

Ohio
Wesleyan
University

ON THE MATTER OF WHY THE CHAPLAINCY MATTERS

**Remarks by OWU President Rock Jones at the
Council of Independent Colleges' NetVUE Chaplaincy Conference**

Friday, March 28, 2014

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Our assignment this morning is to reflect on the question of why the chaplaincy matters to institutional mission and strategic goals. We who are gathered here represent quite a diverse set of institutions, so in some sense the answer to the question will vary by institutional history and particularity. I will address the question from the perspective of an institution with denominational origins and a church-relationship today that influences the ethos but not so much the daily operations of the university. It is, perhaps, in this type of institution that the chaplaincy matters the most to institutional mission and strategic goals, for it is in the chaplaincy that the founding vision and values may rest most securely. I offer as a case study the institution I know best, Ohio Wesleyan University.

Ohio Wesleyan was founded in 1842 by Methodists in Delaware, Ohio, with the support of the town of Delaware and Methodists in nearby communities. The people of Delaware provided funds to purchase the first building, and Methodists provided funds for subscriptions, or scholarships, for the first students. The founding charter, written by the Reverend Adam Poe, states, "the University is forever to be conducted on the most liberal principles, accessible to all religious denominations, and designed for the benefit of our citizens in general." So from its founding, Ohio Wesleyan was to be nonsectarian, offering a liberal education accessible to all students, regardless of religious conviction or affiliation, and preparing its graduates for the role of citizenship. We should note that in practice those early years included mandatory chapel as frequently as eight times a week. And the founding Methodists, while offering lofty rhetoric in the charter, infused the institution with the values of their Wesleyan heritage.

Those values persist to this day in the ethos of the university, in large part because of the presence of our chaplaincy. I cite three ways in which I see the persistence of those values.

Mission. Our charter states the intention of preparing graduates for citizenship, and our Wesleyan heritage reminds us of the importance of connecting head, heart, and mind; nurturing the intellect; feeding the soul; and serving the world. To use a term embraced by many in this room, we are deeply concerned about the whole person, both in the undergraduate years when students are on our campus, and in what we hope will be the productive and fulfilling lives of our graduates who enjoy the benefits of the education they receive at OWU. Our education aims toward a particular end, the end of an engaged and active life, a life that matters, a life that is well-lived. Nowhere is this mission more fully recognized than in the work of the chaplaincy. It is the chaplaincy, more than any other sector on campus, that bridges the curriculum and the co-curriculum, the life of the mind and the habits of the heart, the inner life of reflection and the outer life of service to the world. This happens in numerous concrete, programmatic ways, and it happens in the ethos created by each of the chaplains on our campus.

Strategy. Our strategic plan, adopted five years ago, articulates a vision for a liberal education designed to prepare moral leaders for a global society. We seek to accomplish this through the connection of theory to practice in a global context. Since the strategic plan was adopted, we have seen a four-fold increase in the number of students participating in credit-bearing programs outside of the United States. We have documented a six-fold increase in the number of students participating in programs that connect theory to practice by extending learning from the classroom to the real world through internships, travel learning, study abroad, service learning, mission trips, undergraduate research, and cross-cultural experiences. For 30 years, Ohio Wesleyan has located community service learning within the chaplaincy, and our director of service learning is present at this conference. Each spring break, students connect theory to practice with as many as a dozen mission trips, both at home and abroad, planned by the chaplaincy. We award grants to students for short-term immersion experiences that connect theory to practice, often in the developing world. We have noticed that a large number of students include service in the program they propose to undertake with the benefit of these grants. The connection of theory to practice, the understanding of a global society gained through global encounters, and the preparation for citizenship through service learning reflect our key strategic initiatives. The chaplaincy is critical to the development and advancement of this strategy. And in all of these programs, the chaplaincy infuses the development of student leadership, spiritual formation, and vocational reflection. For example, each mission team is led by a student, with a second student serving as the team's reflection leader.

Diversity. Our campus celebrates diversity in every way, and those who understand best our founding and our heritage identify diversity as a founding value. That diversity is reflected in international students from nearly 40 countries, an entering class including 27 percent of students who are students of color, a long-standing commitment to serving the LGBT community, and a plethora of faith traditions represented in our student body and served admirably by our chaplaincy. When I interview graduating seniors to gain their perspectives on their OWU experience, they invariably begin with a story of a particular faculty member and then turn immediately to a discussion of the diversity of our campus. Baccalaureate at Ohio Wesleyan is an annual celebration of the rich diversity that is woven into the tapestry of the Ohio Wesleyan student body. Tomorrow evening our team will return to campus in time for our annual Culture Fest, one of the most well attended events of the year. We will witness the richness of a diverse campus through music, dance, poetry, clothing, food, and more. Close to half of the student body will be present some time during Culture Fest, and our chaplaincy will play a key role. On a campus founded 170 years ago to be accessible to students of all religious denominations, our founding value of diversity extends to the full rainbow of human diversity today. Our chaplaincy is at the nexus of the protection, celebration, and advancement of this fundamental institutional value. Perhaps nowhere has that been more evident than in a major conference last fall, Love Across the Spectrum, "a conference designed to give voice to the lives and stories of LGBT persons and their allies from various Christian traditions engaged in the journey we all call faith."

From mission trips to Take Back the Night to Love Across the Spectrum to service learning to reflection-based wilderness treks to celebrations of deep and rich cultural diversity, the chaplaincy matters to mission and strategy on our campus. Our current statement of aims indicates that Ohio Wesleyan offers an education designed to impart knowledge, to develop and enhance certain important capabilities in students, and to place education in the context of values. In fleshing out the third objective, the statement notes that Ohio Wesleyan “recognizes that trained sensitivity to private and public value issues, grounded in a sound grasp of various cultural heritages, is important for maturation and for living a good life.” It is toward the ends of maturation and a good life that our education points, and that our chaplaincy works day in and day out.

In a sense, the chaplaincy is the conscience of the university. It holds us true to our values, it challenges us when we stray from those values, and it regularly refreshes our commitment to those values with creative programming that brings to life that which we as an institution cherish the most. In our structure, the autonomy of the chaplaincy, with the chaplain reporting directly to the president, enhances that role. In the end, the chaplaincy reflects our mission, advances our strategy, and celebrates the diversity and full humanity of our community. Along the way, it leads us toward fulfilling the aim of maturation and living a good life. To answer the original question of why the chaplaincy matters to institutional mission and strategic goals, it matters a great deal.

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