

A Brief History of
Religious and Spiritual Life
at Carleton



Carleton





Chapel construction, 1915–1916

Celebrating 150 Years of Religious and Spiritual Life at Carleton, 100 Years of Skinner Memorial Chapel, and 70 Years of the Carleton Chaplaincy

Every Carleton alumnus has memories of Skinner Memorial Chapel. The massive gray stone English Gothic chapel, with its majestic bell tower soaring above the Bald Spot, is a campus centerpiece—whether it's covered by winter's snows or framed by summer's trees. Nearly all students once sat in the wooden pews, waiting to be welcomed to Carleton during their first week on campus. Most alumni attended a convocation, concert, or worship service in the chapel—especially those who graduated before 1964 when Sunday chapel was mandatory.

The chapel has served generations of Carleton students as Carleton's spiritual center and a primary campus lecture and music performance space. It's been a place to worship and learn, celebrate and grieve, gather with the entire community, or sit in solitary silence. The chapel experience—like the Carleton experience—is varied, individual, and yet profoundly common. For thousands of Carls, Skinner Memorial Chapel is a place of memories, meaning, and music.

Although Carleton has had its chapel for a century—it was dedicated at the college's 50th anniversary in October 1916 and financed by a gift from Emily Willey Skinner in honor of her late husband, trustee Miron Skinner—the chaplaincy is much younger. It was established in 1946 when Larry Gould—Carleton's first noncleric president—appointed Philip Phenix as Carleton's first chaplain. Carleton's chaplaincy has evolved significantly over time into a multifaith, multiform program emphasizing ethical reflection and action that enables students to make an engaged spiritual life a transformational part of their liberal arts educational experience.

The History of Religious Life at Carleton

The central place of religion was implicit in the details of Carleton's founding and explicit in the pages of early college catalogs, which declared that the school, while unsectarian in its aim, was "intended to be emphatically a Christian college." Although Carleton was not under the ecclesiastical control of the Congregationalists who founded it, the college defined its purpose as providing "an education liberal and thorough, embracing moral culture as well as mental discipline; and securing a symmetrical Christian character."

The evolution of Carleton's mission over the past 150 years reveals the changing status of religion in its liberal arts education. Today's mission statement implicitly honors the work of the chaplaincy without using explicit religious language, proclaiming, "We support each other in pursuing a healthy balance of mind, body, and spirit. Quiet reflection and lively engagement are valued as sources of self-understanding and renewal."

Religion's place at Carleton has evolved significantly over the past 150 years. In the traditional Protestant Christian

college era (1866–1900), a religious ethos permeated the entire institution and was woven into the mission, curriculum, and student life. It was typical for American colleges to designate an ordained president or faculty member to direct the college chapel and preside over occasions in the life of the institution when the whole community gathered in scholarly convocation or worship. When President Larry Gould—who as a layman was unable to perform this function as his predecessors had done—established a Carleton chaplaincy, he gave symbolic expression to the normative religious convictions of the institution.

Nevertheless, from 1900 to 1965, as American society and colleges became increasingly secular, religion became primarily a cocurricular pursuit. It went from public to private and from mandatory to voluntary. Since 1970, religion at Carleton has broadened from a liberal Protestantism to a multifaith spirituality. In fact, in recent years, there has been a notable revival in student interest in religious and spiritual life.



Carleton College Choir, ca. 1921

The Changing Role of Religion

The differences between how Presidents Strong and Cowling—both ordained ministers—spoke about religion and how later leaders addressed it, exemplify how religion’s place at Carleton evolved over time. Modern presidents have continued to support religious and spiritual life at the college as a vital part of a liberal arts education.



James Strong (1870–1903)

“Carleton was founded to provide . . . religious training for the spiritual nature. It has seemed to me perfectly plain that Carleton has had no moral right to exist, or to appeal for support, except as an institution caring for the spiritual as well as for the intellectual.”
—President James Strong, 1901 Annual Report



Donald Cowling (1909–1945)

“There is a real place in the need of the country for the small Christian college. By the Christian college, I mean the denominational college, and in these there is an effort to make the atmosphere of the college and the training distinctly Christian.”
—President Donald Cowling, “The Small College,” *Carleton College Voice*, May 1911



Larry Gould (1945–1962)

“Carleton College seeks to train young men and women with a sense of the responsibilities of freedom—young citizens with informed and critical minds who have a sense of their moral and social responsibilities. Carleton College seeks to stimulate in her students an active faith in noble ideals. Toward this end she reaffirms her ancient dedication to the development of a Christian view of life.”
—“Aims” statement, 1950 Academic catalog



