

Wooster Advocate

“Living Religious Dimensions”



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Spring-Summer 2013

From the Chaplain



This has been a season of asking questions from many of our constituencies. As the world around us is in constant motion, as the College of Wooster develops its strategic plans for the future of the campus, as the context for our students, staff, and faculty lives changes, so do the spiritual and religious needs of our community. Together with the Ad Hoc committee on Cultivation of Humanity of the board of trustees, Interfaith Campus Ministries and I as the Campus Chaplain have been asking questions of alumni, students, and other members of our community about the religious dimension of our lives together.

The “religious dimension” of the College is located in many people all across the campus and beyond. It is in unexpected places, like a chemistry laboratory or a table in Kittredge dining hall. It can still be found in the traditional locations, a campus ministry office, the fellowship hall in Westminster Church House, or a sacred space where a set of Buddhist prayer beads hangs on the wall. Beyond geography, it is in the conversations between Interfaith scholars, in the struggle to complete a musical composition, and in the heart and hands of a work crew in West Virginia and the students who live in the Poverty Outreach house. Following the trail of our religious dimension and working hard to create spaces for it to emerge and thrive have been the ministry of these past months. In this issue of the Advocate, I invite you to listen along with us to what alumni, parents, students, faculty, and staff have told us.

Staff 2012-2013

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WVN Rake-a-Thon

Key Acronyms

OICM: Office of Interfaith Campus Ministries
CDGE: Center for Diversity and Global Engagement



Peace Workshop with Paul Chappell

*The Advocate is the bi-annual publication of the Office of Interfaith Campus Ministries for friends and alumni with an interest in the Spiritual and Religious life of the campus. To subscribe email ministries@wooster.edu or contact the Office of Alumni Relations.

To read this or other issues of the Advocate, please find the Pdf's at <http://www.wooster.edu/students/oicm/publications>

Responses from Alumni

Chaplain, Linda Morgan-Clement

In Volume 6, Issue 2, the Spring-Summer 2012 issue of the Advocate*, I invited alumni and friends of Interfaith Campus Ministries community to respond to a question that has been engaged by the Board of Trustees ad hoc committee on the cultivation of humanity. Christina Bowerman '13 and trustee Karen Lockwood '72 offered their thought provoking reflections to help get the conversation going. The request for responses also appeared in the Wooster magazine.

"The time is ripe for us to raise the question, what should the religious dimension at The College of Wooster look like in 2012? What role should religious and spiritual life play in the lives of students, staff, and faculty? How should the institution itself support the religious dimension and how should the religious dimension play out in the institutional culture? What key attitudes and approaches are essential in the creation and support of a lively spiritual dimension that can truly equip our graduates to be leaders of character and influence in an interdependent global community?"

What follows is a summary of the responses that we have received. Not surprisingly, responders and responses demonstrated the diversity of religious backgrounds among Wooster's many stakeholders. There was largely agreement in both personal memories and prescriptive suggestions that Wooster has been and should be a place where there is, as one person described it, "a pervasive presence of a value for social ethics. . . supporting questions and inquiries [with] warmth, openness, accessibility, and respect of [individual] spiritual values and journey" Most of our responders took the questions quite seriously, with most letters running over a page in length. Stories of the experiences and relationships at Wooster that were vital in shaping them as spiritual, religious, and ethical persons included music, pivotal courses and faculty, friendships, required chapel, and Westminster Presbyterian Church pastors, among others. The general tone of warmth, openness, and care for the campus and our current 'religious dimension' is a tribute to those who have intentionally and unintentionally contributed to spiritual and religious life on campus throughout the years.

With only one exception, persons articulated strong affirmation of the value of the Christian and Presbyterian heritage. They do this with a nuanced awareness of the changing religious and cultural landscape and little or no sense of returning to the past. One writer asks, "How can Wooster do justice to its rich institutional history of religious life, but also serve with distinction the diverse and largely 'unchurched' contemporary student population in an increasingly pluralistic world?" Several commented that

"Wooster could productively reaffirm its religious heritage, perhaps standing more openly for the best of its religious tradition and for the value of a reflective, spiritual life." This affirmation came from personal experiences and a value that many shared for the kind of openness and welcome that includes "genuine curiosity, acceptance of various paths, celebration of the commonality of many fundamental values among religions," which contributes to the creation of a "safe environment for people to express their religious and spiritual practice." Another person who recalls his own awakening in 1965 in a course on Religions of the World, comments, "Among the greatest impediments to religious openness is answering the question of how to be inclusive, welcoming all to share no matter what their cosmology. Our cultural history makes new beginnings almost impossible, but putting that aside, among the first steps are sharing our personal search for clarity."

