

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Who is my neighbor? Exploring art, faith, community

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Last week, Grand Rapids hosted a major conference and exhibit on the relationship between art and faith. Participants from all over the country gathered to hear nearly 20 artists and theologians from California, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Indiana and Michigan discuss and exhibit the relationship between art and faith. The April 25-26 event took place at eight churches primarily in downtown Grand Rapids and had a Christian focus. The talks, as well as the art, were like an interfaith event.

The theme of "Who Is My



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Neighbor?" comes from the Gospel story of the lawyer who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him what it says in the law, to which the lawyer responds by quoting from the Torah: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

But he then asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds by telling the story of the Good Samaritan, which makes it clear that loving the neighbor is

achieved by showing mercy.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, formerly a professor of philosophy at Calvin College and Yale University, was one of the two keynote speakers. His book, "Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic," urges us to see art as not merely what is seen in a museum or heard in a concert hall, but something essential in everyday life as what it means to be human. It is to be seen and celebrated in acts of memorializing, poetry, verse and in the singing of hymns.

Writes Wolterstorff, "Aesthetic delight is a component within the shalom God has ordained as the goal of human existence ... That is why you and I are to pursue

aesthetic delight, for ourselves and others."

Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, a political refugee from Cuba and now professor of theology at Loyola Marymount University in California, gave the second keynote presentation based on her recent book, "Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty." As she writes, "Art becomes a gospel, an announcement of the good news of our beloved status as children of God. ... Art, like religious faith, can foster a different kind of consciousness and understanding." She refers to art as a bridge to wonder and beauty: "But beauty is not the ultimate goal, God is, but since there is nothing more beautiful than God, then beauty

is the best sign we have that we are on the right path."

A MULTIFAITH MESSAGE

Strong themes of community and justice ran throughout the conference — not simply art for art's sake. In the context of community, art not only raises our vision of what can be but also exposes our failures to love our neighbor as ourselves. This prophetic role was famously stated by Pope Paul VI in his message, "If you want peace, work for justice," to which Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu added, "If you want justice, work for beauty."

It is a message all faith traditions can endorse.

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