

A House of Prayer for All People, by Daniel Kuhn and Richard McBride L5070325

Isaiah 56:7 and John 10:16

Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 25 March, 2007

Dan Kuhn:

A house of prayer for all peoples! What a magnificent concept-that everyone would be welcome in a house dedicated to God- a house in which anyone, in any language could pray. A house of prayer. Although we often think of prayer as simply the making of requests to God, it is the human attempt at communicating with our creator or with the divine. It is entreating, but it is also listening. It is the act of becoming one with the divine.

Why would I, a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, talk about building a structure that would welcome people from other faiths? If we are Christians, and believe that Jesus Christ is the way to God, why would we welcome Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus, or what have you's? In January, Daniel Shutt organized a series of discussions that were held right here in our fellowship room. The title of the series was, "Enriching the Christian Faith Through Other Faith Traditions." Sessions included presentations by a practitioner of Zen, a Jewish rabbi, and a Muslim. In our final session, we decided that if all the major religions stuck to their central tenet of becoming one with the divine, if we stuck to prayer and played down our doctrines and institutions, we would discover that we are all doing the same thing.

Isn't this what Jesus would do? This is Jesus who ate with tax collectors and sinners. This is the Jesus who had intimate dealings with foreigners like Samaritans and Canaanites, and Gentiles, with lepers, and women. He was fulfilling what the Prophet Isaiah said six hundred years before, that God's house is a house for all peoples. The prophet spoke for God saying that God would welcome those that the culture rejected: the foreigners and the eunuchs.

Richard McBride:

In the Tenth Chapter of the Gospel of John Jesus launches into an extended discourse around the theme of the True Shepherd, the one who enters by the gate and not over the fence like a thief. The True Shepherd is the one whose sheep know and trust his voice. And then Jesus offers an astonishing assertion, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So they will be one flock, one shepherd." John 10:14-16 (NRSV)

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold" ... Jesus says that he has other sheep who already know his voice. His original hearers may have thought of "this fold" as the Jewish flock and "other sheep" as non-Jews. But you and I can hear other possible references. In our multi-cultural and multi-religious world, who might the "other sheep" be that are recognized as already having a relationship with God?

Huston Smith, son of Christian missionary parents in China, became one of the world's foremost authorities on world's religions. If you have a coffee table book about the world's religions at home, you may discover that Huston Smith is its author. In 2005 Smith published a new book called *The Soul of Christianity*. In his first chapter, Smith reminds us that a language is meaningful to those who speak it. Also, a religion is most fully understood by those who believe it. We grow up believing that there is one language, and then we discover that other peoples speak differently; and think differently, because their language emerged in a different context than our own.

Similarly, you and I have grown up within a particular faith tradition. We have been immersed in the Christian story. It has shaped our sense of what is holy and how we should live. And then, we meet someone who grew up within a different sacred story. Other language and

other stories call them into reverence and provide instruction for living. Their stories may be strange to our ears, and yet who can deny that they provide an authentic access to sacred truth. ... Brave are the people who spend enough time together to honor one another's sacred stories.

And yet some insist that they alone hold the authentic and absolute truth. A recent Wheel of Fortune contestant declared, "I am engaged to the handsomest man in the world." Does her declaration mean that her boyfriend was in a world-wide contest in which he was judged by an impartial panel of judges to be the handsomest guy in the world? No, her declaration simply expresses the depth of her affection for him. It makes sense within the context of their relationship; it is not an absolute claim that triumphs over similar claims by all other girlfriends.

Similarly, for Christians and within our faith relationship to God through Christ, Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life." That is the experience of Christians, speaking from within our understanding of God and within the avenue to God afforded to us by Christ. But there are other avenues to God, just as there are other handsome boyfriends. As Huston Smith puts the matter: "... for Christians, God is defined by Jesus, but he is not confined by Jesus." We know that other pathways exist. Other people devoutly believe they have authentic access to God. Are we under some obligation to assert that they are wrong? Some believe so and do so. Franklin Graham (Billy's son) has asserted repeatedly over the past 5 years that Islam is an evil religion - making no distinction between the faith itself and its distortions. (It is interesting to me that his father has not endorsed Franklin's harsh judgments.)

