

ECUMENICAL TRENDS

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A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2013

“Religion or Relationship?”

Micah 6:1-8

By Terry L. Brensinger

I’ve always enjoyed courtroom dramas. I’ve read virtually all of John Grisham’s novels, and I’ve watched countless TV shows and movies over the last thirty years that are set in courtrooms: *Perry Mason*, *Matlock*, *Law and Order*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *12 Angry Men*, *The Verdict* and *Erin Brockovich*, to name just a few. In fact, I’ve nearly worn out my copy of *A Few Good Men*, particularly the closing scene. How could anyone forget the intensity in the air as the brilliant but inexperienced Lt. Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) risks disbarment by ruthlessly interrogating his egotistical superior, Col. Nathan R. Jessup (Jack Nicholson)? In my mind, few things are more suspenseful than a first-rate courtroom drama.

Interestingly enough, several of ancient Israel’s prophets apparently enjoyed such dramas, too. They do, after all, make regular use of courtroom imagery to drive home their major points. In Isaiah 3:13, for example, the prophet depicts the Lord rising to argue his case against the leaders of Judah. The scene is much the same in Hosea 4:1, where God brings an indictment against all of the inhabitants of the land. The prophet Jeremiah uses similar imagery as well, though with a remarkable twist. In one instance, Jeremiah reverses roles and lays charges himself against the Lord (12:1)! Again and again, Israel’s prophets couch their messages in the language of the judicial system. None, however, does it more vividly than Micah here in 6:1-8.

The prophet Micah lived and served during the latter half of the eighth-century BCE. He was, for at least a part of his ministry, a contemporary of the great prophet, Isaiah, although they came from vastly different backgrounds. Isaiah was an influential urbanite who constantly rubbed shoulders with people across the social spectrum in Jerusalem. From all indications, he even enjoyed ready access to the inner workings of the royal court. Micah, by way of contrast, was a simple farmer from the small

village of Moresheth, situated some 20 miles southwest of the capital. Although he no doubt visited the “big city” from time to time while growing up, perhaps to sell his family’s produce, he certainly never had the connections there that Isaiah did. Nevertheless, Micah’s message bears striking similarities to that of Isaiah. From their respective vantage points – one urban and one rural – both Isaiah and Micah preached timely messages that addressed head-on the key issues of this important period of history.

The closing decades of the eighth-century BCE were a time of external and internal turmoil for the people of Israel and Judah. Externally, the Assyrians to the northeast were flexing their military muscles and threatening everyone who dared oppose them. Indeed, the northern kingdom of Israel eventually fell to the Assyrian onslaught during this very period of time – 722/21 BCE. Internally, both Israel and Judah labored under corrupt leadership. Micah himself harshly criticized materialistic prophets (2:6-11; 3:5-7), self-serving priests (3:11) and unjust political rulers (3:1-3, 9-10). In large part because of the faithless example of those in power over them, the Israelites in the north as well as the south increasingly practiced false or heartless religion. They went through the motions, in other words, but showed little evidence of genuine faith.

In this wider context, the scene here in Micah 6 unfolds. As the curtain rises, we find ourselves ushered into, of all places, a heavenly courtroom. There is a great deal of energy – no, tension – in the air. A trial is about to begin, and the various participants are in their respective places: Micah, the court commentator; God, the accuser; and Israel, the accused. In the coming moments, all

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Dr. Terry L. Brensinger is Professor of Pastoral Ministries at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary in Fresno, CA.

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three will speak before the jury – the hills, mountains and enduring foundations of the earth. They will make moving accusations, pose crucial questions, present pertinent evidence and vent deep-seeded emotions, all in the hopes of winning this historic case.

The Prophet Micah Calls the Court to Order (vv. 1-2)

The silence in the courtroom is broken when Micah stands and calls the court into session. According to the prophet, the Lord has a "controversy with his people" and will now "contend" with Israel (v. 2). Both the opening statements in verse 1 as well as the implied background of God's upcoming testimony, however, suggest that Israel herself had made the initial accusations sometime earlier – though apparently out of court. From all indications, the Israelites had faulted God for failing to live up to his side of their covenantal agreement. Instead of loving and caring for his chosen people, God mistreated them. Instead of nurturing and protecting his people, God wearied them like an overbearing father (cf. Eph. 6:4). In response, the Lord now brings formal charges against the Israelites and challenges them to support such accusations with hard, cold facts.

God Takes the Stand (vv. 3-5)

Following Micah's opening statement, God takes the witness stand and presents his case. Rather than offering the type of brutal rebuttal that might be expected here, God poses two simple questions, questions typically asked by wounded people who have been spurned or abandoned. "What have I done to you?" he asks, as though a thoroughly confused husband who has been scorned by his wife. "In what have I wearied you?" So distraught is the Lord at this overwhelming feeling of rejection, in fact, that he never stops to give the accused an opportunity to respond!

With a sense of bewilderment more so than anger, the Lord next answers his own questions. In reflecting back over his past dealings with Israel, God recalls one incident after another in which he acted graciously on Israel's behalf. Rather than harming his people or treating them harshly, God has in fact delivered them and cared for them. "When you were captives in Egypt," God declares, "I brought you out." "When you were lost and without direction, I sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead the way." "When you were without hope, I set you free."

But that's not all. God, according to the ensuing testimony, did not free the Israelites from Egypt, only to abandon them in the desert. He did not merely lead them "out of" or "away from" their

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place of misery, but he cared for them as they made their way into the future. "Remember," God implores them, "what King Balak of Moab devised." "Don't forget," he continues, "what happened from Shittim to Gilgal."

In Moab, the Israelites faced an unwelcoming opponent on their way to the Promised Land (Numb. 22-24). So desperate was Balak, king of Moab, to thwart the Israelite incursion into his land that he solicited the services of Balaam, a Mesopotamian diviner who lived several hundred miles away. Hired by Balak to curse the Israelites, Balaam instead found himself standing helplessly on a hill overlooking the enemy:

*Balak has brought me from Aram,
the king of Moab from the eastern mountains;
'Come, curse Jacob for me;
Come, denounce Israel!'
How can I curse whom God has not cursed?
How can I denounce those whom
the Lord has not denounced?*

Then, unable to curse the Israelites, Balaam defied King Balak of Moab and proceeded to do just the opposite:

*See, I have received a command to bless;
he has blessed, and I cannot revoke it.*

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Ecumenical Trends

EDITOR, James Loughran, SA ■ ASSOCIATE EDITOR, Timothy I. MacDonald, SA ■ BUSINESS MANAGER, Veronica Sullivan, Editorial Office ■ Ecumenical Trends, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 1960, New York, NY 10115 ■ Business and Subscription Office, Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, PO Box 333, Garrison, NY 10524-0333.

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*He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob;
Nor has he seen trouble in Israel.
The Lord their God is with them,
acclaimed as a king among them.
God, who brings them out of Egypt,
is like the horns of a wild ox for them.
Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob,
no divination against Israel;
now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel,
'See what God has done!'*

And why this sudden change of heart? Did the Israelites actually believe that Balaam's "decision" to bless them rather than curse them was a mere coincidence? If so, Balaam himself knew better. "I have received a command to bless," he acknowledges. But from whom? Certainly not Balak! Balaam knew the answer to that question, too. "See what God has done," he concludes.

Immediately, everyone in the courtroom recognizes why God enters this story into evidence. For one thing, it demonstrates his obvious care for Israel. God did not abandon his people in the desert, regardless of what the Israelites say. For another, it raises this troubling question: "If God's concern for Israel was apparent even to a foreign diviner like Balaam, then how in the world could the Israelites themselves fail to see it?"

