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New chaplain has connections to Wagner College

By MAURA GRUNLUND

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — Wagner College is stepping up its chaplaincy with a new, full-time religious leader and a dedicated location for its Center for Spirituality in Grymes Hill.

The Rev. James Smith, a Lutheran pastor who graduated from the college in 2005 as part of the Upsala scholarship program for ministerial candidates, assumed the post of lead chaplain last week. His appointment was announced by Dr. Richard Guarasci, the college president, and the Rev. Dr. Robert Rimbo, trustee of the college and bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Metropolitan New York Synod.

“Our call to Pastor Smith indicates our commitment to Wagner’s historic heritage as a Lutheran institution and our recognition of the special relationship we have with the ELCA as well as our desire to serve those of all faiths, including those who would identify their spirituality in humanistic rather than theistic terms,” Dr. Guarasci said.

“With Pastor Smith now on board, Wagner College is prepared to take the next step in developing its capacity to nurture the growth of the whole student — mind, body and faith — into a more complete picture of the educated global citizen.”

The Rev. Smith served his senior internship at Eger Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center, Egbertville, before enrolling at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, from which he earned his master of divinity degree in 2010.

The Rev. Smith, who lives on Grymes Hill within walking distance of the campus, succeeds the Rev. Richard Michael, who served both as the college chaplain from 2007 until early this summer and pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Stapleton. Trinity is known as the college church for its long association with Wagner.

NEW CENTER

The cottage which had formerly served as the chaplain’s on-campus residence is being refurbished as the Center for Spirituality, scheduled to open during the spring 2012 semester. The Rev. Smith and the associate chaplains who serve Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist communities will have their own facility rather than sharing space, as they have done with the External Programs Office.

The center will have offices upstairs, with informal meeting space in the enclosed porch area downstairs. The combined living room/dining room on the main floor will serve as a chapel for all of the faith communities served by the college.

The cottage has special significance to many Wagner graduates, since it was the home of the Rev. Lyle Guttu, who served as the college’s chaplain from 1972 until he died after being struck by a car a few days before Christmas 2007.

‘PREACHER’S KID’

The Rev. Smith grew up in Wyandanch, L.I., the son of the Rev. Mack Smith, pastor for 30 years of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in that community.

“I’d known about Wagner since I was a kid,” the pastor said. “Grymes Hill was always the first stop on my father’s college visitation tour for young people from our parish and our community.”

The Rev. Smith initially earned a community college associate’s degree in radio and television production before enrolling as a pre-ministerial student at Wagner.

“No preacher’s kid wants to acknowledge ‘the call’ right away, but it’s always there,” the Rev. Smith said.

“I finally stopped fighting it.”

The Rev. Smith also was pointed toward Grymes Hill by a member of his home congregation, the Rev. John E. Mack Jr., a 1996 Wagner alumnus and a graduate of the Upsala program. The Rev. Smith’s sister, Juli Smith, is a Wagner alumna, and his activities during his student years at Wagner included singing in the choir, managing the men’s basketball team, and service as a resident assistant in Harbor View Hall.

“It feels good to be back,” the Rev. Smith said.