

Bringing Together a Diverse Community



“[The Reverend Konkol] brings an old-soul wisdom and calmness, matched by an energy and a sense of urgency for meaningful engagement.”

—DAVID VAN SLYKE

ON A RECENT SUNDAY EVENING AT Hendricks Chapel, the Reverend Brian E. Konkol told a story about 5-year-old Brianna, who drowned in a sewage pit in 2006. The tragedy occurred in Guyana when Konkol, the seventh dean of Hendricks, was serving an Evangelical Lutheran parish there. Konkol told the story at the weekly Dean’s Convocation, one of the first programs he implemented at the chapel.

“Although some considered diving in to save the girl, not a single soul stepped forward,” Konkol told a rapt audience. “She was moving closer to death with each tick and each tock of the clock.” Finally, Ordock Reid—a stranger drawn to the commotion—dove in. Slowed by his dreadlocks (sacred to the minority Rastafarians in Guyana), Reid cut off his hair and jumped back into the human filth. Finally, he found the unconscious girl and pulled her out. Despite his sacrifice

and heroic efforts, the girl died.

The anecdote echoed the Gospel excerpt Konkol read earlier: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” It also underscored a guiding principle for Hendricks Chapel amid an increasingly diverse student body in a highly polarized era. “It’s a lesson about what it means to be a community together,” he told the congregation. “Sometimes it means jumping into the sewage of life to help another, even if it’s a stranger.”

During his November 7 installation, Konkol described Hendricks as “a visible and vibrant and beating heart” that is “inclusive of all for the good of all.” “We’re all in this together,” he said, sharing a list of goals that align with recommendations of the 2017 Hendricks Chapel Review Report. Broad plans include reaffirming the chapel as a crucial component of University life, expanding programs that celebrate diversity and inclusion, continuing social justice initiatives, and highlighting music and arts.

He aims to “make sure that Hendricks is extremely visible,” noting that many members of Syracuse’s diverse campus community experience religion and spirituality beyond the chapel walls. In his first semester, he participated in the Pan Am 103 remembrance service and Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration. He also lectured at Foundations, a life skills program (see page 8), and co-facilitated a discussion about fake news, among other campus speaking engagements.

Konkol has embraced the call to connect with the greater Syracuse community. He spoke at Thursday Morning Roundtable, the civic discussion program run by University College, and represented Hendricks at the local World Interfaith Harmony Assembly. He’s visited religious congregations, including the Islamic Society of Central New York.

Dean’s Convocation has proven popular, drawing up to 300 people to music and spiritual reflection from diverse perspectives. Before the weekly gathering, Konkol offers a free dinner to build community.

As evidence of the chapel’s renewed vitality, Konkol points to a 21 percent increase in fall fundraising over the previous year. More than 190 students applied for 23 spots on a winter break service trip to Puerto Rico. And the chapel’s social media engagement has increased nearly 200 percent. The dean frequently tweets upbeat messages, too.

Maxwell Dean David Van Slyke, who served on the search committee that selected Konkol, praised Konkol’s unique mix of gravitas and humor. “[He] brings an old-soul wisdom and calmness, matched by an energy and a sense of urgency for meaningful engagement,” Van Slyke said at the installation.

Konkol demonstrated those qualities in his talk about Brianna’s death. “Every day the poor and the marginalized are up to their eyes in sewage, literally and metaphorically,” he said. “Do we really care? Or do we stand on the sidelines and wait for someone else to jump in?” —Renée K. Gadoua