

Observing the Fiftieth Anniversary of Ordination

Remarks as delivered were a few words shorter.

The Reverend Vern Barnet, DMn

Since my ordination by the Lincoln, NE, church, I served in Rockford, IL, then in Meadville, PA, and then for the Shawnee Mission, KS, congregation. With the last 45 years in the Kansas City area, I've seen ministers come and go and churches struggle and flourish. This does not give me *wisdom*, but it does give me *perspective*. And to that *parish* perspective, I bring 36 years of *public* ministry in this community.

While serving in my last parish, because of presumed competence in the field of world religions, I was recruited to teach at (among other schools) Ottawa University, the Saint Paul School of Theology (Methodist), and the Unity Ministerial Institute.

Thus began my continuing good fortune of having one foot in the *academy* and another in the *practice of ministry*. In 1982, with the support of my congregation, I founded the CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND STUDY, putting *theory* and *practice* into dialogue.

By the time I left the parish, I had discovered wonderful folks here from A to Z — American Indian to Zoroastrian [*American Indian, Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian Protestant, Christian Roman Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Sufi, Unitarian Universalist, Wiccan, Zoroastrian*] — and decided to continue the Center to uplift religious diversity. My cherished International Association for Religious Freedom adventures ironically led me to believe the *real* interfaith work is on the local level.

After serving on the planning committee for the first North America Interfaith Network conference in 1988, I founded the Kansas City Interfaith Council in 1989 and

continued it as a program of my Center for 16 years until I arranged its independence in 2005.

That work drew the attention of The Kansas City Star which offered me a paid position as a weekly religion columnist in 1994. Over 18 years, I wrote 947 columns. I focused mainly on local activities and concerns, and in the process came to know many religious, civic, artistic, business, and political leaders, local and in the US House and Senate, sometimes asking my advice.

The day after 9/11, a Congressman Dennis Moore called on me to organize a public metro-wide interfaith observance for that Sunday, September 16. Some Muslims later told me that this event was the first time they had come out of their homes since the terrorist attacks. Six weeks later, I presided over a 3-day conference with over 250 religious, civic, business, and political leaders. The results of that consultation still resonate in many ways. Jackson County then commissioned a 5-county task force which I led for most of a year to produce a 35,000-word report with recommendations to enhance religious comity

For the first anniversary of 9/11, I organized a metro-wide religious observance which began before dawn outside City Hall with a brass ensemble from the KC Symphony and continued with a march, prayer, and an evening assembly with the Mayor, the governor, the Lyric Opera, and the Kansas City Ballet. The national CBS-TV half-hour broadcast from Kansas City opened with Jewish and Muslim children singing together songs of peace.

Because of our good local interre-



ligious relations, Harvard's *Pluralism Project* and *Religions for Peace at the UN Plaza* selected Kansas City for its first two-week residential National Interfaith Academies for religious professionals and students. I was the site-visit facilitator and a member of the international faculty.

With three others, I wrote and edited the 740-page *The Essential Guide to Religious Traditions and Spirituality for Health Care Providers*, endorsed by Mayo's and the American Academy of Family Physicians.

Of my book of 154 Shakespearean sonnets, *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire*, Mark Belletini wrote, Barnet "does not separate the worship of the sublime in a sanctuary from the worship in the bedroom. Nor is the meaning of the ancient blessing, 'This is my body,' lost on him."

More recently, Central Baptist Theological School asked me to create a new course on ministry in an age of pluralism, and the Episcopal bishop has asked me to serve on the diocesan Commission on Ministry — with a mandate that seems considerably broader than our Ministerial Fellowship Committee. So for me the question of what it means to be a minister remains a burning question even in my so-called retirement.

From my career in both parish and public ministry, I offer three observations:

First — Excellent **religious formation** is essential. Since before going to seminary, as the first paid Director of Religious Education at the Lincoln church, this has been a steady conviction. At Shawnee Mission, after researching then-existing coming-of-age programs in our churches, and studying the work of scholars like Victor Turner and visiting with folks like Joseph Campbell, I prepared what may be the first year-long Coming of Age sequence published by the UUA. The UUA president spoke here at our inaugural graduation ceremony.

Second — The chief function of church, which the UUA and many congregations hijack, **is worship**. Always, and especially in these times of fragmented vision, pandemic, and racial and economic in-

justice, being called to give thanks for the mystery and wonder of existence is *the* key to religious faith and practice. Worship is not moral instruction or an opportunity to organize; it is not intellectual stimulation; it is not a social gathering. It recognizes the paradox of existence, beauty and suffering. It is a compelling and terrifyingly playful, physical encounter with the sacred, that on which our lives depend, that on which no agenda can be imposed. But from beholding the sacred, fulsome gratitude flows which matures into loving service. In a world of unending assault, our humanity is restored.

