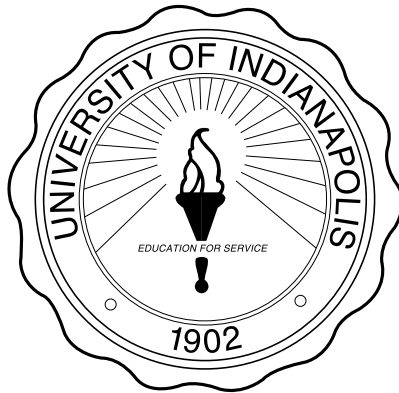


'Above All and Through All'

President's Convocation Address



Jerry Israel
University of Indianapolis
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With the start of each new school year and the arrival of a new group of students, university presidents have the opportunity to address issues we judge to be important for our campuses to think about. By no means is this special circumstance always matched by a compelling message to be shared. But once in a while, even presidents feel like we have something to say.

Two years ago, I urged this campus to mirror more completely the diversity we see in the larger world. I am grateful that so many members of our community have kept that conversation alive. Today is another of those times when I choose to use the special influence of my office to give voice to my views on an issue I think needs to be openly discussed. I do not know what the impact of my words will be; I can only control what I think and feel and say.

My subject today is the role of religion on this church-related campus. I have been applauded for my perceived courage in tackling the sensitive subject of racism two years ago. Actually, I think most Americans have at least an awareness of the fact that discriminatory behavior is unacceptable. Speaking out about public injustice, then, is probably less provocative than conventional wisdom might suggest.

A quite recent survey suggests more than ninety percent of all Americans believe in the presence of a divine or spiritual force in their world. It is the opportunity and challenge for those of us in the church-related independent educational sector to engage our communities in respectful conversations and practical cooperation about religion.

The recent, lively, University intranet debates about faith issues certainly tell us that conversations about religion engender substantial heat, if not always light. Furthermore, many of us have chosen to eliminate religion from the subjects we dare to discuss in polite conversation. Today I take us to where we are uncomfortable. I

Note: The title of this convocation address comes from the Letter to the Ephesians 4:6. United Methodist readers will notice that President Israel invokes "Our Theological Task" of the 2000 edition of The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church at several points in his speech, particularly the section on Ecumenical Commitment and the Conclusion of Para. 104. pp. 84-86.

know there are wide and deeply felt disagreements among us. I invite you to take a risk with me to explore this topic.

I expect this is a risk worth taking if we can open our campus conversation to issues of religion. Indeed, I believe it is vitally important that we communicate about religion right now, since in the months ahead we have a campus minister search to conduct, a substantial grant from the Lilly Endowment's Religion Division to manage, and a Centennial birthday of our founding as a church-related college to celebrate.

Please know that I am not here, despite the subject, to preach or to proclaim a truth or to exhort for some particular perspective, doctrine or dogma. Rather I want to express my understanding and invite you to think about yours.

I sense that harsh reactions to discussion of religious issues often stem from preexisting views or feelings people carry with them from prior, perhaps even unexamined, experiences. We are peculiarly unready to listen to what is being said before reacting emotionally. Such circumstances are especially complex and difficult. As universities, we properly devote an overwhelming percentage of our time and attention to the cognitive dimension of human experience. Our classrooms are very much in tune with an eighteenth-century Enlightenment view that might be paraphrased as "We think (or, I might say, think *critically*), therefore we are." Our emotive, affective selves, so powerful and essential in our private lives, are seriously understudied and underutilized in our academic pursuits. So when we encounter powerful personal reactions to religious issues, we are, I think, scared and lack practice in how to proceed—all the more reason why we should try.

It seems to me that our church-connectedness begins with a parent-adult child metaphor. The church (specifically, in our case, the United Brethren) gave us life in 1902. We have doubtless grown, 100 years later, into an institution very different from the one that that denomination hoped to create. And, like parents who no longer control nor make decisions for adult children, the United Methodist Church today must learn—and in many significant ways has learned—to accept, tolerate, and understand what we have become. As flesh-and-blood humans, we have only one set of parents to wish the best for, honor, and love. Too many of my presidential colleagues have made the church-college relationship about money rather than connectedness. Too often we talk about how much we "get" or "used to get" or "should get" from the church. Dollars are important and significant donors deserve much cultivation, but to make a parental relationship into a financial one cheapens, weakens, and threatens our connection.

Furthermore, the connection between college and church can also be understood in terms of a shared mission and a collective history. The mission piece is relatively simple and does not need to be made unnecessarily complex. The church exists to serve the world. The college exists to serve the world. We are connected by this

mission we have in common. It is the glue that binds the graduating class of 2006 with every class that has come and gone before. It is our unequivocal collective identity.