In this vein, most of the respondents were also clear that it was the interplay of the academic and co-curricular that shaped their spiritual and religious lives and still has a role to play today. Their stories were specific and powerful. Deeply aware of both the college's current mission and global realities, one person writes, "The College might consider ensuring that all Wooster students graduate as theologically literate individuals with a sound understanding and appreciation of the enduring religions of the world. I think that this undertaking is especially important as Wooster strives to prepare its students to be leaders in the global community—where for many peoples, their religion is a central part of their lives and culture, but often misunderstood." Another approach to this theme was, "it seems crucial that the spiritual dimension of human experience be woven into the overall fabric of institutional life. Given that the college is first and foremost an academic institution, it is essential to begin with the classroom." All of the respondents take very seriously the role of academic study in shaping one's understanding of religion and its role and place in human society and personal development. Whether or not they were religious, all respondents addressed its impact on society. Several folks lauded the college for the continuation of the "R" requirement. "Students today need to encounter the academic study of religion—to discover for themselves through the rigor of Religious Studies courses that you don't need to park your brain at the door when exploring matters of religion."

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*This summary is comprised of 15 respondents. They represent classes from '49 – '79. Persons responding include both parents and clergy.

A Conversation among students and the Ad Hoc Committee on the Cultivation of Humanity

Assistant Chaplain, Emily Howard

In March the Ad Hoc Committee on the Cultivation of Humanity, of the Board of Trustees, met with students. The following themes emerged in the conversation.

First, students recognize that religion at Wooster pervades campus through implicit and explicit value commitments. For example, in the science classroom, a primary value will be the search for knowledge through rational inquiry – a value that for many students impacts their understanding of the ‘big questions’ religion tackles – yet the value and its impact is often unspoken. One student says, “It’s important to talk about the value commitments that we have in order for the College to be a space for learning and growth.”

Just as the classroom provides a space where questions of meaning, purpose, and ethics are explored, students also observe values displayed in institutional decisions and by faculty and staff role models, and raise concerns and sometimes distrust because of what they observe. When asked who students trust to address these concerns, and who they find to be trustworthy on campus, a student replied, “I trust [College personnel] when there’s transparency of who you are as a person.” Students watch the value commitments of each staff person; an important reminder that every community member may serve as a role model in the religious dimension of the College.

The religious dimension of Wooster also exists in providing a safe space to express individual faith. Students noted the presence of this safe space through programs at OICM that invite people of faith to share personal convictions with one another. In addition, such space

can also be found in the classroom or informally on campus. While students that actively seek opportunities value these spaces, they recognize the challenge of spreading these safe spaces to the wider campus that may not be seeking similar conversations: “We come to Wooster and realize we have various identities in different groups. I’m not just a Christian student on this campus; yes, that is a part of me. I’m not just a Christian on Sundays or just while participating in events. . . . reaching out into the broader community is tough. It’s not as easy to talk about in a general setting.” Trustees note that this process of forming identity and choosing how to express it becomes an important piece of adult life that is not limited to the college setting.

Several participants identified a social stigma associated with the practice of religion on Wooster’s campus, suggesting that the College is actually unsafe space for some individuals’ faiths. For example, a Muslim student wants to pray 5 times a day but goes back to his room, because he feels the risk of ridicule or discrimination. Faculty feel this pressure as well, as they experience an academic culture in which openly practicing religion discredits their work. Faculty and administration most often take the lead in campus climate, so the stigma within the faculty and the student body are intertwined.

Increasing safe space and decreasing social stigma were important to the committee particularly because one unique feature of religion and spiritual life in this college community is its diversity. Students identified meaningful engagement with students, faculty, and staff of diverse perspectives as a highlight of their educational experience. According to one sophomore, “[the] Interfaith Scholars [program] has been a gift to me. It’s a place where people of faith can express their convictions. We want to know what makes each other tick.” A senior student raised her perception that engagement with religious diversity is an exciting but undervalued part of college experience: “I wish I heard about religion more in conversations about diversity – diversity is not just racial and ethnic. In admissions, we get most excited about racial diversity, not about religious.”