The incident between Shittim and Gilgal is of an entirely different sort. Shittim was a small town on the eastern side of the Jordan River in what today is the country of Jordan. Gilgal was situated on the western side of the Jordan in what is today Israel. Although a relatively short trip geographically – roughly twelve miles – the journey from Shittim to Gilgal was of great significance. For one thing, it served as a fresh demonstration of God's power in that he once again led the Israelites through a body of water – the Jordan River – on dry ground. In the same way that God led the Israelites out of Egypt, so would he lead them into the Promised Land. For another, the journey from Shittim to Gilgal brought an end to Israel's lengthy wandering. In Moab, God saved his people from the destructive hands of a foreign ruler and from the evil intentions of a pagan diviner. Between Shittim and Gilgal, God brought them "home." The same God who now sits rejected on the witness stand both protected and provided for his people again and again. But somehow, they forgot. "What more," he wants to know, "could I have possibly done for them?" As the Lord's testimony comes to an end, we can hardly help but sense the pain and amazement in his words. Here is a thoroughly devoted husband, accused by his wife of total neglect. Here is a caring father, charged by his children of emotional abuse. Here is a generous master, ridiculed by his subjects for hoarding the goods. Now, having heard God's testimony – his desperate pleas – in court, we can only wonder how the Israelites will respond. What will their side of the story be?

Israel Takes the Stand (vv. 6-7)

Alarming, the Israelites stagger as they approach the witness stand. In the light of God's compelling testimony, their former accusations now seem unfounded to everyone in the courtroom, including them. Rather than formulating a defense and calling

witnesses to refute God's case, they interrupt the proceedings and ask for counsel. "What are we to do?" the Israelites inquire. "How can we possibly show our faces to God again?" they wonder. But then, as in the previous scene when God was on the stand, they find themselves so distraught over their ungrateful accusations that they, too, fail to wait for an answer. Instead, the Israelites blurt out possible responses of their own (vv. 6-7).

Reaching deep into their bag of sacred rituals, the accused suggest that perhaps the Lord will drop his case if only they perform more religious acts. "Shall I come before him with burnt offerings?" they inquire. "Would gifts of year-old calves, thousands of rams or ten thousands of rivers of oil put me in the clear?" they continue. As is so often the case when human beings seek to find divine favor, they turn to works and performance – they turn to "religion." "Surely," people in our own day and age often say in either word or deed, "we can earn God's approval by attending our local church more regularly, placing a few extra cents into the offering plate, or serving on yet another congregational committee. God, after all, desires most that we be religious." Such thinking, this text assures us, is anything but new!

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to everyone in the courtroom,
including them.*

Then, apparently sensing the inadequacies of their initial proposals, the Israelites desperately step well beyond the customary limits of religious practices and propose the ultimate sacrifice – human:

*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

Clearly, the Israelites assume that even God can be bought. Everyone can be bought, after all—for the right price. And the currency that God prefers? Religious rituals and practices.

The Prophet Offers a Summation (v. 8)

One can only imagine the expression on Micah's face, not to mention God's, as the Israelites conclude their testimony and step down from the stand. In the same way that Jesus, centuries later, will stare into the eyes of his utterly confused disciples and ask, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:21), Micah turns to the Israelites and begins his summation: "He has told you what is good and what the Lord requires of you." There is, as Micah understands the covenant between God and Israel, no mystery here, no ambiguity, no place for genuine confusion. God has not kept his desires and expectations a secret. God, they should already know, does

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not delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, but in obedience (1 Sam. 15:22). And further, God hates human sacrifices most of all (Deut. 12:31). Everyone in Israel should know this already, Micah implies. It is very basic theology.

Nevertheless, prophet after prophet in ancient Israel, like so many pastors and spiritual guides in our own day, found themselves confronting this same faulty notion over and over again. In its more subtle form, it goes like this: "If I am careful enough to perform enough religious acts, God will ignore my shortcomings and look favorably on me." In its most blatant form, it goes like this: "Do whatever you want. Eat, drink and be merry. You can even lie and cheat. Just be sure to perform certain religious rituals every day and God will be pleased." But are either of these variations correct? "Absolutely not," the Lord responds in Isaiah 1:11. "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" he asks. Then, with unwavering bluntness, he states his true feelings:

*I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.
When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me (Isa. 1:11-13a).*

Other prophets express very similar sentiments (Jer. 14:12; Hos. 2:11; 8:13; Amos 4:4-5). Religious rituals and practices are not an end in themselves. You cannot conceal morally bankrupt lives with a shiny religious veneer. What God truly desires is obedience and the complete devotion of his people.

This is precisely the point that Micah expresses with remarkable brevity and conviction here in verse 8. According to the Talmud, David in Psalm 15 consolidated the 613 requirements of the Mosaic Law into 11. Now, the prophet goes even further, listing three:

*'...and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God.'*

Centuries later, Jesus will go still further, whittling the core requirements of Scripture down to just two (Mt. 22:36-39).

The three requirements mentioned here in Micah's courtroom summation are memorable for both their simplicity and comprehensiveness. You do not need a seminary education to understand them, yet their meaning is inexhaustible. The first requirement, "to do justice," speaks directly to the way people act. Rather than merely thinking or talking about such virtues as fairness, equity and integrity, God calls his people to promote right and proper dealings in every area of life. The second, "to love kindness," describes the very heart condition out of which such acts of justice arise. God delights in those who do justice, not out of fear or the hope of self-advancement, but out of true compassion. And the third, "to walk humbly with your God," captures the entire essence of a life that pleases God – inside and out. "Walking with God" involves *obeying God*, being doers of the Word and not just hearers (Ps. 86:11; 3 John 1:4). Walking "humbly" with God involves *acknowledging God*, living in constant awareness of human


brokenness and divine mercy. God, in short, wants his people to remember that they were once slaves in Egypt, acknowledge God's gracious intervention on their behalf, and extend to others similar expressions of mercy (Dt. 5:15). Years later, Jesus will invite his followers to do much the same thing (Luke 22:19).

The profound implications of these three requirements are minimized, however, if we fail to see them in their precise context here. In listing them in his summation as the proper alternative to the religious rituals proposed by the Israelites in verses 6-7, Micah further establishes a crucial contrast between two competing views of religion and faith. The view espoused by the Israelites and so commonly embraced by many people throughout time places religious responsibility largely in the hands of humanity. As a result, it typically leads to neurosis ("I must do more to earn God's favor"), pride ("My religious acts are better than yours") or indifference to others ("I have enough to do looking out for myself"). The view set forth by the prophet leaves religious responsibility ultimately in the hands of God, where it rightly belongs. As a result, it leads to assurance ("I can rest in God's care"), humility ("Even my most costly sacrifice is worthless") and solidarity ("You and I are in this together"). Clearly, Micah does more in his summation than replace a handful of negative, religious acts with a three positive ones. What he does amounts to nothing less than a total displacement of works-based religion in favor of faith-based relationships.

After concluding his summation, Micah leaves the stand and returns to his seat. There is silence in the courtroom. Although no formal verdict is announced, the mood in the air leaves little room for doubt concerning the anticipated outcome. The Israelites' original accusations were unfounded, as even they have come to realize. God's love and faithfulness over the years can perhaps be ignored or forgotten, but they cannot be denied. God has kept and continues to keep his side of the covenantal bargain.

Yet ironically, it seems from Micah's summation as though the Israelites were half right when they testified on the witness stand just a few moments ago. God does delight in sacrifices and offerings after all. Unfortunately, like so many other people down through the years, the Israelites totally misunderstood the types of sacrifices and offerings that God has in mind. God, the prophet Micah reminds us, has little interest in animals, oil and grain. He apparently already has plenty of them. God also has little interest in religion. He has clearly seen too much of that!! What God does want from his people is genuine devotion. He wants – requires – a *sacrificed life*. As the Apostle Paul so beautifully phrased it centuries later in his letter to the Romans:

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God,
to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to
God, which is your spiritual worship(12:1).*

God wants us. Not animals, oil or grain. God wants our obedience, not new moons or other festivals. And God wants relationships, not religion. God wants us – heart, soul, mind and strength – fully devoted to him and his service. When we come before God with otherwise empty hands, lay ourselves on the altar and welcome his lordship over our lives, we can be sure that our sacrifice will always be warmly received. 

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day 2013

“Where do we go from here?”

