

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Remembering Dick Rhem, at his journey's end



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Early last week, Richard A. Rhem “passed into Life Eternal at his home on the shore of Lake Michigan,” as was stated in his obituary. As he was known and remembered throughout his successful life and ministry, Dick Rhem also was an early West Michigan champion for interfaith understanding and acceptance.

Following his graduation from Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, Rhem served the First Reformed Church in Spring Lake. Later, after further study and receiving the Doctorandus degree (DRS) in systematic theology from the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, he returned to the church in Spring Lake, where he would serve for 37 years before his retirement in 2004. The church renamed itself Christ Community and grew rapidly as Rhem became widely known for his inspiring sermons and progressive ministry.

He was an early supporter of the interfaith movement in West Michigan, actively participating in the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the early 1980s. Rhem served with Sylvia Kaufman for years on the West Shore Jewish/Christian Dialogue Committee, and was honored in 2014 by receiving the first Sylvia Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Award from the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. At that event, the citation included the words:

“Your commitment to inclusion and to an understanding of the expansive grace of God led you into controversy but did not thwart your journey of where God was leading you and the congregation.

“You spoke of a God of love, without presuming to know of limits of that love.

“You were called to serve, but not to judge.

“You were on a quest, without assuming certainty or superiority over those whose journey had a different language and practice.”

At that event, Rhem's response included the affirmation that “good religion does not divide, but unites; that good religion does not denigrate, but affirms; that good religion enables us to transform all that would divide us.”

“THE COURAGE OF HIS CONVICTIONS”

Sylvia Kaufman, on hearing of Rhem's death, wrote, “I will always remember Dick for the courage of his convictions and his

compassion. He had the courage to stand up for religious inclusion and acceptance of all without having to be a Christian. He was inspired to do this after a Jewish/Christian dialogue event in Muskegon where he heard Rabbi David Hartman.”

Sylvia continued, “When I was preparing for serious heart surgery, Dick is the one I turned to for comfort and support. He recommended a verse in Deuteronomy which I repeated as I was taken into the operating room. I will always remember Dick as a wonderful friend and mentor. I will miss him immensely.”

Don Lubbers, president emeritus of Grand Valley State University, was a friend and fellow Hope College graduate. “Dick Rhem's life was a spiritual and personal journey that was helpful to all around him,” he said. “He led a complete life motivated by love and service.”

When I think of Rhem, I also feel his warmth and keen insight. He was on a journey that he pursued with integrity and courage. He would not let himself be divided between what his heart knew and what his mind concluded. In a recent lecture, he summarized his view: “For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false. If they could, we should be hopelessly divided and any firm grasp of reality would be impossible.”

“THROUGH A GLASS DIMLY”

Last October, in one of my Interfaith Insights, I recalled one of Rhem's sermons where he was reflecting on his visit to Chartres Cathedral a few miles outside of Paris. He noted that these great cathedrals, built centuries before the printing press, told stories of faith through their stained-glass windows. As one enters the nave and looks to the west, you see the Creation story, and then the stories of the patriarchs, the exodus and the prophets. Going further, one observes the birth of Jesus and the stories of his life and teaching.

Rhem imagines what it would be like if one group of people only looked at the windows in the west wall of the nave and another huddled in the transept or in the choir. What if they didn't move out of that location and only knew the light coming from that particular story?

“The only part of the story they knew was Creation or Christmas or Easter, or whatever it may be,” Rhem said. “Would they not think, ‘That's it! That's the story.’



Richard A. Rhem, longtime pastor of Christ Community Church, died last week. He was an early advocate of the interfaith movement in West Michigan. *Submitted*

But it wouldn't be the story at all. It was a chapter of the story. It was a facet of the story.”

Rhem then imagines various windows from the different faith traditions.

“What if all of these respective groups were gathered before their windows where the story was told, their story? And what would be the common thing that would bind them together? Being unconscious of one another and without knowledge of anyone else's story, what would be the common thing? Well, it would be the light that streams through all the windows, that illuminates all the stories.”

I continued my earlier Insight by asking, could we mistake our various “windows” as reality itself and not be aware of the light that makes that view possible? Is the whole truth of God's revelation contained in what my finite mind and understanding

can perceive? And yet, Rhem reflected further by affirming that he does have a place to stand as he seeks the reality which can only be seen through our limited human understanding.

He affirms his Christian stance, as do I when I recall the final verses of the famous love chapter, “For now we see through a glass dimly, but then I will see face to face.” (1 Corinthians 13)

Let us learn from the life and ministry of Dick Rhem to not mistake our particular limited window as the full reality of what God is doing in our world. Let us be open to how God might be working far beyond what we see through our tiny windows, while we look to the day when we enter that life eternal and see the light directly “face to face.”

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