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The Agora

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The Agora

“If you have the grit, if you have the gall, to stand up and speak your piece, you deserve to be here.” These words begin each session of the Agora, a program sponsored by the Andrews University Office of Campus Ministries. The Agora began in 2015 and, according to Garrison Hayes, third-year Master of Divinity student and Agora team leader, was originally founded “to engage our campus in dialogue on important issues facing our campus, church, world and students after graduation.”

Hayes says, “As the student chaplain for graduate initiatives, I am tasked with leading ministries that target our graduate student population. In assessing the programming around campus, it was very clear that there was a need for a space that facilitated intellectual and spiritual growth. After much prayer and refining, the Agora was our answer to those complex needs.”

The Agora takes place approximately once a month in Newbold Auditorium, Buller Hall, on Saturday afternoon. The planning for each Agora begins as a topic suggested by/to the Agora team. The team discusses the topic in great detail, determining whether or not the subject matter is appropriate for the Agora and relevant to the audience. Potential participants are then nominated to represent the two opposing sides of the subject. The search for participants is often the most difficult step in the planning process, as not everyone is willing to share their opinions in a public space where they can be engaged in dialogue in real time.

The open presentation style and debate of beliefs can either push people to attend the Agora or to shy away. Hayes emphasizes, though, that the Agora’s platform is not to deter individuals from being involved. He says, “The Agora



Jessica Condon

▲ Garrison Hayes facilitates discussion at an Agora program.

maintains the same mission today that it had at its inception: we desire to facilitate open and honest dialogue on relevant issues. As I look around our church, I see a scarcity of that on some of our most touchy issues. I am a firm believer that if we as a community do not engage our most difficult-to-talk-about issues in a direct way, we will never truly understand or resolve them. The Agora has always aimed to do just that.”

In spite of these goals, time still serves as a limitation. Hayes is graduating this year and hopes the Agora will continue once he leaves Andrews. He is, however, also excited to spread this platform elsewhere. “Seeing the success of the Agora at Andrews has gotten me thinking about how valuable this platform could be in other areas within Adventism! Although the plans are still in their genesis, I have been in talks about expanding this

platform to other campuses and conferences around our Church.”

The student audience also appreciates the Agora. Sharyl Cubero, sophomore biology major, says, “I always appreciate coming to the Agora because it allows for hard dialogue to happen. A lot of times, we have an idea of what we believe in, but we never challenge or fully develop that idea. The Agora allows us to hear different perspectives we may not have heard otherwise, regardless of where on the spectrum they stand.” ■

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