Sermon Notes on Micah 6:6-8

By Michael E. Livingston

“Where do we go from here?” This provocative question is proposed by our friends from the Church of India for study and reflection during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The week includes the annual celebration of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. We owe a debt of gratitude to our friends from India for the selection of this profound text and the challenge to explore where the text leads us in the context of our volatile and complex world.

1. In recognition of two central features of this week, the occasion of the celebration of the birthday of MLK, Jr. and India as the home country of the people of faith who have chosen our text, I am going to provide quotations from a collection of MLK, Jr.’s speeches and sermons titled *All Labor Has Dignity*, and from *Walking with the Comrades*, Arundhati Roy’s searing book on the collusion of the Indian government and the forces of global capitalism that keep one particular rural community in India in extreme poverty. I must also confess my bias to use as a filter the substance of my professional focus on poverty and in particular the plight of the worker in our nation and world.

2. The chosen text is Micah 6:6-8:

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”⁷ He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

First, some thoughts about the text.

3. We don’t know much about Micah, but we do know that he was from a small rural village, Moresheth. He spoke for poor farm workers suffering from the oppression of powerful landlords who had little regard for their humanity. Micah used his voice for the worker, for common everyday people. He didn’t just look at injustice in society, he shouted against it, he named the hypocrisy he witnessed and spoke truth to power. Piety masquerading as true faith was intolerable to Micah.

4. What about that word “Require?” Rev. James Howell, pastor of the Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte, NC points out that a more subtle rendering of the Hebrew word translated as require suggests:

“...undertones of affection...” even “the healthiest sort of dependency, as in ‘the child requires his mother’s love... There is a mood of seeking in *darash*; lovers seek each other out, and a shepherd seeks his lost sheep.... So when the Lord ‘requires’ justice, kindness and mercy, it isn’t that the Lord ‘insists on’ or ‘demands’ these things. God seeks them, yearns for them...”
(*The United Methodist Reporter*, June 13, 2012)

5. About the Hebrew word for justice in this text, Howell says the emphasis isn’t on fairness or a more artificial balancing of good

versus evil, rewarding the one and punishing the other. The meaning has more the sense of envisioning and creating a world where a deep enriching community is formed because members of the community share of the resources that God has given not to a few, but to all.

6. Would a just God be satisfied with the form of religion, with the practice of ritual in the absence of humility before God? Would a just God be satisfied with the practice of ritual in the absence of care for the poor farmer? Would a just God accept animal sacrifice and empty words in the absence of acts of loving kindness toward workers in the fields? Micah didn’t just say no, recalling Amos, Isaiah, and Hosea, he said you know what God requires so don’t pretend you don’t.

7. We should be careful not to settle for a sentimental understanding of justice as charity alone. Charity is important – even essential in a nation and world of so much deprivation. The millions of hungry and homeless people wandering the earth as refugees or living in squalid camps for months and years on end need the kindness, the charity of those more fortunate. God bless those who are able to give of their abundance to ease the pain and suffering of others. Justice requires change beyond charity. Structures and systems that create and sustain deprivation, endless wars, and global economic forces that seek new markets at all costs in the ruthless pursuit of profit must be changed.

8. Later notes will illustrate the necessity for compassion (loving kindness) and justice, but what about humility? In a sermon in 1889 Charles Spurgeon preached about the injunction to “...walk humbly...” One could easily miss the subtle contrast in the text to the question the prophet asks: “With what shall I come before the Lord, and *bow* myself...” What Micah later claims the person of faith knows is to “...walk...” humbly with God. Walk implies action, movement, and progress. To go backward is to risk the sin of pride or to be sidetracked by nostalgia or regret. To walk, to move forward is to invite the humility progress against especially difficult odds inspires and instills. And surely progress, moving forward against the terrible odds faced by so many in our world is a more faithful response to God than ritualized bowing.

9. “Where do we go from here?” begs a prior question: Where is “here”? Before we know where we ought to go it makes sense to understand something about where we are, about our context. And again, I want to focus on the most vulnerable among us, the growing numbers of people in the United States and in India who do not have the means to take good care of themselves and their

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The Rev. Michael E. Livingston is the Director of Public Policy and the Washington Office of Interfaith Worker Justice. He is a clergy person in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and a former President of the National Council of Churches.

families and the systems, political and economic that maintain this status quo. The world is not simply a vast place where individuals come and go in splendid equanimity. It is a deeply divided environment polarized by history, by race and nation, by religion and region, by the control and exploitation of natural resources. Christians believe this earth was created by and belongs to God, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." Psalm 24.1

10. Minimum wage in the United States today is \$7.25. The last year congress passed legislation set in motion triggers to raise the wage to its present level was in 2007. Senator Harkin of Iowa has a bill to raise the minimum wage to \$9.80 but there is no hope this bill will be passed anytime soon. Why \$9.80? It has nothing to do with keeping pace with productivity or the actual needs of American workers. It is because crossing the \$10 "barrier" is simply too high a political leap. Where do we go from here?

"Labor and the civil rights movement, the unemployed, the aged, and elements of the church world can unite for a dynamic crusade for a two-dollar minimum wage covering all who work, not merely some. A public works program that will level ghettos, create fine housing for the millions now living in fifty- and sixty-year-old tenements, build new schools, hospitals, recreation areas, will do more to abolish poverty than tax cuts that ultimately benefit the middle class and rich." MLK Jr. (This and all quotes attributed to MLK Jr. are taken from *All Labor Has Dignity*, edited by Michael K. Honey, Beacon Press)

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The Fair Minimum Wage Act last raised minimum wage in 2007, raising it from \$5.15 per hour to \$7.25 per hour. In reality, however, minimum wage has fallen by 25% in real dollars since the early 1970s when considering inflation.

11. In India, about 350 million people, one-third of the population, live below the poverty line. While new measures to set the poverty line are controversial, resulting in lower levels of population, we can agree that 350 million people living in poverty is a staggering number of children of God. Writes Roy:

People are engaged in a whole spectrum of struggles all over the country – the landless, the homeless, Dalits, workers, peasants, weavers. They're pitted against a juggernaut of injustices, including policies that allow a wholesale corporate takeover of people's land and resources. (*Walking with the Comrades*, Arundhati Roy, Penguin Books)

12. CEO's of the 50 companies employing the most low-wage workers make an average of \$9.4 million per year; 450 times that

of a full-time worker making \$10 per hour. Wal-Mart workers can't afford health care, their hours are kept below full-time and their schedules don't permit them to seek other employment. The low prices shoppers come at the high cost of management taking advantage of those whose labor make those wages possible. Where do we go from here? King suggests something of the spirit a person of faith ought to have in the face of the inequalities and injustices that abound in our nation and world:

But there are some things in our social system to which I am proud to be maladjusted and to which I suggest that you, too, ought to be maladjusted. I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of mob rule. I never intend to adjust myself to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence. I call upon you to be maladjusted." (*All Labor Has Dignity*, MLK, Jr.)

13. In the name of development and progress, Roy maintains that the government of India has sacrificed its own people in order to accommodate the appetite of "modern development" and those who profit from it; profit over people:

Each time it needed to displace a large population – for dams, irrigation projects, mines – it talked of "bringing tribals into the mainstream" or of giving them "the fruits of modern development." Of the tens of millions of internally displaced people (more than thirty million by big dams alone), refugees of India's "progress," the great majority are tribal people. When the government begins to talk of tribal welfare, it's time to worry.

14. Income inequality in the United States is staggering, the worst it has been since the great depression in the last century. In the world at large, the poorest among us live off of no more than \$2 a day. Can we even begin to imagine that kind of deprivation?

By the millions, people in the other America find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.

The curse of poverty has no justification in our age. It is socially as cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization, when men ate each other because they had not yet learned to take food from the soil or to consume the abundant animal life around them. The time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct, and immediate abolition of poverty.

In the human rights revolution, if something isn't done, and done and in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed. (*All Labor Has Dignity*, MLK, Jr.)

15. Where do we go from here? King suggests a notion so radical I hesitate to include it here. I do because perhaps it is precisely the radical option that best mirrors the broad and expansive compassion, grace, mercy, and love of God.

