If you have been down to the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life this semester, you will have noticed that the space has been transformed from a carpeted "pit" area with benches around the perimeter, to a flat, more enclosed space with a beautiful tiled floor and a cozy fireplace. Renovations to the CRSL space began over January and we hope the process will be finished soon with the arrival of rugs and furniture. To gain some insight into the physical changes, I asked Chaplain Lucy Forster-Smith some questions about the remodeling of the CRSL:

How long has remodeling the space in the lower level of the Chapel been on the minds of the CRSL staff?

The idea for remodeling the space has been thought about for at least ten years. The major concern was the lack of accessibility. The "conversation pit" style of space was very popular at the time the building was built in 1969, and it served the community well over the years. But it also had its limits. In 2004 the Chaplaincy Visioning Process took place, with outside consultants and campus student, faculty and staff leaders considering the future of the chaplaincy. Following the three day Chaplaincy Visioning Process, a team of students, faculty and staff met over the next year to consider how changes could be made to live out the program directions of chaplaincy at Macalester. Another team met to think about the program of the chaplaincy. Out of both of these team efforts, the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life was born and desire was expressed to "mark" such a center in the lower level of the Chapel. Vice President Laurie Hamre and I have met with Mark Dickinson from the Physical Plant and others to consider what might be possible, but it was only when a donation came from a family very supportive of the Chapel and chaplaincy program that we could put our dreams into bricks, mortar and bookshelves.

What were the main goals of the remodeling? Is there a specific vision for the CRSL reflected in the physical changes?

(Continued on Page 4)
Let all who are hungry come and eat. Passover, or Pesach, as it is in Hebrew, is the Feast of Freedom during which Jews celebrate the Exodus from Egypt. The dichotomy between freedom and bondage shows up multiple times throughout the holiday. We eat matzah, the bread of affliction (because it’s both unleavened and the crumbs left everywhere are a pain to clean up) while at the same time celebrating the Hallel service, the most joyful of all Jewish prayer services. We eat maror, or bitter herbs (most often horseradish) in the same meal in which we drink four cups of wine that symbolize our lasting joy and freedom. Just as we purge our homes of any chametz, or leavened products and most legumes or anything that might have touched chametz in the past, we also celebrate at a seder (or two if you’re lucky) the most festive and delicious meal of the entire year.

Every year, Macalester Jewish Organization hosts a seder on the first or second night of Passover. We eat, we drink, we talk, we celebrate, and we make merry—but what goes on behind all that? What is the point? Why in the world would one bother eating bits of parsley dipped in salt water? We are not rabbits, after all. (But even if we were, at least we would be free rabbits.)

Seder literally means order, because the meal is actually an incredibly complex and some-
what stylized series of rituals that have developed over several thousands of years. Some of them are simple: we bless the wine, we bless the matzah, we eat a ritual meal. Some are more confusing; why do we eat bitter herbs, the maror? Why do we have four pieces of matzah at table, and why do we break one of them in half? What do the little bowls of salt water symbolize, and not that anyone is complaining, but why in the world do we have to drink four cups of wine?

There isn’t enough space here to answer all the questions, or the other questions they inevitably raise. For that, you will have to come to the MJO seder this year on April 8th. There are a few symbols, however, that warrant explaining now. These all appear on the seder plate which sits in the middle of the seder table.

Matzah, the dry, crackerly bread, is the bread of affliction. Legend has it that our ancestors left Egypt in such a hurry that they had no time to let the bread rise. So it cooked on their backs in the hot desert sun. Maror, or bitter herbs, represent the bitterness of our lives under slavery. Similarly, the salt-water represents the many tears that we shed while pining for freedom. Karpas, parsley, and beitzah, the egg, are both symbols of spring and renewal. As a green vegetable, parsley reminds us that spring is here; and the egg is round, just like the life cycle that we continually experience. Charoset is a sweet paste made from apples, nuts and wine (or figs, dates, raisins, and honey if your family is Sephardic). It too is symbolic of slavery: the thick paste reminds us of the mortar we spread upon bricks while enslaved in Egypt. Lastly, the z’roa, or shankbone, sits on the plate as a reminder of the sacrifice that took place in the Temple every year in thanksgiving to God for the freedom that we are now able to enjoy.

Freedom is not something that exists independently of the Jewish people, or something that exists only to a particular time and place. Passover reminds us that it is always happening, and that we are always experiencing it anew.

Macalester students disregard God. They label themselves atheists or agnostics. Religion itself is anachronistic for our time, out of context in this place. Right?