John Nason (1962–1970)

“The college affirms its own tradition and heritage as one which is Christian, but does not require that any of its students, faculty, or administration conform to this tradition. The issues raised by religious and philosophical interpretations of man’s relation to the universe are of fundamental and enduring importance for the liberally educated individual. The college therefore expects each student to concern himself with these issues, and it considers itself under obligation to provide a varied program of worship, inquiry, and instruction so that each student is able to face these issues as knowledgeably and intelligently as possible.”—President John Nason, 1964 letter to alumni



Bob Edwards (1977–1986)

“[Carleton’s chaplaincy] is not one which would minister to parochial, sectarian, or narrowly religious ends. Rather, it would help to serve the college’s more fundamental purpose, which is concerned for the intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth of its students. We believe that this sort of approach is both more profoundly educational and religious, that it honors all people equally and, at the same time, their freedom of conscience. In very real ways Carleton respects the integrity of each person, valuing not only the differences

between people, but also the ways in which each person seeks to reconcile the pluralities within and to become a whole human being in mind, body, and spirit. . . . Beyond their differences, all persons are united in having to wrestle with issues of conscience, self-respect, social responsibility, and the meaning of their life. A chaplaincy which is engaged with people in these ways will enrich and deepen the value of life on this campus, for all its members.” —Future of the Chaplaincy Committee report, 1986

Center Stage: Carleton's Early Chaplains



Philip Phenix, Counselor in Religion (1946–1948, 1950–1953), was the most academic of the early chaplains. He was reluctant to serve as an official of the Congregational Church and shaped the role more like a college professor than a community minister. Under his leadership, required Sunday vespers and Tuesday-morning chapel were less devotional exercises and more intellectual sermons about religion and spirituality. This was a significant departure from the past, but consistent with Carleton's strong academic mission. Phenix ultimately left Carleton for a distinguished career on the faculty of Columbia Teachers College, but President Gould brought him back to Carleton as dean of the college from 1958 to 1960.



James Flint, Dean of the Chapel (1948–1950), served a brief stint as chaplain between Phenix's two terms. Gould offered him the title "dean of the chapel," suggesting that it would "focus attention increasingly on the chapel and its symbolic role in the life of the college." Like each of Carleton's early chaplains, Flint preached both at Carleton and in Congregational churches throughout southeast Minnesota.



David Stowe, College Chaplain (1953–1956), was a gifted preacher who also arrived at Carleton with strong teaching and counseling skills. He reinvigorated the Sunday vespers program, but his sense of calling drew him back to the national and international mission scene. After he left Carleton, he eventually went on to lead the United Church Board for World Ministries.

The Liberal Protestant Meets Interfaith Pluralism: The Maitland Chaplaincy

David Maitland, College Chaplain (1956–1986), shared President Gould’s “liberal Protestant” philosophical approach to the chaplaincy, and he had everything that Gould sought in a Carleton chaplain—familiarity with the small residential liberal arts college, an impressive record as a scholar and teacher, and extensive experience as a college chaplain.

A 1961 article in the *Minneapolis Tribune* described Maitland as having “close cropped hair and casual campus clothes [that] made him look more like a graduate student than a minister” and quoted him as saying that time was the primary challenge of his position.



As a teacher, counselor, preacher, and adviser to student religious groups, Maitland said his goal was to help students “gain an understanding of the religious forces that have played a part in the society they will enter after graduation.”

Maitland’s chaplain’s office was centrally involved in the various social and political issues that rocked America and college campuses in the mid and late 1960s. He encouraged student discussion and action on issues like race relations and antiwar protests. He also wrote and preached extensively throughout the ’60s about the task of building community in the increasing pluralism of society and campus. He worked to help students from minority groups feel welcomed and accepted in the liberal, predominantly white Protestant campus environment. As he addressed growing religious diversity, Maitland also was a leader in Carleton’s nascent diversity efforts.

In 1964 the Faculty Affairs Committee (chaired by seminal religion professor Bardwell Smith) recommended that the religion attendance requirement be discontinued. The trustees approved the change and suggested that Carleton reaffirm its religious heritage and tradition by increasing the quality and expanding the variety of its voluntary religious program.

“A liberal arts education is not merely the development of skills or the accumulation of information, but is an attempt to develop the whole man—socially, intellectually, spiritually,” wrote the newly formed Interfaith Council, a committee of the Carleton Student Association. “Part of your Carleton education will be a serious confrontation with the questions of value and meaning. . . . [Our duty] is to challenge the student to deal with these questions and to provide ways in which this questioning can occur.”

