

Danforth Center hopes to set tone for civility

by [Tim Townsend](#) in the [November 30, 2010](#) issue

Just across from the Gephardt Institute for Public Service at Washington University in St. Louis, employees are moving into a new center named for another legendary Missouri politician.

The John C. Danforth Center on Religion & Politics, launched last year with a \$30 million gift from the Danforth Foundation, officially opened its doors on October 26 with an inaugural speech at the university's Graham Chapel by journalist and historian Jon Meacham.

The proximity of the two centers, one named for former Democratic congressman Richard A. Gephardt and the other for former Republican senator John C. Danforth, is emblematic of what Danforth anticipates the new center will do for the tenor of political conversation in the country.

"My hope is that this is a place that both illuminates the relationship between religion and politics and . . . encourages respectful but vigorous debate," Danforth said. "Respectful does not mean wishy-washy. It means respectful."

Danforth's vision is for an academic center whose scholars can respond quickly when religion enters the political news cycle. Through conferences, debates, panel discussions, lectures and publications, Danforth hopes that as the 2012 presidential campaigns begin revving their engines next year, the center can have a calming effect on a debate that some say has devolved from thoughtful to thoughtless.

"Two things we're told never to discuss at the dinner table are religion and politics, but a lot of us grew up doing exactly that," said E. J. Dionne, a *Washington Post* columnist and author who often writes about both topics. "I think the Danforth Center is trying to reproduce those dinner table discussions and replace the shoutfest."

Officials say the political atmosphere of the recent midterm election campaigns illustrated the need for the new center.

"What is called political commentary is, by most standards, entertainment—a circus atmosphere, fight night, who can shout the loudest," said Wayne Fields, a Washington University professor of English and American studies and the center's founding director. "There's something profoundly boring about it."

Danforth—an ordained Episcopal priest—wrote the blueprint for the new center in his 2006 book, *Faith and Politics*.

In it, he said it would have been "worse than inappropriate" and "divisive and wrong" to "foist" his own religion on the electorate.

Washington

University officials have been careful to portray the new center as nonpartisan, using terms like "unbiased," "ideologically neutral," "diverse" and "academic."

One of the center's first hires, assistant director Lenora Fisher, was a religious outreach coordinator and Midwest operations director for the 2008 Obama presidential campaign.

Fields and Fisher have been busy with center infrastructure and with putting together search committees to find faculty and Fields's permanent replacement as director. The plan is to have a new director in place by next summer, and the goal for the center is to be "a significant voice" during the 2012 presidential election cycle, Fields said. The center could get a profile boost if St. Louis beats out three other cities vying for the 2012 Democratic convention.

The

center, while based in St. Louis, will have a major presence in Washington through its partnership with the Brookings Institution. —*St. Louis Post-Dispatch* via RNS