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Church Relations Update

This edition of the Church Relations Update is long overdue. I could offer a long list of excuses as to why this issue is so late but, unfortunately, that's what they would be – excuses. I consciously or unconsciously put this on the back burner, and I am sorry.

This inexcusably dilatory behavior on my part was certainly not a function of the fact that there was nothing to write about. It more likely occurred because there was too much to write about! Below you will find a sample of the newsworthy items this fall semester 2011.



The death of Seth Dunn

Before the year even began (Aug. 1), we received the shocking news that Seth Dunn, a rising senior from Fresno, Calif., had been killed in a skateboarding accident.

Seth was a popular and well-known student, and his death had a huge impact on this community. On Aug. 5, many of Seth's closest friends organized a memorial service for him in Krehbiel Auditorium. It was heavily-attended and profoundly moving, featuring prayer and song and numerous reflections and reminiscences by both students and faculty. The service went on for almost three hours.

Three carloads of students drove out to Fresno for the memorial service at College Community Mennonite Brethren Church in Fresno (Seth's home congregation). And then, on Sept. 4, another memorial service took place on the Green at Bethel.

Students had prepared a 30-minute video of clips from Seth's time at Bethel, including his frequent appearances on the Bethel stage. Seth's family was present on this occasion. Perhaps the most powerful part of the service was Seth's father, Larry Dunn, speaking about the impact the Bethel College experience and community had had on Seth.

Enrollment growth

In the midst of grieving the passing of Seth Dunn, we also needed to celebrate the successful start of a new year, complete with a second consecutive year of a 10 percent increase in enrollment. We found ourselves experiencing something that had not been an issue for some time – crowded classrooms!

A chapel vignette

We also have experienced this year a crowded chapel. On Sept. 7, chapel focused on the 10th anniversary of 9/11, with the title "How Shall We Remember?" The room was completely full, standing room only, with some 250 people present.

The service featured a reflection by Ruth Tumblin, a 2011 Bethel nursing graduate who was in the World Trade

Center complex on 9/11. Two local television stations had sent reporters to the chapel service. When they interviewed Ruth afterward, one reporter challenged the service's focus on forgiveness and reconciliation. Ruth did not budge an inch. She insisted that retaliation will only extend the pain and suffering – it will not bring any of the 9/11 casualties back to life.

Another chapel vignette

Another chapel service worthy of special mention took place on Oct. 26.

One of the numbers in the Concert Choir's repertoire this year is Eric Whitacre's "When David heard." Based on II Samuel 18:33, it seeks to express David's grief upon hearing of the death of his son Absalom. The piece is very difficult, and long, with an expected running time of 15 minutes. It is an incredibly powerful and moving piece of music.

Dr. William Eash stopped me in the hall one day and suggested the choir might appreciate an opportunity to sing it at a special premiere, perhaps at a chapel service. I offered Oct. 26. And so it came to pass. We structured an entire worship service around this musical number, titling it "Blessed Are Those Who Mourn."

The service began with Woven, a women's ensemble, singing "Jesus walked this lonesome valley." Then Naomi Graber, one of our student chaplains, spoke briefly on "The Blessedness of Mourning," followed by the reading of portions of two Psalms of lament, and one modern psalm of lament. After each reading, we sang "Kyrie eleison." I offered a very brief explanation of the context for the death of Absalom. And then the choir sang.

At the choir's request, we had arranged the 60 voices in three concentric circles surrounding Dr. Eash. This meant they could not only hear each other, they could also see each other. The effect was absolutely stunning. It was as powerful a musical experience as I have ever witnessed.

I'm sure Seth Dunn's tragic death had some impact on at least some choir members, but all were moved – many to

Church Relations Update

tears. One choir member said afterward, "I was surprised we were able to maintain the vocal line, given how many singers were openly weeping as they sang." Another said, "I'm not sure exactly what happened there, but it was something much more than just our singing." It most certainly was.

The service closed with a time of silence and the reading of Psalm 42:11. A meaningful service of worship indeed!

Still another chapel note

There would be many other chapel services worthy of mention. A number of folks have commented that chapels have been unusually effective this semester. I had a community member stop by my office a few weeks ago to tell me she had basically left the church at age 12, but now she found herself never missing our chapel services, which were functioning for her as a way back into the church. God be praised!

The "Doxology"

During the summer, I received an e-mail message from Melissa Volk, a senior biology major. She plays volleyball. She is Roman Catholic. And she had just returned from two weeks of counseling at Camp Mennoscah.

She told me she had an idea she wanted to test with me. We met at Mojo's, our new – and very wonderful – coffee shop in the Student Center. Melissa exulted how much she loved Camp Mennoscah. She loved everything about camp, but the thing she loved most was the singing of grace before each meal. And Melissa was wondering if we couldn't make that a new Bethel tradition.

Now singing grace before meals is a bit of a logistical problem. Not all students eat at the same time. Moreover, the Concert Choir (of which Melissa is a member) meets from noon to 12:50 p.m., so our best singers wouldn't be available if the singing were to take place at noon. We decided that the standard doxology would be the most universal grace to sing. So, in conversation with our student chaplains, we decided to sing the doxology in the cafeteria every Wednesday, roughly ten minutes after the conclusion of chapel.

Though it began somewhat tenuously, it is still going at this point in the semester. It's probably too soon to declare it a new Bethel tradition, but I think it stands a decent chance of making it.

Worship and the Arts Symposium

This gathering Nov. 19 was, in a word, fabulous. Thomas Long of Candler School of Theology at Emory University and John Ferguson of St. Olaf College were the primary presenters on Saturday during the day. Dr. Long spoke about "Creating Vital and Faithful Worship in a Time of Change" and Dr. Ferguson addressed "Music as Exegetical Art."