We must distinguish between faith and its distortions! ... Which Christian vision do you align yourself with - that of Desmond Tutu who embraced a universal understanding of the love of Christ for all people, or that of Afrikaner Christians who insisted on their racial superiority and the separateness of the races? ... Such distinctions matter profoundly. Some expressions of our faith are distortions, and we must name them as such. Others expressions convey the welcome of the spirit of Christ who told us that he already has "sheep not of this fold."

The Qu'ran proclaims: "Had Allah willed it He could have made you one people, but he hath made you as you are. So vie with one another in good works. Unto Allah you will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein you differ." (V:48) This verse recognizes that God has created the differences, and that in God's time - when we all return to God - the meaning of these differences will be explained. In the meantime, "vie with one another in good works." That's a worthy contest.

Alamance County has never had a very diverse population - not like our neighbors to the east and west of us. But that reality is changing. No doubt you've seen the shopping malls and the large housing developments. We are experiencing in-fill between the Triangle and the Triad. The town of Elon and the University are only beginning to experience the increased diversity that is coming. I promise you that more religious diversity is on the way.

How will we position ourselves as a Christian congregation going forward? Will we be ready to relate to our new neighbors? Will we express Christian hospitality to them? Will we do our part to build a healthy community, celebrating common ground where we can find it and creating respectful space for honoring our differences?

On Thursday, I heard Maria Hanlin describe her work with Mecklenburg Ministries in Charlotte. They include seventy-nine member congregations and faith centers. Their mission is "to build bridges across differences through the inspiration of our shared faith traditions." Maria described her organization's Vision for Charlotte as "helping our citizens live by the highest values of our faith traditions and upholding the integrity of each."

By the way, one of our own members knows Maria quite well. She is an ordained Methodist minister and was once Daniel Shutt's pastor. In fact, last summer Daniel helped lead one of the organization's newest efforts, an interfaith summer camp for middle school youth called "In Our

Own Backyards."

Eighteen children, from different faiths, races and socioeconomic backgrounds came together to learn more about each other's faith traditions and to serve Charlotte residents in need. The children represented Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Baha'i and Unitarian faiths and Latino, Caucasian, African-American, Persian and Arab ethnicities. They came from the Myers Park neighborhood and from Habitat for Humanity houses. They visited one another's worship centers; they spent a day hearing the stories of people who live in a homeless shelter. They experienced community. Maria said that she is personally motivated for the work she does by the belief that "building relationships builds peace."

What is our Vision for Elon and for Alamance County? Can we see ourselves embracing work similar to that of Mecklenburg Ministries, building relationships that build peace? As our University brings to our doorstep more and more diverse students and faculty and as the growth of Alamance County brings more religiously diverse citizens, I pray that this church will put aside the fearful response that some will have to these changes. My prayer is that this church will confidently see that God is leading us into a broader understanding of our faith and a deeper commitment to expressing the love of God as good news for all people.

Dan Kuhn:

For years, there has been talk in this congregation about replacing the parish house next door. During the last major discussion of that topic, the church decided that they had better keep the parish house and do some major renovations. This was the most prudent path that could be taken at the time. The parish house is now older, now less usable (we cannot allow people in the upper rooms), now less efficient to heat or cool, and remains as poor acoustically as ever. The topic has arisen once again, of replacing the parish house. The problem is, how can we possibly afford to do that?

Please look at the front of your bulletin, at the photo of Dr. Andes standing on the footers of this very sanctuary building, holding a brick. A lone man holding a lone brick. The year was 1958. There was no money then, either. I'm sure there were people in this church who thought the task was too daunting to ever come to fruition.

There was only faith—the faith of people who were building for the future. Enough people must have said, "We can do this with God's help." Some of those people are sitting here in this room this morning.

That man holding that brick has told me for the past four years, "I hope we can replace that parish house before I die!" That parish house has served the past three generations of this town well. Imagine the courage, skill, and faith of Mark McAdams and the men who went down to that army base and dismantled that chapel board by board, carried them up here, and re-constructed that chapel on this property. I challenge us today to have that same courage, skill, and faith to build for the next 3 generations.

I would like for us to have the faith that those members of this church had when they made the decision to move out of Whitley Auditorium and build a new building, a building dedicated to God, a house of prayer.

We live in a time of warfare and strife. People are dying daily because of religious and sectarian violence. Wouldn't it be magnificent if we, followers of the Prince of Peace, could build a building for ourselves, for the community, and for the world, that would say, "All are welcome here to find God, no matter what their faith tradition or absence of faith tradition. God's house shall be a house of prayer for all people!"