Maitland’s other contributions include helping found Carleton’s volunteer and service organization, Acting in the Community Together (ACT), and serving as a catalyst for community and social justice. In 1971 he helped students found the monthly black church service, featuring an interracial soul choir and guest pastors from black churches. Maitland debuted the student chaplain associates program—which continues to this day—and was the first Carleton chaplain to hire professional associate chaplains.

A New Chaplaincy in the Old Chapel: The Davis Chaplaincy



Jewelnel Davis, College Chaplain (1986–1996), arrived at Carleton after a national search for a new chaplain who could reshape the chaplaincy at the increasingly pluralistic college and engage students to “wrestle with issues of conscience, self-respect, social responsibility, and the meaning of their lives.” In introducing Davis to the Carleton community, President Bob Edwards wrote that she had “impressed everyone with her intellectual strength, character, ease of manner, and her range of interests and capacities.”

Davis’s experience and background aligned remarkably well with the Future of the Chaplaincy Committee’s vision. With an interdisciplinary degree from a residential university, a divinity and social work degree, chaplain experience with the black church at Yale and Colgate, and experience counseling diverse student populations, Davis was ideally prepared to play that “important role in the life of the pluralistic Carleton community.” Perhaps most important, Davis represented a significant departure from Carleton’s first four chaplains—she was the first chaplain to be female, nonwhite, and educated after the transformative 1960s. As a result, her very presence made the promised new chaplaincy more real and visible to the Carleton community.

In 1989 President Steve Lewis added the title “adviser on human relations” to Davis’s position. In his letter to the faculty and staff announcing the change, Lewis wrote that he wished to recognize Davis’s “efforts and effectiveness in helping all of us at Carleton deal with some of the more difficult issues of human relationships, including sexual harassment, gender roles, and racial and religious intolerance.”

Davis left Carleton in 1996 to become university chaplain at Columbia University. But during her tenure she had realized the future of Carleton’s chaplaincy by broadening its mission to all things spiritual and placing it in the center of the college’s commitment to building an inclusive, pluralistic campus community.

Religious and Spiritual Life in a 21st-Century Liberal Arts College: The Fure-Slocum Chaplaincy

Carolyn Fure-Slocum '82, College Chaplain (1997–present), was the first chaplain to come into the role already a Carl. A religion major with an emphasis in Asian studies, she recalls being profoundly influenced by her Carleton undergraduate experience, which included study in India. She returned to Carleton with experience as a community organizer in rural Minnesota, a campus minister, and an associate pastor, having dealt with issues of social justice,



Chaplain Carolyn Fure-Slocum '82 and associate chaplains Shoshana Susan Dworsky and Ailya Vajid at Eid al-Adha, 2015

ethics, and interfaith dialogue. Fure-Slocum's focus has been to build and support a vibrant multifaith community. She and her staff work to provide opportunities for everyone on campus—whether they consider themselves to be religious or not—to reflect on and engage with the big questions of life and the important issues of our time.

“In describing the chaplaincy to those curious or skeptical folks who ask, “So what does a chaplain actually do, anyway?” I often find myself deciding between metaphors depending on the day: wearer of many hats, gardener, utility player, shepherd, juggler, parent, dancer on thin ice, or firefighter,” Fure-Slocum wrote in her 2002 annual report. “Further roles: priest (leading worship and other ceremonies), pastor (caring for the spiritual and emotional needs of individuals and the campus as a whole), rabbi (informal teaching and encouraging dialogue), prophet (calling individuals and the institution to consider ethical implications), and apostle (assisting religious groups in expressing their traditions, building community between individuals and between the campus and larger community). Each of these roles is interdependent and needs to be balanced within a chaplaincy in order to deepen the spiritual and ethical life of the campus.”

