

Michael W. Smith: A Place in Liberty's World

Multi-platinum recording artist Michael W. Smith told Liberty University music students that his best days are ahead of him. That's after 35 years of success in the industry, with three Grammy Awards and over 18 million albums sold.

"I think my best days are ahead; I feel it. I'm still passionate about what I do; I've been doing this for a long time, and I just sense that God is stirring something. I still have my ear to the ground," he told students at a special session in the Center for Music and the Worship Arts, Concert Hall.

Some of those best days could be at Liberty.

Smith is the executive director of Liberty's new Michael W. Smith Center for Commercial Music, which launched last fall. The artist visited campus on Sept. 18, 2019, to meet with university administrators, School of Music leadership and students to set goals and cast a vision for the center. He was also a special guest at Convocation, leading worship and telling a few personal stories about how he has seen God's presence in his life.

In the Concert Hall, Smith addressed nearly 1,000 music students, campus worship leaders, faculty and staff before enjoying a private time of worship with LU Praise, the School of Music's gospel choir.

Smith shared some of his personal and career challenges, imparting wisdom on everything from getting through a writing block and waiting patiently on the Lord for the creativity to flow, to lessons on practicing humility as a celebrity and leaning on others' faith when you have struggles with your own. He played parts of his favorite songs over the years,

including cinematic scores, and told students that his next task to complete is a “vibrant and fun” symphony, which he has been working on for several years.

Senior Amber Taylor, a member of LU Praise, said students have been highly anticipating Smith’s involvement with the School of Music.

“I was really excited because he’s a giant in the Christian music world from way back. For me, it’s a big deal because I one day want to do what he does, and now I’m seeing how it plays out,” she said. “To have people like him be so willing to come here and pour into us is wonderful. It’s not every day you meet someone that great who says, ‘Yes, I’ll sit down with your students’ and ‘Yes, I’ll come listen to your choir and sing with them and just love on them’—and that’s a big part of what he does.”

Smith said he plans to return to the university in the coming months, making the new center a priority even with his busy touring schedule of 38 shows before the end of the year. He’ll also be talking to classes remotely through video calls and teleconferencing.

Pouring into the younger generation, he feels, is a personal duty.

“I’m kind of a father here, too—I feel like it’s really my responsibility. To whom much is given, much is required. My responsibility is not to go retire and just hang out and play golf for the rest of my life—I’m just not going to do that. I feel like part of my calling is to mentor young students, not only in the creative part but also hopefully in teaching them a little bit about life. I’ll share with them my triumphs but also the missteps I took along the way.”

He said spending time with students and seeing the growth of Liberty’s campus and music program was a motivator for him.

“It’s great just being here; you just feel there’s some energy here, and I think for everybody I’ve talked to and know, there’s a real pure heart here to do the right thing and want to see the kingdom further advancing—and we’re going to play our part in doing that.”

Liberty announced the new center in June 2019. It coincides with a major recording initiative that will attract new and already successful artists from across the country. Kevin Jonas, father and original manager of the Jonas Brothers (he launched their music careers in 2005), will also play a pivotal role in working with students to introduce their talent to the world by publishing and recording music. Serving as Liberty’s newly appointed commercial music industry liaison, former Christian recording artist and music industry practitioner Al Denson has been a key player in securing Smith, Jonas and others for this unique School of Music partnership.

Dr. Vernon Whaley, dean of the School of Music, said the goals of the center are to equip musicians for marketplace evangelism in today’s music culture, reestablish the culture for God’s glory and become a top choice for the training and equipping of commercial music professionals.

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