

End the intolerance



Renovations to campus chapel sparks discriminating dialogue, exposes saddening issues of prejudice

What started out as one Facebook post has ignited a national social media firestorm with Wichita State University as its crux.

The recent controversy — which was delayed by about five months — surrounds the removal of pews from WSU's Harvey D. Grace Memorial Chapel last spring to make the space more flexible and faith neutral.

Since then, many of the key players have played somewhat of a blame game.

In one statement, university President John Bardo said, "I don't think that change was undertaken with enough consideration of the feelings of all elements of the campus and broader community."

In actuality, Bardo gave the renovations a go-ahead March 23 to make changes to the chapel when he sent a memo to then-Student Body President Matt Conklin that read, "So long as the basic structure of the chapel is not changed, removing pews should not present a problem."

Meanwhile, former and current Student Government Association representatives have felt betrayed by the university's response to the Facebook users who are now threatening to pull out precious donor money, which seems suspect given the amount of support SGA received from people on and off campus, including religious groups, at the time of the resolution.

In a document presented to Bardo on March 17 to request for university action, former Student Body President Matt Conklin provided several letters of support from both inside and outside sources.

In one, Baptist minister Gerald Durley, a member of the International Civil Rights Walk of Fame and NAACP in Atlanta, wrote, "Please convey our concerns to the president that WSU will be mocked nationwide because of the perceived fear of the possibility of one faith being dominate. I was born in Wichita and believe our city and the university is more progressive than what I felt and heard during my visit," when he helped dedicate the Peace Pole, a new sculpture on campus, earlier in March.

It's interesting, now, that the university is

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being mocked for other disappointing reasons.

While blame can go one way or another, the recent controversy exposes a much larger issue of intolerance, and the role the media and technology plays in it.

Only behind the guise of a keyboard are people able to say things like, "Who do you think the Muslim's in this Country would back if Isis ever invades, or starts their terroristic acts against the United States of America?"

Also: "I am offended I have to see a prayer carpet in the chapel. It needs to be put away so as not to insult others when we worship. Muslims are FORCING their beliefs on us because we have to see the prayer carpet and it is highly offensive."

Most of these statements are fueled by misinformation. The source of the misinformation is "media" sites that use hearsay, gossip and click-bait as if it is the truth.

One headline read, "Muslims take over Christian chapel with university's help." Christian Today reported, "The Muslim students have also apparently taken over the university's student body." A Fox News opinion article called it a "Christian cleansing."

If readers pride themselves on patriotism, then they should be appalled by the lack of professional reporting that went into these stories, which are, in most cases, nothing more than blog posts that twisted fact into something else entirely.

A journalist's duty is to serve as a watchdog. Readers should support the news organizations that report the truth in a fair and ethical manner. The task is difficult and subjective. But what those sites did was entirely manipulative. They took advantage of the fact that many people — especially ones that scour social media sites, like Facebook, for news — believe what they want to believe, regardless of the truth.

The controversy surrounding the Grace Memorial Chapel has revealed a deep-rooted intolerance toward Muslim students on campus.

A public university should be a place of acceptance, which was the original intent of the chapel. A plaque at the entrance to the building reads that it is a space for "all creeds" and "all races."

Now, Muslim students can't even practice their faith inside the chapel without fear of retaliation or attack.

"Even my family, they fear for me," junior Misha Nazir said. "When you're in a university setting, you don't know what's going to happen ... Instead of praying on campus, I just go home to pray, because of that safety factor."

"I hope this blows over because only until that happens we will feel safe, for every faith, to go there and pray."

One Facebook user posted to the university's public page: "This country was founded on Christian - Judaeo principles. For those that can NOT live by them, I say leave. AND do NOT come back."

Another posted: "You catered to one long standing group to appease the other group, that wants to KILL us!"

SGA Vice President Khondoker Usama, who is Muslim, said he received a 47-page "hate" email.

"Something needs to be said on behalf of the institution that those messages are not OK," Student Body President Joseph Shepard said.

Many of these students have left their homes — miles and miles away — to build an education at Wichita State. Now, the community that surrounds them threatens their freedom, promised to them in our country's constitution.

As Gerald Durley pointed out in his letter of support to Matt Conklin, Wichita and Wichita State University is a progressive place to live, work and learn. If WSU is going to stand on its premise of "innovation," then this is where it starts — learning to cancel out the noise of intolerance to create a safe, engaging, welcoming space for all students.

This requires courage, but so did every big movement in America.

At a Muslim Student Association meeting Wednesday night, an audience member asked students to indicate if they feel unsafe on campus. At least five raised their hands.

— Editorial Board



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