

Doing Good Works

By Howard McEwen
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BELLEVUE - The Northern Kentucky Interfaith Commission has taken the prayer of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane - "for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one (John 17:20-21)" - and made it an organizational mission.

That belief, "so that they may all be one," has been the commission's inspiration for uniting Christian denominations in NKY through dialogue, cooperative ministry and joint worship for the past 35 years. Under newly appointed Executive Director Timothy F. Hungler, the commission will continue, and develop, that work.

Hungler, who also serves as interim pastor to Bellevue's Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, is motivated by a document called the Lund Principle that asks, "Should (Christian churches) not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?"

His belief that they should has influenced his involvement with the commission for the past 10 years. Hungler described his new position as "putting each Christian church's feet to the fire to do everything together that can be done together." This is the best way, he feels, that the various churches can serve the needs of all Northern Kentuckians.

Reaching Out to All

This has been the commission's goal from the beginning. Mary Middleton has been a delegate to the commission since its founding and is proud of several of the programs begun over the years, including the Airport Ministry Support that provides Bibles to travelers and offers a place in the airport for prayer.

"People often travel not for business or pleasure, but because of some tragic circumstance. If they have a need, we'll be there," she said.

Middleton is also proud of the ECHO Soup Kitchen that helps those in need in Newport. She said the commission has been "helpful to the community because all of the churches working together have accomplished more than if they had worked separately."

But she also has gained a sense of personal satisfaction from the work as well. Although she and her husband, former Kenton County Judge-executive Clyde Middleton, are members of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Crestview Hills, she says, "I feel at home in almost any church in Northern Kentucky."

Another long-time delegate to the commission is Father Ronald M. Ketteler, chairman of the Department of Theology at Thomas More College. His ecumenicalism-the promotion of Christian unity-was sparked by the Vatican II reforms. He first encountered other denominations when he worked closely with various religious groups as a young priest assigned to the University of Kentucky. He was then welcomed as the first full-time Catholic chaplain at Eastern Kentucky University. He continues that work with the commission and as the Diocese of Covington's Director of Ecumenism.

Going Beyond Bars

While Ketteler has praise for the commission's past accomplishments, he sees a need for more work, particularly in reaching out to the various NKY ministerial associations. These associations in the area gather locally to share and help one another across denominational boundaries. If leveraged, Father Ketteler believes, these groups could be a tremendous source for good.

Hungler also believes the commission needs to do more.

"We must ask business leaders and social services what is needed-a needs assessment analysis for the works of Christ, if you will," he said.

Hungler points to the Exodus Jail Ministry organized in conjunction with the Mental Health Association of Northern Kentucky as an



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UNITY: Rev. Chinnamuthu Simon talks with Rev. Timothy F. Hungler at the NKY Interfaith Thanksgiving service.

example.

The Exodus program began in 1984 in response to an increase in the number of suicides in jails and an overworked clergy who worked to serve the prisoners. In the program, pairs of volunteers, who range in age from 30 to 84, visit prisoners on a regular basis. These volunteers, who often feel they have a calling to help those in trouble, are trained in listening skills and in identifying signs of suicide. Jill Kartisek, director of education at the Mental Health Association of NKY, who administers the program, called it a success based solely on the fact that no participant in the program has committed suicide.

"It also reduces the legal liability the jail and local government face when a prisoner commits suicide as well as giving the jail staff a break from bearing the brunt of the prisoner's concerns," Kartisek said.

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Although the commission members include only Christian denominations, each year the organization extends a hand to non-Christians at the annual Yom HaShoah Ceremony or Holocaust Remembrance Service. For the past eight years commission delegate Wanda Trinkle of the Bullittsville Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has organized a solemn night of prayer, readings and song. The most striking time of the ceremony comes when a Holocaust survivor lights a candle to remember the 6 million Jews who perished.

When asked if ecumenism is a watering down of each denomination's beliefs, Hungler was emphatic that it isn't.

"Sharing worship also shares our differences. In fact, worshipping with a Methodist makes me more Lutheran and that Christian more Methodist," said Hungler. "It makes us appreciate why we believe what we believe and also makes us curious about each other's beliefs."

Ketteler summarized the ecumenical spirit of the commission at the group's annual Thanksgiving Service.

"I have learned to appreciate the authentic Christianity of those not in full communion with my church," he said.

After the service, members of the commission gathered to collect clothing for NKY's needy to be given away at their upcoming Christmas Day Dinner.

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