Now, what we've got to do . . . is to attack the problem of poverty and really mobilize the forces of our country to have an all-out war against poverty, because what we have now is not even a good skirmish against poverty. I need not remind you that poverty, the gaps in our society, the gulfs between inordinate superfluous wealth and abject deadening poverty have brought about a great deal of despair, a great deal of tension, a great deal of bitterness.

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Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2013

Micah 6:1-8 - A Homily

By Mary Lin Hudson

Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

What if God decided to take us to court? What if the time came when humanity was finally held accountable for all its actions against the earth and its people? I can envision the trial of the century, enacted at the International Court of Justice at the Peace Palace in The Hague, the Netherlands. It is there that legal disputes between nations and disputes on an international scale are submitted and heard. “God versus the People of God.” At that global level, imagine the God of the universe bringing a dispute against the people who claim to belong to God.

That is what is happening in the language of the text from the prophet Micah. God is taking God’s people to court. The courtroom is not of human construction, however. The trial takes place in full view of mountains and rivers, trees and animals which will adjudicate the trial. This setting suggests that God’s “controversy” with God’s people is more than a momentary problem to be corrected. This “controversy” has historic roots with cosmic consequences. How the dispute is resolved has consequences for the future of the earth, as well as the destiny of a covenant people.

Who better to adjudicate the dispute between God and God’s people! Although the mountains and the hills of Micah’s day had not yet suffered grave injury at the hands of human exploitation, today’s mountains and hills in Tennessee, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and now Utah, that bear the scars of mountain top removal or strip mining, would be perfect judges. The rivers that flow through South Africa, Mongolia, Peru, Russia, Indonesia, Zambia, Argentina, Mexico, Bangladesh and Haiti carry the waste of human consumption and the stains of pollution from the industries of “human progress.” Let the rivers be the judge! Global economics has been quick to alter the earthly landscape in order to fund the human desire for wealth and power. The earth, our home, stands as a witness to the pleas of the plaintiff in the case against God’s people. Now, more than ever, God’s judgment will be adjudicated by a planet at risk.

So what is the nature of this great dispute? What is the nature of the great controversy that would lead God to drag the people of God into court? It is not beyond our imagination to suggest a variety of charges that might be brought against us by God. God could charge us with defamation or libel, making public statements about God that are false and injurious to God’s reputation within the wider society, especially where public confidence in a Christian God is waning. God could accuse us of making claims about God that just aren’t true. Or, instead, would God bring a charge of fraud, indicting us for those times when the church has conveniently falsified the truth in order to place itself in a more advantageous position? Surely God has not forgotten the attempts by church leaders to cover up the sexual exploitation of children or the economic exploitation of the poor to ensure the wealth, reputation and power of church leaders. Perhaps God is accusing us of the physical and mental maltreatment of others who cannot contribute significantly to our own prosperity. Certainly, God could bring a charge of negligence against God’s people in light of the thousands upon thousands of persons in conditions of poverty, hunger, enslavement, and/or disease that live without protection from unreasonable risk or harm. We can imagine a number of charges that God might bring against us, God’s people. It wouldn’t be too difficult to indict us, either. There is plenty of evidence to discredit the church’s claims of innocence.

In spite of all the criminal indictments that could be hurled against God’s people, God’s controversy shows greater resemblance to a case in a civil court, rather than a criminal one. The complaint sounds as if the one party has injured the other, and the question of restitution or reconciliation is at stake. God is sitting in the plaintiff’s chair, while humanity is required to defend itself. The covenant has been violated and the defendant is being charged.

Listen to the language of grievance coming from Yahweh: “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” These are deeply emotional statements coming from a sovereign deity. They are angry words. The courts are more apt to hear these words uttered by a spouse of 10-20 years whose partner has been engaged in an extra-marital affair or whose spouse perhaps has stolen and spent the lifelong savings upon which the other party depends. This God has been hurt by the cruelty and desertion of God’s people from their original agreement that established the relationship. God has been betrayed. With God’s utterance comes the question that must be adjudicated by the court: Is this covenant “irretrievably broken,” or can the two parties be reconciled?

When controversies arise between parties that lead to civil action, the courts in the United States would much rather the parties sit down together to negotiate a fair settlement of the claims. Rather than dragging the controversy through a long, painful, expensive

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Mary Lin Hudson, PhD is Professor of Homiletics and Liturgics at Memphis Theological Seminary, Memphis, TN.

God is sitting in the plaintiff's chair, while humanity is required to defend itself. The covenant has been violated and the defendant is being charged.

ordeal of a trial, many persons or groups now prefer to offer a "settlement" before the judge rules. In our text, the people's response is exactly like that. The people of God would like to "pay off" the plaintiff if they could. They would love to be able to assess the damages done and "settle" the dispute so that it would go away and they could get back to their lives. Considerable damage has been done to the covenant relationship, however, and any efforts to rectify the situation would require more compensation than the people can muster. "Burnt offerings, and calves a year old?" Not enough. "Thousands of rams with ten thousand rivers of oil?" That's impressive, but not enough to settle this lawsuit. "Our firstborn children for the sin of our souls?" That may be an overtly dramatic offer to settle the damages, reminiscent of the human sacrifices made to other people's gods, but what would it truly accomplish? These suggested efforts to appease God grow in size, scope and scale of sacrifice, but none of these has the power to make restitution for the betrayal of the covenant. None of these has the power to restore the relationship between God and God's people.

What sacrifice can we offer that can make up for over 20,000 children a day who die of diseases resulting from malnutrition? (The World Food Programme, www.wfp.org/hunger/stats) What can begin to replace the life of a child or a parent blown apart by the missiles of war in Afghanistan, Syria, the Congo and elsewhere? What price can be paid for the genocide committed in the past two hundred years in the name of God? Nothing is enough! We cannot make restitution for our sin. Nothing can erase what has been done.

Why would God's people think that by exercising their own power to take a life – a life of a calf, a ram, or even a human – that such an act would somehow eliminate the consequences of sin? After all, God already has the sovereign power to exercise God's claim over all these things. Do not the creatures of the fields belong to God? Do not the offspring of human beings come from the miracle of life beginning and ending in the mystery that is God? Human efforts to enact judgment through exercising power over life and death, even in an effort to please God, do not impress the God who is the source of life itself and who receives all living things into death. Every human effort to "settle the lawsuit" that God brings against us is always futile.

Who is this God who calls us to account for our betrayal, anyway? Who is the one who dares to bring charges against God's own family? This is the God of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – the Deity that empowered the men and women leaders who saved God's people from slavery in Egypt. This is a God of liberation who lifts up courageous and compassionate leaders in every time and place to release people into freedom. This is a God who

creates God's own family of faith out of a rebellious, ragtag bunch of oppressed people. This is the God of freedom and hope.

Who is this God? Who cries out to God's people for an answer to this charge of unfaithfulness? This is the God of Balaam, the prophet, who proclaimed to the King who hired him to curse Israel, "How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom God has not denounced?" (Numbers 23:8) This is the God of Balaam who prophesied, "God is not a human being that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Numbers 23:19) This is the God who keeps promises. This is the God of blessings and not curses.

Who is this God? Who makes an effort to restore covenant with a wayward people? This is the God of Joshua who, at Shittim, parted the waters of the Jordan River so that Israel could cross over into Gilgal, the land of promise. (Joshua 3:1-4:24) This is the God who exercised the power to establish a homeland for God's own people where they would be safe and stable, productive and proud. This is the God who establishes, enables, and protects God's own people.

So, what does the God of Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Balaam, and Joshua truly desire as a settlement of the lawsuit? Nothing that God's people do not already know. Nothing that God's people are not capable of providing. God has already revealed the terms of the covenant relationship: to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. This is what God wants.

