

# RICHARD L. EVANS CHAIR OF RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

*Interview with Fred E. Woods* Interview by Erin Tanner Mecklenburg

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**MECKLENBURG:** What in your life has best prepared you for your assignment as an Evans professor?

**WOODS:** My eclectic background is an asset because this is a chair of religious understanding.

I come from a mixed Christian background. My father was educated at a Seventh-day Adventist academy. My mother was a member of the Church of Christ for half a century, and I was baptized in that church when I was fourteen. As a teenager, my sister joined a Baptist youth group. I would say my family has a very strong Christian background, but different strands of Christianity. I became a Latter-day Saint when I was just turning twenty in southern California. Growing up in the Los Angeles region with such diverse religiosity, culture, and ethnicity provided valuable experience.

I have an interest in many things in both ancient scripture and LDS Church history. I don't know if I'm the master of any particular

discipline, but I have multiple research projects. I received a PhD in Middle East Studies with an emphasis in the Hebrew Bible, but I've also been deeply involved in Mormon maritime migration studies and always interested in improving the art of teaching. In my current assignment, I'm dealing with people of different faiths, varied interests, and a host of nationalities, so it's been helpful to have a fairly broad background.

**MECKLENBURG:** What projects and publications have you been involved with as part of the Evans Chair?

**WOODS:** Primarily I've been working with telling the interfaith story of a leprosy settlement on the Hawaiian island of Molokai known as Kalaupapa. I've been interviewing patients there for several years. In my historical research I found a wonderful story of a Hawaiian Mormon convert by the name of Jonathan Napela. He was probably the most influential island Latter-day Saint.

Because his beautiful wife contracted leprosy and went to the settlement on Molokai, he decided to stay with her and ended up getting leprosy himself. He died about two weeks before his wife. While in Kalaupapa, he was the ecclesiastical leader for the Saints there and became best friends with the leader of the Catholic faith, Father Damien. Their relationship seems to have fostered a wonderful interfaith collaboration that continues to the present. It was a perfect way to capture St. Augustine's maxim, "In the essentials, unity; in the non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity."

We're doing an hour-long documentary that will air next year, and it's been a wonderful way to use a historical model for what can and should be done in building bridges, looking for the common ground instead of battleground with people of other faiths. I've been teaching others about Kalaupapa at a number of universities, and one of the things I've targeted is using the Newman



**Fred E. Woods, Richard L. Evans Chair professor, interviewed by Erin Tanner Mecklenburg.**  
 Courtesy of Richard B. Crookston.

Centers, which are the Catholic Church’s equivalent of our Latter-day Saint institutes of religion.

The best thing about my assignment has been the great people I’ve met. I’ve been truly amazed how many fabulous people there are who are not Latter-day Saints. I have discovered that there truly are many wonderful people “who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it” (D&C 123:12). They have put me to shame with their kindness, their unselfish acts, their humility, and their authenticity. It’s been a very humbling experience, and I feel that I have friends in a number of places, both in and out of the U.S. I love my assignment. I’d love to keep it a few more decades, but I’m certain there are many other people who will serve in this assignment and do great things with their talents and unique experience.

**MECKLENBURG:** What are some of the conferences you’ve participated in, and which universities have you lectured at during your time as the Evans Chair?

**WOODS:** I really enjoyed a conference in 2005 at Seoul, where my father had served in the Korean War. It was the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Joseph Smith’s birth, so my topic was “The Thoughts and Teachings of Joseph Smith.” It was a great experience to lecture to a large group of people of different faiths. One of the questions they asked was, “Are Mormons really Christians?” This is something I have heard again and again from various people over several decades. That question was later used for another speaking opportunity at Derby University in the United Kingdom the following year. I posed the question, then spoke on the topic and ended the lecture with a five-minute clip of the

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BYU choir and orchestra performing “Come, Thou Font of Every Blessing.” After showing this piece, I again asked the question, “Are Mormons really Christians, or are Christians really Mormons?”

I’ve also been involved with the Globalization for Common Good organization. My first contact with them was in Honolulu, and I went to Australia to attend one of their annual conferences. I’m also involved with a BYU conference in 2009 which deals with the role of religion in establishing global peace.

I have been lecturing at a number of academic institutions. Several of the international lectures have been at universities in the British Isles. I’ve also lectured to students of MIT and also Georgetown. A key lecture was in Honolulu at Chaminade University because the president very graciously wrote a very strong letter that opened up a number of doors with other Catholic universities. I have lectured at a number of other institutions, including George Washington University and UC–Berkeley. There were great people I met on each

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campus. For example, at Georgetown, Father Timothy Godfrey was just so delightful, such a great host. I have also been to Texas Tech and the University of Texas. The past few months I taught students at Bowling Green State University in Ohio and the University of Missouri at St. Louis, where I was a visiting professor a few years ago. In addition, I gave a presentation to an interfaith audience at Ohio State University, where I have a son who is a graduate student. I then spent several weeks lecturing in Ukraine at academic conferences and teaching at different universities. My plan for the fall of 2008 includes lectures at Catholic University and New York State University. I also recently presented at Durham University, as well as the University of Iceland. This latter university has extended an invitation to teach an intensive course on Mormonism in 2009. That will be a great opportunity, and it just seems like one thing leads to another in networking, so I've been very fortunate. My own colleagues here have been super about helping with different leads and contacts.

