

Church Relations Update

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If you read last spring's issue of this *Update*, you may recall that I quoted Kathleen Norris' statement, "Blessed be those who throw the church doors open wide."

That quotation has stuck with me all summer. It was reinforced at the annual meeting of the Western District Conference, where Lynn Schlosser, pastor of Bergthal Mennonite Church, rural Pawnee Rock, in a seminar entitled "Re-imagining the Church," spoke of the paradigm shift from "believing, behaving, belonging," (largely operative in the Constantinian church) to "belonging, behaving, believing" (more characteristic of the early church, and now, once again, the church in the post-modern era). If you'd like an enlightening discussion of this paradigm shift, I would point you to Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (HarperOne 2012), especially pages 201-214.

What would it mean if we were able truly to consider all students, faculty and staff as belonging in campus worship, irrespective of what they *believed*? Would it result in some sort of sacrifice of institutional convictions on the altar of hospitality? Or would it perhaps move us closer to the practice of the one we claim as foundational for our institution, Jesus the Christ?

The initial result of all this "thinking" was a new mission and vision statement for campus ministries at Bethel College. Here's what we came up with:

Campus Ministries' Mission: To ensure and encourage an open, accepting and active faith environment for all students, faculty and staff.

Campus Ministries' Vision: To throw the "chapel doors"—the doors of spirituality and faith—open wide. This posture will always be shaped by a decidedly Christian, indeed Mennonite, perspective, but we are committed to a posture of inclusion rather than exclusion, openness to the other, learning from difference rather than some dogmatic demand for uniformity. This is, in fact, precisely how we understand the call of Christ.

I am pleased to report that I think this new commitment has made a difference. I think our campus worship this semester has been more open, embracing a wider variety of worship preferences. I think the worshiping audience has been more diverse than in past years. And I'd like to think all this has played at least a small part in contributing to

very positive morale on campus this year. May it ever be thus!

Does It Make a Difference?

Every once in awhile, you will hear someone ask if attending a church-related, Christian college really makes a difference. The answer to that question is an unqualified "yes" in my opinion. Let me offer a simple example.

Bethel's new vice president of student life is Aaron Austin. Aaron came to Bethel from a position at Texas Tech University. A few weeks ago, he received a call that a dear friend and former colleague from Texas Tech had fallen ill very suddenly (she has since died).



I happened to stop by Aaron's office to ask him something soon after he had received the call. He answered my question and I turned to leave. He called me back into the office, asked me to close the door, related the information he had just received in the phone call and asked me if I would pray with him. I offered a prayer, expressed my concern and left.

President Perry White begins each meeting of the president's cabinet by asking cabinet members to relate a positive happening that has occurred since our last meeting. When it was Aaron's turn, he mentioned our prayer time the previous week, a prayer time that was deeply meaningful for him.

His point was that, at Texas Tech, the thought of asking a colleague to pray with him in the face of a crisis would likely not have entered his mind. After working at Bethel for two-and-a-half months, he thought this a natural and obvious thing to do. Christian colleges do make a difference.

By the way, in my opinion, Aaron is doing a fabulous job as vice president for student life. He's an outstanding addition to the college administrative staff.

The view from the top of the mountain

by Jocelyn Wilkinson

I don't talk about religion and my personal beliefs in depth very much. I don't like to, mainly because I think what a person feels regarding religion and God is extremely personal and more often than not points to our differences as people rather than the much larger number of things we share in common that bind us together.

However, because Bethel is one of what feels like the few colleges that is active in the religion it is associated with, lists discipleship as one of its four central values and has

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played a big role in my faith life the last few years, I'm going to broach a subject I often avoid.

Before I came to Bethel, I quickly and with little thought identified as Quaker whenever someone asked me what religion I was. Throughout my childhood, I regularly attended the Friends Meeting in San Antonio, Texas, where I'm from, but as I got older and entered high school, my attendance dwindled. By the end of high school, I was going to meeting maybe once a month and other than the yearly Quaker retreat, wasn't really interacting with Quakers my own age. So when I started Bethel, I felt like a fish out of water, to be surrounded by and have so many friends with a strong faith in God, Jesus and Christianity.