Doing justice is a way of living cooperatively with a just God. The history of God's relationship with God's people reveals that God acts justly (Isaiah 30:18). The theologian, Carol Dempsey, suggests that three types of justice are involved in this ethical orientation: commutative justice, which focuses on just relationships between members of the community; distributive justice, which ensures the equitable distribution of goods, benefits, and burdens of a community; and social justice, which creates a social order necessary for these other forms of justice to be sustained. (Carol Dempsey, "Micah 6:1-8" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Vol. 1, p. 294.)

"Doing justice" does not mean single-handedly wrestling all the wrongs of society in order to make them right. Sometimes "doing justice" does mean taking an active role in standing up to persons in power to hold them accountable for the welfare of the community. Activism has an important place in the work of justice, but it is not its only expression. "Doing justice" can also mean aligning oneself with the "shalom" of God and its values. It means valuing all persons and creatures as full and equal partners in a life of mutuality and interdependence established by God from the foundations of the earth.

Sitting together at the table of Christ and saying "Thanks" is a model of justice. In a world of individual, privatized religion, where self-satisfaction trumps the common good, God calls us to a different way of life. Like the words of Paul to the church at Corinth (I Cor. 11:17-34), the church is not to be commended by a table practice that enriches a few at the expense of the rest of the community. Until the church learns to practice the equitable distribution of wealth, benefits, burdens and responsibilities, we

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cannot “walk as one.” And so, at the table of Christ, we keep practicing until the day we get it right, gathering as brothers and sisters given life by one God. We do our best to resemble the accounts of the earliest Christians in Acts 2:43-47 who shared everything in common so that no one was in need. At the table of Christ, all have full and equal access to nourishment. All are fed from the same loaf and cup. The meal is incomplete until all are fed. We pour out our gratitude to a God who is generous in all good gifts, rich in mercy and love, and overflowing with blessings of peace. That God has told us what is “good.”

Justice seeks ways to distribute food and water, health care and security to all members of the human family. As people of God, we must question the church’s accumulation of wealth and material possessions when human brothers and sisters lack basic resources to sustain life. We must open doors and hearts to provide health care, clothing, education, and employment to persons who are cast aside because of gender, race, caste, ethnic background, age, and levels of ability. God’s household of justice is a place where everyone is cared for, everyone is valued, and everyone makes a valuable contribution to the welfare of all. A just life values relationships over things, compassion over power, and peace over privilege.

Loving kindness is more than “just being nice.” The word for kindness in this passage (*hesed*) can be translated as “steadfast love” or “loyalty.” Loving kindness means to live steadfastly, remaining loyal and faithful to the relationships with God and with neighbor. Establishing a relationship of trust is essential for justice to sway the hearts and minds of the larger community. A person who is trustworthy is someone who can be relied upon to act for the good of the other, whose love does not waiver. To love kindness is to value one’s obligation and freedom within the human family and in the covenant relationship with the Creator. Compassion is born out of this kind of loyalty. Compassion is a feeling of deep sorrow for the misfortune of another, accompanied by the desire to alleviate that suffering? How can we hear of the enslavement of a young woman as an object of sexual exploitation without having our hearts broken in sorrow for her? How can we see another young mother die of AIDS in Africa without engaging resources to provide education, medication, and support for the orphans of this pandemic? In steadfast loyalty to the covenant with God, we commit ourselves to falling in love with what God loves and being trustworthy in our devotion to God’s desires for the people and creatures of God’s universe.

Walking humbly with God simply means staying aligned with God and maintaining a proper estimate of our own significance. Walking with someone requires that you alter your own gait to match the length and pace of the other’s steps. Too much inde-

pendence in walking moves persons far ahead of the other or causes one to lag behind the other. Too much distraction can take us in a completely alternate direction, separating us from the other. So it is with our walk with God. Walking humbly with God is modeling our own lives after God’s own life. God acts justly; therefore, we act justly. God is faithful; therefore, we are faithful. God reaches out in mercy and love; so do we. We align ourselves with the God who sees us, loves us, and calls us to become what God intends for us to be. In turn, we see ourselves and others as valued, loved, and deserving to be full participants in this gift of life. Walking humbly with God keeps us walking beside all our brothers and sisters on the journey

As members of the worldwide Christian community, the task of walking together in humility has proven to be a difficult exercise. We desire to walk in ways that are just, trustworthy, compassionate, and humble because we have been claimed in our baptism by a God who is just, trustworthy, compassionate, and merciful. When we try to walk together, however, we run into some problems. Our different languages, theological claims, and ritual practices, which shape our relationship to God, shape our views of justice, loyalty and humility in differing ways. How we relate to God shapes how we understand ourselves, others and the world. One Christian’s commitment to justice for women envisions an economy based on equality and mutuality between women and men in all areas of life. Another Christian’s commitment to the just distribution of wealth envisions a stable global economy unhindered by warfare, climate change, greed, and disease. Another Christian’s commitment to the just exercise of government may envision a world where rulers and citizens share a common social vision of peace. Each Christian’s vision motivates them to act in ways that promote their particular vision of God’s realm. However, our separate visions, no matter how noble, prevent us from perceiving the complete nature of God in all of God’s full expressions.

True justice is only possible when all persons make a commitment to engage in honest conversation from a position of humility, hearing the sorrow and joy in the voices of other human beings who are unlike us and engaging those stories of real people as the place where the covenant between God and humanity is enacted. The people with powerful voices commit themselves to listening in silence so that the silenced may find a voice. Persons of power must prove their trustworthiness so that victims of oppression and violence might find the courage to entrust their stories to them. Christian unity requires a high level of loyalty to God and neighbor, a willingness to walk together in humility, and a compassionate desire to bring an end to all forms of injustice in our world.

After all these years, Christians still struggle to walk as one? Christian unity requires much more than most of us have been willing to offer. Yet, the prayer of Jesus, “that they all may be one,” begs us to renew our commitment to live together as sisters and brothers in unity. After all, according to the prophet Micah, that is exactly what God requires of us.

So, there it is. We are guilty on all counts. The earth is quick to pronounce judgment against us. We must pay for our betrayal of

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Ten Ecumenical Lectures Series Addressing Christian Unity Across North America

By Gerald Stover

The purpose of this article is to report on ten annual (and semi-annual) formal ecumenical lecture events held in North America for local and regional audiences. Several of these lecture events also present interreligious dialogue lectures. The Internet websites, web pages and brief histories of these lecture events have been researched and several “Best Practices” for Digital Internet posting of these formal ecumenical lectures have been scrutinized and noted. Additional commentary regarding the histories, procedure, presentation, substance and evaluation of these public events will follow.

Ten Lectures

1) Paul Wattson Annual Lectures on Christian Unity & Interreligious Dialogue

(Society of the Atonement, San Francisco University and annually repeated in San Jose, CA on following day)

See: http://www.atonementfriars.org/our_missions_and_ministries/paul_wattson_lectures.html

2) Paul Wattson Annual Lectures on Interreligious Dialogue

(Atlantic School of Theology Nova Scotia, CN)

See: http://www.atonementfriars.org/our_missions_and_ministries/paul_wattson_lectures.html

3) Graymoor Bi-annual Lectures on Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue

(New York City, NY, Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute)

See: <http://www.geii.org/>

See: http://www.atonementfriars.org/communications_and_online_media/video_archives.html

4) Bi-annual Earl Lectures

(Pacific School of Religion Berkeley CA) Week long events.

See: <http://www.psr.edu/earl-lectures-and-pastoral-conference>.

Best Online Practices Ecumenical Lecture Webpage(s) USA

5) Peter Ainslie annual Lectures On Christian Unity

(Disciples of Christ)

See: <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/resources/#1>

6) Bi-annual Stalcup Lectures on Christian Unity Dallas Texas

(Disciples of Christ) See: <http://www.disciples.org/ccu/resources/#1>

7) Figel Annual Lectures on Christian Unity

(Washington DC, Washington Theological Consortium)

See: http://www.washtheocon.org/consortium_events.html

See also: <http://www.olconference.com/>

Best Online Practices Web Page(s)

(For Byzantine Catholic, Roman Catholic and Orthodox TriLateral Dialogues).

