

On March 27, 2014

At the Kaufman Interfaith Institute's
First Annual Interfaith Leadership Dinner
at Grand Valley State University
Sylvia Kaufman presented Richard A. Rhem with

The First Sylvia Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Award

Citation for Richard Allen Rhem

You were raised in a Michigan Dutch community surrounded by the love of family which included not only your mother and father but also three older sisters. You described it as “like having four mothers”. It was a deeply spiritual environment that called forth your serious and authentic engagement which led you to your study at Hope College and then to preparation for ministry at Western Theological Seminary. You were ordained and called to the First Reformed Church in Spring Lake, Michigan. Following post-graduate study at the University of Leiden, in the Netherlands, you returned to the church in Spring Lake which later voted to change its name to Christ Community Church. 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.

As one who early on embraced interfaith understanding and acceptance you are hereby acknowledged as the first recipient of the Sylvia Kaufman Interfaith Leadership Award.

A Response Upon Receiving the Sylvia Kaufman First Annual Interfaith Leadership Award

Richard A. Rhem
First Annual Interfaith Leadership Award Dinner
Grand Valley State University
March 27, 2014

Transcription of the handwritten document

When I received the call from Dr. Kindschi that I was being awarded the First Annual Interfaith Leadership Award, I was quite overwhelmed and my wife, Nancy, says it was the first time she ever saw me speechless. I had to have a few moments to take it in. I was so honored, so humbled, so grateful. I had no knowledge that such an award was being contemplated. Thus I was taken completely by surprise.

As the fact of the award began to sink in, I realized that if my ministry was to be noted and honored for any aspect of it, I would value most the dimension of interfaith engagement. And thus let me express my heartfelt gratitude for this honor.

The one whose name names the award, Sylvia Kaufman, is one of the very significant persons in my life. My years with her on the West Shore Jewish/Christian Dialogue Committee were rich and, for me, life changing. I have valued the friendship and hospitality of Sylvia and Dick Kaufman – so much rich experience we have shared.

It goes back to 1991, the first Interfaith Dialogue in Muskegon. Dr. Frank and Sue Pettinga provided for our Christ Community Pastoral Team registrations for the all-day dialogue between Rabbi David Hartman and Bishop Krister Stendahl. It turned out to be for me one of the peak religious-intellectual-spiritual experiences of my life.

The theme was “Faithful Interpretation: A Jew and a Christian Reflect on Continuity and Change”. I still remember it with goose bumps! I remember Rabbi Hartman asking,

“To experience your joy do you need to deny my joy? To hold your truth, must you deny my truth?”

And deep inside me I knew the answer was No.

In the wrap-up evening session – I can visualize it still – Rabbi Hartman, who loved Bishop Stendahl deeply, asked, “Krister, must I become more than the Jew I am to be a child of God?” That was the question, of course, and Krister, who loved David, put his head in his hands and said, “David, I’m so tired!”

And David said, “No, Krister, you are not too tired.”

And of course, everything in me said, “No, David, you need be nothing more than you are.” It was a transforming day for me and the timing was right.

I had written an article for a theological journal, *Perspectives*, published by the Reformed Church in America, of which I and my congregation were a part. The article entitled, “The Habit of God’s Heart,” probed the question of the extent of God’s Grace. I wrote cautiously but indicated my hope that God’s Grace was of wide extent – perhaps even universal. And so the day with Rabbi Hartman and Bishop Stendahl was a catalyst for moving me from religious exclusivism to pluralism.

It wasn’t long before Sylvia had me on the West Shore Jewish/Christian Dialogue Committee, a committee I thoroughly enjoyed, with wonderful people from the Muskegon Jewish community as well as Catholic and Protestant communities. And every three years, another stimulating all-day Dialogue.

In the mid-90’s some in the Reformed Church challenged our ministry at Christ Community. The catalyst was our hospitality to the gay community, but it soon moved to a challenge to my understanding of the universal extent of God’s Grace – a recognition of the wide embrace of God of all, no matter their creed or observance.

I mention this because during those difficult times when we at Christ Community felt alienated from our own religious family, we were embraced by the Muskegon Jewish community. I felt the love and care of Rabbi Alpert, Sylvia and the West Shore Committee and the Temple family. To this day I feel the warmth and care they extended.

Eventually the conflict with the Reformed Church was resolved and we gained our independence and we flourished as a place of Grace, open, accepting, celebrating the Grace of God that embraces the whole human family.

I close with two stories. Before the local RCA moved against us, I was asked by our General Secretary in New York to be the RCA Representative to a “Think Tank on Congregational Affiliation.” Christian congregations and Jewish congregations were involved, seeking to determine why congregational participation was falling off. The workshop was held at the Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. I was invited to lead a Vesper Worship to begin the workshop. Preaching at Christ Community that morning (October 25,

1992), I shared with my people what I would bring to the Vesper Worship at Brandeis.

I concluded by suggesting we Reformation Christians stemming from Geneva should go to Rome and heal the Reformation wounds. Then together Protestants and Catholics should go to Constantinople to heal the East/West split. Then, together we should go to Mecca to express our unity with Islam and, bringing them along, all go to Jerusalem to reunite with Israel – all of us embraced by the Grace of our Covenant God.

