

Looking Back, Looking Forward: Images for Devotion and Worship

On March 6, 2020, as part of a broader communication to the Westmont Community around questions of race, President Beebe announced “we are working to make changes to the prayer chapel window that will allow a richer, more full expression of our Christian faith in hopes that all members of our community will feel welcome and included.”

The window in question is the only devotional representation of Christ on the Westmont campus. It was gifted to the college in 1961 as one element of an architectural whole, a “small, New England-style chapel” given to students as a dedicated space for prayer and small-group devotional gatherings. The occasion of the gift was the untimely death of Nancy Voskuyl, a first-year Westmont student and daughter of college president, Roger Voskuyl. We are grateful to the Voskuyl family for creating this dedicated space, even as it will always, for them, be associated with the tragic loss of a beloved daughter and sister.

Between 1961 and 2020 many things have changed. While Westmont remains rooted in and committed to the worldwide evangelical tradition, our student body is much more racially and ethnically diverse and much more confessionally diverse. The interior of the chapel itself has undergone changes, and was recently renovated to provide more flexibility. All these changes have focused attention on the role of this specific image in the lives of students and in the symbolic articulation our college’s mission and witness. With the blessing of the Voskuyl family, the college will be undertaking a project during the 2020-2021 school year called “Looking back, Looking Forward: Images for Worship and Devotion.” The goal of this project is to engage the college in the discussion of and development of a new range of images better suited to enhance God-glorifying and mission-enhancing worship for a diverse evangelical college community.

“Looking Back, Looking Forward” will, we hope, allow three conversations. First, it will create space to engage the prior image, its origins, its participation in a wider history of Christian representation, and its strengths and weaknesses over time in a changing physical and social context. Second, the project will create space for a community-based discussion aimed at generating new images, images intended to support the worship of a campus significantly richer in both ethnic and religious diversity than it was in 1961. Third, through a final poster session showing the results of study and image development and via chapel presentations, these activities will help engage and equip our entire student, staff and faculty community to appreciate more richly and approach more thoughtfully issues of race and representation, and issues of images and worship—themes crucial for the college’s ability to shape students and fulfill its mission to cultivate thoughtful scholars, grateful servants and faithful leaders for global engagement with the academy, church and world.

President Beebe, Campus Pastor Scott Lisea, and Professor Telford Work and I will introduce “Looking Back/Looking Forward” in chapel at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year.

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