The group returned to the issue of religious language – what words best describe this part of campus life? How do students talk about religious and spiritual matters among themselves? How do (and how should) faculty, staff, and administration talk about it? The words “faith, values, beliefs, and morals” resonated with the student group as descriptive of the religious dimension for all students. Yet, as one non-religious student noted, “I don’t think we can lose the word religion. I don’t want that support to be lost. I like the word ‘faith.’ I like ethical, too, but that’s to me a severing of the head and heart. It’s a tough task to support students who need the head and heart connection.” Another Catholic student noted, “I see things simply – my religion has impacted my faith. I can’t say religion OR faith; one inspires the other.” To these students, regardless of the language used, matters of religion and spiritual life represent the heart (the holistic nature) of the educational experience, necessarily complementing the heady academic engagement of higher education. The language used ought to make this experience as accessible and substantive for all students as possible, and reflect the educational goals and value commitments of the institution.

Finally, the group considered the question, “What does it mean to say Wooster has a soul?” Drawing together the head and heart, doctrinal and ethical, individual faith and interfaith, the trustees themselves provided



insight: “What we are teaching here isn’t just about the classroom, it is about the residence halls. Every staff person touches our students and these are meaningful relationships. We value that.” A second trustee noted in regards to the dining services assessment, “There is more to life than what is on an excel spreadsheet.” Students recognize that their education includes developing a whole self in relation to life’s biggest questions. The soul of Wooster may be found in the dynamic of our community that lives those big questions and helps one another through the process.

2012-2013

Religious Studies Courses

Religious Thought and Action
 Comparative Religious Traditions
 Intro to Biblical Studies
 American Religious Communities
 African Religions
 Hinduism
 Global Christianity
 Religion and Film
 Modern Jewish Identities
 Religious and History: Modern Middle East
 Religious and Science in American History
 Religion and the Environment
 Philosophy and the Religious Life
 Religious Thought and Action

Comparative Traditions: Middle East
 Comparative Traditions: East & West
 Intro to Biblical Studies
 American Religious Communities
 Ethics in a Social Perspective
 Buddhism
 Islam
 Judaism
 New Religions and the New Age
 Asian Religions in America
 Interfaith Dialogue
 Documentary Film and Religions
 Gender and Sexuality in Ancient Christianity

Religious Studies Faculty

Lisa Crothers
Instructor
 Jennifer Eyl
Visiting Assistant Professor
 Joan Friedman
Assistant Professor
 Mark Graham
Associate Professor
 Charles Kammer,
Chair of the Department
James F. Lincoln Professor
 Sarah Mirza
Assistant Professor
 Jeremy Rapport
Visiting Assistant Professor

The Art of Asking Questions

Christina Bowerman '13

What is your experience with religious and spiritual life on campus in your role as faculty, staff, or student?



As you think about your peers and the interfaith campus ministries mission, do you have ways we could better serve the campus community?

The following reflection on Wooster's spiritual and religious dimensions comes from a focus group of College of Wooster students, staff, and faculty. Their conversation centered around two questions: *What is your experience with religious and spiritual life on campus in your role as faculty, staff, or student?* AND *As you think about your peers and the interfaith campus ministries mission, do you have ways we could better serve the campus community?* One theme that ran throughout the conversation was a feeling that there is a lack of space to really delve into questions of religious and spiritual life. One student said, "Sometimes I feel like we look down on people who are not questioning, either because they are strong in their faith or because they are strong in their disbelief." This pressure to be doubtful and questioning in religious or spiritual beliefs is clearly part of the college community at Wooster. The focus group agreed that if an individual is perceived as strong in their faith, the individual would likely not feel comfortable engaging their questions because they might not be well received into the community that is questioning core principles of the traditions themselves.

The Worthy Questions program was a second theme that ran throughout the conversation. This program is designed for students who wish to investigate their life's passions. Worthy Questions works to assist students as they learn to integrate their personal, professional, and spiritual values by providing a model for dialogue and a community for reflection. While it incorporates spiritual and religious life, it is not based in one specific religious tradition. Students who participate in the program come from a diverse range of religious and spiritual locales. One individual said, "This is what I expected Wooster to be and it has blown away even those expectations." Worthy Questions reflects the theme that reflection involves deepening questions and integration as a central component in faith development. Just as the title would suggest, this program encourages both the mentors and questors that are participants to explore life's big questions with one another. The program encourages such exploration with the tag line: "Asking questions worthy of the person you can become". Having participated in Worthy Questions throughout my college career, I know personally that my mentor and I continually question our faiths, traditions, and backgrounds as a way to get to know one another and as a way to deal with the struggles and tribulations in life.