**MECKLENBURG:** It sounds like a lot of the topics you've presented have been interfaith. Do you feel like these visits have built bridges with other faiths



**Fred Woods meets with Father David E. Farnum November 8, 2007, at the University Catholic Center in Austin, Texas.** Courtesy of Mark J. Sanderson.

and maybe dispelled the thoughts that Mormons aren't Christians?

**WOODS:** I do, but I don't think it's because of me. There's a spirit in Mormonism that zapped me and touches others who really listen. As a young man searching for truth, the last thing I thought I would ever be was a Mormon, but listening to the message of a restoration of the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ has changed my life.

The documentary titled *The Soul of Kalaupapa* is going to be absolutely tremendous because there's something special about experiencing the power of this unique, loving community. The interviews with these patients from Kalaupapa have had a transforming impact on my life. The disease eradicated any

type of boundary between culture and religion, and these people are very wonderful human beings. The documentary will be aired on BYU Television, and we're hoping to launch it on PBS as well. I have also been invited to present this film next year in Melbourne, Australia, at the World Parliament of Religions. There's so much to do as far as building bridges with other faiths and helping the LDS Church come out of obscurity in many areas of the world. President Hinckley was a great mentor. He was such a master at interfaith relations. I recently went to Iceland, where I visited with the president of Iceland in his home. During our hour-long visit, he expressed delight at the humor of President Hinckley. At the time of President

Hinckley's passing, the president of Iceland wrote a beautiful letter expressing his friendship and paying tribute to the legacy he left. President Hinckley knew how to build relationships and how to generate light instead of heat. There is a very big difference between the two, and you don't have to water down your own faith to get along with people. And he demonstrated that in a number of public venues with some hard-hitting people like Larry King, Mike Wallace, and others.

**MECKLENBURG:** What advice would you give to those who want to be more involved with interfaith work?

**WOODS:** My advice would be to review some of the principles that Stephen R. Covey has written about. In one of his many books he talks about the principle of seeking to understand before you seek to be understood. Listening to the other person first is absolutely critical. Most important, though, is cultivating love for another human being, because you can have an encyclopedic mind—you can memorize the scriptures—but if you don't have love and respect for other human beings, they can see right through you. Doctrine and Covenants section 12, verse 8 says that no one can assist in this work unless they have love. When I go to conferences or meet different people I've worked with, there is a genuine feeling of love, respect, and friendship. In addition, you just need to throw your line in the water. You go seeking to be led by the Spirit, not knowing beforehand what will happen. Like any assignment of this nature, being led by the Spirit is crucial.

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**MECKLENBURG:** What have been the most meaningful or memorable moments you have experienced in this appointment?

**WOODS:** People. I think of Father Vince Heier, who served in St. Louis at the Archdiocese, where he graciously permitted me to give a presentation. I have a hobby of studying the American West, and he's been a great fan of Custer. In fact, I think he has the largest Custer collection in the United States. So we can share that wonderful interest in the American West and then talk about more serious things. Arun Joshi is a gentleman from India I hosted when he came to BYU. I think of him as a wonderful, caring person. He is Hindu and full of the Light of Christ to a great degree. Different friendships I've developed have been the most meaningful, friendships with Jewish rabbis, such as Rabbi Jonathan Ginsburg at George Washington University. I also consider Dr. Pétur Pétursson at the University of Iceland both a friend and a colleague, as well as Professor Douglas Davies (Durham University), who is probably the most well known scholar (from another faith) on Mormon studies in the United Kingdom. I remember the people, people you can go out to dinner with and have a great time talking about most anything, as well as engage in serious conversation about interfaith

issues and Mormonism—what it is and what it isn't.

One thing I wanted to say is that my assignment has not been a one-man band. "The sin of ingratitude is a crime more despicable than revenge," someone once said. I've had tremendous help from my wife—we've been a team. When I bring people to my home it is the one-two punch; this is not just Fred Woods doing things. My wife is a very active person in the Evans Chair assignment. She is my chief editor, my confidante and consultant. She has been terrific. My mother has been and continues to be a great influence in helping me understand things not only from the outside looking in but also from the inside looking out, to deal with different issues and realize sometimes there is more than one right answer. Tremendous support has also come from my department chairs, the late professor Paul Peterson and Dr. Arnold Garr. Former dean Andrew Skinner and current dean Terry Ball have provided continual encouragement. And academic vice president John Tanner has also been a great support. I've also had constant backing from my family and colleagues. It's wonderful when you really feel that people have joy in the success of others. That is a great thing because it is teamwork, and as far I'm concerned I am playing one instrument in the orchestra, but there are others who are playing different instruments and doing a wonderful job. I admire their wonderful work. I'm just glad to be in the orchestra and acknowledge the Lord's hand in directing His marvelous symphony. ❧