initiatives underway at Illinois Wesleyan, and noted that King spoke about racial injustice at Illinois Wesleyan in 1966. Simeone made reference to **King’s 1966 remarks** on the “myth of time” where the civil rights leader rejected the idea that people should just be patient and the problem of racial injustice would work itself out. King’s belief was that “time is neutral, it can be used either constructively or destructively...it is necessary to help time and to realize that the time is always right to do right.” In that 1966 address, King also said that as a society “...we must rely on education to solve the problem...”

Monday’s Teach-In also included a presentation by IWU’s Peace Fellows on Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng, a civil rights activist who was imprisoned, and the case of two Russian professors – Svyatoslav Bobyshev and Yevgeny Afanasyev -- convicted of high treason after a business trip to China. The Teach-In concluded with a panel discussion among students participating in the Making Human Rights Real cluster of courses.



John Maki
John Howard Association

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