Beyond the programs, services, and student organization that comprise the Office of Interfaith Campus Ministries (OICM), the group also discussed the overall culture of the College of Wooster and came to the consensus that Wooster's culture includes a competitive expectation for individual productivity and business. This expectation does not often leave room for larger discussions or conversations outside the programmatic or academic encounter. Among the members of the focus group there was a shared longing for a culture with more space to encounter one another and themselves as human beings and to participate in shaping the community without the pressure to produce a product.

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Responses from Alumni Continued . . .

In the co-curricular realm, suggestions included the creation of safe space that encourages exploration and questions as well as regular reminders that we should “*strive to create a more heightened awareness on campus of the wide range and universality of religious experience. . .*” There were a range of programmatic approaches suggested to address these concerns. Some included fond reminiscences of campus-wide gatherings which helped to build a sense of community where such discourse was encouraged and nurtured. A valued colleague, reminded me that interfaith ministry can run the risk of leading to a “*Thanksgiving Service’ kind of thing which cuts out Christ altogether.*” Several people worry that there is a direct link between the not so gradual decline of the mainline churches and the work that is done in the name of interfaith. They wrestle with the concern that openness can be vacuous – one suggests, “. . . it seems that the college could enrich the growth of faith in its students through more intentional promotion of religious and ethical thought.” Other ideas included many things that we are already engaged in: interfaith dialogues, public gathering and conversations, space for silence, reflection, and the practice of spiritual disciplines from a variety of traditions.

Finally, most of the folks seemed to agree with the comment, “[efforts] to enable the spiritual dimension to thrive, must begin from the top down. Institutional leaders such as the President, the chaplain, the deans and indeed the entire faculty have a vital role to play—not only in what they say, but in what they do.” This is a reflection of Christina Bowerman’s (’13) query, “*Why aren’t there more adult role models who are open about their religious/spiritual life or lack thereof? I wish that more professors/staff and students alike were more open about their religious/spiritual life.*” Clearly from the perspective of this small sample, the spiritual dimension of campus life needs to run wide and deep – drawing from the lives, stories and resources of the diverse campus population. I am pleased to note that the persons on campus who contribute to the spiritual and religious life on campus come from a wide range of departments, beliefs (or non-belief) backgrounds, and cultures as well as places on the college’s organizational chart.



Students at Fall Feast



Students enjoying Soup & Bread

The Art of Asking Questions Continued . . .

The presence of a campus ministry helps to address this need to a small extent. One person said, “Sometimes there is a message of ‘work hard/play hard’ and there is not much room for anything else in that. So I appreciate OICM as offering additional options that are not as individually focused- but more communal.” OICM offers a different type of culture for members of the Wooster community. It offers communal activities based on long and deep conversations that are often not had other places on campus. While the programs help facilitate these conversations, the physical location of OICM allows it to be a retreat space away from the hubbub of campus life. Many of the individuals who seek it out, do so in order to participate in these conversations.

Two suggestions that the group made to Interfaith Campus Ministries as it seeks to do its part to meet the spiritual and religious needs of the campus community were:

- ◆ Reach out to the faculty population because for various reasons they are the least represented group in regards to OICM events and programs.
- ◆ Offer more retreats, suggesting again a space to “get away” or escape from the culture of Wooster’s busy campus.

In an increasingly diverse community, not only in terms of traditional categories of race, religious, socio-economic class, gender, nationality, or physical capacity, but in many other visible and invisible ways, any response to the College of Wooster’s questions about its role in cultivating the humanity of the existing community and the students whom we send into the world is a complex one. Clearly the tried and true answers and approaches will offer some wisdom, but if Wooster is to continue to take the spiritual life of the community seriously, it must look carefully at its “inherited Presbyterian” culture and be intentional about creating and holding spaces for deep reflection by diverse groups of persons; to seek in some way to offer experiential moments where the “working together” piece of our tagline is embodied in substantial ways.

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OICM Mission Statement:

The Office of Interfaith Campus Ministries fosters religious, spiritual, ethical, and moral growth for students, staff, and faculty at The College of Wooster. As a community of communities and as seekers after meaning, we wrestle individually and communally with questions of ultimacy. Interfaith Campus Ministries supports and encourages the development of character and commitment required to be agents of just and peaceful transformation in the