Primary Duties of the Contemporary Chaplain

- Lead the Office of the Chaplain, including the associate chaplains, an administrative assistant, and the student chaplain's associates
- Lead or coordinate several weekly campus religious services
- Facilitate discussion, interfaith dialogue, meditation, and prayer groups
- Advise student religious groups
- Provide spiritual counseling for students and faculty and staff members
- Contribute to crisis response, including leading memorial services and arranging vigils
- Develop religious, service, and social justice opportunities
- Give opening and closing readings at public ceremonies
- Help the campus wrestle with ethical concerns





Student Religious Organizations

In Carleton's early days, the president and faculty provided the formal religious activity on campus, but student religious life was centered around the two student Christian organizations: the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

According to the 1915 *Algol*, the YMCA's work was pervasive: handbooks mailed to prospective students, new student orientation, a social "breaking in" reception at Gridley Hall, and "violent outcroppings of religio-social spirit" throughout the year in the form of get-togethers, rallies, powwows, and carnivals. In fact, the *Algol* proclaimed the YMCA the "most uproarious organization in the college." But the YMCA's work was serious, too, especially in Wednesday-evening prayer meetings, Bible study gatherings, and social service activities, including leading local Boy Scout Patrols and teaching Sunday School classes in town. Through their religious and social activities, the YMCA exercised a "constant influence on student life throughout the week."

The YWCA claimed a similar influence on the lives of Carleton women, taking credit on their 1915 *Algol* page for Carleton's statewide reputation as a college with a "high moral and religious standard" and a "clean and wholesome" atmosphere. Like the men of the YMCA, the women viewed their association as democratic, open, and inclusive, proudly proclaiming that the YWCA was the one

organization at Carleton "to which any girl may belong." The YWCA sponsored activities similar to the men's—new-student activities, socials, Wednesday devotionals—and also sponsored women-only events, including a Christmas sale, girls' track meet, and the May-Fête festival.

In the mid-20th century, the YMCA and YWCA gave way to a new set of student religious organizations that fell within one of three distinct—albeit interrelated—types: denominational, interdenominational, and interfaith. By 1965 there were 10 denominational groups, all established to help students associate with others from their own faith tradition, including the Society of Friends (Quakers), Hillel (Jewish), Christian Scientists, Presbyterian Fellowship, Newman Club (Catholic), Lutheran Student Association, United Student Fellowship (Congregational-Baptist), Baptists, Wesley Fellowship (Methodist), and Canterbury Club (Episcopal). The YMCA and YWCA now functioned as interdenominational groups, and the Sunday Night Club provided a weekly forum for discussing religion and related topics. All of these organizations operated under the broad canopy of the Religious Activities Council (RAC), Carleton's interfaith organization.

A major renovation of the chapel's basement in the 1960s provided meeting and activity space for the RAC and its member organizations.



YWCA students, 1957



YMCA students, 1957



Jewish Purim and Hindu Holi Celebration, 2011



Diwali - Festival of Lights, 2014



Dia de los Muertos, 2014

Many of these student organizations have continued to flourish, joined by the Unitarian Universalists, the Reformed Druids of America, and the Muslim Student Association. The Jewish Students at Carleton (JSC) group assists with chapel-related Jewish services and ceremonies and has hosted social and cultural gatherings to appeal to the nonreligious segment of the Jewish student body.


Despite Carleton's often secular and liberal environment, evangelical Christian student groups have flourished and even expanded in the 21st century. New groups include the Mustard Seed Praise Band and a Christian interest house (FISH House). Most campus evangelical groups have united under the umbrella of the Fellowship in Christ, which continues to coordinate Christian activities and bring groups together for retreats and Bible studies.

Almost every religion in the world is represented at Carleton. While there may be only a few students from a given tradition on campus, most groups are active, creative, and diverse in their understandings and backgrounds. While Carleton has evolved into a vibrant and pluralistic community that its Congregationalist founders couldn't have imagined, the college still embodies their vision of a religiously, ethically, and spiritually engaged campus.

Music in the Chapel

Skinner Memorial Chapel was designed first as Carleton's place of worship and second as a community gathering place, like a New England-style town hall. While it has fulfilled those roles admirably, the chapel has also taken on another vital campus function: that of a music hall.

The chapel served as Carleton's primary concert facility until the Concert Hall was built in 1972. Even since then, the chapel has continued to occasionally host the Carleton orchestra, band, and choir, as well as guest artists including the Minnesota Orchestra and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. In addition, music has been a mainstay of campus worship since the dedication concert of the Emily Willey Skinner Memorial Organ in 1916.



Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra play to a sold-out crowd in fall 2015



Choir, 1941



Patricia Affeldt '58, Sandy Craig '57,
and Henry Woodward, 1957



Skinner Memorial Chapel: Campus Landmark

Upon its dedication in October 1916, Skinner Memorial Chapel immediately became a prominent campus landmark. With its soaring 108-foot bell tower, the chapel was undoubtedly the most imposing building in Northfield, visible from all the surrounding countryside. The editors of the *Carletonian* suggested that the chapel tower, “built as it is of the white

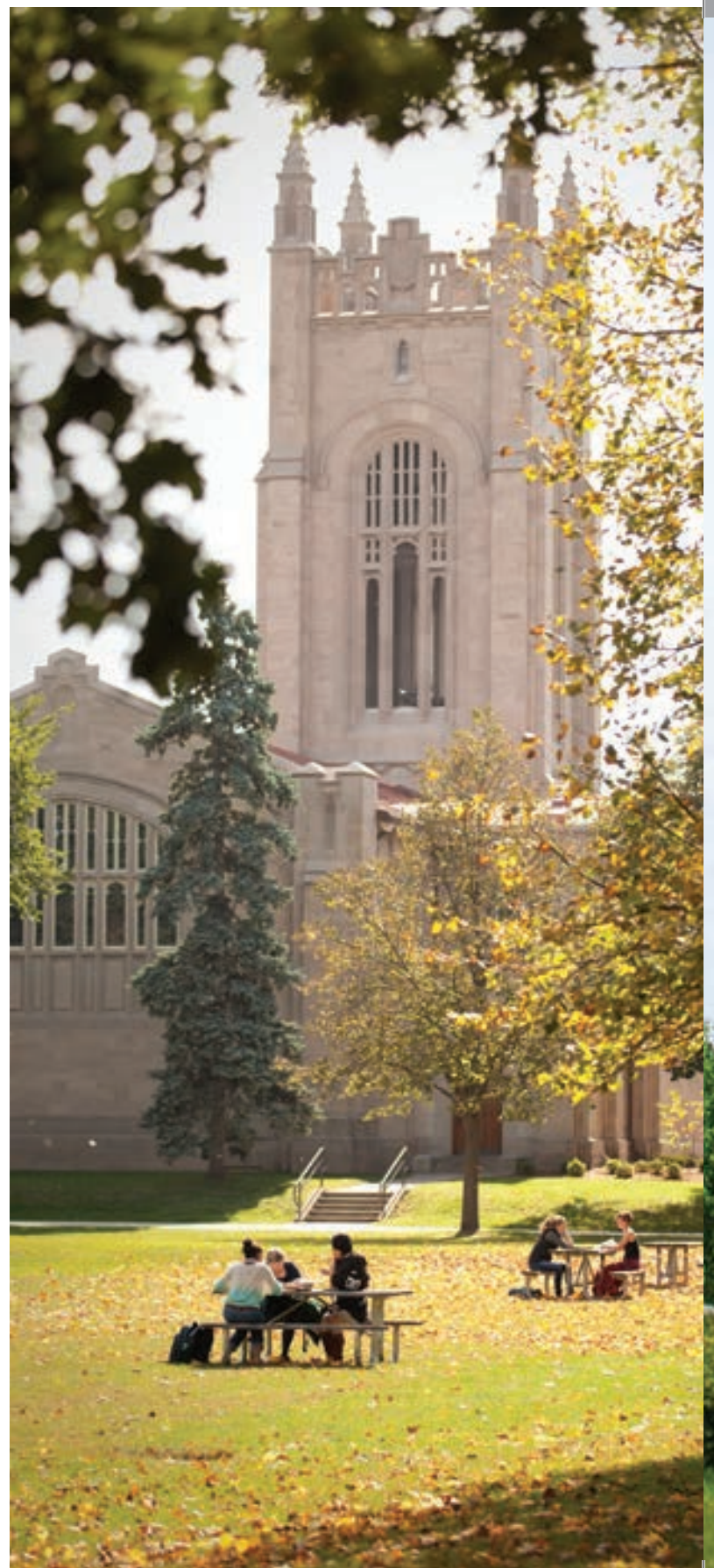
Bedford stone, would be a striking and artistic advertisement of Carleton” if it were properly illuminated at night. In his letter to architect Raymond Flinn, President Cowling wrote, “The satisfaction of the hundreds of people who were here last week with the chapel is simply wonderful. I do not believe I ever heard a building given such unqualified praise.”