The presentations were engaging, accessible and profound. Each presenter gave an equally successful afternoon

session as well. But the crowning achievement may well have been the evening worship service in Memorial Hall. It featured an orchestra, the Bethel College Concert Choir, Men's Ensemble and Women's Chorus, plus singers from seven local church choirs.

Tom Long offered four brief and powerfully moving reflections. John Ferguson played organ, conducted the choirs, and had composed or arranged several of the pieces sung. The evening effectively demonstrated precisely what they had proposed in their morning presentations.

Students who had been less than enthusiastic about participating (this event came at the end of the second to last week of classes in the semester – a desperately busy time for serious students) came away deeply touched by the event. And Long and Ferguson came away very impressed with Bethel College.

On Sunday afternoon, Martha Yoder, associate pastor of West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa, spoke about creating the "Images of Revelation" that were on display in the Fine Arts Center Gallery as part of the symposium. It was a fascinating and fitting end to what was a very fine weekend.

Messiah Sing

This is a Bethel tradition that began back in 1988. In those days, it took place in the chapel, and we had faculty soloists and only keyboard for the accompaniment. Over time, it began to change, so that we now meet in the Bethel College Mennonite Church (I'd estimate that there were at least 300 people present this time), now students sing all the solos, there is a full orchestra with student instrumentalists, and students even conduct many of the choruses.

The results are absolutely stunning. The soloists, the conductors, the orchestra were virtually flawless – in some cases positively stunning. Even the chorus is getting better every year (though "He shall purify the sons of Levi" still needs a lot of work – at least in the tenor section, says this tenor). I have to wonder how many undergraduate music majors at a state university get a chance to conduct a full orchestra and a 250-voice choir.

The Lighting of the Green

This year was the 24th Messiah Sing at Bethel, and the 26th Lighting of the Green. All the lights in the central part of campus are turned off and candles are distributed to all who assemble. We hear a reading from John, chapter one; Patty Shelly begins singing, "The Light Shines in the Darkness"; and we pass the light from candle to candle until we've created a giant Advent wreath encircling the Bethel College Green.

Some 250 people gathered on Sunday night, Dec. 4, to participate in this much-loved tradition. The weather was absolutely perfect. A holy night indeed!

more on next page

Church Relations Update

A Thoughtful Reflection

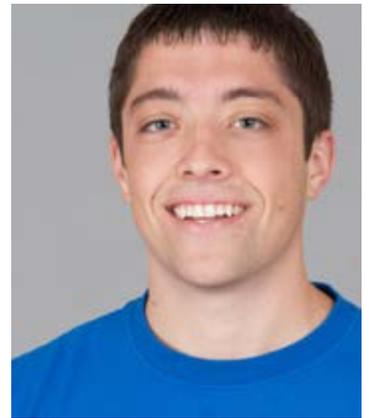
John Miller is a Bethel senior from Partridge, Kan. He transferred to Bethel from another institution, after spending a year in China with Mennonite Central Committee's SALT (Serve and Learn Together) program. He is majoring in history and Bible and religion. He did Ministry Inquiry at Christ Community Church in Des Moines, Iowa, served as a student chaplain and sings in the Concert Choir.

John will graduate this May, but he will be studying in Germany for six months beginning in February 2012. He'll miss commencement, and he'll also miss his final semester of singing in Concert Choir. So on the last day of classes, Bill Eash, director of the choir, gave John (and two other seniors who would not be singing spring semester) a chance to talk about what being in choir had meant to them during their time at Bethel.

The following is John's reflection. I've included it (with John's permission) because I think it is thoughtful and profound, but also because it gives a precious window on the changes that at least some students undergo in this holy experience of higher education.



When Bill asked me to discuss something I've gained through my experience in Concert Choir, the topic that first came to mind was beauty. The fact that we gather every weekday to create beauty is the single greatest gift that choir has given me. As I think back to the transitions that brought me to this college and to this choir, I recall where I was five years ago and I am reminded that it isn't always easy to see beauty.



Five years ago, I was a freshman at [a college other than Bethel]. My majors were accounting and information systems and my main goal in life was material success. I was an atheist, a nihilist, a hedonist, and I was angry at God, or perhaps it's more accurate to say that I was angry that God didn't exist. I was consumed by a fear of death and by the violence, hatred and pervasive injustice of the world and I blamed God's absence for the problems of humanity and the personal pain of an ultimately meaningless existence. Each news report of famine, war and disease confirmed for me the hopeless belief that we are nothing but mere animals – vying for survival and vapid success.

In this worldview, nothing was beautiful. Certain things might be aesthetically pleasing, presumably because it was evolutionarily advantageous for humans to be fond of it, but nothing possessed a transcendent quality of beauty because nothing could – every cause was natural and every end was meaningless.

While I can't go into the long story of my conversion to theism and eventually to Christianity and my experience of living in China – I will say that I might not be alive today had I not come to see and experience God. God gave me the ability to see beauty in the world and in people.

It's here that choir enters the story. While God made it philosophically and experientially possible to see true beauty, choir has allowed me to participate in the creation of beauty itself. In my view, to create music as we do is evidence that we are made in the image of a creative artist. Our ability to fashion beauty is something that makes us more than mere animals. Every song that we sing affords us dignity as creatures and enjoins us to a greater human cause for goodness. More importantly, every song that we sing which praises God is not only a song of worship, but it is a protest against the powers of destruction and hatred which deny us a full existence.

I want to offer Bill my deepest gratitude for giving me the opportunity create music with you and to contribute some amount of beauty to a world which desperately needs it.