8) Robert K. Campbell Annual Lectures on Christian Unity

(Lehigh County Conference of Churches Allentown, PA)

See: http://www.lehighchurches.org/campbell_lectures.html

9) Western Diocesan & Eparchial Commissions on Ecumenism Biannual lectures (Western Canada)

See: <http://www.calgarydiocese.ca/ecumenical-a-interreligious.html>

For Best Online Practices of a Diocesan CADEIO Web Page in Canada.

10) Lourdes University Annual Ecumenical Lecture

(Sylvania, Ohio).

See: <http://www.lourdes.edu/ecumenical.aspx>.

The 21st Century Ecumenical Lecture Format Challenges: Process, Presentation, Substance & Evaluation

The variety and histories of regional ecumenical lecture series devoted to the topic of Christian unity manifest only one part of a wider group of theological education challenges now facing the churches and theological institutions of North America.

Will the “lecture format” for *any* theological or religious topic be sustained through formal live, adult lecture settings in the future? Live audiences for all formal lecture events in North America seem to be diminishing while online “ghost” or “aftermarket” lecture audiences are growing. (See: <http://www.apple.com/education/itunes-u/>)

International audiences without Internet access are, of course, an entirely different, albeit, pressing concern. This article will restrict its descriptions and commentary to formal ecumenical lectures given in North America.

Current ecumenical lecture series in North America often function more as “silos of information” that are more “insular” than “expansive” in the distribution of their content and public witness. Several ecumenical lecture series described are not sufficiently funded to switch to newer media platforms, or they are restricted by copy right and institutional restrictions from disseminating their content via the Internet to a wider public.

As of 2012, only a few North American ecumenical lecture series have fully embraced the use of Internet and multimedia platforms for distribution of their content. Even the better funded and established lecture series have only posted partial archives online up to, and during the writing of this article in 2012. One recent exceptional example available for any reader’s review is the National Workshop on Christian Unity 2012 website where written text, high quality video, and PowerPoint media platforms are made available to Internet viewers with a high speed Internet connection.

Confusion continues over which media platform and Internet formats are most appropriate for the posting of lecture events in *all* forms of adult higher education. The National Workshop on Christian Unity can be viewed as a group that dealt directly with Internet viewers needs and concerns and can be acknowledged as a “Best Practices” website during 2012 for delivery of coherent Internet content and clarity for their National Ecumenical Event of April 16-19 2012 in Oklahoma City, OK, USA.

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Gerald W. Stover is a lay ecumenist from Mennonite background and a MATS graduate in Old Testament Studies from Moravian Theological Seminary. A long time friend of the Focolare Movement, he lives Christian Unity by serving as a planning committee member of the Robert K. Campbell Lectures on Christian Unity.

The fact is that North America has a patchwork quilt of formal ecumenical lecture events and venues reflecting the current diversity, upheaval, and the wider turmoil of theological education and the religious institutions in North America. The ecumenical movement is both blessed and burdened by these complexities in its presentations and public witness. Ecumenical lecture events can be seen as “bell weather” occasions for monitoring the changes in North American Theological Education. They can also be seen as “foot notes” to wider changes in the religious history of North American regional concerns for Christian faith and practice.

The rise and decline in attendance at various ecumenical lecture events can be useful for evaluating ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue vitality at the local and regional level wherever and whenever such lectures happen to unfold – or come to a close.

The fact is that North America has a patchwork quilt of formal ecumenical lecture events and venues reflecting the current diversity, upheaval, and the wider turmoil of theological education and the religious institutions in North America.

Procedure

While it is useful to compare and contrast the histories and foundations of the formal ecumenical lecture series noted above, it does not serve to undergird the reason(s) these formal ecumenical lecture events should actually continue, or whether new ecumenical lectures should be planted or encouraged to unfold.

Lecture coordinators, theological institutions and formal lecture planning groups need to have clear Statements of Purpose and/or Mission Statements to guide their deliberations and preparations for selection of their annual or bi-annual events, presentations, and their selection of the actual substance or ecumenical topic being presented. Funding restrictions (or funding surpluses) cannot excuse or substitute for shared, systematic reflection by the planning group as each of these scheduled formal lecture events approach and unfold.

The ten lectures listed above vary in how they choose to address these systematic procedural concerns. Respect for local and regional audience needs, and an awareness of their audience(s) concerns and priorities are seminal to planting and cultivating any formal ecumenical lecture series over time. Constituent planning groups, and lecture planning leaders need to know and be **able to clearly articulate** why the churches of North America need to keep the vision, and call to visible Christian unity alive in their individual lecture settings and regional contexts.

Rotation in planning personnel, regional ecumenical leadership, and the passing of one generational ecumenical vision on to a new group of younger persons who take ownership of the formal lecture event under their own ecumenical vision is critical to any formal ecumenical lecture event’s long term survival. Cultivating and mentoring future ecumenical leadership at the local and regional level also needs to be a healthy and intentional by-product of any vital formal ecumenical lecture event.

Presentation

The selection of a public venue or lecture hall, the sharing of a meal and/or a Prayer Service for Christian Unity, the remuneration of the speaker, the arrangement of seating for the audience, the value of organized panel responses, or an audience dialogue with the lecture presenter through a question and answer period are all moot points for each formal lecture planning group or committee to decide. Hospitality and a distinct form of shared public Prayer for Christian Unity seems to be valued by most of the ten formal lecture series described above (Below). The length of the presentation(s) and the level of fellowship and exchange between attendees is varied by the regional and local contexts and their constituencies, along with local needs and preferences. The needs of regional groups in diverse locales like Dallas, Texas, Western Canada, and/or New York City, or Sylvania, Ohio vary widely.

Archival needs are similar if a “ghost audience” or “after market” witness is to be cultivated and encouraged by any formal ecumenical Lecture series planning group. An argument can be made for not pursuing *any* archival records of formal lecture events so that all persons absent will experience genuine regret and plan attend “next time” – but good stewardship requires that the challenge of consistent archival record keeping be addressed more directly. A stated policy for belated inquiries for access to lecture content is necessary. Clear written contractual agreements with selected speakers can add further clarity in matters of ownership and copyright for lecture content and texts.

Substance

The variegated breadth and depth of the vision and call for visible Christian unity provides a broad spectrum of possible topics for any North American ecumenical lecture planning group. Ecumenical scholars writing and lecturing in both English and French are currently in sufficient supply to stimulate serious reflections for any Canadian audience.

Bi-lingual Spanish speaking scholars are also slowly appearing as the Hispanic populations of North America continue to grow and influence ecclesiastical life. Other bilingual ethnic, religious, cultural and racial groups can and will appear in these formal lecture settings in the future. The shifts in Church growth from European and North American settings to other global contexts requires attention and systematic reflection. Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry continue to be topical touch stones in public ecumenical dialogues both on a bi-lateral and multi-lateral basis. Ecclesiology and Theological Anthropology hold more difficult challenges for audiences to embrace and ponder.

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Several ecumenical lecture series are also founded and maintained to function as interreligious lecture series. The challenges of religious pluralism and public relations between religion and the state are now demanding steady North American public review. The global shift of Christian church growth and development to the Global South and to Asian regions of the Pacific rim may even leave some current heated Eurocentric and North American ecumenical debates on the sidelines of both future and present global church history.

How ecumenical lecture planning groups embrace these questions and the emerging tensions engendered by such topics may be determined by the comfort and/or discomfort level of their audiences. That would be most unfortunate. The variety and locales of the ten formal lecture series hitherto described, and their respective vision(s) for the call to visible Christian unity will reflect the intellectual honesty, integrity, and perseverance of their planning groups and their regional ecumenical leaders – with and without the regular approval of their audiences.

How these local and regional forums and formal lecture events can support further study, systematic reflection, and implementation of the vision and call to visible Christian unity should be of central concern to the wider ecumenical movement in North America. It is doubtful that live audiences will grow with regularity and enthusiasm at these formal lecture events in the foreseeable future. Therefore disciplined care and attention have to be given to the scheduling and rationales offered for the continuation and use of the formal lecture event format in the 21st century local and regional North American context.

