



Wendy Luella Perkins, Abdullah El-Asmar, Nathan Brinklow, Kate Johnson

Together, in faith

BY ANDREA GUNN

Light fills the lounge of the new Faith and Spiritual Life office. From the floor-to-ceiling windows, you can look down onto a small courtyard below, and across to the far corridor of Mitchell Hall, now abuzz with students entering engineering studios.

This is a calm spot in the midst of campus hub-bub. It's got a different vibe from its old space in the John Deutsch University Centre. *That* office had the same inclusive philosophy, to be sure, but its dark wood-panelled walls and limited space for private conversations gave the office a more formal, almost forbidding, feel.

The new Office of Faith and Spiritual Life has an airy, plant-filled lounge with adjacent kitchen, perfect for drop-ins by students and others. It also has two offices in which people can meet privately with one of the four university chaplains.

Next door is the interfaith room, used for a drop-in lunchtime singing group, Friday Muslim prayers, and other campus gatherings. It's also increasingly used by off-campus faith and community groups.

Altogether, it's a welcoming space for people of all faiths – or no faith at all – to find solace,

guidance, or simply a little quiet time.

The doors of the Queen's chaplain's office have always been open to everyone on campus, even from the early days of the university's first chaplain, "Padre" Lavery, who came to Queen's in 1947. But it was the university's second chaplain, Brian Yealland (MDiv'72), who brought the interfaith model to campus. And for his successor, it was a natural fit. A member of the Religious Society of Friends – Quakers – Kate Johnson (MDiv'06), believes that the Divine speaks to everyone in their own personal way. She shares her workspace – and workload – with three assistant chaplains, each bringing their own worldview to the office. And thanks to the support of an anonymous donor, Kate has been able to expand some of their programming, to build community while working to address issues like food insecurity and isolation.

The act of making and sharing food is a powerful way to bring people together. In addition to organizing communal dinners for stressed-out students at exam time, Wendy Luella Perkins (MTS'97), a Unitarian Universalist minister, runs two cooking programs through the school year. Cooking with Grandmas brings together members of the Queen's Women's Association and students to cook and share a meal at the QWA's Albert Street space. It became so popular that it now has a spin-off, Cooking with Kingstonians, which brings together community members and students to cook and share vegan meals at St. James Anglican Church.

"At least half of the women who volunteer with Cooking with Grandmas are Queen's alumni," says Wendy Luella. "And about half of the Cooking with Kingstonians volunteers are also alumni. A rich part of my work is that I get to be involved with volunteers – to create something *together*. On the surface, it looks like the Grandmas and the Kingstonians are helping the students, and of course they *are*, but I would say that they receive more than they give. They all say 'What a great experience. I've never met so many students from different backgrounds and different cultures and different places in the world, and studying different things.' So alumni who live here have the opportunity to stay connected with Queen's in really interesting ways.

"The idea is that the Grandmas and the Kingstonians buy the food and bring the recipes, but essentially the students – with the volunteers' help – are making the food. So, some students come and they don't know how to use a knife. So they're getting support: 'This is the safe way to use a knife.' or 'Look, you cut up this pepper, but there's a whole piece around the stem that still can be used and eaten.' In many small ways, there are skills that get shared.

"The students learn practical skills, so there's the joy of that, but they're also building their own capacity, and I can see the pride that gets experienced. 'Oh I totally learned to how to devein a pepper and get the most out of it.' There was a young woman making banana bread with the Grandmas. And at first, she said, 'Oh, I don't bake!' But there she was, stirring

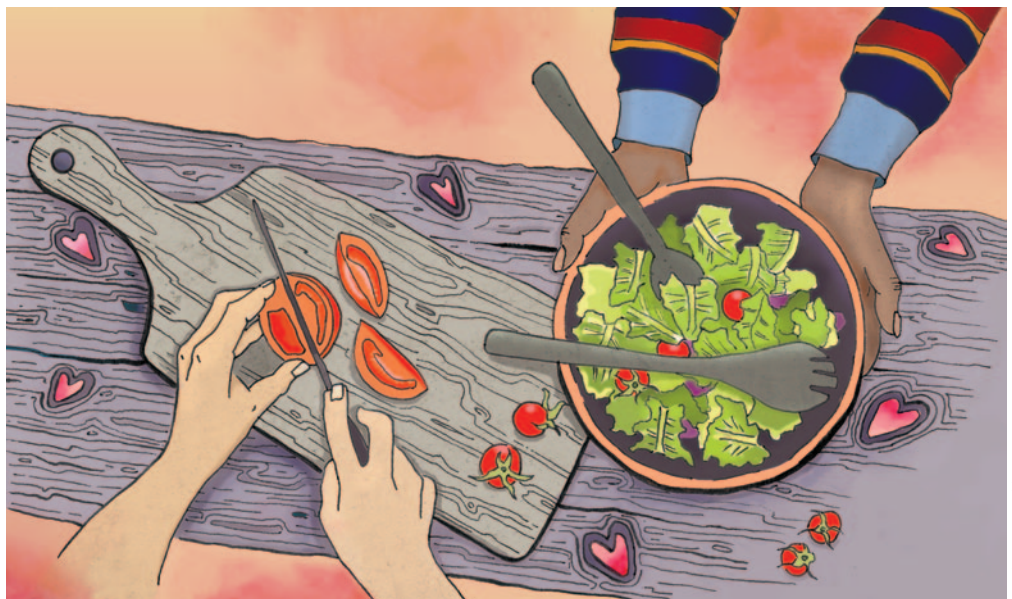
things up, learning at the side of someone who bakes a lot, and just feeling pride and joy in knowing she could do something she didn't think she could."