You know what happened! The whole congregation rose to their feet and applauded – my first ever standing ovation! My people felt it in their hearts – the people know!

One more story of an experience that confirms the intuitive sense of the people that we are all God's children. I recounted this true experience in a sermon I preached at Christ Community on August 31, 2003, which was printed in a book of my sermons entitled *Re-Imagining the Faith*.

This story happened to me last weekend. About a year ago a member of the church called and wanted to come in with his daughter, who wanted to be married. There was a problem. She fell in love with a young Jewish man. I said it was no problem for me; I'd be glad to do a joint service with the rabbi.

A little while later the problem occurred on the eastern side of the state in one of the large Jewish congregations. The groom's rabbi didn't feel he could do a service with a Christian minister. I said to the couple, "Well, my friend Alan Alpert in Muskegon – Rabbi Alpert – I think he would do it." They talked to him; they loved him. To make a long story short, we worked out a service which happened last week in the Amway Grand, and it is always great to work with Rabbi Alpert, such a dear man. We spent a couple of hours putting the service all together, all the pieces – who would do this and who would do that. (He did the Hebrew parts.) In my little meditation, I said,

"One of my favorite musicals is *Fiddler on the Roof*, and when I first experienced it as a musical, I loved it. Someone asked about the significance of the fiddler, and I was embarrassed to say I didn't have the slightest idea. So when it came out in the film, I was watching for a clue. The opening scene shows the fiddler on this steep roof, fiddling, and to be fiddling on a steep roof is precarious. But life is precarious, and how do you keep your balance? Tradition."

So I said to these two, "You both have wonderful traditions that have shaped and formed you. Now, don't do as so many have done who come

from different traditions – just let them both go – because they are so important. They give you a life map, tell you who you are and guide you.”

I told them sharing traditions is nothing new. In the Hebrew Scriptures in the Book of Ruth there is such a story, the story of Naomi and Elimelech. There was famine in Israel, they went to Moab with their two sons to get food, and the two sons fell in love with Moabite young women and got married. What were the boys going to do? They stretched tradition a little bit.

Then Elimelech died and the two sons died. Naomi was left with two Moabite daughters-in-law. She wanted to go back to Israel. She started back and the daughters-in-law followed. Naomi says, “Look, I don’t have any more sons in my womb. Please, just go back. Why should you come and share my bitterness? Go to your people.”

Orpah kisses her and leaves, but Ruth says, “Implore me not to depart from you for where you go, I will go. Where you dwell, I will dwell. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God, and where you are buried, I will be buried, and even in death we will not be parted.” Well, in this beautiful expression of a Moabite young woman to a Jewish mother-in-law, traditions were transcended in love. So I said to these young people, “What a fortunate time for you to have fallen in love, because your parents flank you here and neither one of them are embarrassed about this or wish it wasn’t so.”

There were 350 people at the wedding and white yarmulkes all over the place, for there were about 200 Jewish people from the other side of the state. I said that this was a beautiful celebration because we know today that religious traditions are to shape us and form us and help us find meaning, but not to isolate us and divide us, for they can be transcended in love and therefore be mutually enriching.

The wedding concluded, they broke the glass, and away they went. Rabbi Alpert and I remained under the chuppa together and I looked at him and said, “Alan, when we step from under the chuppa, I’m going to give you a hug.”

He smiled and said, “Okay.” So we did.

You know what happened? The place erupted. It erupted in applause, and the applause didn’t quit until we got way down at the end of that long aisle. The wedding party had already exited the hall. They didn’t know what happened, and the applause didn’t quit because the people had seen a symbol, they had experienced a symbol of what in their hearts was a deep truth.

Then there was the grand reception. Jewish people know how to have a party, how to do a wedding. There was wonderful music and a great band and vocalists. It was just marvelous. All of a sudden it was quiet and one of the uncles of the groom, a Jewish man, took the loaf of bread and said the blessing in Hebrew. I said to Nancy, "Oh, they asked me to say grace! I put the prayer in my portfolio which is in my room." She said, "Go get it." I said, "There's no time. Maybe they'll forget about it."

Just then the soloist said, "And now, Reverend Rhem." I walked up there and of course, in the joy and celebration of this moment, I just gave a little prayer. You know what happened? The place erupted in applause again! It did! As I went to my seat, they said, "Bravo! Bravo!" People were experiencing a moment of truth. They were experiencing concretely what they know down in their souls: 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.

With the awarding of this Interfaith Leadership Award you honor me, and I accept it with gratitude and with deep humility. And I accept it also including my dear wife Nancy.

When I asked her to marry me she said, "Yes, if I don't have to be president of the Ladies' Aid and you never ask me to pray out loud." I agreed. But she has been at my side, my unfailing support. There have been many wonderful times but standing in our truth as we have, there have been some dark valleys as well. And, through it all, Nancy has been there, a source of strength, always believing in me when the way was hard. Together we thank you for this very great honor.