Evaluation

The formal ecumenical lecture event should remain a resource for experimentation in dialogue, the presentation of new concepts and understandings of current ecumenical issues, and offer a challenge to audience experience. Focused opportunities for further systematic reflection upon a variety of media platforms which are previously agreed upon by the planning group and the lector need to be provided. The copyrights of the lector, the planning group, and the audience should be clarified before the formal lecture event unfolds – afterwards – especially in regard to the new forms of media content provided for any Internet absentee audience.

The diminishing value of the theological lecturer is often linked to the contemporary North American audience's access to other multi-media platforms for information. No guest lector can carry the full responsibility of the formal lecture event without the commitment of the lecture host planning group. While seasoned guest lecturers are essential for successful formal lecture events, the planning group's perseverance and attention to detail while developing the context and addressing the content of the lecture is also necessary. Support for the formal lecture can include panel responses, small group interaction before and after the lecture, and focused, coherent Q & A audience responses. It should be noted that very few Internet audience Q & A sessions are fully audible to Internet viewers. Live streaming video and questions by e-mail or texting is also an option for some newer lecture settings and media platforms. This technology is beyond most of the current formal ecumenical lecture events listed above, but it has been presented and pursued in the Chicago area in 2012.

No guest lector can carry the full responsibility of the formal lecture event without the commitment of the lecture host planning group.

The shared responsibilities of both the formal ecumenical lecture planning groups and their guest lecturers are growing – audiences for formal lecture events have rising expectations as both live participants and as Internet observers. The lecture planning group and the lecturer need to have a clear idea of whether their audiences expect a formal lecture setting, an informal workshop environment, or a panel of organized regional representatives responding to the lecture. Audiences also need to be informed at the outset what technologies and media platforms are being utilized for a wider Internet audience. Clarity in such matters should also be provided to the lector in advance of the ecumenical lecture event.

21st Century North American Formal Ecumenical Lecture Events as both Foolishness and Profundity

Bringing the esoteric and ephemeral aspects of the vision for visible Christian unity to bear upon the needs of both the local and regional audiences and a new absentee Internet audience is a necessary goal for both the 21st century ecumenical lector, lecturer and any formal ecumenical lecture series if they are to survive. All the local and regional efforts to keep the vision for Christian unity alive in the minds and hearts of their varied audiences as described above are to be embraced and commended to *Ecumenical Trends* readers... enhancing the “qualitative control” ecumenical lecture planning groups and committees exercise through the depth of *Koinonia* they choose to cultivate in their own group and committee relationships during the planning process and the actual implementation of their ecumenical lecture events needs to be emphasized. The quality of these planning group relationships along with the foresight and discernment they provide for their guest lector and their guest audiences (both live and absentee) are the lasting gift planning groups and ecumenical lecture committees make to their local environments, regions, and to the wider ecumenical movement.

It must also be noted that the newer and wider North American and international Internet audience is receiving the benefits of such local and regional ecumenical lecture planning, consideration, and commitment with increasing alertness. Explicit encouragement of Internet viewers to attend their own regional and ecumenical lecture events, Christian Unity Prayer services, and activities in person should soon become obvious to most ecumenical lecture planning groups. As of 2012, ecumenical lecture moderators and coordinators do not yet formally welcome Internet audiences into their events, and live audience experience in their ecumenical lecture introductions. This aspect of ecumenical hospitality and public Internet decorum needs to be more prudently and consistently cultivated by all North American formal ecumenical lecture planning groups in their regular public presentations.

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Comparisons and Contrasts

1) Paul Wattson Lectures on Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue: 30 year documented history

- a) organized website, overview and *History*
- b) partial online archives in text format
- c) full archival written texts at Graymoor archives in Garrison, NY
- d) historically published in the *Ecumenical Trends* monthly in full text format.

2) Earl Lectures: 100 years old with a published history chapter in text format.

“Best Practice” Online Model of a Lecture Series Web Page

- a) organized web site – Best Practice model with short History posted online
- b) partial online archives in audio pod cast format
- c) week long events and workshops attract a larger group than most other North American ecumenical lecture events.
- d) diminishing attendance and Earl endowment have led to a new Bi-annual format for 2013 and 2015.

3) Peter Ainsle Lectures on Christian Unity: Owned and operated by Disciples of Christ Denomination USA

- a) webpage organized and posted by Council on Christians Unity (DOC)
- b) past lectures published in DOC Journals and COCU Journals in text format
- c) recent lectures and partial archives posted online in text format.
- d) currently presented following annual Disciples of Christ National Church Convention banquet(s).

4) Stalcup Lectures on Christian Unity co-sponsored by Brite Seminary (East Texas University) and Council On Christian Unity (Disciples of Christ)

The Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity, jointly sponsored with the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is held every other summer in Dallas. It brings together the participation of a wide diversity of institutional colleagues Divinity School Program from the congregational, regional, and national levels. Lecturers are leaders in the ecumenical movement. Reference: <http://www.brite.edu/pdf/britebulletin.pdf> pp11-12

- a) Stalcup Lecture web page posted through Brite Seminary Stalcup School of Theology for Laity
- b) 2011 Stalcup Lecture for Christian Unity is now posted in podcast audio format and in “text summary” format

5) Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Lectures (newest lecture series for Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute, New York, NY.

- a) web page posted at GEII and Graymoor Semi-annual Lecture dates announced at GEII web page.

- b) videos of previous Graymoor lectures are posted at <http://www.geii.org>.

- c) Graymoor lectures are also published in full text format in GEII *Ecumenical Trends* monthly publication

6) Annual Figel lectures On Christian Unity (Washington DC, Washington Theological Consortium)

- a) presented in conjunction with WTC annual Prayer service for Christian Unity.
- b) published in *Eastern Catholic Journal* in full text format
- c) announced annually on Washington Theological Consortium web page.

7) Robert K. Campbell Lectures on Christian Unity

- a) Two lectures presented annually with brief Prayer service for Christian Unity and an informal meal. DeSales University facilities through a written contractual agreement.
- b) organized web page at Lehigh County Conference of Churches website
- c) partial archives online in full text format. DVD videos available upon request.

8) Paul Wattson Lectures at Atlantic School of Theology in Nova Scotia, Canada

A partial archives online in full text format is listed under Paul Wattson Lectures web page posted through the Friars of the Atonement, see <http://www.atonementfriars.org>

- a) The annual Paul Wattson lectures for Interreligious Dialogue in Halifax, Nova Scotia remain under the direct auspices and financial supervision of the Friars of the Atonement.
- b) A ten - twelve member board of local and regional Interreligious representatives meet twice a year for planning (once midyear and once immediately following the annual Halifax Paul Wattson Lecture).
- c) Advertising and promotion are provided by Atlantic School of Theology along with meeting space for the semiannual Halifax Paul Wattson planning committee meetings.
- d) St. Mary’s University, whose campus directly adjoins the Atlantic School of Theology campus, provides the actual meeting and lecture space for the annual Paul Wattson lectures in November of each year.
- e) Live audience attendance has been steady, varying between 100-200 persons during AST Advancement Director Erhard’s past five years of professional contacts with the Paul Wattson Lectures in Halifax.
- f) A meal is served prior to the lecture by special invitation to friends of the Wattson lectures with the public lecture event following the banquet format.

9) Bi-annual Western Diocesan and Eparchial Commissions on Ecumenism Lectures

- a) Sponsored by Eastern Rite Catholic and Roman Catholic Diocesan Committees of Western Canada Provinces.

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Live audience attendance has been steady, varying between 100-200 persons during AST Advancement Director Erhard's past five years of professional contacts with the Paul Wattson Lectures in Halifax.

b) Available on DVD through CADEIO office of Calgary RC Diocese of Alberta.
See: <http://www.calgarydiocese.ca/ecumenical-a-interreligious.html>

Contact: Current Calgary Alberta Roman Catholic Diocese CADEIO Director

10) Lourdes University annual Ecumenical Lecture in Sylvania, Ohio

a) operated by the Lourdes University Theology Department for 30 years.

