

Muslim chaplain-candidate leads service honoring veterans and Ft. Hood victims

With the recent tragedy of the Ford Hood shootings still fresh on the mind of the nation, Claremont School of Theology's annual Veterans Day service took on additional significance this year.

Thirty-eight people attended a Muslim-themed Veterans Day chapel service on Wednesday that featured a corporate prayer, Qu'ran reading, remembrance of veterans and fallen Ft. Hood soldiers and a sermon by Muslim Navy Chaplain candidate and Claremont School of Theology student Asif Balbale.

Mr. Balbale's sermon focused on the need to honor soldiers who have sacrificed themselves for the good of the country and challenged the attendees to reflect on their own dedication and gratitude.

"I was glad to have this opportunity," he said. "It's an honor to be with people of different faith groups and to be with my classmates."

The news of the Ft. Hood shootings came as a surprise to Mr. Balbale. Yet the Navy chaplain believes the media has been unbalanced in its reports of the horrific event.

"It was a shock," Mr. Balbale said. "I heard his name and I was hoping it was not true. But immediately, I started thinking about the people who lost their life and the media has focused more on the guy [Hasan] and his faith. I think the media should have focused on the whole and beyond that, especially the people that suffered."

The selection of Mr. Balbale as this year's speaker was not based on the current tragedy. The MA student had already been picked earlier in the fall for the Veteran's Day



COURIER photo/Landus Rigsby
Claremont School of Theology student and U.S. Navy Chaplain candidate Asif Balbale led a special Veterans Day chapel service on Wednesday morning to honor veterans and victims of the recent Fort Hood shootings.

service due primarily to his military experience.

The weekly chapel services are led by students in order for students to gain preaching experience before graduating from the school. Due to the various religious backgrounds of the Claremont School of Theology student body, the services are also adjusted weekly to fit the religious traditions of the speaker.

"The majority of the students we have are Christian but we have students from other religions as well," said Kathleen Black, vice dean for Academic Programs. "For every student that preaches, we adjust the service for them. In Asif's case, we designed the service the way he

wanted it. So he read from the Qu'ran and we turned the chapel around so we weren't facing the Christian cross."

As an ecumenical and inter-religious graduate school, the Claremont School of Theology nurtures a variety of religions based on the diverse beliefs of its students. Participants in the chapel services are encouraged to "acknowledge the differences in theology and practice while respecting the religious traditions of others."

Third-year student Cheryl Reagan was interested to see how Mr. Balbale would be received on Wednesday in light of the recent shootings and because her peer is a Muslim. She was pleased with the event and said more people would have attended had classes not been in session.

"Especially because of Ft. Hood, the face of the shooter being shown and both the shooter and Asif being Muslim, I wanted to make sure Asif was received graciously and respectfully," Ms. Reagan said. "I really admire him for his bravery and enjoyed the service."

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, Muslims make up .3 percent of the total active duty military. The August 2009 data also reported a total of 3557 Muslims on active duty personnel in the U.S. military.

Yet Mr. Balbale is not concerned about religious beliefs when discussing military men and women. As a chaplain candidate, he hopes to one day be an encouragement to people who serve in the military.

"When you're in the military, you're going to think we can depend on each other whether you're a believer and a non-believer," he said. "We need to take care of all the troops, regardless of faith or non-faith."

—Landus Rigsby