

2014

What's in a Name?

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Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Marohl, Matthew J. (2014) "What's in a Name?," *Intersections*: Vol. 2014: No. 40, Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2014/iss40/10>

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What's in a Name?

During the last academic year, Boe Memorial Chapel at St. Olaf College underwent major renovation. The lower level of the chapel had previously housed the religion department, but they had moved to the newly renovated Old Main the previous year. So, we began to envision how this space might become a new hub for student activity. We would call it "The Undercroft." It would house a very large student lounge and study space. There would be rooms for small and large group meetings. There would be new and necessary "church related" spaces: a new sacristy, new offices, rehearsal space for handbells. And, there would be a prayer and meditation room.

We have a mosque, but it is in a residence hall away from the heart of daily campus activity. The chapel is always open, but it is large and public. A Quaker meeting had been held in an unused office. The meditation group had been using a classroom. It was clear that we needed a space that was specifically designed for prayer and meditation.

I met with a number of religious groups on campus, including a meditation group. Together, we discussed possible paint colors, wall hangings, furniture and furnishings. During the early meetings with this group, they called me "Matt." The use of first names is common on campus. So, it was not strange for a group of student to sound so informal and personal in their communication. In fact, I understood this to be a sign that we were working together on a common project.

However, as we continued to meet together and as we continued to become closer in our personal relationships, they started to call me "Pastor Matt." Typically, as we become more familiar with one another, we become less

formal in our address. So, a move from "Pastor Matt" to "Matt" would have been expected. But, in this case, the move to a more formal address was telling.

There is no doubt that I am a Lutheran Christian. From my black cleric shirts to my "College Pastor" name badge to my preaching and teaching, I am Christian. This identity did not change when I met with the meditation group. I did not change my language, nor did I water down my faith. But I was also deeply intentional about showing this group of students that as a Lutheran Christian college pastor, I was interested in and supportive of their faith stories. I wanted to work together. When they became aware of how much I respected them and their practice of meditation, I believe they began to more fully appreciate my role on campus as the college pastor. I became "Pastor Matt."

One month after the official opening of The Undercroft and the prayer and meditation room, the college hosted an awards event. The Meditation Group won the award for "Emerging Organization of the Year." Dressed in suits and dresses, they came directly from the event to my office to show me their award. They proudly announced, "Pastor Matt, we won!"

It was gratifying to share in their (our?) victory and my work with the meditation group is ongoing. It is our hope that all religious organizations at St. Olaf College would share in the mutual respect that we have enjoyed throughout our experiences together.