And after the cooking, there's the eating. And the conversation.

"We sit around the table, we have an appetizer, a main, and a dessert that we have made together, and then there's conversation at the table. Usually, I do a go-around and have people say their names. And then I might pose a question, like 'What's a sign of spring that you've noticed?' So it's like a low-investment kind of question, it's not like, 'Tell me the most important thing about your research!' It's a light question, and then we go around the table while we're eating. And then people start talking and asking questions. It's very relaxed. There's a lot of laughter.

"And as a bonus, the students get to take home the leftovers. Who doesn't love leftovers?

"But truthfully, a not insignificant portion of the students who come are struggling to make ends meet. We have a bursary available; it's five dollars to come to these events, but five bucks is a lot for many students. At the end of the month, you may not have much left for groceries. At an institution like Queen's, there's an assumption that all our students come from middle-class or wealthy families, but that's not true. There's a great diversity of students. And for many international students, their families have done everything they can to get their child to a world-class university, to pay for their housing and their tuition, and don't have a lot left over."



Two cooking programs offered through Faith and Spiritual Life create nutritious meals for students while nurturing community connections.

CHRISTINE JAMIESON, RGD

SECOND FLOOR: FAITH AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

Imam Abdullah El-Asmar has been with the Office of Faith and Spiritual Life for two years. He splits his week between this office and Kingston-area penitentiaries, as the local Muslim chaplain for Correctional Services. “They’re two very different populations,” he says, “with very different needs.” Ideally, he’d like to spend more time on campus. “I feel that the work that I do here has more of a direct impact on the students’ lives. In the prison, it’s a program: they come, they attend, they go back to their cells, and life goes on. But here, they’re living in society, they’re interacting with people, they’re learning, they’re growing, and they’ll go on to their careers. So whatever happens here in this environment really has a lot of impact on their growth, on their future. So I feel that we have a positive effect on them. Not to say that I don’t have an effect on the prisoners I see! But here, it’s more immediate, it’s more *felt*, and I think it’s more needed.”

He is, he stresses, an interfaith chaplain, like his three colleagues, and welcomes visits from all students. “But it *just so happens*,” he laughs, “that I’m Muslim, I’m an imam, so the majority – but not all – of the people I work with are also Muslim.” And he says, “Muslim students face the same issues as every other student – stress, anxiety, depression – but they may come to me because they want to get answers that come from an Islamic understanding on how to deal with these situations. So I feel I provide that kind of specialized service. It may be ‘What can I draw upon to help me through this?’ as well as practical problem-solving. So we can discuss with them how to talk to their teachers about an issue, what resources the university provides, and also, how we can help them to have conversations about accommodations for religious holidays, for instance.”

A week before I met Abdullah, the world was rocked with the news of the terrorist attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. He tells me how he and his colleagues came together for the campus community.

“The office was busy!” he says. “I made it a point to be here on campus, so I took time off from my other job to be here for students, so at our Friday service, I addressed the congregation, and so did Kate. And that same evening, we held a gathering of remembrance in the interfaith room. It’s a circle of remembrance, meditation, and invocation. A lot of people came out that night, and we talked about the events in New Zealand. People just spoke about their feelings and their fears. A lot of emotion was let out. A lot of it was in a positive, constructive way, and I think that was a nice outlet for them to come here, express themselves, and feel safe.”

Even if they couldn’t make sense of this tragedy, this was a place where they could feel vulnerable and afraid and angry, together with others feeling all the same emotions. There was also a public vigil in Kingston that attracted more than 150 people, all standing together in mourning, hope, and reconciliation.

“An attack on one faith is an attack on all faiths,” says Abdullah. “An attack on a worshipper is an attack on all worshippers. So we feel a lot of solidarity for our Christian and Jewish neighbours and we’ve seen that outpouring of support in our communities. So that gives us a lot of comfort, that this is not the general population feeling enmity against the Muslim community. It’s a small minority of extremist, radical people. It makes us feel at ease to know that we stand together against violence, against hate, against extremism, no matter which place they come from.”

“At the end of the day, we all want the same things. We are all people who are worshipping God, and we want to live our lives to the fullest, in terms of being as spiritual as we can and expressing our faith in the best way we can. And there is *no* faith out there that calls for anybody to be hurtful or violent to their neighbour. It doesn’t exist! These are radical interpretations by extremists who are deluded. And unfortunately, sometimes they are seen as being representatives of that faith.”

