

Dialogue center bridges Islam, Christianity

By JESSICA ZIMANSKE
STAFF WRITER

Islam represents one of the fastest growing religions in the United States, and the number of undergraduate and graduate Muslim students at St. Thomas has increased to at least 95. To accommodate this trend, the university has created a Muslim-Christian Dialogue Center on campus to encourage interfaith relations and dialogue.

The center has recently opened its doors at 2093 Grand Ave., behind McNeely Hall. At the center students can get more information on Islam, attend seminars and speak with other students. The center will hold an open house Oct. 18 for students to explore the new site and the opportunities for dialogue.

Theology professors Terence Nichols and Adil Ozdemir led the development of the center in 2004. Nichols has been involved with Muslim-Christian dialogue for more than 10 years, and he said discussion has to begin with shared ideas and not differences.

"You need to begin with areas of commonality," Nichols said. "Then you can make progress."

Nichols stressed that the cen-

ter will focus on theology and not politics related to the United States and highly Muslim-populated countries.

"The point of dialogue is first of all to encourage mutual understanding which can then generate cooperative action," he said.

Nichols pointed to several documents written by popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI that explain that Muslims and Christians indeed worship the same God. In his 1985 document "Insegnamenti," John Paul wrote, "We believe in the same God, the living God, the God who created the world and brings his creatures to their perfection."

Nichols said most people do not know the facts about Islam.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding," he said. "Most people get information from the media so it is important to try to present the other side of Islam."

"There are all kinds of interesting ideas that can be explored," he said. "You come to see aspects of your own tradition that are underrepresented and that is very fruitful."

Adil Ozdemir, a theology professor who was influential in the creation of the center and whose office is in the center's house,

said he feels a program focused on interfaith dialogue is necessary on campus.

"It is widely known that there are prejudices, biases and misconceptions about Islam," he said. "People don't know about Muslims and what they believe and what their culture is."

Ozdemir currently is talking to area churches to get the word out about this new forum for dialogue. He also is working closely with the Muslim Student Association on campus to plan events and discussions that will be held at the center.

Karen Lange, dean of student life, said MSA existed years ago but disintegrated because of poor membership. At students' requests MSA was brought back in 2001 with Lange and Ozdemir as co-advisers.

Lange said she hopes that the center will bring more understanding of Islam and Muslim students on campus and that students will take advantage of the center's events and opportunities to be open about their faith.

"I wish students would ask more questions" to bring about understanding, Lange said.

Sophomore Iman Ahmed, the MSA co-president, said she feels

like the center is important to show students religious diversity in a mainly Christian setting.

"It would be great for students to know that there are Muslim students that go here and to break some of the stereotypes of Muslims," she said.

Ahmed and MSA will be working with the center to plan events and to encourage dialogue between students.

"Once you get to know someone, you don't have a wall up," she said. "You're not putting them in a category."

Ahmed said she thinks most people see Muslims as being associated with terrorism after Sept. 11, 2001.

"The image that Islam is associated with terrorism needs to be worked out," she said.

Ahmed wants to stress that the center is not intended to convert anyone to Islam or to preach at people. Its purpose is to give people the facts.

MSA also will be collaborating with the Theology Club to sponsor events and continue the interfaith dialogue.

Junior Amanda Floyd, Theology Club co-president, said the club already is planning to participate in the Muslim observance of Ramadan by break-

ing the traditional daily fast with Muslim students by eating Islamic food together after sundown. MSA members also spoke at a recent Theology Club meeting about the basics of Islam.

"As a Catholic university, we need to learn more about religions other than Christianity," Floyd said.

Students have the opportunity to take several courses through the Theology department to better understand the Muslim community. Ozdemir teaches two sections of introductory Islam course each semester that have always been full, and Nichols will be teaching a new class, Muslim-Christian dialogue, this spring.

Ozdemir said he believes the center, along with the various student organizations and classes, will be essential for interfaith relations.

"St. Thomas is leading this," he said. "This is the right place to do this and without correct understanding we will not have peace."

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Stewarding the Earth

Four speakers at the Sept. 21 symposium "Peace with Creation: Catholic Perspectives on Environmental Law" discuss legal and moral obligations to care for the Earth. Archbishop Harry Flynn also spoke at the daylong event. "We need to treat creation — human and otherwise — as gifts to be treasured," he said.

SIMI KANG/THE AQUIN



Taking the lesser-known academic road

■ Five minors provide alternative options to more popular programs.

By MEGHAN DAVY
STAFF WRITER

After settling on a major, many students worry that their education will be limited to their chosen field of study. Five St. Thomas minors — family studies, American culture and difference, geographic information systems, urban studies and the renaissance program — strive to alleviate that worry and offer an enriched learning experience compatible with several majors.

The family studies program aims to develop an understanding of the concerns that affect families and their individual members.

"We don't want to simply be an offshoot of the economic department or the psychology department, we want to be interdisciplinary," said Meg Wilkes Karkaker, director of family studies. "Students from many disciplines want to make a difference in this world, and they want to work through the family to do that."

While few students minor in these programs, those who do often appreciate the

fields because they have a personal interest in the subject matter.

Senior Chuck Harmston, who is minoring in family studies, is one of them. A psychology major, Harmston has siblings adopted out of the foster care system, and he said he plans to pursue a career in child welfare.

"Family studies gives the opportunity to do meaningful work with kids and it's interdisciplinary, so you get a good, broad experience," Harmston said.

American culture and difference, formerly American cultural studies, encompasses a broad range of interdisciplinary fields and compels students to form a critical perspective on culture.

"The courses try to look at American culture and examine texts across disciplines, and try to understand how culture is a combination of ideologies, hopes and dreams," Director Kanishka Chowdhury said.

Students in the program examine ways that elements like music, literature and film shape a national identity and define life in the United States.

"The biggest thing is to be able to critically read a text, to look into the world with a critical eye," said Todd Lawrence, former interim director of the program. "Any students who have a deeper understanding of literacy and culture are

going to have a leg up when they go out into the world."

The geographic information systems program provides its students with career-building skills through techniques used to gather and analyze data in maps.

"There is broad applicability for GIS," said geography professor Bob Werner. "It incorporates factors like satellite and air footage, and there are concentration areas such as land surveying."

Most of mapping is now computer-driven and automated, and the skills can be applied to many disciplines.

"Everything has a special context and a footprint on the planet, be it the spread of a virus or the building plans for a store," said David Kelley, geography chair. "GIS is appealing to many majors because there is more to see than a regular map."

City life and structure can be analyzed at St. Thomas through urban studies, which works closely with the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs program. Created as a response to the civil unrest of the 1960s and 70s, HECUA blends formal academic work with the real-world experience of living and working in cities.

"The city is a complex structure, a value structure," said Steven Hoffman, director of urban studies. "It is a physical structure as well, as most people across the planet

now live in cities. Urban studies examines the kinds of attitudes in these structures and is an investigation of how urban life is unique."

Students who are passionate about English and philosophy but fearful of a shortage of career opportunities related to those majors often are directed to the renaissance program. Inspired by the Michelangelo-era image of the Renaissance Man, an individual who is knowledgeable in many aspects of learning, the program offers support for liberal arts majors by giving them exposure to business concepts and practices.

"Because students can often land a better job with a background in business, one of our program's components is that its graduates can come back to St. Thomas and take business classes for free," said Ray MacKenzie, program chair. "It's part of the institution's commitment to the liberal arts."

Completion of these minors confers a well-rounded education that will benefit students in their future professions.

"As it says in the mission, 'challenge yourself, change our world,'" Wilkes Karkaker said. "I think our students truly desire to make this world a better place."

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