

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Philosopher looks at science, faith, answers to prayer



Douglas Kindschi
Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

Philosopher Scott Davison was on a camping trip with his 12-year-old son and some other relatives in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. It was a remote area many miles away from the nearest town and only accessible by canoe. He told his son, who was inside the tent, which was zipped closed, that the rest of them were heading out to fish in the canoes and would be back soon.

When they returned his son, Drew, was nowhere to be found. As Davison writes in his recent book: "We searched everywhere. The people camping at the next site, some distance away from ours, had not seen him, but insisted that they would have seen him if he gone that direction. We hiked the other way, shouting, but could not find him. ... I began to grow desperate, I ran out of things to do. So I called 911, and they said that they would send help, but we were in such a remote location that it might take quite a long while before anyone arrived. ... As it became late in the afternoon, I worried about what would happen after darkness fell. I remembered that Drew did not drink water with his lunch, and I imagined that if he were dehydrated from hiking, he might be unable to respond even if he heard us calling.

"I sent a text message to my wife, who



Scott Davison, speaker at Grand Dialogue on Saturday, May 13 at GVSU

was at work back home, many hundreds of miles away. I apologized profusely for the whole situation and asked her to join me in praying for Drew, because I didn't know what else to do. And I did pray for Drew myself, asking God to return him to safety."

About a half an hour later, his son returned. He had been asleep in the tent when his father told him what they were doing. So when he awoke and didn't see the canoes, he thought they might have gone over to a nearby lake. So he decided to hike in that direction, spent some time on the beach and then finally returned to the campsite.

Now, Scott Davison is a philosopher so he asked, "Was this an answer to prayer? If I had not prayed, would things have turned out differently? Was my prayer somehow responsible for Drew's return to safety?" Not only did he ask these questions, he wrote a book about prayer — petitionary prayer, when we ask God to do something. Do our prayers actually influence God to act in specific ways in the world?

Davison's book "Petitionary Prayer: A Philosophical Investigation" was just published in the United States by Oxford Uni-

versity Press. A professor of philosophy at Morehead State University, he will speak on this subject at the Grand Dialogue event at Grand Valley State University at 10 a.m. Saturday.

Davison has written extensively on issues in the philosophy of religion. He is the author of the entries concerning prophecy and petitionary prayer in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and his first book, "On the Intrinsic Value of Everything," argues that everything that exists has some degree of intrinsic value.

The publication of his latest book continues a recent trend that reflects a significant shift in the philosophical landscape that started about 40 years ago.

"Although most famous Western philosophers were theists," explains Davison, "philosophy was hostile to religious belief in the recent past, especially during the early part of the 20th century in the English-speaking world. That began to change with the work of a handful of prominent philosophers who started defending religious belief in the late 1970s, including especially Alvin Plantinga from Calvin College."

Plantinga, a Grand Rapids resident who taught philosophy at Calvin and recently retired from the University of Notre Dame, was awarded the prestigious Templeton Prize this year and will be honored at the Grand Dialogue event Saturday.

"I was fortunate to study with Professor Plantinga myself," said Davison, who

earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in philosophy from Ohio State University before completing his master's and doctorate in philosophy from Notre Dame.

Davison currently is associate editor for *Faith and Philosophy*, the journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers, and serves as book review editor for the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. Recently a research fellow in the Moore Institute at the National University of Ireland in Galway, he also has taught philosophy at Calvin and at Minzu University of China; served on the executive committee of the Society of Christian Philosophers and is past president of the Society for Philosophy of Religion.

So how does a philosopher look at "Science, Faith, and Answers to Prayer," which is the title of his talk? I am very interested in hearing his response.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

If you go

What: Grand Dialogue in Science and Religion annual conference

When: Saturday

Where: Cook-DeVos Center for Health Sciences, 301 Michigan St. NE, Grand Rapids

Online: Information and free registration at GrandDialogue.org