

THE UNIQUE EXPERIMENT

**A Centennial Sermon
By Scotty McLennan, Dean for Religious Life
Stanford Memorial Church
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One hundred years ago at the dedication of the Stanford Memorial Church, Chaplain Charles Gardner explained that “We begin today a unique experiment. No less an experiment than this. To test whether a non-sectarian Church can minister to the spiritual needs of a great University.”¹ He went on to state that this Memorial Church was built in love, not to teach a theological system, not to use a creed or book or polity, but simply to minister to the higher life of the university.

Today student Alan Dagovitz proclaimed that the Stanfords’ unique brand of faith has taken root within him during his time here, and he has seen it in his fellow students and professors. It’s a faith that combines open-minded learning with productive dialogue. As Alan explained, when he first arrived at Stanford, having been raised in a secular family, he associated religion with intolerance, and thought of religious faith as close-minded devotion to inflexible dogma. He believed that religion and education belonged in separate spheres, and it bothered him that Memorial Church was the centerpiece of campus architecture. Now he sees Memorial Church as

representing tolerance and as a place where people with disparate worldviews not only can flourish together but also can be stimulated to make a positive difference in the world. And he personally takes pride in it as a place where the extraordinary faith of the founders is alive and well at Stanford today.

With my colleagues, Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann, Senior Associate Dean for Religious Life, and the Rev. Joanne Sanders, Associate Dean for Religious Life, I'm honored to be connected with this kind of university chapel as we enter the twenty-first century. I like to think that our predecessor, Charles Gardner, as well as Leland and Jane Stanford, would be proud of the resounding success of their unique experiment. Here are a few of the activities that have taken place in the church over the last year or so: An evening of Siddha yoga and chanting with an address by a Hindu swami; an interfaith celebration of the oneness of humanity, organized by the Baha'i Association, the Latter Day Saints Student Association and the Islamic Society; ecumenical Ash Wednesday and Good Friday services; a commemoration of the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. with a sermon by the coordinator of the national Muslim Peace Fellowship; Buddhist meditation and an address by a Buddhist monk; and the Daniel Pearl Music Day, in

honor of the Jewish Wall Street Journal reporter, and Stanford alumnus, who lost his life to terrorists in Pakistan.

Chaplain Charles Gardner also made clear in 1903 that Memorial Church is “linked through her ministry and her sacraments to historic Christianity.” Jane Stanford decreed in an amendment to the founding grant that “the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper [be provided] at stated intervals in Memorial Church.”ⁱⁱ We now have Eucharist Sundays twice a month as part of University Public Worship. With a 1973 court modification of the founding grant, there are also now many denominational Christian worship services in Memorial Church, including Catholic mass, Lutheran and Episcopal services, Mormon convocation, and Eastern orthodox worship, as well as ecumenical Christian services like All-campus Praise, Taize and Compline. I hope Mrs. Stanford and the Rev. Gardner would be pleased to see, in effect, a thousand flowers blooming here today, understanding that the church has not been captured or controlled by any particular sect.

So, my colleagues and I see Memorial Church now certainly as a Christian church – as is obvious as you look around yourselves at its iconography -- but as an open Christian church, not only in the sense of Christian ecumenism, but as informed by and embracing the religions of the world. That’s not just a twenty-first century idea, though, for it was inherent

in the “unique experiment” that Charles Gardner proclaimed in 1903. One of the clergy invited to participate in the church’s dedication, Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger of Temple Emanuel in San Francisco, explained years later that “Mrs. Stanford has sat at the feet of preachers of every possible denomination and no denomination... Unitarians, trinitarians, infidels, Brahmins, Buddhists, Mohammedans, materialists, atheists, all have been heard, all were welcomed, the main condition of their welcome being that they must have something to say.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Today I wish formally to proclaim an extension of the unique experiment. It takes us beyond the so-called “fundamental principles of religion” that Charles Gardner and Jane Stanford wanted taught in Memorial Church.^{iv} Instead of just emphasizing the common denominator of religions, Memorial Church is now dedicated also to celebrating the richness and diversity of actual spiritual experience, which is expressed through the particular stories, symbols, and rituals of distinctive historical traditions. Faith may be a universal human quality, and I believe it is, in much the same way that love is a universal human quality. Yet, faith – like love -- comes in specific forms, and faith is developed through participation in unique communities. Memorial Church must be a place where different forms of faith can be experienced – not only in denominational services but also in

University Public Worship and in interfaith or multifaith experiences of various kinds.

Hopefully those expressions of faith will, in the Stanford tradition, be respectful of others who are not part of the particular tradition being celebrated. Hopefully there will always be an educational dimension, so that those expressions will, in Alan Dagovitz's words, combine open-minded learning with productive dialogue. As an aside, I've particularly enjoyed the sermon talk-backs after University Public Worship on Sunday mornings, when anyone who would like can discuss the content of the morning sermon. Memorial Church in the twenty-first century needs to be a tolerant environment where people with disparate worldviews can voice them clearly. Ideally, those perspectives should be presented with an sensitivity to our all flourishing together and to our being stimulated together to make a positive difference in the world, building both upon the strengths of our own traditions and also upon a vision of our common humanity.

Furthermore, Memorial Church needs to be that centerpiece of the Stanford community of which everyone can be proud, regardless of his or her religious background or lack thereof. It must be a great spiritual center where the non-religious can come as well for quiet meditation during the day, inspiring music in the evenings, and momentous speeches, poetry and

artistic expressions of many kinds and at many times. It must serve as the spacious and welcoming crossroads of the highest and the best at Stanford University, by whatever name. The unique experiment continues, building, in Charles Gardner's words, on the founders' belief that "man is a moral and spiritual being," and that "the human soul yearns for something beyond itself,"^v now and always.

ⁱ The Rev. D. Charles Gardner, "Afternoon Address," The Daily Palo Alto (January 25, 1903).

ⁱⁱ "The Founding Grant With Amendments, Legislation, and Court Decrees" (Stanford University, 1987), pp. 21-22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aa quoted in Gail Stockton, Stanford Memorial Church: An Appreciative Guide for the Not-so-casual Visitor (Stanford, CA, Memorial Church and Office of Public Affairs, 1980), p. 8.

^{iv} Gardner, "Afternoon Address;" See also Jane Stanford, San Francisco Chronicle, May 15, 1887 (as quoted in Orrin Leslie Elliott, Stanford University: The First Twenty-five Years (Stanford University Press, 1937), p. 137).

^v Gardner, "Afternoon Address."