Nathan Brinklow (Thanyehténhas) is a part-time adviser in the Office of Faith and Spiritual Life, balancing his work here with a busy schedule as an instructor in Mohawk language and culture, both at Queen’s and on nearby Tyendinaga Territory. Like many people whose lives take a spiritual path, his journey took some detours, from his original goal to become an Anglican priest. As he describes it, “a series of nudges” led him back to his roots. A member of the Turtle Clan, he is a speaker in the longhouse, the traditional spiritual and political organization of the Haudenosaunee.

Although he’s in the office less than the others, Nathan is available to act as a frontline team member to students looking for help. He says, though, that due to the addition of other resources at Queen’s, the requests for help with resources specifically for Indigenous students has decreased somewhat. “If a student wants to talk to somebody specifically about finding cultural services or gaining cultural perspectives,” he says, “they can make contact through Indigenous Initiatives. And of course Four Directions [Indigenous Student Centre] has always been there. But this is one more place for them.”

Still, students find Nathan when – and where – they need him. “Things just happen,” he says with a smile. “Students connect with us in different places, in different ways. Abdullah may connect with students at prayer. Kate and I meet students at events; Wendy Luella connects with them through food. I connect with students in my classroom.”

Nathan also connects with the Queen's alumni community, officiating, often in collaboration with Kate, at formal events. At a recent Grant Hall Society dinner, the two debuted their hybridization of a traditional Mohawk opening. They took turns, Nathan speaking in Mohawk, Kate in English, each with the appropriate subtitles broadcast on the wall behind them.

“Shiyonkwatateweyenenta’ónhatye skáthne taetewá:tonte’, skenná:kon teyethinonhwerá:ton ne akwé:kon ne kayenthókwen tsi enyonkhí:nonte’; ne kawerá:no tsi yonkwatonryè:tha; táhnon tsi akwé:kon ne Kanenha’ké:ne oksohkhwa’shón:’a yonkwatshennonyà:tha.”

“As we are preparing to share a meal together, we acknowledge (in peace) all of the plants and animals that feed us, the humans who make this event possible, and the hope that comes with signs of spring.”

“I don’t use the word ‘prayer,’” Nathan says of this oration. “It’s tricky; we’re a secular institution and the Indigenization of events poses a challenge when the secular and the sacred aren’t as separate as they are in the non-Indigenous world. While some people, in their personal practice, think of these words as a prayer – they are praying to *someone* – my understanding has always been that this is more of an acknowledgement and a way to say ‘thank you.’ We say ‘thank you’ to the people who made our dinner, we’re going to thank the people who came to the event. But it also extends out into the rest of the world, so we also send thanks and greetings to all these other things on the earth and all the things we’re working on together.

“For a lot of people, it will be their very first time to hear Mohawk, and to see, in context, this piece of our tradition at this big event. It’s not just stuck in the Indigenous language classroom. It’s in this real part of the university, not just in the small isolated clusters.”

As the full-time chaplain of Queen's University, Kate Johnson works a 40-hour week, and then some. During office hours, she sees a steady flow of visitors, some just dropping by,

others who make appointments for individual counselling. While the resources of the office are open to Queen's faculty and staff, most of Kate's time is spent with students. “I get many referrals from professors,” she says, “who see students struggling in one way or another.” For students nervous about talking to a chaplain, she is reassuring. “About 75 percent of my work with them is active listening. I tell them, ‘You get to direct the conversation.’”

Outside the office, Kate is active with fellow members of the Kingston Interfaith Council. She sees a lot of benefit in growing the town-gown collaborations among members of the faith community and other community support organizations. For instance, she initiated a partnership

with the local chapter of Bereaved Families of Ontario, which now uses the interfaith room for its meetings.

In addition to finding areas in which they can share resources, members of the Kingston interfaith community often find themselves coming together in solidarity in times of tragedy. As this story was in development, there was another terrorist attack, this time on Christian worshippers in a church in Sri Lanka. On behalf

of the local interfaith community, Kate Johnson posted this open letter on Facebook:

“We write to once again decry the senseless sectarian violence that mars our world. We are deeply saddened to think of the deaths of so many Sri Lankan Christians, other Sri Lankan citizens, and guests to Sri Lanka as they went about their lives. We are deeply moved by the irony of so many killed as they gather to celebrate the festival of hope and renewal that is the Christian festival of Easter.

We write also to testify to our sense that this violence is so unnecessary. The best ethical systems allow human beings to control themselves without the need to control others. Where religious rhetoric is used to justify control of others, we see politics co-opting faith. As a diverse group of people of faith we affirm our obligation to live without violence against, or control of, others.

We will gather Wednesday April 24 in Kingston's City Park to tie ribbons of mourning and hope onto the Peace Tree. No matter how often we need to gather, we will not retreat from our efforts to increase cooperation across humankind.” ■