Follow-up:

Growing up in a post-9/11 United States, I saw people use the Bible and Christianity time and time again to discriminate against and hate people who did not fit their definition of acceptable. It hurt to see something I had been taught to see as good, both the lessons of Christianity and diversity, take such a beating. The more ugliness I saw in the news, driven by the minority of extreme Christians who spewed their hate (which they claimed to be love, a sentiment I found even more insulting), the more I hated Christianity and religion in general. I rejected it and the many good things that can come from it.

So when I had to take Introduction to Biblical Studies my first semester freshman year, I thought I wasn't going to make it through the course, both because my knowledge of the Bible was weak compared to my fellow Threshers and because I had internalized such a contempt for it and Christianity. I ended up making it through the class and was glad when it was over – every day, I felt out of the loop, like I was learning a new language.

However, the class helped open the door to allow me to start mending the ties I had chosen to break in high school. I attended hymn sings every week that year. I listened actively to the sermons I heard when Women's Chorus went to churches to sing on Sunday mornings. I went to the Lighting of the Green. I even occasionally went to chapel, though that was rare. I didn't agree with everything, but I was at least listening.

My sophomore year was very different. There were a number of deaths in my life leading up to the start of school, so by the time the fall semester started, I was grieving and angry with God for causing so much pain to me but, more importantly, to my friends and communities. I was a sad, angry person, though I chose to hide it more often than not.

It was also my first year singing in the Concert Choir, in which we performed "When David Heard" by Eric Whitacre. (It's a beautiful song and you should look it up if you don't know it.) Although I was not familiar with the story behind it, there was a hard-won healing that it facilitated throughout the year for me. I eventually came to see the beauty in the piece, past the sadness, and was in awe of the amazing things religious stories can inspire people to create.

As the year went on, I became less angry and less sad and eventually wounds from the start of the year simply

became sore spots. I began singing at First Presbyterian Church in Newton and regularly listening to sermons, as the chancel choir sang nearly every week. My understanding of Christianity, though I still didn't always agree with it, grew. Not only was I willing to listen, but also to discuss.

It is only since I got here to Greece that I have realized how much those experiences have meant to me and how much I miss them. I gained support in those places I hadn't known I had.

In my travels thus far, I have had the chance to visit the stunning monasteries of Meteora, which spurred these realizations. The holiest places in Greece are on mountains, because the Greeks believe that the mountains allow you to be closer to God and to clear your head of all the clutter that gathers below.

The Greek mainland is also largely mountains, so most of my time traveling has been spent in a bus on the mountain roads, thinking. And I think the Greeks are onto something. Everything seems clear in the mountains. Even though I still have my qualms with Christianity, I've realized there is a beauty to gathering in church, in community, to learn of the life of a man who loved his fellow humans so much he gave his life for them. Despite all the controversies surrounding that, the symbolism of such an act is breathtaking. How many people do you know now who would do that? We may all say we would, but if the time ever came to do it, I don't think we would.

Religion is about vulnerability. Putting ourselves out there; accepting the love of someone we can't prove exists and the community in which we worship; learning to love ourselves for who we are, shortcomings and all. I realize now that rejecting even the possibility of exploring that vulnerability is one of the dumbest things I've done.

Whether you agree with any of what I said or not, there is a grain of truth in it and a beauty that's hard to explain within. Although everyone's experience is different, Bethel has helped me find my way to this point and I am so grateful, mainly because I don't think it would have happened otherwise.

Jocelyn Wilkinson, a junior majoring in history and communication arts, is spending the fall 2012 semester in Greece.

Some Events to Note

Annual *Messiah* Sing, Wednesday, Nov. 28, Bethel College Mennonite Church, 11 a.m.

Lighting of the Green, Sunday, Dec. 2, 8 p.m.