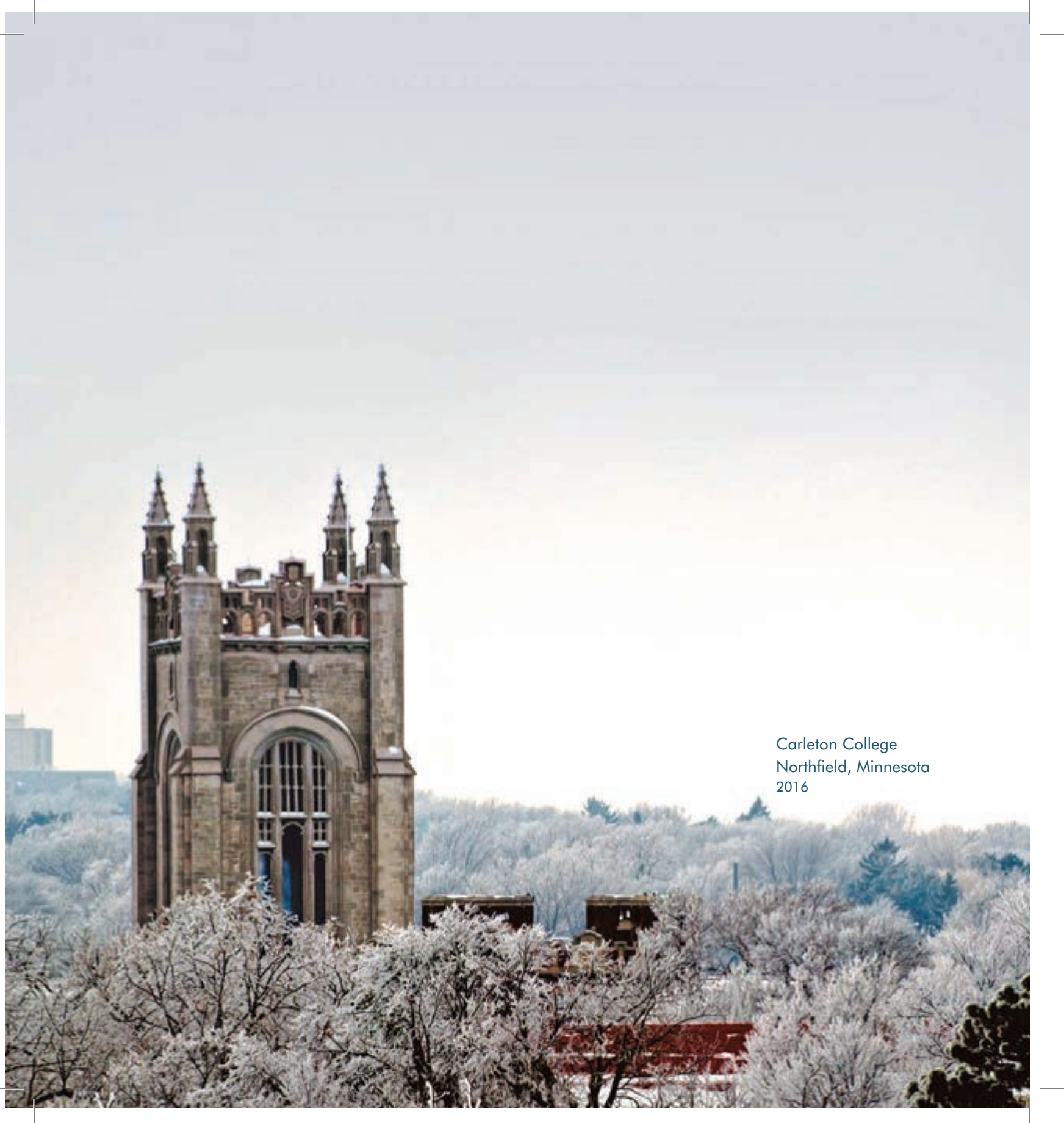
The chapel has remained a campus centerpiece and a source of inspiration over the years. For example, the January 1919 issue of the *Voice*, Carleton's alumni magazine, featured a photo of the chapel in winter, captioned with the Wordsworth poem "Spires." At the end of that year, the December issue of the *Voice* featured a reflection on the chapel by biology professor Ambrose White Vernon:

That building expresses more than faith in God. It expresses faith in Carleton and Minnesota and in the eternal relation of beauty to Carleton and Minnesota. That building builds the future. It is difficult to recollect any pile of stone and mortar that is so alive as the Skinner Chapel. It is even more of a creator than it is a creation. It adds to every sermon and oratorio that is given in it. It is the mute but immutable judge of all the campus; it is the unseen moulder [sic] of all the other buildings. It is, perhaps, the best member of the faculty, for it outlasts them all; perhaps it is more lucid and suggestive than any of them.

Text adapted from *The Place of Religion at Carleton: The College's Religious Underpinnings, Skinner Chapel, and the Chaplaincy*, by Bruce William Colwell, to be published in fall 2016.







Carleton College
Northfield, Minnesota
2016