Wrong. If you look for religious life at Macalester, you will certainly find it. Perhaps the misconception that Macalester is a campus devoid of religion comes from its endeavors to be a place of multiple religions, thereby not endorsing a single faith above others in spite of its affiliation with the Presbyterian Church. Macalester seeks to promote multiculturalism, and I believe this extends to religion in all its diversity. Simply because calls to worship are not plastered on campus walls and sidewalks or shouted into the ears of passers-by, it does not mean that religious life at Macalester is extinct or obsolete.

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One of my favorite stories in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of Nehemiah. As a high ranking official, Nehemiah was living the ‘good life’ in Persia away from a demolished Jerusalem. The king found reason to send Nehemiah to the holy city, and when he got there he was outraged at both the sight of Jerusalem lying in ruins and the people coping after living for years in this state of destruction. Nehemiah shook up the community, shouting, “You see the trouble we are in?” The people were moved by his passion and responded, “Let us start building!” and “so they committed themselves to the common good” (2:17-18). What is it that first compels us to serve the common good? For many people it is hard to put their finger on it. We can say it is our faith or our belief in a common humanity, but the feeling of responsibility towards the whole is often fueled by a complex mixture of past experiences, cultural expectations as well as our religious and moral values. The Lilly Project at Macalester wants us to ask “why?” Why when you have a cushy job in Persia would you want to devote your life to transforming a city that you only knew through the glimmer of your grandparents’ eyes?

Doing a compassionate act is worthy, but understanding our motivations allows us to more seamlessly incorporate our values into the totality of our actions. We can help rebuild someone else’s city, as many of the students have done this Spring Break in New Orleans and Arkansas. But if we are not clear about our intentions there is little hope in creating relationships with the inhabitants. The ability to share with a community our personal stake in rebuilding can create solidarity which moves the emphasis away from the deed and towards the community that is being built in the process.

For the last three years the Lilly Project has been lessening the gap between the work people do in the community and the big questions that arise while doing this work. Through Lives of Commitment, students dedicate their first year of college to asking what it means to live a life of commitment in the context of working with immigrants and refugees. Yes, students serve because it feels good and right, but they also explore the foundations of their own personal ethics and/or religious traditions to discover a stronger root for their action. Moreover they take note of how their interactions with the world can also dramatically change or deepen these beliefs. The Lilly Project bridges the Civic Engagement Center and the Center for Religious and Spiritual Life, allowing action and reflection to be a continual and circular affair.

Religion has an important part to play in public life. If it was merely a private endeavor, Jerusalem would not have been rebuilt. If religion was a private matter, hundreds of people would go without food and shelter in South Minneapolis every night. Religion is a public matter that demands both private contemplation and public debate about its role and limit in creating democracy.

Above: Students from Lives of Commitment tackle poverty issues around St. Paul.
The main goals were to make the space into a student destination, make it welcoming, make it accessible, and set it apart from the office space so it would feel somewhat private.

We also wanted the space to have the flexibility to be a lounge for students, a meeting space for smaller groups, an area for small receptions, and a place where the famous CRSL lunch and dinner conversation groups can meet. We also wanted to have bookshelves and a little fireplace so it felt more cozy.

The CRSL vision is most represented in trying to open the space for radical hospitality, for a place that feels welcoming, for the availability of books/texts from religious/spiritual traditions. We thought the fireplace or hearth also aligned with living out our values shaped by Sharon Parks in her book, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: “Hearth places have the power to draw and hold us, for they are places of equilibrium offering an exquisite balance of stability and motion. Hearth places are where we are warmed in both body and soul, are made comfortable, and tend to linger.” (p. 154) I think this is very much a part of the vision of the CRSL.

What have been some highlights and challenges of this process?

The highlights are the outcomes: a beautiful, calming, lovely space that captures the “Ooo–Ahh” phenomenon. Another highlight has been working with colleagues across the campus who have given time and care to this space. KP’s amazing eye for detail; Mike Hall’s remarkable vision and capacity to take vague notions and make it concrete reality; Laurie Hamre’s amazing ideas—the fireplace, bookshelves, raised floor; Pattie’s patience, attention to funding concerns, and contacting furniture contractors; Mark Dickinson’s vision for a space that can hold the chaplaincy’s program. The challenges were the timing. We would have liked to have more student involvement along the way, but because the contractors were ready to go and the space is used so much during the academic year, January made sense.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I must say that having a space where students can linger, feel connected, know they are welcome and truly feel the warm embrace of our spiritual agency at Macalester has been a calling in my own life. I want to thank the family that made this possible by their amazing generosity. It is a gift to those of us who work here and to all who enter the space.