My years as Executive Secretary of the Congregation of Abraxas convince me this need is desperate but largely unheeded except in the shallows. We have more sentiment than sacrament. When, on behalf of the Abraxans, at the (I think it was) 1980 General Assembly, I presented a stole to president Gene Pickett, and he

graciously put it on, I was hopeful; but all that happened was the beginning of a new personalistic and undisciplined clerical vestment fashion, displacing the traditional academic gown.

Finally — from the CRES Gifts of Pluralism conference — I offer this summary below of **wisdom from the world religions** in our secularistic age, created by asking each faith, *what is sacred?* Note that the strengths of the PRIMAL, ASIAN, and MONOTHEISTIC faiths offer remedies to our ENVIRONMENTAL, PERSONAL, and SOCIAL CRISES. With this or another such overview, eschewing fragmented approaches, effective ministry may be possible before we destroy ourselves and the planet.

As the Tao Te Ching says, without a sense of wonder there will be disaster. I pray our ministries may yet engender awe and bring forth healing.

A Way of Looking at Our Desacralized Society and the World's Religions as a Whole System

Crisis	Examples of secularism's crises	170215 15ot TNR	Faith Family	Sacred found in	Perversion	CAVEATS
Environmental	pollution (toxic wastes, as from the auto) overpopulation; loss of diversity of species deforestation; dying oceanic life; climate change corrupt food supply; antibiotic-resistant 'bugs'		PRIMAL Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman; Mayan, Incan; American Indian and Tribal African; and many others.	Nature (ecological interdependence)	Superstition	1. Specialization can deprive us of a sense of the whole. This is a research program aiming to remedy that. 2. With any generalization, exceptions and qualifications abound. Examples: Shinto is Asian but is a nature religion, Sikhism is sometimes called syncretistic, and Marxism may be atheistic. Nonetheless, this scheme may be useful as a starting point for study. 3. This outline does not characterize any particular faith. 4. Religions are dynamic; this summary chart does not limn historical development. 5. Primal faiths can be just as sophisticated as Asian and Monotheistic. 6. In any richly developed faith, elements of many other faiths can also be found, though they may not be as frequently emphasized.
Personal Identity	addiction (substances, consumerism, power) codependency, depression, aggression, bullying prejudice (sexism, racism, homophobia) loss of sense of vocation and direction		ASIAN Hinduism, Buddhism Jainism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc. See note, right, and below for Sikhism	Consciousness (inner awareness, Larger Self)	Narcissism	
Social Cohesion	violence (in movies, games, real lives); terrorism exploitation (disparity between rich and poor) consumers, not citizens (private over public weal) using religion for political or partisan purposes		MONOTHEISTIC Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Bahá'í, Zoroastrianism, Unitarian Universalism, Marxism, American Civil Religion, etc.	History of covenanted community	Self-Righteousness	

The Four Wisdom Treasures — Our task is to apply them and find they are one.

		How terms are used
PRIMAL faiths emphasize	NATURE is to be respected more than controlled; it is a process which includes us, not a product external to us to be used or disposed of. Our proper attitude toward nature is awe, not utility.	Secular ► fragmented, broken, partial, divided, unrelated, disconnected; the profane.
ASIAN faiths emphasize	WHO WE ARE IS DEEPER THAN WE APPEAR TO BE; this means our acts should proceed beyond convention, spontaneously and responsibly from duty and compassion, without ultimate attachment to their results.	Sacred ► ultimate worth, the network on which all depends, cornerstone of all values, holy, holistic, wholesome, cosmic connectedness or well-being, sensed in "peak experiences" which shape or direct or give meaning to life, opening us to the Infinite in nature, personhood, society .
MONOTHEISTIC faiths emphasize	THE FLOW OF HISTORY TOWARD JUSTICE is possible when persons in community govern themselves less by profit and more by the covenant of service.	Religion ► arises from the search for, and encounters with, the sacred: we discover how to live in the world; the holy evokes wonder, grows in gratitude, matures in service.
LIBERATION movements show	Those disempowered by a secular age may, through the varied struggles, show THE IMPULSE TOWARD THE SACRED in fresh ways.	Spiritual ► breathing with a sense of what really counts.