Contact person: Dr. Benjamin Brown, Theology Dept. Interim Chair

b) past lectures published in *Ecumenical Trends* in full text format.

c) technical difficulties prevented the 2012 lecture to be posted in full video format on "Knowledge Stream" a WGTE public television information and lecture video service based in Toledo, Ohio.

Selected Lecture Histories

1) Peter Ainslie Lectures on Christian Unity History

In 1982, the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church inaugurated the annual lecture series as a permanent remembrance of Ainslie. He founded the Christian Temple and was the first president of the General Convention of the Disciples of Christ. In 1910, he led a call to congregants to reclaim their original vision of Christian unity by creating an agency devoted to the ecumenical movement. In 1911, Ainslie launched an ecumenical journal titled *The Christian Union Quarterly*. This international journal subsequently became *Christendom*. A few years later, *Christendom* was transformed into a quarterly journal of the World Council of Churches entitled *The Ecumenical Review*.

With Ainslie's guidance, the council set up relationships with the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, Congregational and Christian Connection churches. In addition, the council communicated with unity movements in India, Australia, Great Britain and Europe. The Disciples participated in the first multilateral proposal for church union in America in the 20th century – the Philadelphia Plan (1918-1920) and in the Faith and Order movement. Before his death in 1934, Ainslie published 15 books on prayer and spirituality, war and peace, ethics and Christian unity.

The council hoped to continue Ainslie's legacy by establishing the lecture series. To that end, the Peter Ainslie Fund for Christian Unity was established. With the help of Christian Temple parishioner Frank Baker Jr., the organization raised an initial \$107,000.

Baker matched every donation dollar for dollar. The first lecture, given by Cardinal Jan Willbrands, was held at the local Christian Temple in May 1982. Church leaders from all over North America attended the event. Over the years, the lecture series has traveled to various churches, colleges and assembly halls across the United States.

As part of the 100th anniversary celebration of the Christian Temple, in Baltimore MD, the Peter Ainslie Fund decided to hold the 21st lecture back in the Edmonson Avenue Church. About 90 people attended the lecture and church service.

Reference: See: <http://archives.explorebaltimorecounty.com/news/6001505/ecumenical-scholar-gives-annual-lecture/>

2) Robert K. Campbell Lectures on Christian Unity History

Following the death of Robert K. Campbell in 1990, a leading citizen of Allentown, and prime mover in the establishment of the Lehigh County Conference of Churches/Alliance Hall building program, Father Gambet President of Allentown College and Rev. Bill Seaman, Executive Director of the LCCC in 1991, decided to engage in a commemorative fund-raising campaign. The campaign was meant to honor the memory of Robert K. Campbell, who in his personal life exemplified a deep commitment to ecumenism. The funds received in that campaign were used to establish the Robert K. Campbell Lectures for Christian Unity to be maintained under the sole supervision of the Lehigh County Conference of Churches.

His Eminence Cardinal Avery Dulles gave the first Campbell Lecture on Christian Unity in 1993. His topic was Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue. Seventeen annual Campbell Lecture Series have followed since that inaugural Lecture series in 1993. As of 2008, all of these presentations, to date, have been held at the DeSales University campus in Center Valley, PA. DeSales University has entered into a renewable five year contract agreement with the LCCC to provide a site for the Lectures, a cooperative Christian Unity prayer service, and a shared evening meal. Lecturers have represented all major North American Christian including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Mainline Protestant, and Free Church traditions.

The annual presentations are currently guided by a Mission Statement adopted in 2006, and the lectures are supervised by the Campbell Lectures Committee that meets four times a year. In 2008, a new Preaching Contest for Christian Unity was established by the Campbell Lectures Committee to extend the Robert K. Campbell Lectures educational and mission outreach to a wider audience. The preaching contest was not continued in 2009.

Annual Reports of the Campbell Lectures and committee activities are submitted to the Lehigh County Conference of Churches' Board of Directors. A public, online electronic archive of the Lecture Series is maintained on the LCCC website. Audio tapes and DVDs are also archived at the Conference of Churches offices at 534 Chew Street. In Sept 2011 the Lehigh County Conference of Churches, in cooperation with the North American Academy of Ecumenists celebrated the 20th Anniversary of the Robert. K. Campbell Lectures on Christian Unity by hosting the September 2011 NAAE annual meeting of scholars in Allentown, PA.

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Summary

Any disciplined reader of this “Ten Ecumenical Lectures Across North America” introductory survey article will note a lack of vigorous examination regarding the specific topical contents and/or comparisons between these diverse ecumenical lecture events.

Readers desiring such specific information should contact the actual lecture coordinators and planning committees directly responsible for each of the ten ecumenical lectures presented and described above. Leaving the printed page may be necessary while exploring the new digital opportunities requested by Internet audiences and their rising expectations for interactive engagement with the traditional lecture format among North American Lecture audiences.

The Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute and the Society of the Atonement, who have encouraged this introductory survey and report may also be contacted.

As this article was being prepared for publication, a new Ecumenical Lecture Series was discovered. The Bishop Vinton R. Anderson Ecumenical Institute has been established under the auspices of Payne Theological Seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio in 2011. Following an inaugural lecture in 2011, the second annual Bishop Vinton R. Anderson Community Ecumenical Lecture was given in May 2012 by Bishop John White, Presiding prelate of the Eighteenth Episcopal District and Ecumenical and Urban Affairs Officer for the African Episcopal Church. Four respondents provided reflections on what they had observed and understood from their own perspectives about ecumenism and Christian Unity.

This new ecumenical lecture series reminds all seasoned readers of *Ecumenical Trends* that new expressions of the ecumenical lecture format are still emerging in the North American religious landscape. Perhaps additional local and regional ecumenical lectures will also emerge. Thanks be to God. 

REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY 2013..., from page 6

I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most revolutionary. The solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure: the guaranteed annual income.


16. King proposes not simply that we raise the minimum wage for workers, but that we guarantee a minimum income for everyone. Can we even begin to imagine that something like this is what it might mean to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God?”

17. Let me close by sharing with you a story from a sermon by PC(USA) pastor, the Rev. Angela L. Ying:

Charlie was one of those kids who the Sunday School teachers just could not get a hold on. When it came time for the Christmas pageant, the teachers thought themselves wise to give Charlie a simple part. Charlie would be the innkeeper. This would mean saying, “No room” three times. The night of the pageant two of the children dressed as Joseph and Mary came to the inn. “No room,” said Charlie. The couple knocked on the door a second time. “NO ROOM!” Charlie repeated. Banging on the door


King proposes not simply that we raise the minimum wage for workers, but that we guarantee a minimum income for everyone.

even harder, desperately seeking space for themselves and their new baby, Joseph and Mary pleaded with the innkeeper, “Please, is there any room in the inn?” Moved with compassion, Charlie forgot his line. “Oh,” he said, “why don’t you take my room tonight?” The pageant came to a complete halt.

The world has to figure out how to make room for the poor; how to shake out of our paralysis and with our whole strength confront the forces that enslave our brothers and sisters in the deepest poverty and embrace even the most radical ideas to heal the wounds of the world. 

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2013, MICAH 6:1-8 - A HOMILY, from page 9

True justice is only possible when all persons make a commitment to engage in honest conversation from a position of humility, hearing the sorrow and joy in the voices of other human beings who are unlike us and engaging those stories of real people as the place where the covenant between God and humanity is enacted.

God – a debt that is so great that it can never be paid – or we must suffer the consequences of our own alienation. The verdict demands punishment and retribution. However, the settlement that God wants is clear. What God wants from God’s people is reconciliation, not restitution. God wants the marriage to be healed between God and God’s people. God wants to live faithfully with a people who will realign themselves with God’s purposes, will honor and cherish the relationship with God and neighbor and the planet, and will acknowledge their own true significance within the created order. God wants to renew the covenant relationship with us. God wants unity restored. Are we ready and willing to renew our promises to God? We know what is good. Let’s give God what God wants. 

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