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New Multifaith Space 'Open to All'

Aug. 28, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Students, faculty and staff joined together Aug. 27 to celebrate and dedicate Illinois Wesleyan University's Multifaith Meditation Room – a space President Richard F. Wilson called “a concrete example of what it means to be diverse and inclusive.”

The space is located on the second floor of the Memorial Center in what was for decades called the Room of Remembrance. “It’s a room with a rich history,” **University Chaplain** Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger said at the dedication. She noted the room — which generations of students have used for meditation, prayer, study of religious texts, and even to get engaged — included the names of IWU students who perished in the world wars memorialized on a brass plaque, which will be reinstalled in the north entry to the Memorial Center.



Students, faculty and staff took a tour of the new Multifaith Meditation Room in the Memorial Center.

The Room of Remembrance also included a tribute to **four chaplains**, including IWU alumnus George L. Fox. The four chaplains gave their lives in the World War II sinking of the *U.S.A.T. Dorchester* so other soldiers could escape.

“A U.S. postage stamp remembers their witness with the words ‘interfaith in action,’ so the seeds for this Multifaith Meditation Room have been within it all along,” said Nelson Winger.

Nelson Winger said that although hope for a multifaith space on campus goes back decades, it was the work of Multifaith Ambassador Lisa Mishra '15 and a major gift from the Merwin Foundation that made the project possible. As a 2014 **Mellon Scholar**, Mishra conducted a historical survey of sacred space on the IWU campus. She also met with many IWU campus groups, including faith-based and secular Registered Student Organizations, and visited multifaith spaces at other colleges and universities. Representatives from many of those IWU student organizations participated in the dedication by presenting a selected text to establish a multifaith library of texts housed in the redesigned room.

The dedication ceremony also included a musical offering, *Prayer*, written especially for the occasion by music composition major David Allen Flowers '16 and performed by a 9-member ensemble of vocalists and musicians. The composition included the words “prayer,” “faith” and “peace,” sung in Hindi, Arabic, Hebrew, Latin and English, in the hope of conveying the shared principles of religions throughout the world, Flowers said.

Speaking at the dedication, Mishra said the newly redesigned space means different things to different people. “For our institution, it is a reaffirmation of our commitment to diversity,” she said. “For students, it is a place of meditation and peace. For me, this project is a culmination of years of work and a perfect ending to my time at Wesleyan.”



Students from several registered student organizations, including Linda Zhang '18 (left), presented texts to stock the multifaith library.

Several speakers noted the importance of a space of refuge. The new space “is a place to let go, to embrace, to endure the exciting and exhausting pace of college life,” said Nelson Winger. Multifaith Ambassador Nicole Chlebek '16 said she was reminded of her Episcopalian roots and the words “be still” when she thought of the space.

After Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students Karla Carney-Hall determined the Room of Remembrance could be utilized for a multifaith space, Nelson Winger — along with Mishra and other Multifaith Ambassadors — worked with Russel Francois of Francois Associates Architects, Bloomington, to develop a design for the Multifaith Meditation Room.

Centerpieces of the new design are glass window sculptures designed, constructed and installed by Professor and Director of the **Ames School of Art** Kevin Strandberg. Recalling his youth in Minnesota and the

state’s thousands of lakes, Strandberg spoke of the human fascination with flowing water.

“It is no wonder that water has been part of ritual around the world for centuries,” said Strandberg. “Consequently, architecture often contains the presence of water to create a calming atmosphere.”

Using striations of cut glass fused into sheets, Strandberg created designs that mimic the movement of flowing water. The vertical piece in the entryway refers to the cascading waters of falls and rapids, while a window piece refers to the currents and undercurrents of streams and rivers, Strandberg said. The stained glass window that previously hung in the Room of Remembrance’s south wall will be hung in Evelyn Chapel.

In his remarks at the ceremony, President Wilson noted the space is also a concrete example of the commitment the University has as an institution to help students with their religious and spiritual journeys. “We strive, of course, to help students with their intellectual journey, but I think we have an equal responsibility to help them with their spiritual journey,” Wilson said. “It seems consistent to me that we have a space [in the Memorial Center] that would evoke all of us to think about larger purposes in our lives and the importance of contemplation and reflection.”