In his brilliant analysis of “Habits of the Heart,” Robert Bellah tells us that a community like the University of Indianapolis has “a history—in an important sense (we) are constituted by (our) past.” We need, in Bellah’s terms, to retell Indiana Central’s story, to have and be a “community of memory.” At this place we love, our stories and our memories are in great part church-related, taking us back to a time when a shared United Brethren church perspective was locally pervasive. I look forward to celebrating those traditions along with University Heights United Methodist Church one month from tomorrow on our 100th birthday, Sunday, October 6. But, I also know that today’s University of Indianapolis is becoming a diverse, pluralist, and cosmopolitan place. I celebrate also that opportunity to be intentionally inclusive.

The voices I hear speaking loudest on religious issues seem to want to push the University to one end or the other of the spiritual/secular spectrum.

The **spiritual extreme** position is: “Above all, we are a Christian college (one of my great frustrations is that we have allowed the very word “Christian” to be owned by those advocating an extreme view) and our essential mission is evangelical. Towards that end, expressions of diverse religious experiences or beliefs are counter-productive and to be suppressed.”

The **secular extreme** position is: “Above all, we are a diverse community in which expressions of our religious heritage or character automatically exclude some of our members and should be repressed.”

Advocates of these two polar-opposite views regularly and loudly proclaim their views. I am grateful for their passion and proud that they feel comfortable enough to choose to express themselves here. They are doing what they feel they need to do and are not the problem, though I am sure fingers are sometimes pointed in their direction.

The problem, in my view, is with the rest of us who choose to remain silent about what we believe. Through all the discourse we remain mute, afraid to be judged as extremists. No more for me. The passion of zealots on either side is always intimidating. But our silence makes them the majority. I refuse to accept that they are. I fervently believe most of us accept that this is a community, founded by Christians, and still rooted in its religious heritage; that is open, accepting, and encouraging of ecumenical and interfaith encounters and explorations.

Thus it is right both to proudly invoke our religious identity with the prominent placement of United Methodist symbols (the cross and flame) on the exterior walls of our new and improved student center and also to invite Tibetan Monks to build their mandala in that very same building (as they are doing this week). Our chapel should be a house of prayer for all peoples. Our goal is to build an inclusive

human community, the highest and most noble social purpose an institution can have. Above all else, the University should be a place where ideas, thoughts, aspirations, decisions, and commitments find expression.

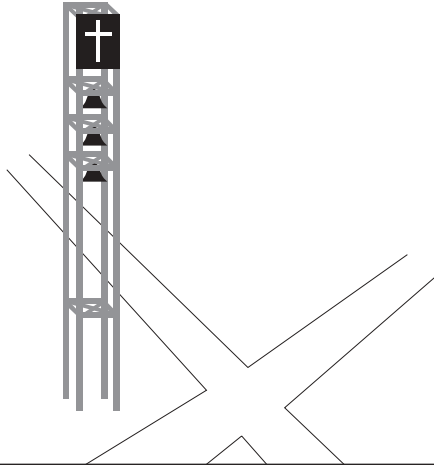
The United Methodist Book of Discipline says what I believe so well. “As people bound together on one planet, we see the need for a self-critical view of our own tradition and accurate appreciation of other traditions. In these encounters, our aim is not to reduce doctrinal differences to some lowest common denominator of religious agreement, but to raise all such relationships to the highest possible level of human fellowship and understanding.”

A former and conservative United Methodist bishop helped shape my understanding years ago when he told me of his response to the criticism of one of our sister schools inviting the well-known atheist Madelyn Murray O'Hare to speak on their campus. The bishop said, “First of all, I don't, and the church doesn't, decide who should or shouldn't speak—but furthermore, why wouldn't a Christian want to invite an atheist to speak? What is to be feared? Any Christian (or substitute here any other faith) unwilling to listen to an atheist for fear that his or her religious beliefs will be shaken or undermined isn't much of a Christian.”

In fact, I believe we should ultimately be judged by our willingness to extend to others the hospitality that would make it possible for them to “feel free” to practice their own religious sensibilities and to encourage them also to be hospitable to the religious convictions of others in this learning community.

Indeed, I hope my speech today invites others of you to speak about religious convictions as well. Such speech will make us stronger because it will add to our **clarity** (we will learn to pose the questions that arise in our midst), our **humility** (we will learn to be aware that our first words are not our only words, and may be words we might need to reconsider), our **respect** (we will learn about our religious heritage and about the humanity of those who offer different views), and our **confidence** (we will learn, as Aristotle thought, that it is necessary to have “proper pride,” if we are to avoid “small-mindedness” in the exercise of our practical reasoning about matters of ethics and politics).

I urge us to welcome the differences and the discourse. I am not a theologian, nor do I think of myself as a **deeply** religious person, but I have spent 28 glorious years on four fine United Methodist campuses, and I know what it is to labor together with (I hope) the help of God toward social justice and well-being for all people. That quest is what we can and must do together as we strive to define our sense of community, no matter our many differences. For that continuing opportunity I say thanks be to the one who is above all, and through all, hallelujah, and amen. □



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